

Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: Royal Borough of Greenwich



The **Royal Borough of Greenwich** (Royal Greenwich) was selected in 2012 as it wanted to expand the involvement of the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) with children's centres. The Programme worked with Royal Greenwich to develop their collaborative conversations through a series of task group meetings and a workshop¹ in October 2012. The intention was to strengthen the engagement between the voluntary sector and children's centre services, to build relationships and trust, leading to working together but not looking at changes to commissioning or at the VCS taking over the running of children's centres.

Participation in the Programme with Royal Greenwich

Ten VCS took part in an online engagement survey in September 2012. More than 34 local authority professionals, VCS representatives including GAWS (Greenwich Association of Voluntary Services) and children's centre managers took part in one workshop event in October 2012. An area approach was used to target the VCS and children's centres in one part of the borough.

The challenge for Royal Greenwich professionals, children's centre managers and the local VCS addressed in the programme was:

Challenge 1 "How can children's centres and the voluntary and community sector work together to improve the opportunities of children and families?"

1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches from De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, board storm or forcefield analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible actions using general knowledge gained by experience

Co-production = working together to produce better outcomes

The Programme introduced the 'co-production' process, that is:

- allow time for the acceptance of a 'blank page' approach;
- agree and reiterate a clear message; and
- get decision makers and participants to 'tell it as it is'.

The content built consensus on what the challenge is, before discussing 'solutions', using a balance of 'structured' and 'open' conversation methods.



4Children launched its **Children's Centres and Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) Programme** in April 2011 to work with commissioners, children's centres and small to medium VCS providers in 15 local authorities over two years. The Programme aimed to explore the barriers and opportunities faced by voluntary and community

organisations in developing or managing local services for children, families and adults and those that the local authority and children's centre managers have in the involvement, engagement and commissioning of the VCS.

Learning from listening: what can both Royal Greenwich and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

Common emerging themes

Three common emerging themes were developed from analysis of all the comments made in the group workshop and listening exercises. These were a 'best match' of the comments raised around meeting the challenge of collaborative working.



Partners' proposals for ways of working collaboratively

Three main proposals to achieve successful collaborative working were generated by partners through the workshop:

Performance management: Develop an on-going and increasing flow of information at a strategic and local level. Information discussed included the mapping of the VCS and children's centres; a needs analysis of services and support; and sharing impact measures

Community engagement:

- Develop arrangements and communications between organisations that are reciprocal; identify opportunities to collaborate strategically, operationally and practically and for these to be set out in partnership and service level agreements; and
- Model more consultation on an area basis to enable the development of shared collaborative values including setting standards and expectations for consistency in working with families.

Partnership working: Establish a realistic approach about what is possible given the capacity of both the VCS and children's centres. Ensure there is a shared understanding of the requirements of OFSTED and the increased focus on working with targeted families and the value of community outreach to improve outcomes

Positive impact achieved

The workshop evidenced that the main barriers to working collaboratively or with a co-production model was capacity on both sides and opportunities for finding, accessing and learning about each others' services.

Putting learning into practice for success in developing a collaborative working environment

The Task Group is now identifying ways to take forward the positive proposals for improving joint working and to feedback an action plan to the workshop participants and to the VCS and children's centres across the borough. These include:

- setting up a market place event to raise awareness and understanding between schools, children's centres and voluntary sector organisations;
- organising training on collaborative working, how to work effectively with organisations from different sectors, outcomes based planning and impact assessment;
- developing policies and local agreements to set out expectations on quality and safe practice when engaging with different organisations: and
- finding ways to share information and data about families using services in children's centre areas.

About 4Children

4Children is the national children and families charity which develops, influences and shapes national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families and works with a wide range of partners to deliver real support for children 0-19 and families in their community.

4Children (or the National Out of School Alliance as it was originally known) was established 30 years ago in response to growing concern about the welfare of so called 'latchkey' children. Since then we have gone on to deepen and broaden our work around the needs of all children 0-19 and their families and over the last six years deliver services including more than 80 Sure Start children's centres, nurseries, out of school clubs and youth and family support.

We have worked with families, communities, local authorities and governments to develop new policy ideas and delivery solutions, to meet the evolving challenge of supporting children and their families.

Find out about 4Children's wide range of support programmes, campaigns, services, products and events at www.4Children.org.uk.

Information Helpline: 020 7512 2100

To read about the work of this programme in other areas, please visit www.4Children.org.uk