

Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: Kent County Council



Kent County Council (Kent) wanted an open discussion to help in future direction of travel with the key partners in children's centre and children's services commissioning. In 2011, the Programme helped in the formation of a future commissioning strategy. This was explored with partners in 2012 as Kent wanted to continue collaborative conversations about the future delivery arrangements of children's centres and children's centre services.

Participation in the Programme with Kent

The Programme worked with Kent to develop these collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings, listening events and workshops.¹ In October 2011, three workshops were held with 80 local authority professionals, children centre managers and staff and local VCS service providers. A 'Mutual's Training Seminar' took place in February 2012 with a similar mix of 80 attendees. Two 'listening and open conversation' events were run by the Programme in July and November 2012 as part of Year Two. In July, the mix of 60 attendees was similar to 2011 and in November 2012 the 60 attendees were predominately from the VCS. In total, more than **300** local authority professionals, VCS representatives, the CVS, and children's centre managers took part in six events over the two year period.

The intention was to leave a clear development of collaborative working practice that will help Kent in future consultations and service delivery planning.

The challenges for Kent professionals, children's centre managers and the VCS addressed in the Programme were:

Challenge 1	"Given that staying the same is not an option, how can children's centres work with the voluntary and community sector to improve the opportunities of children and families when both are faced with less money and the need to integrate with a wider range of services?"
Challenge 2	"How can adult, children and family voluntary sector services improve children's outcomes by working collaboratively to deliver children's centres or children's centres services?"

1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches selected from: De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, speed dating exercises, focused conversations, 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 Kent County Council and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

Common emerging themes

Six common emerging themes were developed from analysis of all the comments made in the group workshops 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

Six main proposals to achieve successful collaborative working were generated by partners through the workshops:

Performance management: Partners could work together to build service capacity and maintain quality and quantity of services, working to VCS strengths (namely local knowledge, range of skills, specialisms and experience)

Community engagement: VCS favour Kent continuing to develop the long term strategy on commissioning compact principles, building a community profile which reflects real local need of the Kent community

Partnership working: VCS, with the CVS, could build on the existing openness and willingness to work together by sharing good practice, resources, information, skills and expertise

Kent offer and vision: LA continuing to develop and share a clear vision of future purpose and impacts of children's centres in Kent. This vision to be informed by local priorities and community engagement and agreement

Localised commissioning: Partners could consult to review the tendering process tailoring it to a VCS configuration by localising and down-sizing bids in terms of funding, technicality and time

Change management: VCS, with the CVS, to address the issues of managing any fear of change and accountability, and overcoming any reluctance to share family information and roles

Positive impact achieved

At the end of the first year of the Programme there was a positive shift to developing more opportunities for partnership working, and joining forces to ensure joint delivery continues between children's centres and the VCS. The VCS felt they had a better understanding of the issues. In Year Two solutions to the challenges were discussed and a range of themes and solutions emerged. Commissioners, the VCS and children's centre management became more positive about the possibilities of a co-production approach.

After the workshops, 64% of VCS participants rated working collaboratively as a helpful way of delivering children's services overall compared with 60% before. 67% of children's centre participants were similarly positive about collaborative working after the workshops compared with 56% before.

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

A change in the strategic direction in children's centres and their services will not be without difficult choices of meeting need within a tighter budget. However, this Programme suggests these issues engage the VCS and children's centre workforce with the potential for a mutually supportive and creative relationship in a collaborative working model with Kent.

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