**VCS and Children’s Centre Delivery**

This DfE commissioned project is ‘to *work with the voluntary sector within selected authorities to ensure their organisations are sustainable and ‘fit for purpose’ to be commissionable by local authorities to run children’s centres or be commissionable by children’s centres to provide services for them.’*

**The Attitude Survey**

As part of a series of workshops run in participating local authorities, a survey was conducted to identify the benefits and barriers perceived in involving the VCS in this activity. Possible models to overcome the challenges participants perceive in commissioning the VCS to deliver children’s centres or children’s services were used to assess their ability to change perceptions of these benefits and barriers.

Surveys were self completed in the workshops pre and post the activity and presentation of a range of models. 253 attendees completed the pre survey and 200 completed the post survey. The surveys derived from 7 participating Local Authorities, namely Knowsley (the pilot), Bexley, Barnet, Kent, Leeds, Poole and Westminster.

The six models presented and explained and discussed were Collaboration, School Company, Cooperative Trust, Lead Partner, Consortium and Mutual.

The sectors represented were VCS organisations (107), Schools (however only 9 schools contributed to the survey), Children’s Centres (77) and Local Authorities (42).

**Main Themes and Way Forward**

Six key concerns recognised by the VCS as they increasingly deliver public services were ranked by participants in order of importance of concern or impact on them or their organisation on delivering children’s centre or services.

* The greatest concern for the VCS and the Children’s Centre sectors was the possible drift away from VCS core values.
* Local authorities were most concerned about contract competition undermining cooperation and co production with providers.
* The loss of VCS responsiveness was second in importance for VCS organisations and local authorities, and loss of VCS independence was second for children’s centres.

**Perception Shift produced by Models**

Exposure to the models in the workshop resulted in the participants becoming better informed about the benefits and barriers which would be part of the challenge to involving the VCS in service delivery. There was a recognition that models such as the Consortium or Mutual models could be effective in overcoming these challenges.

The VCS sector felt that the Consortium model would improve the ability of the VCS to tackle the key concerns and issues and overcome perceived barriers. The children’s centre sector felt that the Mutual model would be the most effective in achieving this.

The VCS organisations felt that the Consortium model would allow them to overcome the challenges posed by five of their six key concerns but they did not see it having any impact on the challenge of possible loss of VCS responsiveness

The Children’s Centre sector considered that the Mutual model would be able to make a positive contribution to their ability to overcome all of their key concerns and challenges in delivering services with the VCS.

**Future Actions to Ensure Effective VCS and Children Centre Delivery**

The four major areas which participants said they would now act on to ensure that the VCS is more involved in running children’s centres or their services are:-

* *Developing effective communication and relationships with the VCS by creating links, networking, meetings and visits (23%)*
* *Sharing information by feeding back information, sharing knowledge and raising awareness by promotion and advertising (22%)*
* *Auditing or mapping resources, agencies, children’s centres service needs (20%)*
* *Partnership or collaborative working with the local authority and children’s centres (20%)*

This order of priority is strongly influenced by the VCS sector as it was the largest participating group. *Sharing information by feeding back information, sharing knowledge and raising awareness by promotion and advertising is mentioned by 37%* as the activity they will take up.

Local authority participants added a fifth activity as an equal first priority with *developing effective communication and relationships*, namely

*Engaging the VCS in decisions about governance, commissioning and service delivery (23%)*

The children’s centre sector added two other priorities, placing

*Including VCS in advisory boards or steering groups (20%)*

as their second priority and, as their third

*liaising with the VCS to motivate, support, encourage and develop them (18%)*

The children’s centre sector also included

*Parent/volunteer involvement (16%)* as of equal priority to *partnership and collaborative working* which they placed fifth.

**The Way Forward**

The greatest concern for the VCS and the Children’s Centre sectors was the possible drift away from VCS core values.

However, this survey shows that there was a recognition that models such as the Consortium or Mutual models could be effective in overcoming this and the other kinds of challenge.

The VCS sector focus its future activity for the way forward on information sharing and partnership or collaborative working more than the other sectors, local authorities are looking to get the VCS included on their advisory boards and steering groups, and children’s centres are most interested in improving and increasing contact and communication and encouraging parent and volunteer involvement.

These insights provide the pointers for how to support the VCS in the way that is most useful to them and to assist and encourage local authorities and children’s centres to initiate and implement their activities to make the VCS more sustainable and ‘fit for purpose’ in running children’s centres and delivering children’s services.