

Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: Darlington Borough Council



In 2011, **Darlington Borough Council** (Darlington) welcomed the opportunity to test the appetite and capacity of the Voluntary and Community Sector for VCS run services should this be a strategic direction that the local authority wanted to take. The aim was to explore how social enterprises could help strengthen/develop the local market. The Programme clearly opened up a conversation which needed to be built on, using a range of participatory approaches to build co-production. For the second year Darlington continued with a focus on co-production, particularly unpicking the pre-conditions to effective practice.

Participation in the Programme with Darlington

In November 2011, a sample of six local VCS groups took part in a telephone in-depth survey interview. This led to a facilitated session for the VCS (Evolution) with the local authority and PCT commissioning managers. In January 2012, there was a workshop with 10 local authority and VCS (Evolution) participants. This was followed by a **task group** meeting in May, a steering group meeting in June and a listening¹ workshop in October with 10 participants. Upwards of 30 participants in total.

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

Challenge 1	"To learn how voluntary sector providers could improve children's outcomes by working collaboratively to deliver children's centres or children's centre services"
Challenge 2	"What are the challenges for the VCS to work collaboratively through a community consortium to deliver services as part of wider co-production decisions?"

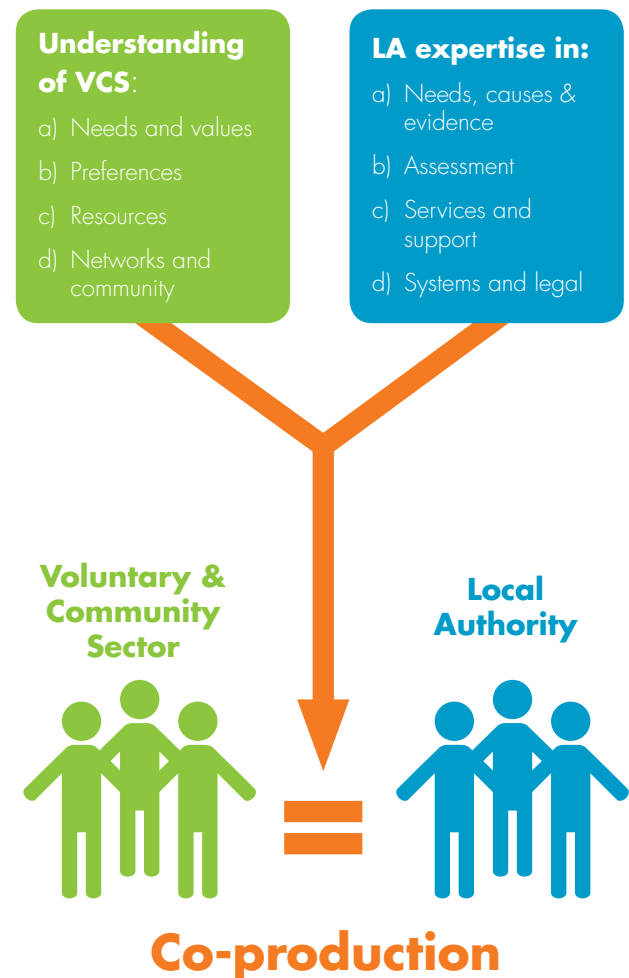
1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches: De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, boardstorm or forcefield analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible actions 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 Darlington Borough 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: Address issues for the VCS of advocacy, competition, fund raising and data protection as they affect collaborative working in service delivery

Community engagement: Partners might monitor Darlington Social Capital Network (DSCN) Mapping, county-wide asset based community development, and the involvement of large VCS in a new Community Interest Company

Partnership working: Continue to build on the willingness of the VCS to work collaboratively and the existing strong relationship between public and voluntary sectors with respect for the VCS role as representing parents and community

Darlington offer and vision: LA could commit to a VCS tendering process, reviewing commissioning and procurement arrangements to accommodate the local VCS and improve dialogue

Localised commissioning: VCS (Evolution) to continue the process of becoming commissioning ready; VCS moving to consortium formation for October

Change management: LA to continue to manage the change from service provider to facilitator for local partnerships providing services

Positive impact achieved

Darlington did not start its discussions with delivery models but did engage with co-production approaches. It continued exploring that while moving to address the commissioning of more children's services on a wider families agenda with the VCS and working collaboratively with them. The Programme encouraged this positive shift to working collaboratively in a co-production model.

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 its difficult choices of meeting need within a tighter budget. However this listening exercise suggested these are issues that will engage the VCS and children's centre workforce. A 'pathfinder' approach is being adopted as the next step in setting up a commissioning/procurement process which gives a level playing field for local providers. The VCS (Evolution) are to contribute a response to the Darlington Social Capital Network proposal.

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