

# Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: London Borough of Bexley



**London Borough of Bexley** (Bexley) welcomed the opportunity to work with the VCS and children's centres in developing their future delivery strategy. Bexley needed to make savings, so considered outsourcing and the VCS running local services as part of a mixed economy. Bexley discussed a number of commissioning models.

## Participation in the Programme with Bexley

The Programme worked with Bexley to develop collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings, listening events and workshops.<sup>1</sup> One workshop was held with 25 local authority professionals, children's centre managers and staff and local VCS service providers on 28 October 2011. A follow up training session workshop, with 25 participants in a similar mix, was held on 13 February 2012. 50 participants have taken part in the Programme in Bexley.

The intention was to leave a clear development of collaborative working practice that would help Bexley in future consultations.

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

### Challenge 1

"How to improve engagement of the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the delivery of children's centres and their services?"

### Challenge 2

"How to work collaboratively to deliver children's centres and children's centre services?"

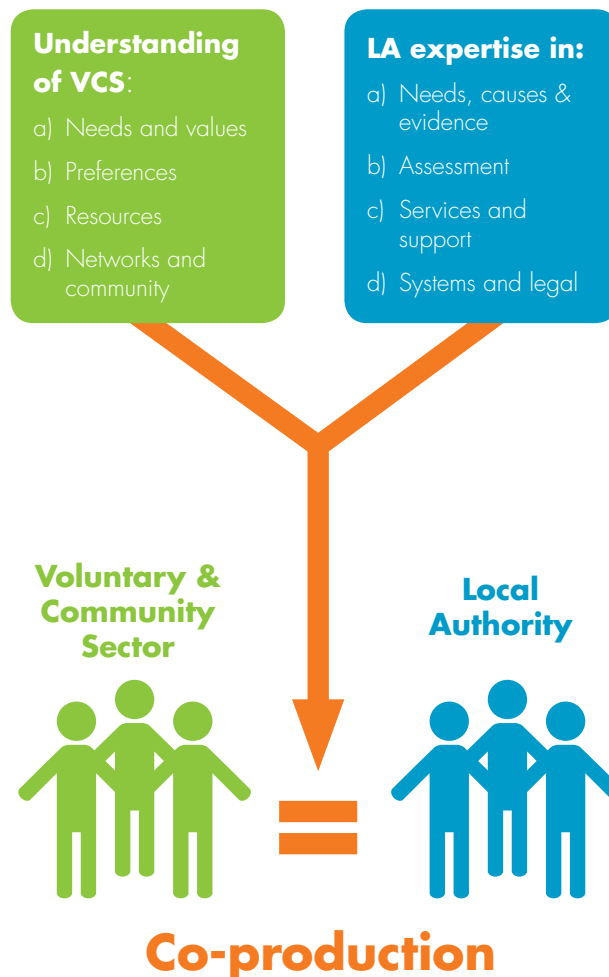
<sup>1</sup> Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches selected from: De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercise, boardstorm or force field analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated 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 the London Borough of Bexley 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:** Market place events could be arranged for children's centres and VCS that mapped what is available and what services the VCS could offer children's centres. Also workshops to explore and agree a local line on children's centres

**Community engagement:** Partners could work with parent/forum/advisory boards to broaden awareness of community-led services

**Partnership working:** A workshop aimed at schools and VCS could be organised to explore partnership working

**Bexley offer and vision:** The local authority could develop a Question and Answer facility through web posts to make key performance criteria transparent and deal with a range of practical issues

**Localised commissioning:** Development of a commissioning strategy based on timetables and a co-production consultation with the VCS on what they could offer with CPD in commissioning for children's centres for partners

**Change management:** Partners could collaborate in a workshop on change management for VCS and children's centres to acknowledge and work through the emotional response to change

## Positive impact achieved

The workshops acted as a catalyst for the local VCS who reviewed how best to engage with children's centres. After the Programme, 84% of participating VCS were more positive about tackling key challenges, 50% of local authority attendees were more positive about contract competition issues and 58% of children's centre managers were more positive about tackling key challenges.

## 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 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 Bexley.

Bexley formulated an action plan and options for future delivery of children's centres with collaborative commissioning. Children's centres planned to improve links with the VCS and researching more into ways of delivering children's centres and services. The VCS planned to improve engagement and links with the children's centres and to research more into ways of delivering children's centres and services.

## 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](http://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](http://www.4Children.org.uk)