

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



**London Borough of Richmond upon Thames** (Richmond) was selected in 2012 as it wanted to explore ways of improving commissioning, and get better services through co-design and where possible build up the local VCS to have the capacity to provide services.

- Developing an open and transparent pre commissioning process that leads to a preferred bidder option that could help shape the service. This suggested a co-production solution.

- Improving the commissioning of local (and national) VCS to make a better fit between need and service design – the process is legally robust but a lack of co-design affected the final outcomes. Richmond needs more joint working to make future specifications fit for purpose.

## Participation in the Programme with Richmond

The Programme worked with Richmond to develop collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings in May 2012 with five participants from the local authority and the CVS.<sup>1</sup> A workshop was planned in June but Richmond withdrew from the Programme due to local authority capacity issues before the workshop could take place. The format was to be a targeted focus group for existing funded providers, potential providers, procurement officers, and advisory board members.

The intention had been to leave a clear development of collaborative working practice that will help Richmond in future consultations. Instead, an informal round-table discussion took place with the local authority and CVS exploring the learning from the programme and its applicability to local circumstances.

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

<b>Challenge 1</b>	"How can we work together to ensure that commissioning and procurement processes are proportionate, build a sustainable VCS sector and reflect local need?"
<b>Challenge 2</b>	"Will a change in children's centre organisation or how services are delivered lead to improvements in terms of improved outcomes for children and families, better quality services and value for money?"
<b>Challenge 3</b>	"How can working collaboratively challenge current commissioning/ procurement processes and move local barriers while supporting a sustainable local VCS?"

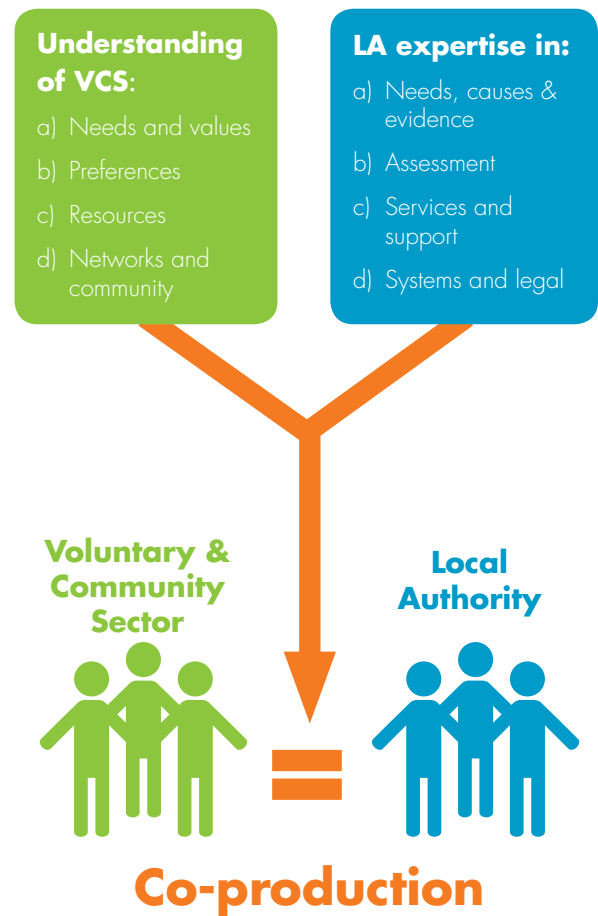
1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches selected from De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, speed dating exercises, focused conversations, board-storm and forcefield analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess 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 the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

## Common emerging themes

Six common emerging themes were developed from analysis of the task group notes. 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, one for each theme, were generated by partners through the task group meetings:

**Performance Management:** Acknowledge local providers' understanding of local needs. Assess VCS appetite and capacity to work in consortia (community or lead partner) with special attention to providing the time and resources to train (upskill). Grow VCS capacity to deliver services for children's centres and to issues of confidentiality and data protection for families

**Community Engagement:** Develop the concept of community growth through balancing how to meet borough and locality needs whilst retaining a sustainable local VCS

**Partnership Working:** Build on existing good working relationship with VCS providers and develop the VCS as key co-providers of universal services with children's centres, with local CVS or a national charity as lead partner, based on clear specifications about local VCS sustainability and local advisory boards engaged in commissioning

**Richmond Offer and Vision:** Work toward a commissioning strategy where the strategic lead is with the local authority and operational delivery through local partners including parents. Aim to 'future proof' a sustainable VCS through collaborative working and commission methods

**Localised Commissioning:** Support and protect the local VCS to provide services within a local authority managed network of children's centres, for example by establishing 'start-up' or developmental commissioning. Allowing mainstream commissioning to grow local services through commissioning that is more consistent and fair for small local VCS organisations

**Change Management:** Challenge the appropriateness of current commissioning attitudes and processes to the sustainability of the local VCS by adopting new ways of working which are necessary if local VCS are to survive, for example ensure any national external agencies are tied into supporting and growing the local VCS

## Positive impact achieved

At the end of the task group meetings 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. Commissioners were moving to considering the co-design process as contributing to community growth not just sub-contracting.

## 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. Major restructuring of children's services is under discussion in Richmond with options including an arm's length social enterprise or consortia which would provide a clear commissioning route for schools. A review is in progress of procurement implications of working to a multi-agency delivery of children's centres where each agency understands its contributions.

## 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)