

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



**Borough of Poole Council** (Poole) welcomed the opportunity to have an external neutral organisation to engage local VCS as the local authority reflected on commissioning direction. At the end of year one Poole wanted to work with small and large VCS to inform partnership arrangements as part of co-production consultation. Poole was selected to continue in 2012 as it wanted to explore the local VCS and parents' willingness and capacity to form either a 'community consortium' or to be part of a lead partner consortium to provide children's centres and/or children's centres services.

## Participation in the Programme with Poole

The programme worked with Poole to develop engagement with local VCS through a series of events and workshops.<sup>1</sup> In 2011, a workshop was held in November with 25 attendees from a mix of children's centre managers, VCS, local authority professionals and parents. In January 2012 there was a training session on collaborative working with a similar audience in size and mix. 25 VCS organisations completed a telephone survey in June 2012. Ten VCS and 10 parents took part in separate focus conversations in July. Twenty-five mixed VCS, children's centre managers and local authority professionals took part in a final review of next steps in November 2012. In total, more than 120 local authority professionals, VCS representatives, parents and children's centre managers took part in four workshop events and a survey over the two year period.

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

<b>Challenge 1</b>	<p>"How with reasonable support and capacity over say 18-24 months are the local VCS willing to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) manage children's centres or provide services through consortium approaches and/or</li> <li>b) add value to existing arrangements?</li> </ul>
<b>Challenge 2</b>	<p>"If children's centres and services were outsourced, what service specification outcomes would ensure that parents and local voluntary groups are engaged in the delivery and management of those centres and services?"</p>

## 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.



1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches from De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused Conversations, speed dating exercise, board storm 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

**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 Borough of Poole Council and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

## Common emerging themes

Four 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

The four main themes that emerged in discussion shared some common threads – particularly the importance of a local needs focus.

Four main proposals to achieve successful collaborative working, one for each theme, were generated by partners through the workshops.

### Consultation in strategic engagement:

- Sustained and improved involvement of VCS organisations in the delivery of children centre services
- More parents might have the skills/knowledge to participate in decision making concerning the children's centre

**Co-production in strategic engagement:** Stakeholders could be involved in defining needs of sector using local knowledge and approaches

**Technical/legal or next steps:** An 'outcomes framework' might form the start point in children's centres

### Building community capacity:

- Outreach set up where there is a cluster of identified need
- Community volunteers in each centre or service could have increased opportunities

## Positive impact achieved

The Programme found that the one model approach was of little interest and the need was to develop a local focus. This approach generated much interest and engaged a wide variety of groups. And because there was capacity missing among the smaller VCS, there was positive traction in the notion of larger groups mentoring smaller ones to add value.

## 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. Participants adopted an overall positive attitude to co-production, accepting that the 'right to challenge' has introduced common priorities which have opened minds about co-production and collaboration. Next steps include a CVS Meeting to take lessons forward and the collaborative preparation of a proposal for elected members in April 2013.

## 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)