**Children’s Centres**

**Voluntary and Community Sector programme**

**Final Report 2011-2013**

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**March 2013**

**Executive summary and practice guidance**

**1 Policy and delivery background**

* The rapidly changing policy and delivery background created opportunities and challenges for the voluntary and community sector and local authorities in ensuring that children’s centres remained central to early intervention strategies.
* Three steps of the nine steps 2006 planning and commissioning framework helped shape the response of the programme to these opportunities and challenges.
* The strategy was to ensure the DfE goal of improved outcomes for all children with Sure Start children’s centres at the heart of early intervention.

1. **Programme objectives**

* These focused on building up the capacity of the VCS and moving the barriers of local authorities and children’s centres in engaging with this sector.
* Success was seen as increased positive attitudes to VCS involvement.
* This helped the programme to champion small local VCS in terms of what commissioning strategy would sustain them and what co-production methods would engage them.

**3 Programme delivery strategy**

* As changing hearts and mind was critical**,** theprogramme delivery strategywas based on a simplified five step change management programme (Engage, Establish, Enquire, Ensure and Embed Evaluation)
* The first year mainly explored six delivery models drawn from models of governance
* The second year explored ways of listening and engaging drawn from community development

**4 Partners and evidence gathering**

* Over the two years the programme worked with 15 local authorities of which three (Darlington, Kent and Poole) stayed with the programme for two years and the others a year each. The second year emphasized work with VCS partners
* Initial discussion with partners framed the themes that have helped shaped the case studies
* Five DfE key performance indicators have also been addressed in the design of the programme.
* Together this evidence base was produced for the report’s discussion

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Range of Evidence  Code:  **✓ = available**  **🗶 = not produced**  **NA = not applicable** | **Barnet** | **Bexley** | **Darlington** | **Greenwich** | **Hillingdon** | | **Kent** | | **Knowsley** | | **Leeds** | | **Luton** | | **N.E.Lincs** | | **Northamptonshire** | | **Poole** | | **Richmond** | | **Telford & Wrekin** | | **Westminster** | |
| Delivery Plan and notes | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | |
| Workshop 1 Materials | **✓** | **✓** | **NA** | **✓** | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | |
| Questionnaire | **NA** | **NA** | **✓** | **✓** | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | |
| Outcomes 1 Report | **✓** | **✓** | **NA** | **✓** | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **✓** | |
| Questionnaire Report | **NA** | **NA** | **✓** | **✓** | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | |
| Workshop 2 Material | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** |
| Outcomes 2 Report | **🗶** | **✓** | **✓** | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** |
| Training resource | **NA** | **NA** | **NA** | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **NA** | | **NA** |
| Workshop Evaluations | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** |
| National Sharing | **✓** | **✓** | **✓/🗶** | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **🗶** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **🗶** | | **🗶** | | **✓** |
| Regional Sharing | **✓** | **✓** | **🗶 /✓** | **✓** | | **✓** | | **🗶/✓** | | **🗶** | | **✓** | | **🗶** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **🗶/✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** |
| Attitude Survey | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **✓** | | **NA** | | **✓** | | **✓** |

| **Themes** | **Barnet** | **Bexley** | **Darlington** | **Greenwich** | **Hillingdon** | **Kent** | **Knowsley** | **Leeds** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Programme activity | Focus group with training session cancelled | Focus group and training session | Interviews and follow up training session with focus conversation in 2nd year | Survey and focus group | Focus group | Five focus groups and two follow up training sessions | Focus group with business skills session in 2012-13 and detailed strategy paper | Focus group |
| What attracted you to the project? | Opportunity to be part of a national programme to shape the local discussions with schools and the VCS | Opportunity to work with VCS and children’s centres in developing future children’s centres strategy | Opportunity to work with the VCS to test their appetite (and capacity) should VCS run services be a direction we went with our children’s centres | Opportunity to explore with ways of expanding the involvement of the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) with children’s centres. | Opportunity to encourage the involvement of the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) in delivery of children’s centres in partnership with schools. | Opportunity for an open discussion with VCS and CC about delivery models and to engage them in shaping the future direction of travel | Opportunity to explore the commissioning and delivery issues for children’s centre services if community run | Opportunity to work with the VCS and local CCs to future proof current arrangements through judging various delivery models against three key criteria |
| What have you done so far particularly with the VCS to deal with the issues that you wanted to address? | Engaged VCS and then schools in the planning and learning from activities | Acted as a catalyst for the local VCS who are now reviewing how best to engage with children’s centres | Services have had to be re-designed due to reduced budgets and move towards targeted services and joint commissioning. The work in the first year allowed feedback and a facilitated session for partners and encouraged a positive shift to working collaboratively in a co-production model over 2012-12 | • setting up a market place event to raise awareness and understanding;  • organising training on collaborative working  • developing policies and local agreements to set out expectations on quality and safe practice  • finding ways to share information and data about families using services in children’s centre areas. | After the Programme there was a feeling that this way of working could help provide more time and resources, more effective service delivery as well as opportunities for staff personal development. | The workshops in were well attended and showed that this was a real conversation on future direction especially when coupled with the seminar on mutuals and social enterprises in the first year and the practical work in the 2nd year | We were able to share the learning of local community groups who are ‘growing’ services with CCs and reflect on implications for services in the future | Workshop allowed for honest discussion between partners and showed that some interesting improvements were possible within the existing robust delivery framework |
| What challenges have you identified which had to be overcome? | Schools understanding of the VCS and knowledge of local VCS services can be problematic | Working out the issue that the different delivery models could help to tackle from each partner’s perspective | Local VCS concerned with LA and TUPE issues rather than VCS capacity which it questions as a barrier | Strengthen the engagement between the voluntary sector and children’s centre services, to build relationships and trust, leading to working together but not looking at changes to commissioning or at the VCS taking over the running of children’s centres | The intention was to grow the willingness of the voluntary sector to work with or deliver children’s centre services through building relationships and trust, leading to working together, and new opportunities for commissioning services from the voluntary sector. | VCS had been shaken up by pace and scope of change around early intervention so there was an element of needing to regain trust | Community services need time and support to be sustainable separate from any wider commissioning considerations | Engaging with the VCS and children’s centres around a time of change can be problematic and needs careful handling to avoid the resurfacing of historical attitudes |
| What are your plans for the future? | Use the learning to improve understanding and help the move to an enabling authority | Implement the commissioning strategy | A focus on co-production, particularly unpicking the pre conditions to effective practice in delivering services through consortia | Identify ways to take forward the positive proposals to the workshop participants and to the VCS and children’s centres across the borough | Use the learning to contribute to the service review process | Exploring in depth practical ways of engaging the VCS in children’s centres services and commissioning | Supporting community grown services and their enrichment of children’s centres management and practices | To continue to review ways of ensuring CCs are sustainable with VCS support within a LA managed framework |

| **Themes** | **Luton** | **N. E. Lincs** | **Northamptonshire** | **Poole** | **Richmond** | **Telford & Wrekin** | **Westminster** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Programme activity | Interviews and training manual | Activity workshop | Survey and focus group | Two focus group, two training sessions and a survey | Roundtable discussion | Two focus conversation workshops | Focus group |
| What attracted you to the project? | Opportunity to support VCS managed children’s centres as we had just completed a review of services and had quite a few anxieties about which way to go and this programme helped us | Opportunity d to continue collaborative conversations about the future delivery arrangements of children’s centres. | Opportunity to start collaborative conversations about the future delivery arrangements of local authority services. | Opportunity to have an external, neutral organisation to engage local VCS as we reflected on commissioning direction | Opportunity to explore ways of improving commissioning, and improve services through co-design and where possible build up the local VCS to have the capacity to provide services. | Opportunity for an open discussion with Parents, VCS and CC managers about delivery models and to engage them in shaping the future direction of travel | Opportunity to build the capacity of the local VCS to be commission ready |
| What have you done so far particularly with the VCS to deal with the issues that you wanted to address? | On the point of moving towards a merged model the questionnaire/survey had very positive response and enabled us to identify training needs for VCS children’s centres. | Developed collaborative conversations through a series of task group meetings and events. | The workshop evidenced a willingness of the local VCS to work collaboratively with NCC and NVC, with NCC taking a facilitator role rather than a provider role in the new way of working. | Stakeholder events had a reasonable number and variety of VCS groups attending. All seem positive and pleased to be part of the process. In discussing possible models providers and parents in a focused conversation it clarified the commissioning | Major restructuring of children’s services is under discussion with a review in progress of procurement implications of working to a multi-agency delivery of children’s centres where  each agency understands its contributions.. | The focus was to model ways of co-production practice that will help Telford in future consultations | Enriched market warming events and local VCS consortia arrangements already planned |
| What challenges have you identified which had to be overcome? | Focus workshops at a time of rapid changes in service design are not feasible and discussions have to be held within the framework of change management to be effective | It was seen that with resources and time to achieve a collaborative approach that user’s needs would be met. Also that the culture and ethos of their own organisation would continue to thrive within the new commissioning priorities. | Identifying and engaging local small to medium VCS groups to take the new ways of working forward | Getting the balance between larger VCSs who are wanting to push on quite quickly – but needing to hold back, specifically for the small to medium organisations so that they can be as fully involved as capacity allows | Developing an open and transparent pre commissioning process that leads to a preferred bidder option to help shape services. | Ensuring that the needs and aspirations of parents. staff and local providers are listened to and used to shape future plans | Ensuring that small and local VCS from across the range of services of interest to children’s centres can influence commissioning strategy and grow capacity |
| What are your plans for the future? | Build on the training developed for the VCS for the wider CC sector | Move to the role of facilitator rather than provider, while the VCS work to engage with children’s centres in a developing collaborative working model. | Work towards ascertaining what skills support the VCS sector might want for successful co production service delivery. | Work with the small and large VCS to assess what needed for partnership arrangements with a national VCS if this the commissioning decision | Aim to ‘future proof’ a sustainable VCS through collaborative working and commission methods | Move to a facilitator role that supports and balances diverse cultural ethos, replace the corporate presence and influence and encourage and promote parental involvement with more user-friendly labelling | Continue to grow and support local VCS to build capacity  so that they are ready to face the new commissioning world and the opportunities of Tri borough working |

**6 Programmes Overall KPI performance**

* A 2011-12 national baseline survey of LA commissioners reported workshops was the preferred model of engagement. So in year one, nine focus workshops and two interview surveys for over 280 participants were a catalyst for change.
* It was found that whilst outsourcing children’s centres and services was a valid strategy, three alternative commissioning strategies were identified.
  + Make VCS commission ready
  + Make VCS and Children’s centres work together smarter
  + Commission external provider of children’s centres on basis of how to make local VCS sustainable
* Keeping services in-house was also a valid strategy
* New partners in 2012-13 and lessons from the first year shifted the focus to how to engage the VCS and children’s centres in coproduction design of commissioning options, which remain broadly the same.
* During the second year the programme ran 10 workshops and undertook 3 surveys for up to 379 participants from children’s centres, local authority and the VCS.
* The key performance measures for the two years are set out in this table

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Key Performance Measures** | | |
| **Year one** | **Year two** | |
|  | | |
| **Providing strong and effective management of DfE grant funded activities** | | |
| **35** reports delivered – Delivery plans/ outcome reports including surveys and workshop evaluation | | **34** reports delivered – Delivery plans/ outcome reports including surveys and workshop evaluation |
| **Achieving high levels of VCS satisfaction** | | |
| Overall evaluation - good plus = **80%**  More positive about tackling key challenges = **62%** | | Overall evaluation - good plus = **81%**  More positive about tackling key challenges = **70%** |
| **Strengthening capacity and intent of local authorities to commission**  **and engage the VCS in management and delivery of children centre services** | | |
| Overall evaluation - good plus = **84%**  More positive about tackling key challenges = **64%** | | Overall evaluation - good plus = **69%%**  More positive about tackling key challenges **= 79%** |
| **Strengthening intent of neighbouring local authorities in the partner LA locality**  **to engage the VCS in management and delivery of children centre services** | | |
| Dissemination through national and regional sharing | | Dissemination through national and regional sharing. (Regional sharing was weak in both years due to lack of appropriate networks or travel restrictions) |
| **Strengthening capacity and intent of children centre managers to commission VCS services** | | |
| Overall evaluation - good plus = **76%**  More positive about tackling key challenges = **52%** | | Overall evaluation - good plus = **74%**  More positive about tackling key challenges = **66%** |

**7 Programme evaluation and discussion**

* In the first year a need to ‘refocus’ and ‘rebalance’ ways of engaging the VCS was recognised. In the second year it was grappling with ways of engaging through coproduction.
* Each local authority identified different challenges and started from a diverse range of perspectives
* The programme acted as a catalyst and helped create much positive action from enabling authorities to review to helping develop VCS capacity and reaffirming the community roots of children’s centre work
* The importance of consortia for small VCS was identified and ways forward to build capacity were explored by various authorities. In the second year, interviews and surveys were used to engage providers not fully engaged with children’s centres
* In the first year VCS capacity building or community growth emerged as options but in the second year it was found that having open conversations created real attitude change.
* It was clear after the two years, that how to deliver or commission services discussion has to be matched with imaginative ways of listening if the community and VCS are to engage in changed service arrangements.
* Making procurement more user-friendly and building local leadership capacity to overcome delivery fragmentation emerged as a solution in the first year and remained an issue in the second year
* In the first year, mutuals and consortiums remained the favourite options of partners although the capacity and commitment to make them happen wasn’t so clearly stated
* In the second year, the positive effect of co-production was highlighted as positive
* The programme leaves a legacy of delivery models to inform the commissioning and community engagement process to enable co-production so that families and children can continue to access support

**Practice Guidance**

The following table takes the impact and outcomes from the case studies, and combines similar or draws out common factors to identify key common learning. These in term are linked to practical activities drawn from all the workshop activities and discussions, which are then related to the steps of commissioning relevant to this programme. These are drawn from standard commissioning and planning frameworks. Although contributions to needs analysis does arise the main emphasis in on planning and delivery. The focus themes emerged from analysis of workshop activities over the two years. The guidance reflects generalised learning rather than any one partners experience or views.

|  | **Common Learning** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus themes** | **Key Principles** | **Commissioning Stages** | | | |
| **Practice Suggestions** | **develop needs assessment** | **identity resources and set priorities** | **plan pattern of services and focus** |
| **Performance management of VCS** | * Involve VCS partners in the planning and delivery of services where children’s centres are school-based, with shared language, understandings and expectations | * Use a market place event to raise awareness and understanding between schools, children’s centres and voluntary sector organisations | ✓ | ✓ |  |
| * Hold briefing and training sessions with schools on what the VCS is and does |  | ✓ |  |
| * Manage risk through building and sustaining local VCS capacity | * Support and engage VCS through networking, with a contact centre helpline to enable effective signposting to other services and resources |  | ✓ |  |
| * VCS partners to address governance issues such as roles and responsibilities, managing conflict, assertiveness training, confidence building, being able to challenge effectively and negotiating skills |  | ✓ |  |
| * More meetings, events and networking opportunities for the VCS to meet each other. Identifying and working with new and existing local VCS and promoting their services with regular newsletter and website communication |  | ✓ |  |
| * 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). |  |  | ✓ |
| * Address issues for the VCS of advocacy, competition, fund raising and data protection as they affect collaborative working in service delivery | * Work with partners (providers, users and staff) barriers through focused conversations and open space techniques to establish local barriers and solutions | ✓ |  | ✓ |
| * From a shared vision based on outcomes, develop a flow of information   ( strategic and practical) with partners to meet need within communities identified by local groups | * Develop simple traffic light system of key data based on Results Based Accountability methodology[[1]](#footnote-1) |  | ✓ | ✓ |
| **Community engagement** | * Build on local VCS knowledge to identify models already working in local authority with hard data and a benefit analysis | * If a mixed economy of children’s centres and services develop a simple delivery model to show the differences and similarities between partners approaches |  |  | ✓ |
| * Develop reciprocal arrangements and communications between organisations for collaboration at strategic, operational or practical levels | * Monitor this through regular listening activities and ensure that this is tied into service or partnership agreements |  | ✓ |  |
| * Encourage community engagement through commitment from volunteers, and help to recruit, support and retain them | * Focus on community-led services meeting needs identified by parents using generational potential and offering a wider range of activities. | ✓ | ✓ |  |
| * Identity and celebrate local best practice to improve understanding of the VCS sector | * Use award ceremonies to showcase what has been done with VCS partners already so opportunities to increase VCS involvement could emerge |  | ✓ |  |
| **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 | * Use local Compact arrangements to build up a local authority rather than departmental policy for community engagement and support |  |  | ✓ |
| * 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 |  |  | ✓ |
| * Establish a realistic approach about what is possible given the capacity of both the VCS and children’s centres to ensure sustainability and ethos, common values and goals | * Create opportunities for honest and open conversations using community participation tools and processes so that all stakeholders are involved in defining needs using local knowledge and approaches | ✓ |  |  |
| * Develop autonomy for children’s centres to form partnerships with local VCS. And build on the willingness of smaller VCS to work with children’s centres | * Work with local CVS to audit and mobilise local VCS and review/refresh community development skills of Children’s centre staff |  | ✓ |  |
| **Vision** | * Create a shared vision where the local authority as a facilitator rather than a provider to show where and how the VCS could add value informed by local priorities and community engagement and agreement | * Engage with the range of small VCS that support families and adults through interviews and networking to explore how they could work with children’s centres |  | ✓ |  |
| * Build on the capacity of the VCS who are the voice of users and close to families, along the lines of co-production with children’s centres and parents that helps to build on the existing good record of VCS commissioning |  | ✓ |  |
| * Focus more on market development and ensure co-production is recognised as an option in the commissioning cycle emphasising working together rather than funding; perhaps collaborating in bids and adopt a listening and more respectful attitude to smaller VCS | * The LA could address the provision of help with tendering, applying for funding support, development of legal governance framework and policies and procedures |  |  | ✓ |
| * Aim to ‘future proof’ a sustainable VCS through collaborative working and commission methods |  |  | ✓ |
| **Localised Commissioning** | * Ensure that VCS are able to scrutinise and challenge decisions and recognise the VCS as equal partners | * Work with the VCS to shape approaches using a range of community development tools |  |  | ✓ |
| * Support and protect local VCS to provide services within a local authority managed network of children’s centres, for example by establishing ‘start-up’ or developmental commissioning. |  |  | ✓ |
| * Allow mainstream commissioning to grow local services through commissioning that is more consistent and fair for small local VCS organisations |  |  | ✓ |
| * VCS sector need to become commissioning ready and pro active and the local authority strengthen localized commissioning by providing support in how things work | * CVS and local authority need to have a strategy and training programme that enables local groups to be engaged and supported for service and added value commissioning |  | ✓ |  |
| **Change Management** | * Develop a commission framework where Partners work together to build service capacity and maintain quality and quantity of services, working to VCS strengths (namely local knowledge, range of skills, specialisms and experience) | * Start with operational understanding and build with users, community, providers and staff a strategic framework of policies and local agreements to set out expectations on quality and safe practice when engaging with different organisations |  |  | ✓ |
| * 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, | * Partners to think more outside the box ‘who can help us’ by following up contacts, visiting other organisations, as prospective partners, be more positive with partnership working and explore new avenues |  | ✓ | ✓ |
| * Work to grow tentative community providers into robust ones – provide help with business skills development and capacity building |  | ✓ |  |
| * For example ensure any national external agencies are tied into supporting and growing the local VCS |  |  | ✓ |
| * Work to introduce change management training in co-production and collaborative working models |  |  | ✓ |
| * Facilitate local partners supported by bigger organisations to give economies of scale and create more sustainable services |  |  | ✓ |

1. www.resultsbasedaccountabilty.com [↑](#footnote-ref-1)