

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



**Luton Borough Council** (Luton) welcomed the opportunity to support VCS managed children's centres as they had just completed a review of services and had quite a few anxieties about which way to go. It had been decided to merge a number of children's centres into a hub and spoke model.

## Participation in the Programme with Luton

The Programme worked with Luton to develop collaborative conversations<sup>1</sup> through a series of **task group** meetings, a survey with key children's centres and a training pack. Six children's centres identified challenges. In total more than **10** local authority professionals, VCS representatives and children centre managers took part.

**The challenge for Luton professionals, children's centre managers and the VCS addressed in the Programme was:**

<b>Challenge</b>	"How to increase the capacity of the local private, voluntary and independent sector to deliver children's centre services within the refigured structure of delivery to a 'hub and spoke' model?"
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1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches from De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, 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

## 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 Luton Borough Council and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

## Common emerging themes

Five 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

Five main proposals to achieve successful collaborative working were generated by partners through the task group meetings:

**Performance management:** 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

**Community engagement:** Partners to enable effective parental involvement and make time to tackle local issues properly

**Partnership working:** Work together to address operational issues such as staff working together across a hub and spoke, needing to share knowledge and ways of working

**Luton offer and vision:** Luton could plan to create a business mindset or culture across all partners with a focus on problem solving

**Change management:** Create guidelines, how to guides and signposting to existing support such as Business Link

## Positive impact achieved

The Programme was recognised by partners as a help in working out which way to go forward.

## 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. Luton wanted to explore how to make the local VCS partners commission-ready for a 'hub and spoke' children's centre service and build on the training developed for the VCS for the wider children's centre sector. A second planned workshop was superseded by a bespoke training manual delivered in Spring 2012.

## 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 6 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)