

Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: Telford and Wrekin Council



Telford and Wrekin Council (Telford) was selected in 2012–13 as it wanted to start collaborative conversations about the future delivery arrangements of local authority services. The **focus** of the work in Telford over 2012–13 was to develop local co-production practice through a series of task group meetings, and focus conversation listening events¹. The programme worked with Telford and Wrekin Council to develop these collaborative conversations through Workshops in November 2012 and January 2013. The intention was to leave a clear development of co-production practice that will help Telford in future consultations.

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.

Participation in the Programme with Telford

More than 50 local authority professionals, VCS representatives, children centre managers and parents took part in the first workshop event in November 2012. A second workshop took place in January 2013 combining the two other children's centre areas with a similar mix of 40 attendees. 90 participants in all.

The challenge addressed in the Programme by Telford professionals, children's centre managers, the local VCS and parents was:

Challenge	"To learn how voluntary sector providers could improve children's outcomes by working collaboratively to deliver children's centres or children's centre services"
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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



4Children launched its Children's Centres and Voluntary 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 Telford and Wrekin Council, the local VCS and Parents 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 workshops:

Performance Management: All partners work together to develop a continuous and accurate flow of information potentially using an upgraded Family Connect as one point of access for information with one dedicated person

Community engagement: Focus on community-led services meeting needs identified by parents using generational potential and offering a wider range of activities. Encourage training/upskilling of volunteers by building on existing services by empowering community to increase its role

Partnership working: All partners could make time and commitment to create partnerships with collaborative planning between health, safeguarding and children's services in an atmosphere of mutual respect

Telford offer and vision: LA could move to a facilitator role supporting and balancing diverse cultural ethos, replace the coporate presence and influence and encourage and promote parental involvement with more user-friendly labeling

Localised commissioning: Continue high level strategic thinking about how children's services are commissioned, strengthen localized commissioning by providing support in how things work

Change Management: Manage consequences of structural change, orchestrate the balance of conflicting cultures/ethos, maintain and foster a positive and passionate outlook

Positive impact achieved

The Programme saw an improvement in the attitude of participants to the concept of co-production or collaborative working. After the workshop 63% of participants were confident about their understanding of the concept compared with 38% beforehand, and they were more likely to think that this new way of working would help most aspects of service delivery, for example: effectiveness, provision of more time and resources, and personal development especially for volunteers.

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.

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.

Information Helpline: 020 7512 2100

To read about the work of this programme in other areas, please visit www.4Children.org.uk