

Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: North East Lincolnshire Council



North East Lincolnshire Council (NE Lincs Council) was selected as it wanted to continue collaborative conversations about the future delivery arrangements of children's centres. The programme worked with the local authority to develop these collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings and events.¹ The intention was to leave a clear development of collaborative working practice that will help the local authority in future consultations.

Participation in the Programme with NE Lincs Council

Following a series of task group meetings, a 'speed dating' event was held on 20 November 2012. More than **25** local authority professionals, VCS representatives and children centre managers took part in the Programme in meetings and the event.

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

Challenge	"Given that staying the same is not an option, how can children's centres work with the voluntary and community sector to improve the opportunities of children and families when both are faced with less money and the need to integrate with a wider range of services?"
------------------	---

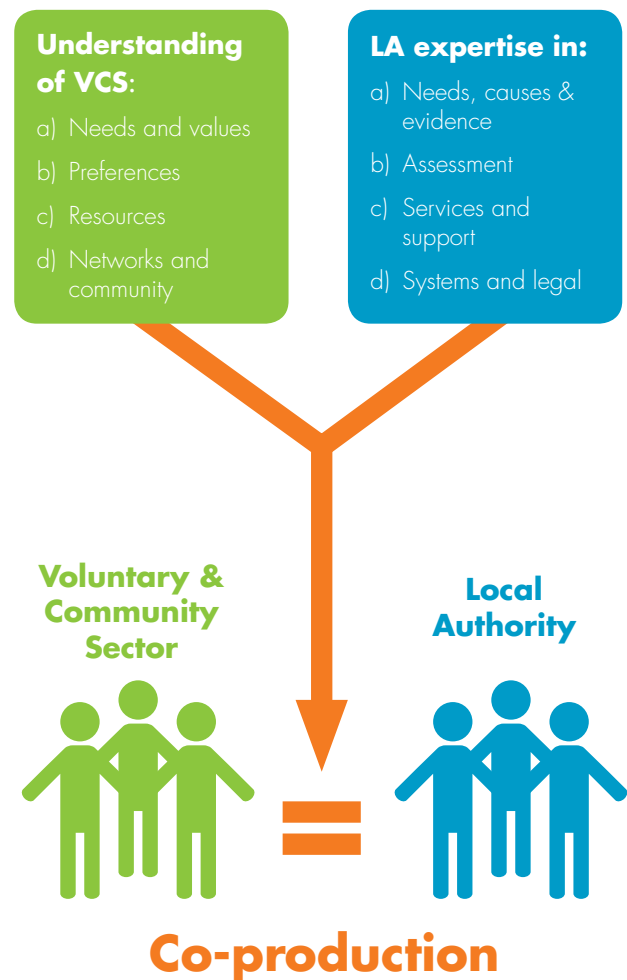
1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches from De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, board storm or forcefield analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible 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 aims to build consensus on what the challenge is before discussing 'solutions', through the use of 'structured' and 'open' conversation methods and challenge and celebrate commissioning/procurement practice.



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 North East Lincolnshire Council and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

Common emerging themes

Six common emerging themes were developed from analysis of all the comments made in the group workshop 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

Six main proposals to achieve successful collaborative working were generated by partners through the workshop event:

Performance management: 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

Community engagement: Improve understanding of the sector and its services, engaging more, with a commitment to attracting more VCS representatives. Also listen to and discuss needs of each children's centre and service provider

Partnership working: Develop autonomy for children's centres to form partnerships, actively seek partners from local VCS. And build on the willingness of smaller VCS to start working with children's centres

NE Lincs Council offer and vision: 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

Localised commissioning: LA could adopt the role of facilitator providing high level support and engagement in practical commissioning by supporting the VCS in setting up a consortium locally, through offering match funding and knowledge to facilitate large funding applications and setting realistic timescales

Change management: VCS 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

Positive impact achieved

22% of participants were more confident about their understanding of co-production at the end of the event than at the beginning, with more people thinking that there would be enough resources and time to achieve a collaborative approach, that user's needs would be met, and that the culture and ethos of their own organisation would continue to thrive within the new commissioning priorities.

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. NE Lincs Council could 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.

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