



Thinking Small When Thinking Big:
Research exploring positive practice for involving small voluntary
and community sector organisations in local children's trust
arrangements

A report for Children England

Funded by



GHK

June 2009

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Document Control

<i>Document Title</i>	Thinking Small When Thinking Big: Research Exploring Positive Practice for Involving Small Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations in Local Children's Trusts Arrangements
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<i>Date</i>	5 th June 2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research study commissioned by Children England¹. The research aimed to explore examples of positive steps that can be taken to create and sustain an environment in which smaller organisations within the voluntary and community sector (VCS) can thrive and contribute to children's trust arrangements and the agenda for children, young people and family services associated with Every Child Matters and the Children's Plan.

Children England is the leading membership organisation for the children, young people and families voluntary sector. Its mission is to create a fairer world for children, young people and families by championing the voluntary organisations which work on their behalf.

Children England has published research that demonstrated the importance of infrastructure to support the engagement of the VCS with children's trust arrangements and the Every Child Matters agenda². The research reported here involved telephone interviews with VCS Engage Regional Development Managers, local infrastructure leads and VCS organisations from three areas in order to identify learning about positive practice from different models of infrastructure.

2 Children, young people and family services and the small voluntary and community sector

The '*Every Child Matters*'³ (ECM) agenda and the overarching Children's Plan⁴ provide a comprehensive framework for services that support children and young people aged up to 19 years. Together they provide the Government's framework to bring together all of those who deliver services to children, young people and families in order to focus on improving outcomes across all aspects of their lives.

Children's trust arrangements were introduced as part of the Every Child Matters agenda and have been required of all areas since 2008⁵. Policy guidance is clear that VCS organisations should be involved at every level of these arrangements.

Research evidence indicates that on the whole there is a lack of engagement of the VCS in children's trusts. Small organisations in particular are identified as lacking the resources to engage. This research, in common with that by Children England, suggests that infrastructure is essential to the effective engagement of the VCS in children's trust arrangements and the Every Child Matters agenda.

3 Promising practice? Research findings

Our findings are organised by the three different examples we identified.

Example one: The Network

¹ Children England was formerly the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations, NCVCCO

² J. Thompson (2008) *Under the Radar: A survey of small voluntary and community sector organisations working with children, young people and families*, London: NCVCCO

J. Thompson and E. Whitaker (2009) *Small Change? A survey of small voluntary and community sector organisations working with children, young people and families*, London: Children England

³ DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters*, London: DfES

⁴ DCFS (2007) *The Children's Plan; Building Brighter Futures*, London: DCFS

⁵ Following the Children's Act 2004

This model is from Northumberland, a large rural county in the north of England with a two tier county authority with five districts. The Northumberland VoiCeS Network had been developed from a previous Children's Fund network; the local branch of a large national VCS organisation was the lead for that programme continues to provide funding for a part-time co-ordinator.

The network meets monthly and a database is maintained by the co-ordinator with email used for information sharing so that those who cannot attend meetings receive relevant information. The representatives who sit on the different groups of the local children's trust arrangements report back to the monthly meetings and ensure that all relevant information from across the trust and their activities is shared through the distribution list.

Example two: The Group

This example is from Derbyshire a two tier county authority in the Midlands, with eight districts. The model of Derbyshire GRID built on a previous *Connexions* network; the co-ordinator was seconded to the children's trust to further develop the network. Meetings were held across the county to consult with the VCS about what structure would support them. This model has a regional body, Derbyshire GRID Group, with two representatives from each district, where locality forums are held. The group is moving towards elected representation, with eight of the 16 representatives elected every two years. Group members have places throughout the children's trust arrangements.

The children's trust provides significant resources to support the structure: a full-time co-ordinator, a part-time administrator and three part-time development officers with a specified 'small organisations' remit. One of the representatives' roles is to feedback to the group about what is happening to support small organisations in their area.

Example three: The Forum

This example is from Portsmouth, a city in the south of England, with a city local authority and children's trust arrangements. When the trust arrangements were first being established, the executive group approached a local VCS figure to bring a sector perspective to the trust. He ensured a structure was then developed to bring representation from the VCS. This structure became the Portsmouth VCS Forum.

The forum meets fortnightly and the city Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) provide funding for a day a week of the co-ordinator's time and for a part-time administrator. The forum elects members to take places on the Executive and the trust's other groups, with the LSP providing payment to support attendance.

The forum is now moving towards the development of a Community Interest Company (CIC). The CIC will be a single body that tenders for contracts on behalf of the local sector members. It will provide support for smaller organisations, ensuring that they have the right policies and procedures in place.

Wider perspectives

A focus group was held in London but only two organisations could attend. Although they described working in London boroughs as very different from a county, a district or a smaller city, they also described similar issues in relation to infrastructure engagement and engagement in children's trusts. They could identify in the examples issues that were the same as their own experiences and learning that was appropriate to their local settings.

To obtain a wider perspective, Two VCS Engage Regional Development Managers (RDMs) whose regional responsibility did not include any of our examples were also interviewed. The features within our models which both highlighted as distinctive was the provision of resources that are dedicated to involvement of the children, young people and families VCS, particularly the significant resources invested in example two. Both RDMs were

interested in the development of a CIC in example three. As with the research participants from each example locale, the Regional Development Managers stressed that although children's trust arrangements have been developing for up to four or five years, it is still "early days".

4 Conclusion: Thinking small when thinking big

In planning services for children, young people and families, children's trusts are expected to work with their local VCS, including small organisations, to identify need. In commissioning services, trusts are expected to include their local VCS as an essential element of effective provision. Policy and best practice guidance recognise the clear messages from research: to support engagement, in both planning and the delivery of services, infrastructure should be developed and resourced.

In our final section we are able to make a number of recommendations from our examples of promising practice.

Recommendations

A thriving VCS includes small organisations

When promoting a thriving VCS it is vital that small organisations are included. Small organisations require support and appropriate measures must be taken if they are to be included and supported to engage in local infrastructure and thus prosper under children's trust arrangements.

- **Small organisations are vital to effective children's trust arrangements and appropriate support should be provided to enable them to engage; VCS infrastructure should be developed to achieve this.**

Take time but make progress

When developing local infrastructure, it is important that time is taken to ensure that what is developed is appropriate, and affording the maximum involvement of stakeholders. There also needs to be demonstrable progress. Progress does not need to involve huge change; what is important is that progress is being made, however incremental. Our research participants recognise that it is "early days" and that there is ongoing learning on all sides.

- **Infrastructure should be developed in a careful and locally appropriate way. It is important that whilst taking time, progress is demonstrated so that engagement is meaningful from the earliest stages.**

Ensure VCS ownership

All of our participants were very clear about the importance of infrastructure, which includes small organisations and that is carefully developed to be locally appropriate, being 'owned' by the VCS. Posts that are key to the infrastructure may be closely related to children's trust arrangements but for them to be effective they must be trusted by the sector. Two of our examples also illustrate that with time, effective democratic measures can be put in place so that representation is transparent and accountable.

- **The features within our models which both highlighted as distinctive was the provision of resources that are dedicated to involvement of the children, young people and families VCS, particularly the significant resources invested in example two.**

Provide Resources

Each of our examples was supported by some dedicated resource and participants in each locale were clear about the importance of this. Example two is clearly very well resourced, but there were also concerns about the sustainability of this. We conclude that what is

important is some dedicated resource for co-ordination and some resource to support participation, so that smaller organisations are able to represent the local sector within their children's trust arrangements. Resources are not only money, but also include time of key officers within children's trusts to attend meetings and to work with the VCS to find solutions to emergent problems. Resources can also include presentations by commissioners at meetings and work within the statutory sector to support the engagement of the VCS, for example by resourcing a commissioning guide, a reduction in bureaucracy for VCS organisations or allowing the time that sector-led infrastructure needs to develop and supporting the measures that are required to engage all organisations, particularly those smaller organisations.

- **Resources should be provided to support the development of VCS-owned infrastructure. Resources include materials and time, for example the involvement of local officers, as well as funding. Small organisations struggle to engage without resources to support this.**

Reach out

The inclusion of development officers in example two is the strongest illustration of how an outreach approach can support the engagement of small VCS organisations. Small organisations are often unable to attend meetings or lack the infrastructure, such as effective IT, to receive updates and information that is provided by children's trusts and any associated infrastructure arrangements. In order to engage small organisations, children's trusts and the infrastructure for VCS engagement need to reach out to their local sector in order to raise awareness, map their local sector and understand local needs. They also need to reach out on an ongoing basis to ensure continued engagement.

- **Small VCS organisations can exist 'below the radar' and identifying them so that they can be supported to engage with children's trusts requires an outreach approach. Children's trust arrangements and the infrastructure they develop cannot rely on organisations reaching them.**

Conclusion: Thinking Small When Thinking Big

Our title '*thinking small when thinking big*' is chosen to reflect some important features that have emerged from the research presented here. The ECM agenda is a huge one, with transformation of services and structures taking place on a major scale. Commissioning services from the VCS is a big change for many, for both the VCS and the statutory sector. Developing infrastructure that is representative of, and facilitative for, the VCS is a big challenge. But this research highlights that it is necessary in all these big challenges to think about the small organisations that are an essential and distinctive feature of the voluntary and community sector, and that provide valuable and effective services and support for some of the most marginalised communities.

Working in the ways suggested here would ensure that children's trusts are engaged in best practice – as identified both by Government and sector-led guidance.

GLOSSARY

CVS	Council for voluntary service
CWDC	Children's Workforce Development Council
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
ECM	Every Child Matters
LAA	Local Area Agreement
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
RDM	VCS Engage Regional Development Manager
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a research study commissioned by Children England. The research was undertaken by GHK, an independent consultancy specialising in applied research and evaluation for policy and practice.

The research aimed to explore examples of positive steps that can be taken to create and sustain an environment in which smaller organisations within the voluntary and community sector can thrive and contribute to children's trust arrangements and the agenda for children, young people and family services associated with Every Child Matters and the Children's Plan.

We would like to thank all the organisations and individuals who gave their time to the research.

1.1 Background: Children England

Children England⁶ is the leading membership organisation for the children, young people and families voluntary sector. Its mission is to create a fairer world for children, young people and families by championing the voluntary organisations which work on their behalf.

It seeks to achieve this by:

- providing a range of practical resources to members including training, events and a high quality information service;
- promoting good practice including by bringing members together to support each other and take collective action;
- stimulating policy debate on the issues which matter most to members; and
- lobbying and influencing central and regional Government, local authorities and decision makers on the issues that matter most to its members, using their knowledge and experience to achieve change.

Children England is in a unique position to influence and make a difference. Its members include the largest children's charities in the country through to small local groups working with children, young people and families in one neighbourhood. Children England works alongside its members and partners to achieve a collective vision of a society where children and young people are able to achieve their potential and where families and communities are supported and properly resourced.

The *Supporting Small Organisations* project was a three-year programme of activity funded by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), which aimed to support small VCS organisations to engage with *Every Child Matters* (ECM)⁷ through a programme of resource development, training, research and advocacy.

This research builds on two surveys of smaller VCS organisations⁸ conducted in 2008 and 2009, which highlighted the difficulties they faced as the ECM agenda began to be implemented across national and local government. Both '*Under the Radar*' and '*Small*

⁶ Children England was formerly the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations, NCVCCO

⁷ Every Child Matters is the overarching agenda for children and young people's services and involves multi-agency working to deliver preventative services and to improve outcomes across every aspect of children and young people's lives. More information is provided in section 2.1

⁸ Small organisations are defined in the survey as organisations with an income of less the £250k per annum

Change highlighted a lack of detailed knowledge about ECM and concerns about the implications the new agenda might have, particularly in relation to the ending of local authority grant funding and a move to the commissioning of services by newly established and developing children's trust arrangements.

Both surveys found that involvement in 'influencing structures'⁹ was closely related to the experiences and perspectives of small organisations in relation to ECM. *'Under the Radar'* found that those small organisations that were involved in influencing structures felt more positive about the opportunities ECM presented for them, more likely to feel well informed about ECM and more confident about changing their services in response to them. *'Small Change'* explored this further and showed the importance to organisations of being involved in influencing structures. These organisations were much more likely to:

- be very well informed about the Every Child Matters agenda;
- have noticed positive changes to how local services are planned and delivered;
- have a contract as part of their local area's commissioning strategy;
- have heard of the Vetting and Barring Scheme¹⁰ and understand their organisations' responsibilities around it; and
- have heard of Local Area Agreements (LAAs)¹¹, know what their LAA contains and know the implications for their organisation.

The surveys also found that where there was a lack of engagement and that this was linked to pressures on time and funding that limited the capacity to attend meetings. There were also concerns about how able representatives involved in children's trusts were to speak on behalf of the sector without the infrastructure to support them and their engagement with local organisations.

This evidence of the importance of influencing structures and the intelligence gathered through Children England's *Supporting Small Organisations* project provide the background to the research reported here.

1.2 Methodology

The aim of the research was to explore the role of influencing structures ('infrastructure' from here on in) in supporting the involvement of small VCS organisations in the ECM agenda. In particular the aim was:

"...to focus on the positive steps which can be taken to create and sustain an environment in which the smaller VCS can thrive and continue to develop. We want to learn from history and from the places and people who have managed to sustain a flourishing small sector."

⁹ Influencing structures include groups that identify needs and plan services, groups that advise on local plans for children's services, groups that decide on local plans for children's services, groups that commission services, groups that evaluate and/or monitor services and groups that distribute funding.

¹⁰ Created under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, the new Vetting and Barring Scheme will be administered by the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA). The ISA will decide who is unsuitable to work or volunteer with vulnerable groups. It will base its decisions on pulling together information held by various agencies, government departments and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). Once the scheme is fully rolled out, it will be illegal to hire someone in regulated activity who is not registered, and has therefore not been checked by, the ISA (adapted from www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)

¹¹ Local Area Agreements are the agreement between local government and their partners, including health agencies and the third sector, about local priority outcome areas and the steps that will be taken to achieve those outcomes

This was a relatively small piece of research, and this is reflected in the scale of the activity. The research involved a literature review followed by a series of interviews, which were all conducted via telephone.

Regional Development Managers (RDMs)¹² suggested examples of good or promising practice and from their suggestions a mix of three urban and rural localities were selected from across England. Following interviews with the RDMs we conducted interviews with:

- the infrastructure leads for each of the example locales in order to explore their local practice;
- managers from three small VCS organisations¹³ in each locale in order to explore their experiences; and
- Regional Development Managers from regions that had not participated in the research in order to explore with them their perspectives on our findings.

These final interviews supplemented a focus group held in London that only two organisations were able to attend.

More detail about the methodology is contained in Appendix A.

1.3 Structure of this report

This report is structured by the following sections:

- 2 Children, young people and family services and the small voluntary and community sector** – establishes the context for the research.
- 3 Promising practice? Research findings** – reports the findings of the research.
- 4 Conclusion: Thinking small when thinking big** – summarises the findings of the research and provides key messages for policy makers and those involved in children, young people and family services.

¹² Regional Development Managers (RDMs) are part of the DCSF funded and Children England managed programme of activity called VCS Engage. RDMs Support the strategic involvement of the sector within the region, working with voluntary sector partners to identify their ongoing support and infrastructure needs, coordinate the implementation of the VCS Engage programme in their region and support the development of improved links and coordination between regional Government Offices and the VCS in each region.

¹³ There is no single agreed definition of 'small' VCS organisations in the literature about the sector. The 'Under the Radar' survey and the 'Small Change' survey used organisations with an income less than £250K per annum. NCVO the national umbrella group for the sector uses bands of £1-10k, £100k-£1m and beyond. We agreed to focus as far as possible on small organisations within Children England's overall definition and with incomes at £100k.

2 CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILY SERVICES AND THE SMALL VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

This section provides a brief outline of the context for the research, drawing on a short literature review. Here we explore evidence relating to both policy and practice. The policy review establishes the context for small organisations' engagement with children's trust arrangements and the practice review focuses upon evidence of the experiences of small organisations in engaging with children's trusts.

2.1 Children's trust arrangements: Policy context

The '*Every Child Matters*'¹⁴ (ECM) agenda and the overarching '*Children's Plan*'¹⁵ provide a comprehensive framework for services that support children and young people aged up to 19 years. Together they provide the Government's framework to bring together all of those who deliver services to children, young people and families in order to focus on improving outcomes across all aspects of their lives.

Although a key focus of the ECM agenda is the provision of services, the aim to restructure this provision is also related to concern about child protection and the 'safeguarding' agenda. *Every Child Matters* was in part a response to the Laming Inquiry of 2003 that investigated the death of Victoria Climbié, a child killed by her carers. The Inquiry identified a number of failings in the sharing of information and joint working of professionals, and the Children Act 2004 included statutory requirements and responsibilities linked to closer working between professionals to help ensure the protection of vulnerable children. Children's trust arrangements are one mechanism of helping to ensure that closer working and better communication between professionals. They have been required of all areas since 2008¹⁶.

Children's trusts are led by local authorities in order to plan, fund and deliver children's services. They establish what services are missing in order to coherently address the needs of children and young people in an area and are responsible for producing a strategic plan that focuses on the outcomes for children and young people in the area. This means that most funding for children's services, particularly since the loss of key funding streams that the VCS relied on such as the Local Network Fund and the Children's Fund, will be coming through the children's trust.

It is therefore ever more important that small organisations are engaging with their children's trust to have a voice in local decision making to ensure that funding and services reflect the needs of the children and young people involved in their work. The intention for the VCS to be a central partner in children's trust arrangements has been clear since the first publications and guidance linked to *Every Child Matters*¹⁷. Government guidance, *Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sectors in Children's Trusts* (2005), made it clear that the VCS has a "distinctive contribution" to make, and that "voluntary and community organisations should be involved at every level of children's trust arrangements"¹⁸. This

¹⁴ DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters*, London: DfES

¹⁵ DCFS (2007) *The Children's Plan; Building Brighter Futures*, London: DCFS

¹⁶ Following the Children Act 2004

¹⁷ For example, DfES (2004) *Every Child Matters: Change for Children. Working with voluntary and community organisations to deliver change for children*, London: DfES p.1

¹⁸ DfES (2005) *Every Child Matters: Change for Children. Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sectors in Children's Trusts*, London: DfES p.3

has, however, proved to be a real challenge for small organisations, and the section below highlights some of those challenges.

2.2 Children's trust arrangements: Voluntary and community sector experiences

Every Organisation Matters (2008) reports a major study of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. The report shows that this part of the sector employs one in three of the total VCS workforce, but argues that it is being "adversely affected by huge policy and structural change"¹⁹ that is linked to the ECM agenda. The report argues that despite the policy guidance emphasising the importance of the sector, VCS organisations are not engaged in children's trust arrangements to the extent that they should be. The research found that:

*The pace and scope of change is substantially disadvantaging smaller organisations which do not have the capacity to engage fully in it.*²⁰

The report draws particular attention to the role of commissioning and the negative impacts for smaller organisations, as contracts linked to outcomes replace grant funding; smaller organisations are less likely than larger ones to have the capacity to compete for funding through the competitive tendering that is at the heart of commissioning and they are less likely to engage with children's trust arrangements. The report calls for more resources to support the involvement of the sector in children's trust arrangements, including engaging with commissioning.

The Audit Commission's 2008²¹ review of children's trust arrangements found that the VCS was less engaged than other stakeholders. Although most arrangements included a 'representative' of the sector, the report raised concerns about their ability to fulfil this role. This echoes the '*Small Change*' research, which found that small organisations that are not part of influencing structures are unlikely to know who their local representative is. The Audit Commission argue that children's trusts should ensure that infrastructure should be developed and supported and that:

*VCS representatives have the mechanisms and support they need to report on decisions, progress, and information to their constituencies.*²²

National research that explored VCS organisations' experiences of commissioning reached similar conclusions and recommended that children's trust arrangements:

*support and invest in the development of specific local infrastructure organisations that have a clear mandate for children, young people and families' services.*²³

¹⁹ Craig, G., H. Gibson, N. Perkins, M. Wilkinson and J. Wray (2008) *Every Organisation Matters: Mapping the children and young people's voluntary and community sector*, London: NCVCCO

²⁰ Ibid. p.6

²¹ Audit Commission (2008) *Are we there yet? Improving governance and resource management in children's trusts*, London: Audit commission

²² Audit Commission (2008) op.cit p.60

²³ Packwood, D (undated) *Commissioning, contracting and service delivery of children's services in the voluntary and community sector*, VCS Engage. The research included phone interviews with 127 VCS organisations. VCS Engage was a programme supported by DCSF to strengthen the engagement of the sector with the ECM agenda.

2.3 Conclusions

We have seen in this section the emphasis within policy guidance on the involvement of, and support for, VCS organisations in children's trust arrangements. We have also seen that the experiences of the VCS are mixed and evidence suggests that overall there is a lack of effective VCS engagement in the ECM agenda. Small VCS organisations are identified as requiring additional support. A central message is the importance of infrastructure to support VCS engagement and this is recognised as best practice.

The following section presents the findings of our research with three different examples of infrastructure to support the engagement of VCS organisations in children's trust arrangements and the impacts for, and experiences of, smaller organisations.

3 PROMISING PRACTICE? RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of our research. We explored models of infrastructure support in three locales across England by conducting telephone interviews with those leading local infrastructure and local small voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. In this section we focus on each of the examples in turn before our concluding discussion. In the next section we draw on these findings to make recommendations for how children's trust arrangements can support a thriving VCS.

3.1 Example one: Northumberland VoiCeS Network

For this example VCS Engage Regional Development Manager, the network's part-time co-ordinator and three organisations were interviewed. The organisations were:

- a local branch of a national early education charity, with two staff;
- a local mediation organisation with two full-time staff, with six part-time staff and 20 volunteers; and
- an organisation providing information and guidance for parents and carers of children with learning difficulties and disabilities, with one full-time and two part-time staff and a network of volunteers.

3.1.1 Outline: *The Network*

Example 1: The Network

Example 1: VCS Network

This model is from Northumberland, a large rural county in the north of England. At the time of the research, the county was a two tier county authority with five districts but it subsequently became a single tier authority in April 2009. There was some uncertainty reported about what the change to a single tier might mean for the VCS, but in anticipation of the changes there was a county-wide LSP and children's trust, and Northumberland VoiCeS Network, a county wide VCS network. The Network had been developed out of a group of interested individuals/organisations who saw the need to find ways of working with the emerging Children's Trust and was supported by the local Children's Fund Programme. The local branch of a large national VCS organisation that was the lead for the Children's Fund programme and they continue to provide funding for a part-time Co-ordinator.

What is key is having a funded worker who isn't doing [co-ordination] as an add-on to their day job. (Regional Development Manager)

As a result of these origins, the Network is a VCS initiative that is now supported by the children's trust, rather than being driven by the trust. Meetings of the VCS were held to discuss and agree the structure for the Network and the purpose. The Network has a place on the children's trust board and has Representatives on the different sub-groups and partnerships that constitute the local arrangements. There is a small budget to pay for Representatives' travel, childcare and backfill.

Historically the VCS has not been seen as an equal partner, but now it is being recognised and is making contributions to strategic planning. (Network Co-ordinator)

The VoiCeS Network tried having a locality group structure, but found this ineffective to maintain due to low engagement in some areas. There is a sector Management Group and it was agreed that single county –wide, thematic based meetings would enable more sustained attendance and involvement, supported by local meetings on an ad hoc basis when appropriate.

The Management Group meets monthly and a database is maintained by the Co-ordinator with email used for information sharing so that those who cannot attend meetings receive relevant information. The Representatives who sit on the different groups of the local children's trust arrangements report back to the co-ordinator to ensure that information is shared through the distribution list, aiming to share all relevant information from across the trust and their activities. Although there is a budget to support them, in practice the Representatives use their own organisations' resources as they tend to come from larger organisations that see the support of the Network as an important part of their local role.

The Network is inclusive of any organisation that comes into contact with children and young people and not only those that provide specialist services to these groups. The Network has successfully bid for Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC)¹⁷ funds for the delivery of 'safeguarding' training.

Fundamentally the Network is about building the capacity of the sector, and this is linked to the engagement and participation of the sector in ECM and the commissioning agenda. (Network Co-ordinator)

3.1.2 **Example one: Impacts**

The participants in the research identified a number of impacts. Firstly, the network was seen as an effective conduit for information about the trust, training and all of the activities and issues relating to the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda.

The network provides a link to [the children's trust]. Members of the trust board are invited to attend the network and that is really useful. The trust is now recognising that the VCS can deliver services and they are working hard to make their engagement with the VCS meaningful. (Organisation)

The network was seen to understand the locale and the local sector and to be able to provide support and activities that meet their needs.

The safeguarding training is being delivered as a roadshow in different locations, which makes it much easier for organisations in rural locations to access it. (Organisation)

The model of meetings was seen to be appropriate, and the newsletter, weekly email updates and briefings a useful and effective way of sharing information and ensuring local organisations were up to date with the ECM agenda and local activities, priorities and developments. The newsletter alerts organisations to events organised by the trust, so that they are able to attend and influence the local Children and Young People's Plan. The provision of a budget to support representatives' costs was seen as important.

3.1.3 **Example one: Challenges**

Participants also identified a number of challenges for the network. The network was seen as having required a great deal of commitment in becoming established and becoming recognised by the trust. Given the rural nature of the county and the time it had taken to establish the network, how to engage small organisations was seen as an ongoing challenge. Whilst many small organisations were involved with the network, there were concerns about the potentially large number of smaller organisations who had yet to engage.

One of the organisations participating in the research struggled to attend meetings.

It is hard for the network to be effective because a lot of people don't have the time to attend. Most organisations have five to twelve staff and there is a real lack of capacity to attend network meetings. (Organisation)

The needs of small organisations were seen to present particular challenges for the network, where they were dispersed across a large and rural county. More help was required in enabling small organisations to meet the requirements of commissioners when they did learn about opportunities.

The process isn't user friendly for small organisations and we need someone to facilitate it for us. For example, help with putting in bids and in building capacity to be able to put in bids. And we need help with the monitoring and evaluation requirements that are made of us if we are successful. (Organisation)

Nonetheless the network did have particular advantages for small organisations.

As a small organisation you work in isolation and the network is important because it provides local support. The network has been good for networking and developing links with other projects and organisations. Without the network, there would be no method of having contact with the trust or other VCS organisations. (Organisation)

The network does have a budget to support representatives' attendance at the different elements of the children's trust arrangements, but in practice this is not well utilised as it is

larger VCS organisations who fulfil these roles and, as outlined above, do this within existing roles. Whilst it is positive that larger organisations are happy to fund their involvement with the network as part of their function to support the development and engagement of the local VCS, it is recognised that the challenge of supporting smaller organisations to take representative roles remains.

The final challenge identified was how the network will be maintained over time. With part-time funding and a large area to support, ongoing network development was seen as presenting a challenge. There were also questions raised about the priorities of some VCS organisations. The network was working across the full range of ECM and Children's Plan issues, such as safeguarding or joint working, and some organisations were seen as failing to engage unless funding was the issue for discussion. Equally, some organisations saw the ECM agenda as being solely about funding and therefore didn't engage with the network, meaning that they may miss out on key information and support. There were plans for commissioning to take place under the incoming single tier structure but interview participants were concerned about what this might mean; there was a perception that larger organisations were better placed to engage with commissioning and be successful in tendering for contracts.

3.1.4 Example one: Key features

The following key features for positive practice were identified from example one:

- There is clear VCS ownership, with the network based in local experience, working with the sector to develop a structure that meets local need and supported by a sector management group.
- There is a co-ordinator post which, although part-time, provides for dedicated support focused upon the network.
- Through the network the local sector has representation throughout the county's children's trust arrangements and a budget is available to support this.
- The network provides a structure for representation for a diverse range of groups through an inclusive approach.
- Information sharing is a fundamental feature of the network and part of its effectiveness.
- The activities of the network demonstrate that children's trust arrangements are recognised as being about more than commissioning for the sector.

3.2 Example two: Derbyshire GRID Group

For this the VCS Engage Regional Development Manager, the group's full-time co-ordinator and three local organisations were interviewed. The organisations were:

- a youth worker for a regional church-funded youth work body, the sole member of staff responsible for management of sessional youth workers and volunteers;
- a manager of a district council of voluntary services (CVS) with five full-time and one part-time member of staff; and
- the manager of a growing organisation providing counselling to children and young people in schools and with a team of paid counselling staff.

3.2.1 Example two: outline

Example two: The Group

This example is from Derbyshire, a two tier county authority in the Midlands, with eight districts. There is a county-wide Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and children's trust. This model built on a previous Connexions network, which had developed a district model but was losing momentum due to changing priorities for the that programme. At the same time:

The trust didn't know how to reach the VCS or how to communicate and VCS organisations were struggling to find out about the trust and were getting different messages from different parts of the county. (Group Co-ordinator)

The co-ordinator was seconded to the trust and the Connexions network was further developed to the current model. Meetings were held across the county to consult with the sector about what structure would support them.

This model has a regional body, the Derbyshire GRID Group, with two representatives from each district. The group is moving towards elected representation, with eight of the 16 representatives elected every two years. Thus, eight of the current representatives were elected by their district sector organisations.

Each district has a locality forum where representatives feed back information from the group, and take issues from the forum to the group for discussion. The group members have places on the sub-groups that make up the children's trust arrangements and a place on the children's trust board, which they are also elected to attend by group members. Each district forum meeting is split into two parts, with one part discussing the same issues relevant to the wider group and the second part discussing issues specific to that district. This ensures that when the full group meets together all representatives have the same understanding about the broader issues for the group and that they can bring back the issues specific to their district for discussion at the group meeting. The co-ordinator organises the meetings but does not lead them or present at them. Meetings are held on different days of the week and at different times, including Saturdays and evenings, to encourage participation.

The children's trust provides significant resources to support the structure: a full-time co-ordinator, part-time administrator and three part-time development officers with a specified 'small organisations' remit. One of the development officer roles is to support small organisations to become 'contract ready' and the representatives from each district meet on a monthly basis with the development officer for their area. One of the representatives' roles is to feed back to the group about what is happening to support small organisations in their area. All members of the group are funded for their time at £150 per day, for both group meetings, locality forums and all trust meetings that representatives attend.

The structure is potentially 'best practice' and is certainly not the norm. You have four people supporting the network and that is a significant amount of resource. (Regional Development Manager)

The group explicitly includes the independent sector – uniformed groups and early years providers – and aims to be inclusive of all organisations that work with children, young people and families. The group has CWDC funds for safeguarding training and this was provided on a locality basis.

There is real commitment to the VCS within the trust. I'm on the inside and I can see that it is real. I'm there for those informal moments and chats, so I can feed in what is coming from the VCS and feedback to the VCS what I pick up. I can say the Director of Children's Services is very committed to the sector. And the sector can trust me. (Group Co-ordinator)

3.2.2 Example two: Impacts

All participants were overwhelmingly positive about this model. It was seen as providing a meaningful link between the sector and the trust, to be sector-led and to facilitate genuine engagement.

When the forums started I and few others immediately spotted that this was what we'd been waiting for. This was an opportunity to engage, to network and for the county to provide resources to support the sector. And it has grown from there.
(Organisation)

The funding provided by the trust was seen to demonstrate real commitment to supporting the VCS, but also important was the ability to see change resulting from the group and their engagement with local district VCS.

It's a two-way communication route. And things come out of the meetings that otherwise wouldn't happen... the meetings are a genuine attempt to try and show the VCS how things are moving, what is coming. You get very used to hearing 'we need to involve the VCS' and you think 'oh yea, do you really mean it', but through the meetings there's a trust developing. (Organisation)

The group has mapped the progress of the trust against the *Talking Trust*²⁴ recommendations for best practice and they are monitoring progress against these, with the agreement of the trust.

Children's Trusts and the VCS: Best Practice

Five 'Talking Trusts' recommendations for engaging the VCS in children's trust arrangements:

Active engagement of the VCS in the development and management of trusts, and at all levels, with resources to support this

Representation that is open and transparent and that the VCS is supported to act as a voice to challenge and campaign

An effective funding environment that creates a level playing field through fair and transparent commissioning processes, minimised bureaucracy and support for small organisations

Operational coordination so that joint planning is undertaken with the VCS as an equal partner and investing in the skills of the VCS workforce

Infrastructure development that is strategic, fit for purpose and reflects the needs and diversity of the local sector. Infrastructure is seen as essential for the achievement of the other recommendations

The work of the development officers in mapping the sector locally and aiming to ensure maximum engagement, for example visiting organisations who cannot attend meetings or who are newly identified for inclusion, was seen as providing opportunities and support for

²⁴ In 2006 'Talking Trusts' was published by the Community Sector Coalition, a UK umbrella network for national membership VCS organisations. The guidance provides a comprehensive set of recommendations for supporting best practice in the way children's trust arrangements work with the VCS. The recommendations reflect the messages that we have identified in this brief review, including the importance of infrastructure to support engagement.

all. The CVS described how they worked with their local development officer to ensure local small organisations received support, and how that helped them make best use of their own limited resources. The structure of the locality forums, with each forum discussing the same issues relevant to the wider group, was recognised as contributing to broader agendas around children, young people and family services.

There was a session on IT-crime, and that is just the sort of thing that the sector used to miss out on. (Organisation)

The group have produced commissioning guidance with the trust and this was seen as another example of real impact.

The trust wasn't really very well set up for commissioning but suddenly they decided they were going to do it and they took a risk. They talked to us about it and they went for it. It is still a unwieldy process for small organisations, but the trust have learnt and they have cut it down. So it's gradual. (Organisation)

The group have developed a volunteer accreditation scheme as a response to issues emerging from group and district locality forum meetings. Volunteers attend a programme of training and development and upon successful completion are awarded accreditation. This is intended to increase the skills of the volunteer workforce and provide reassurance for service users as well as commissioners about the quality of the service they can expect.

Example two: Challenges

There were a number of challenges that were identified for the model. Given the high level of investment, key was the need to maintain current funding. The development officers funding for two years ends in Autumn 2009 and there were concerns that their work to map the small organisations within the sector was only just beginning to provide a comprehensive picture, with appropriate support then dependent on this detailed understanding. Some minority groups, for example those working with travellers, were seen to require long-term engagement to further build trust.

The second challenge was the need to maintain engagement over time. As in example one, there was a feeling that some groups do not want to engage with commissioning or with the broader ECM agenda.

It's early days, and people are still getting their heads around ECM and what it means for them. (Organisation)

Finally, there was some concern that the highly focused district structure excludes county-based organisations. One participant in our research who was from such an organisation was happy to attend different locality meetings and saw this as an opportunity to network, but others thought countywide groups lacked an opportunity to engage in the same way as smaller locality-based groups.

Because the group is district based it gets district organisations, but county organisations struggle to have voice. The group know this and they are thinking about having occasional county events. (Organisation)

Example two: Key features

The following key features were identified as positive practice from example two:

- There is clear VCS ownership, with the group developing from previous practice, built upon consultation and with elected representatives with clear remits and lines of communication to their district constituencies.

- There is a high level of commitment from the children's trust, demonstrated by the resources committed, the attendance of trust board members at district forums and by the actions of the trust in response to the group.
- There is a high level of funding for infrastructure support, so that all representatives are paid for attendance at the group, district forums and all trust meetings.
- There are dedicated posts to map the small organisations across the county, to provide them with bespoke support to increase their capacity to engage with the trust and to become 'contract ready'.
- The volunteer accreditation scheme is an example of a sector-led response to a sector concern and suggestion.
- The group is mapping local progress against *Talking Trusts* best practice guidance.
- The election process ensures that representatives are locally accountable, with district structures in place to ensure this.
- Children's trust arrangements are recognised as being about more than commissioning for the VCS, with the group and forum structure engaging stakeholders from across the county.

3.3 Example three: Portsmouth CVS Forum

For this example, the VCS Engage Regional Development Manager, the forum's part-time co-ordinator and three organisations were interviewed. The organisations were:

- a mental health, counselling and befriending project with 10 full- and part-time employees;
- a charity promoting race awareness through projects and strategic engagement with 10 staff; and
- a substance misuse project with 15 full-time staff (and with a turnover over £250k).

3.3.1 Outline: The forum

Example three: The forum

This example is from Portsmouth, a city in the south of England, with a city local authority and children's trust. The trust has an executive group, which is the planning body of the trust. When the trust arrangements were first being established, the executive group approached a local VCS figure, with a high profile locally, to join them and bring a sector perspective to the trust. He agreed on the basis that he was supported to bring the sector together to enable him to represent them. A series of meetings took place, and the forum was the agreed final structure with the sector representative taking the role of co-ordinator.

The way it has developed has been very respectful... and we appreciate that [the co-ordinator] has been doing this on top of everything else. (Organisation)

The forum holds fortnightly meetings and is open to all organisations that work with children and young people. The city Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) agreed to provide funding for one day a week of the co-ordinator's time. They have recently agreed to provide additional funding for a part-time administrator. The administrator will collate and distribute information throughout the forum membership, which is currently done by the co-ordinator. The forum elects members to take places on the executive and the trust's other groups, with the LSP providing payment to support attendance (£75 for a half day). An independent chair was about to join the forum at the time of our research. The forum also has Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) funding for safeguarding training.

The hardest job has been galvanising the sector... but we're now having a meaningful dialogue and we have a place at the table. (Co-ordinator)

The forum is now moving towards the development of a Community Interest Company (CIC) that has been formed. A CIC is a company that is focused upon community benefit and with assets and profits dedicated to this. The CIC will be a single body that tenders for contracts on behalf of the local sector members and then allocates parts of the contract among its members. All members of the forum are members of the CIC. The CIC will provide support for smaller organisations, ensuring that they have the right policies and procedures in place. For commissioners of services, the CIC will guarantee quality service delivery. How service delivery by CIC members will be allocated will be agreed by the CIC.

The CIC is part of the strategy to support small organisations. It's early days, but it is moving in the right direction. (Regional Development Manager)

3.3.2 Example three: Impacts

As with the other examples we explored, research participants were positive about the impacts achieved by the forum.

The forum is really good... it has brought people together. As small organisations we're not very powerful and we're stronger together. (Organisation)

Organisations described how the forum had encouraged networking and had increased their knowledge of, and contact with, their colleagues in the local sector.

Participants also felt informed about the local trust and about developments, including commissioning, that had implications for them.

I feel very positive at the moment. We have got huge representation across all the key boards now and every meeting has lots of reporting back. (Organisation)

The development of the forum was seen to have been done carefully and sensitively. The leadership provided by the co-ordinator and others was described as effective and enabling genuine sector ownership and leadership of the forum. The achievement of funding for an administrator, building on funding already obtained, was seen as a positive impact that would further support the forum to become a more effective conduit between the trust,

statutory partners and the VCS. The appointment of an independent chair was seen as a further positive development and a sign that the forum was evolving to meet identified needs as they arose and at an appropriate pace.

The development of the CIC was described as offering opportunities for the VCS to strengthen their profile, their partnership working and the delivery of services by sector organisations.

The CIC will bring collaborative advantages, enabling us to share costs and enabling us larger organisations to support smaller ones more effectively. (Organisation)

3.3.3 **Example three: Challenges**

As with the other examples, maintaining engagement was seen as a challenge. Some organisations were described as reluctant to engage, but overall the forum was described as including the local VCS with few exceptions. This was related in part to the size of the city providing a manageable sector to support. Nonetheless, there were differences of opinion in the extent to which small organisations are able to engage.

There are lots of meetings... there are four meetings next week that we would like to go to, and which do we prioritise? Representatives from the forum are supported to attend the trust meetings, but what about us attending forum meetings? Our contracts pay for us to deliver services, not attend meetings. (Organisation)

Small organisations aren't using [the forum] as best they can. It's the same message, that they can't make meetings. Somehow that needs to be built into their time. We're a growing organisation and we see [attending the forum] as an important part of what we do. (Organisation)

The key challenge for participants was the CIC and how this will work. It was described as being based on openness and shared objectives and developing from the forum as a progression from emerging ways of working together.

The CIC will be a vehicle for us to work together. Small organisations don't have the skills to do a lot of the bureaucracy, but what they do have the skills to do is deliver. (Organisation)

The potential difficulties in agreeing the division of delivery within contracts, the resolution of disputes and the move away from competition to collaboration within the VCS were all examples of the challenges posed.

We need to establish trust, and so we need to move away from competition. We have to enter into [the CIC] in a spirit of collaboration, of supporting each other. The CIC will have to support member organisations and it will need to be built on trust. (Organisation)

The 'medium' size of the city was seen as perhaps offering the opportunity for a CIC that would be more difficult to establish in a larger city or across a county, but it was still seen as a risk.

It's not the solution to everything, and there will be difficulties, but we will work to resolve them sensibly, hopefully, because we're all here for children and young people and to provide them with quality services. (Co-ordinator)

Example three: Key features

The following key features were identified as positive practice from example three:

- There has been strong and careful leadership, working with the local VCS to develop the model and therefore achieving sector ownership.
- There is commitment from the children's trust to VCS engagement, supporting the forum's development as a structure to facilitate representation.
- There is commitment from the LSP to sector engagement, providing funding for the co-ordinator's time, payment for representatives across the trust and agreeing to fund an administrator post.
- There are elected representatives accountable to the local VCS through the forum, providing ongoing communication and ensuring a range of perspectives are brought to the trust.
- Children's trust arrangements are recognised as having broader implications for the sector than just commissioning.
- The development of a CIC as single VCS body is a distinctive feature of this example, presenting opportunities but also significant risks.

3.4 Wider perspectives

The key features of each example were presented to focus group participants and to VCS Engage Regional Development Managers who worked in areas outside of those of the three study locales.

3.4.1 Focus group perspectives

Focus group contributors came from London-based organisations working with children, young people and families. Although they described working in London boroughs as very different from a county, a district or a smaller city, they also described similar issues in relation to infrastructure engagement and engagement in children's trusts. They could identify in the examples issues that were the same as their own local experiences and learning that was appropriate to their own local settings.

Attending meetings was recognised to be important, for networking and for keeping abreast of local children's trust opportunities and developments. But it was also difficult to achieve for small organisations with limited resources. Participants described how difficult it can be to attend meetings or to access resources such as training when they are held during the day or week and when services involve volunteers and are usually delivered in the evenings and weekends.

Models are OK, but they need resources to make them work. (Organisation)

One participant had experience of exploratory discussions about a CIC being formed for the local VCS but the discussions had broken down, despite the involvement of an independent facilitator. There were felt to be too many unknowns and the model we explored from our research was welcomed and raised some questions. Are there models of CIC development from within the sector that could be used to inform other models? Could research or a VCS body work to understand how CICs develop successfully?

Both participants described how there are differences in the London boroughs where they work in terms of attitudes towards the VCS. Both saw infrastructure, carefully developed with local stakeholders, as providing an opportunity for the statutory sector to learn about the VCS and to raise awareness of the sector's contribution to quality services. The investment of resources in infrastructure was seen as a demonstration of commitment to the sector and to developing real involvement of the sector within children's trust arrangements.

3.4.2 **Regional perspectives**

Two VCS Engage Regional Development Managers (RDMs) whose regional responsibility did not include any of our examples were also interviewed.

The RDMs described different models of practice from within their own regions. The features within our models which both highlighted as distinctive was the provision of resources that are dedicated to involvement of the children, young people and families VCS, particularly the significant resources invested in example two. A concern related to this was that a high level of investment might be difficult to maintain over time, and thus there were questions about the sustainability of the example two model. The high level of investment also brought concerns that other local areas were unlikely to invest a similar amount. Both were clear that the key message is that resources are required. RDMs reported that within their regions, local authorities would not pay backfill to VCS organisations to support their engagement.

One RDM pointed out that where posts are held within the children's trust or local authority, VCS ownership and trust would be difficult to achieve and that sector ownership is essential for successful infrastructure.

It must be done with, not done to. (Regional Development Manager)

The democratic features of examples two and three were seen as supporting this. But the sector led and developmental nature of example one was also seen as important: local areas have local histories and contexts, and models cannot be imposed.

Both RDMs were interested in the development of a CIC in example three. There were concerns that the model was too reliant on 'trust' and that this could break down quickly. Across their regions, the RDMs knew of pressures upon organisations to merge and to enter into partnerships that were about the survival of organisations in newly competitive environments rather than for the benefit of services for users. The CIC was therefore seen to offer a potential solution to some of these issues and, as with our focus group participants, there was a high degree of interest in how it will develop over time and the lessons that it might provide.

As with the research participants from each example locale, the Regional Development Managers stressed that although children's trust arrangements have been developing for up to four or five years, it is still 'early days' (with statutory requirement only in place since April 2008). Development takes time and commissioning arrangements in particular were described as being in the earliest stage of developments.

3.5 **Summary and discussion**

This section has presented three different examples that have been explored through the research. Although the examples are different, there are some common issues that emerge and in this next section we provide the cross-cutting messages that provide learning for positive practice.

- Participating organisations for each of the example locales were clear that what was happening was locally appropriate: it built on local context, histories and in response to local requirements. In example one a group of organisations identified the need to develop a VCS structure and were supported by the local Children's Fund Programme; in example two the origins lay in a structure developed to facilitate involvement in the Connexions service structures; in example three a representative approached by the children's trust had led the development of an infrastructure in the absence of any existing practice.
- The dedicated roles to support infrastructure, and the distinctive focus of the infrastructure upon the children, young people and families VCS emerge as important.

Both of these features were seen to strengthen local involvement. Dedicated roles support engagement, enabling focus to be sustained and therefore not something that is always additional to other roles and responsibilities.

- A distinctive, but inclusive, children young people and families focus was seen to provide a strong voice for this part of the VCS. The huge agenda associated with ECM was seen as requiring dedicated focus and ‘protection’ from broader sector issues.
- Infrastructure was seen by research participants as vital for providing links between the VCS and children’s trust arrangements and a conduit for information about local developments and opportunities. Infrastructure was also described as bringing the sector together, to learn from each other but also to provide a voice for the sector. Some of the organisations we spoke to felt that as small organisations they were seen as representing minority interests and that their perspectives were not always sought or addressed. Infrastructure was described as offering an opportunity to raise issues and to strengthen small organisations’ contributions. Infrastructure, however, was seen to require a two-way process, with the statutory sector and local authority partners needing to learn about the VCS. Infrastructure was seen to offer an opportunity for the contribution of the sector to local communities to be highlighted, for the diversity of the local sector to be celebrated and for mutual understanding to be developed. All of our example structures have invited local authority and trust representatives to meetings and this was seen as contributing to shared understandings.
- There were issues relating to the engagement of small organisations across all of our examples. In examples one and three participants described how they were unable to attend meetings as the resources provided by the local trust partners (or Local Strategic Partnership) were for those selected from core meetings to represent the sector within local trust arrangements. Resources were not provided to support the attendance of organisations at the core meetings themselves. In example two, although resources are not available to support attendance at locality meetings, dedicated development officers provide information to small organisations that are unable to attend, although they were seen to be in the early stages of mapping their local sub-sectors and therefore organisations not known to them were not in receipt of support. It was recognised by participants that it would be difficult to fund organisations’ attendance at core meetings, but it was also suggested that solutions could be found. For example, funding is provided through grants and commissioning which recognises that delivering services also requires strategic engagement. This issue of how VCS organisations’ core costs are funded is, however, a perennial one for the sector²⁵.
- The challenge of supporting small VCS organisations in engaging with ECM was identified across the research participants. Yet, all participants saw their local infrastructure as a developing and an effective mechanism for supporting the local sector, with information routes essential for maintaining knowledge and links with the agenda where involvement in, and attendance at, meetings could not be sustained on an ongoing or regular basis.

²⁵ See, for example, Scott, D., P. Alcock, L. Russell and R. Macmillan (2000) *Moving Pictures: Realities of voluntary action*, Bristol: Policy Press

4 CONCLUSION: THINKING SMALL WHEN THINKING BIG

This report has presented the findings from research that explored examples of promising practice to create and sustain voluntary and community sector engagement with children's trust arrangements and the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda. The research is not able to provide judgements of 'best practice' as it was small in scale and involved a limited number of participants. Nonetheless, the research has been able to gather a range of perspectives to explore key features of three different examples. This has enabled us to explore the implications of our findings, and the applicability of the key messages that we can identify as emerging from our analysis, with areas outside those involved in the research.

In section two we saw how government guidance relating to ECM, and to the delivery of public services more broadly, consistently highlights the importance of involving VCS organisations in service planning and delivery. Small VCS organisations are seen as an essential element of local provision. In planning services for children, young people and families, children's trusts are expected to work with their local VCS, including small organisations, to identify need. In commissioning services, trusts are expected to include their local VCS as an essential element of effective provision. Policy and best practice guidance recognise the clear messages from research: to support engagement, in both planning and the delivery of services, infrastructure should be developed and resourced.

In this final section we are able to make a number of recommendations in support of our aim:

to focus on the positive steps which can be taken to create and sustain an environment in which the smaller VCS can thrive and continue to develop.

4.1 Recommendations

4.1.1 ***A thriving VCS includes small organisations***

When promoting a thriving VCS it is vital that small organisations are included. Small organisations are often those developing from an unmet need and can be the flexible, responsive services so valued by Government and promoted as key to social inclusion and effective services for users. Small organisations may also be long established, providing well used community services run by volunteers. Small organisations require support, and appropriate measures are required if they are to be included in local infrastructure and prosper under children's trust arrangements. Meetings need to be held at different times of the day, in different venues and locations, and tailored support should be provided as part of the recognition of what constitutes a thriving VCS.

- **Small organisations are vital to effective children's trust arrangements and appropriate support should be provided to enable them to engage; VCS infrastructure should be developed to achieve this.**

4.1.2 ***Take time but make progress***

When developing local infrastructure, it is important that time is taken to ensure that what is developed is appropriate and affords the maximum involvement of stakeholders. There also needs to be demonstrable progress. In order to maintain engagement, stakeholders need to see that it is meaningful. Communication is required to ensure that everyone is aware of both the time being taken and the progress being made. This may include outputs such as guidance or principles, but also outcomes such as agreements being reached. Progress does not need to involve huge change; what is important is that progress is being made, however incremental. Our research participants recognise that it is 'early days' and

that there is learning on all sides. This should be acknowledged and can contribute to demonstrating progress.

- **Infrastructure should be developed in a careful and locally appropriate way. It is important that whilst taking time, progress is demonstrated so that engagement is meaningful from the earliest stages.**

4.1.3 *Ensure VCS ownership*

All of our participants were very clear about the importance of infrastructure that includes small organisations, is carefully developed to be locally appropriate and ‘owned’ by the VCS. Posts that are key to the infrastructure may be closely related to children’s trust arrangements but for them to be effective they must be trusted by the sector. There are many demands on the time of VCS organisations and where meetings are purposeful and have a sector focus they are more likely to be sustained by their membership. Two of our examples also illustrate that with time, effective democratic measures can be put in place so that representatives have clear constituencies and associated mechanisms to share and communicate local activity and thus to provide representation that is transparent and accountable.

- **VCS ownership will ensure that infrastructure is based on local needs and local strengths, and therefore that it is effective. Democratically elected representatives help to ensure VCS ownership by making representatives accountable to the wider sector. VCS ownership is achieved through careful and transparent development so that trust is developed on all sides.**

4.1.4 *Provide resources*

Each of our examples was supported by some dedicated resource and participants in each locale were clear about the importance of this. Example two is clearly very well resourced, with dedicated posts to support small organisations, and the participants in the ‘wider perspectives’ element to our research quickly identified this as possible ‘best practice’. Indeed, this was recognised by all of the participants in the example itself. Yet, there were also concerns about the sustainability of this high level of resource. We conclude that what is important is some dedicated resource for co-ordination and resource to support participation, so that smaller organisations are able to represent their local sector within their children’s trust arrangements. Resources are not only money, but also include time of key officers within children’s trusts to attend meetings and to work with the VCS to find solutions to emergent problems. Resources can also include presentations by commissioners at meetings and work within the statutory sector to support the engagement of the VCS, for example by resourcing a commissioning guide, a reduction in bureaucracy for VCS organisations or allowing the time that sector-led infrastructure needs to develop and supporting the measures that are required to engage all organisations, particularly those smaller organisations.

- **Resources should be provided to support the development of VCS-owned infrastructure. Resources include materials and time, for example the involvement of local officers, as well as funding. Small organisations struggle to engage without resources to support this.**

4.1.5 **Reach out**

The inclusion of development officers in example two is the strongest illustration of how an outreach approach can support the engagement of small VCS organisations. The example is from a large rural county, but participants from smaller and more urban locales were clear that small organisations are often simply unable to attend meetings or lack the infrastructure, such as effective IT, to receive updates and information that is provided by children's trusts and any associated infrastructure arrangements. In order to engage small organisations, children's trusts and VCS infrastructure need to reach out to their local sector in order to raise awareness, map the sector and understand local needs. They also need to reach out on an ongoing basis to ensure continued engagement.

- **Small VCS organisations can exist 'below the radar' and identifying them so that they can be supported to engage with children's trusts requires an outreach approach. Children's trust arrangements and the infrastructure they develop cannot rely on organisations reaching them.**

4.2 **Conclusion: Thinking small when thinking big**

Our title, *thinking small when thinking big*, is chosen to reflect some important features that have emerged from the research presented here. The ECM agenda is a huge one, with transformation of services and structures taking place on a major scale. Commissioning services from the VCS is a big change for many, for both the VCS and the statutory sector. Developing infrastructure that is representative of, and facilitative for, the VCS is a big challenge. But this research highlights that it is necessary in all these big challenges to think about the small organisations that are an essential and distinctive feature of the voluntary and community sector, which provide valuable and effective services and support for some of the most marginalised communities.

Working in the ways suggested here would help ensure that children's trusts are engaged in best practice – as identified both by Government and sector-led guidance.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

This appendix describes in more detail the aims and objectives for the research, the methods that were used and the participants who contributed.

Aims and objectives of the research

The aim of the research was to explore the role of influencing structures ('infrastructure' from here on in) in supporting the involvement of small voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations in the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda. In particular the aim was:

"...to focus on the positive steps which can be taken to create and sustain an environment in which the smaller VCS can thrive and continue to develop. We want to learn from history and from the places and people who have managed to sustain a flourishing small sector."

The objectives were:

- to explore examples of good practice from across the English regions by focusing upon three different locales;
- to speak to a number of stakeholders and thus gain a range of perspectives about common processes;
- to focus upon the experiences of small voluntary and community sector organisations, defined here as having an income of circa £100k per annum;
- to limit the focus to 'good' and 'promising' practice as the research would not be extensive enough to make judgements about 'best' practice; and
- to provide recommendations about how children's trust arrangements can support a thriving voluntary and community sector to deliver services to children, young people and families.

Methods

This was a relatively small piece of research, which is reflected in the scale of the activity. The research involved a literature review followed by a series of interviews. All interviews were conducted via telephone. Notes were taken during the interviews and these were written-up immediately after.

Literature review

We undertook a short literature review to build on the '*Under the Radar*' and '*Small Change?*' reports. There were two elements to our review, policy and practice. Our policy review established the context for small organisations' engagement with children's trust arrangements. Our practice review focused upon evidence of the experiences of small organisations in engaging with children's trusts.

Interviews with Regional Development Managers (RDMs)

VCS Engage Regional Development Managers (RDMs) suggested examples of what they considered to be good or promising practice in supporting the engagement of small VCS organisations. This was done purposively to select a mix of urban and rural locales and a geographic spread. Three RDMs were approached to help identify locales to participate in the research. These were:

- a rural two tier country in the north of England;
- a single tier city in the south of England; and

- a two tier county in the Midlands.

Telephone interviews were conducted with the RDMs who had nominated each locale, to explore with them: their rationale for nominating the locale, how the practice in the locale related to other examples across the region where the RDMs worked and the key features of the proposed example that they would identify as good or promising practice and the reasons for this.

Interviews with infrastructure leads

We then conducted telephone interviews with the local infrastructure leads for each of the three example locales. We provided background to the research and sought their agreement to include the locale as an example in the research. We then discussed with them their local practice. This included: the local children's trust arrangements, the detail of the local infrastructure arrangements, the history of their development and the rationale for this, the main drivers, barriers and challenges and the key learning from local experience. Throughout, we included a focus on the needs and experiences of small VCS organisations within the broader local context.

Interviews with small VCS organisations

We then conducted telephone interviews with three small VCS organisations in each locale. Infrastructure leads provided us with details of small organisations that were members of their groups, networks or databases. Our criterion was organisations with an income of under £100k per annum, although this was not strict and we worked to include a range of organisations within the research. More detail on the participants within each locale is provided in section three where we discuss the findings from the research.

Interviews with Regional Development Managers (RDMs)

Our initial proposal included plans for two focus groups to discuss the findings from the research with a broader group of organisations. Unfortunately there were problems recruiting participants to the groups (due to the pressures on small organisations that impact upon their ability to attend meetings, which informed the research itself). A group held in London was attended by members of two organisations. We therefore agreed with Children England to approach RDMs from regions that had not participated in the research to explore with them their views on the findings of the research, how this compared to practice in their regions and the applicability of our recommendations in the local contexts across the regions where they worked. Two RDMs agreed to take part.

Project management and broader activity

Regular discussions were held between the project manager and Children England to agree next steps and update on progress. A presentation was also made at Children England's 'At the Heart' national conference for small organisations, where the findings were shared with 100 delegates.

Limitations

This was a small, qualitative piece of research involving in-depth interviews with a limited number of organisations. We were not able to visit organisations and explore practice in detail. We relied on infrastructure leads to provide us with contact details and a purposively selected sample. This means that only organisations known to leads or included on their databases were included in the research. However, the research participants were able to share what they knew about their local sector, including the experiences of small VCS organisations other than their own. Our focus on the sector means that the key strength of the research is that it is based in their perspectives and experiences; these local perspectives have subsequently been developed with a wider group of participants so that our findings are not limited to each participating locale.