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# Children England

Charities working for  
children and families

**Thinking small  
when thinking big:  
Research exploring  
positive practice  
for involving small  
organisations in  
local children's  
trust arrangements**

## 1. Introduction

This briefing summarises the key findings and recommendations of *Thinking Small When Thinking Big*, a research study commissioned by Children England from GHK Consulting. The study aimed to explore examples of positive steps that can be taken to create and sustain an environment in which smaller voluntary and community sector organisations can thrive.

## 2. Background

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. With members including the largest children's charities in the country through to small local groups working with children, young people and families, Children England is in a unique position to speak out with a representative voice and make a difference.

The *Thinking Small When Thinking Big* study was commissioned in response to concerns raised by Children England's members and partner organisations that current commissioning arrangements were having a negative impact on the sector and disproportionately affecting small organisations. The study set out to learn from places and people who have managed to sustain a flourishing small sector and draw out the positive steps which could provide solutions for the future.

This study builds on Children England's Supporting Small Organisations Project. This was a three-year programme of activity funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). It aimed to support small voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to engage with Every Child Matters through a programme of resource development, training, research and advocacy.

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### 3. Context

The Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda established a new way of creating, measuring and delivering services for children and young people with the aim of improving outcomes for all children and young people across every aspect of their lives. This aim is reflected in the five ECM outcomes: that all children should be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and enjoy economic well-being.

To ensure that these outcomes are delivered for children and young people each local area is required to have in place a children's trust (CT). This is a local partnership arrangement led by the local authority which brings together all the key agencies to develop and deliver the Children's Plan setting out how the ECM outcomes will be achieved in their area through integrated working.

The ECM agenda and the development of children's trust arrangements pose significant opportunities as well as challenges for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) as a whole, and for smaller organisations in particular.

For example, smaller organisations are often based in communities, delivering specialist services, and are skilled at reaching people that statutory services struggle to engage. Their knowledge and expertise can be a significant contribution to both children's trust arrangements and delivering services which achieve the ECM outcomes. However *Under the Radar (2008)* and *Small Change? (2009)*, previous research carried out by Children England, found that smaller organisations were less aware of the ECM agenda and their local children's trust arrangements, and that where they are aware of these developments they often lack the capacity and support needed to get involved. These challenges often result in smaller organisations missing out on opportunities to both shape and deliver services to children, young people and families. This has a particular impact in light of the shift from grant funding to commissioning brought about by the emphasis on measuring outcomes under the ECM agenda.

### 4. Promising Practice

The research focussed on three examples of potentially positive practice. These examples were identified by Children England's Regional Development Managers (RDMs) and selected to represent a spread of rural, urban, and county wide practice:

- Northumberland VoiCeS Network (rural)
- Derbyshire GRID Group (county wide)

- Portsmouth VCS Forum (urban)

In all examples representatives from the local authority and children's trust were invited to the infrastructure meetings to build understanding between the sectors.

#### 4.1 Northumberland VoiCeS Network

Northumberland VoiCeS Network was established by a group of VCS organisations as the Northumberland children's trust arrangements were being developed in order to ensure that the VCS had an effective structure through which to engage with the new children's trust.

The network is open to any VCS organisation which has contact with children and young people, not only those who deliver specialist services to these groups. The network meets through county wide meetings organised around common themes rather than on a geographic basis, although local meetings are held on an ad hoc basis when needed. The network is led by the VCS through a management group which meets monthly and makes key decisions on the direction and operation of the network.

Representatives from the network have a place on the children's trust board and on the different sub-groups and partnerships of the trust's local arrangements. A small budget is provided to pay for their travel, childcare and time away from their organisation to attend meetings (backfill). Representatives feed back to the network's part time co-ordinator who shares all relevant information from across the trust and their activities with the network through its distribution list via newsletters, email updates and briefings. This process ensures that all members, including those without the capacity to attend network meetings, are kept up to date.

#### 4.2 Derbyshire Grid Group

Derbyshire GRID was a further development of a previously existing Connexions network, following consultation with the VCS about what structure would best support them and facilitate good communication with the children's trust.

In this model the GRID is the regional body which is made up of two representatives of the voluntary and community sector from each of the districts of the county. The GRID has a place on the children's trust board and on the different sub-groups and partnerships of the children's trust's local arrangements; representatives from the group are elected to attend these meetings.

Each district has a locality forum for all voluntary and community organisations working with children, young people and families. Locality forum meetings are split into two parts: a discussion on the shared issues across the county and, a second part focussing on the specific issues for that district. The two GRID members for the district feed back information at these meetings and take issues from the forum to inform the representative work of the GRID.

In terms of direct support to smaller organisations the children's trust provide three part-time officers to support the development of small voluntary and community organisations in the county. Representatives from each district liaise with these officers on a monthly basis and feed any relevant information back to the forum. In addition, Forum meetings are held on different days of the week, including Saturdays, and at different times, including evenings, to encourage participation.

### 4.3 Portsmouth VCS Forum

The development of the Portsmouth VCS Forum was led by a key figure in the sector who was approached by the children's trust executive group to bring a VCS perspective to the trust. The person agreed to take on this role only if he was supported to develop a structure to enable the collective voice of the VCS, rather than just his own experience, to be represented on the trust.

The forum is open to all organisations that work with children and young people and meets on a fortnightly basis. Representatives are elected from the forum to sit on the children's trust board and the trust's other groups. The forum is supported by the local strategic partnership which provides coordination and admin support as well as a payment to support representatives to attend meetings.

As part of the strategy to support smaller organisations the forum members have formed a Community Interest Company (CIC). This is a company that uses its assets and profits for community benefit. The CIC will tender for contracts as a single body on behalf of the sector and then allocate parts of the contract among its members. Although still in the initial stages of development it is hoped that this model will enable smaller organisations to engage more effectively with the commissioning agenda through delivering appropriate parts of much larger contracts which they may have lacked the capacity to tender for alone.

## 5. Key findings

Although each of the examples studied pose important challenges, a number of key features can be identified as positive practice in creating and sustaining an environment in which smaller voluntary and community sector organisations can thrive. These are detailed below.

### 5.1 Northumberland VoiCeS

- Understanding the local sector, its needs and the environment in which it operates as a basis for developing support and influencing structures.
- Commitment from larger organisations to support the wider sector can have a major impact for small organisations (in this model the funding for the part time coordinator was provided by a local branch of a large national VCS organisation).
- A variety of approaches are needed to include and engage smaller organisations who may lack the capacity to attend meetings. This may require additional resources (e.g. the part-time coordinator role).
- Organising around common interests/ issues may represent higher value opportunities for engagement, peer support and involvement for smaller organisations rather than disparate issues being raised at geographically based meetings.

### 5.2 Derbyshire GRID

- A democratic structure with elected representatives builds accountability and clarity that representatives speak on behalf of the sector, rather than their own organisation or experience.
- Recognition that smaller organisations need more flexible meeting times, including outside of office hours, shows a commitment to this part of the sector and may increase participation.
- Having, or gaining a high level of genuine commitment from the children's trust builds understanding of the diversity within the sector and a stronger voice for the sector as a whole.
- Dedicated resources for small organisations (in this example provided by the children's trust) increase the capacity of these organisations to engage with local VCS structures and also enables these structures to understand the current picture of the small VCS in the area and engage with them in a relevant, appropriate and meaningful way.
- Creating a space for building awareness and discussing county-wide issues on the local level can work to develop a sense of connectedness, inclusion and belonging.

### 5.3 Portsmouth VCS Forum

- In addition to providing a structure for representation, local VCS structures have the potential to become self organising spaces for finding creative solutions to shared challenges.
- An attitude of mutual support where the specialist services, in-depth local knowledge and local relationships of smaller organisations are valued alongside the strength and experience of larger parts of the sector has great potential to strengthen the whole VCS.

## 6. Recommendations

The research set out to identify examples of positive practice for supporting smaller VCS organisations to thrive. From the examples studied, the report makes a number of recommendations:

### ● Develop specialist support

VCS infrastructure with a distinctive but inclusive children, young people and families focus should be developed to support the sector to engage, and have a stronger collective voice in local children's trust arrangements.

### ● Nurture local leadership

This infrastructure should be led by the local children, young people and families VCS, be appropriate to the local context and specifically cater for the needs of smaller VCS organisations who are vital to effective children's trust arrangements.

### ● Provide the necessary resources

Resources should be made available to support the local children, young people and families specific infrastructure in general, and small organisations' participation in particular. Resources could include, for example, dedicated posts, financial support, officer time and expertise, or guidance. To be effective, any officers involved must be trusted by the sector.

### ● Adopt an outreach approach

An appropriate model of infrastructure, VCS-led agenda, consideration of the needs and capacity for smaller organisations and the availability of resources to support participation are essential in supporting known, or already engaged smaller organisation to thrive. However, an outreach approach should be adopted to identify those small organisations which exist 'under the radar' and to support and encourage their engagement. Neither children's trusts, nor local infrastructure arrangements should rely on smaller organisations making the first approach.

## 7. Conclusion

*Thinking Small When Thinking Big* explored three examples of VCS infrastructure arrangements which represent features of positive practice in terms of creating and sustaining an environment in which smaller voluntary and community sector organisations can thrive. The report concludes that it is essential for smaller organisations to be specifically catered for when considering the bigger picture of the Every Child Matters Agenda, children's trust arrangements and local VCS infrastructure.

Although further research may be needed to draw out the implications of some of the arrangements studied for smaller organisations and to more thoroughly evaluate their impact, *Thinking Small When Thinking Big* provides a useful foundation for consideration of a range of approaches in supporting the development of a thriving smaller organisations VCS.

The full report of *Thinking Small When Thinking Big* can be downloaded from [www.childrenengland.org.uk](http://www.childrenengland.org.uk)

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ISSN:XXXX-XXXX