

Under the radar

A survey of small voluntary and community sector organisations working with children, young people and families

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NCVCCO

helping charities help children

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Executive summary

Recent changes to the way in which work with children is organised, including the advent of Every Child Matters, the development of children's trusts and the move to commissioning, have presented real challenges to the children, young people and families voluntary and community sector (VCS).

The Supporting Small Organisations Project of the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO) wanted to know how these changes were affecting small organisations working locally. We surveyed 108 organisations with annual incomes under £250k to find out how the new approaches to children's services were impacting on small organisations, what needs were arising for these groups and how those needs could be addressed.

The findings suggest that many smaller VCS organisations are in a vulnerable position when faced with the challenges of adapting to changes in children, young people and family services. They continue to function under extremely precarious funding circumstances, with many under threat of closure or having to cut back services to stay afloat.

Many VCS organisations are not accessing information about Every Child Matters and few find it easy to navigate the new structures associated with it, such as children's trust arrangements or children and young people strategic partnerships. There are potentially a lot of risks to very vulnerable families if the small organisations that support them are unable to access funding or to function well in the complex and changing world of Every Child Matters.

The findings can be grouped into three broad themes:

- the precariousness of funding for services and staff
- the impact of Every Child Matters on smaller organisations
- participation in strategic work, or influencing structures, outside of traditional service delivery.

Funding issues: key findings

- Most organisations (92%) surveyed would like more support and training around financial management.

- Almost 10% of organisations surveyed are closing or under serious threat of closure.
- Reported funding changes over the previous 12 months included increased, more stable funding, as well as decreased, shorter-term funding, with some organisations expanding their services while others have closed down completely.

Every Child Matters: key findings

- Organisations that have paid staff or that are part of influencing structures are more likely to be ‘very well’ informed about the Every Child Matters agenda.
- Organisations with no paid staff or that are not part of influencing structures reported significantly fewer changes to their services as a result of Every Child Matters.
- When organisations did report changes in response to Every Child Matters, very often they were changes to how outcomes are described and reported; very few reported significant changes to the content of their services or how their services are run.

Involvement in influencing structures: key findings

- More than a quarter of organisations surveyed reported not being involved in any kind of influencing structure.
- The majority of surveyed organisations who are not involved in influencing structures are organisations with incomes of less than £50k.
- Most organisations that are involved in influencing structures only represent their own organisations.
- Organisations that represent other organisations in addition to their own are likely to be organisations with incomes greater than £50k.

Introduction

In April 2006 funding was approved by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), now Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to enable the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO) to improve support for small voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations working with children, young people and families. In addition to raising the profile of small organisations and highlighting the essential work they do, the programme aims to explore how well groups are engaging with the Every Child Matters: Change for Children agenda, what areas present particular difficulties and how they can be supported to meet the new challenges of children's trust arrangements.

Part of the exploration phase of the project was to facilitate a survey of smaller VCS organisations. Prior to embarking on this work, however, initial evidence gathering was carried out to review existing literature around small organisations and their needs and to identify gaps in knowledge relevant to the aims of the project. Sources were included if they were produced by or about voluntary organisations that are localised, unaffiliated and unsupported by national organisations or if they were produced by black and minority ethnic organisations and organisations meeting the needs of disabled children; definitions of these groups were kept as broad as possible. See www.ncvcco.org for the bibliography of the 134 sources reviewed.

The review of literature led to the development of a 30-question survey relating to the impact of Every Child Matters, infrastructure needs, participation in influencing structures and service user involvement. There were open and closed questions, with space often given to allow respondents to explain their tick-box answers. The survey was administered extensively through local, regional and national networks. It is difficult to estimate the numbers of organisations that received an invitation to complete the survey as it went out in electronic format and was widely forwarded.

The survey was open to organisations with an annual income of under £250k per annum. In designing the questionnaire, and, indeed, in determining the scope of NCVCCO's Supporting Smaller VCS Organisations work, there was much discussion about how to define a 'small organisation'. For example, it was recognised that an organisation with an income of £250k will not feel small compared to an organisation of £5k. However, keeping this upper limit of £250k allowed us to include groups who felt small compared to some of the bigger organisations working around them, possibly working regionally or nationally as well as locally. Additionally, we were able to analyse differences between larger and smaller small organisations (under and over £50k for the purpose of this study). It is interesting to note that the survey indicated very few differences between these two groups of organisations, and it would be useful in another study to compare the responses to this survey with those of much larger organisations in order to ask if these similarities are indicative of a general trend in the VCS or if organisations on the lower end of the size spectrum are having different experiences from those on the larger end.

One hundred and eight organisations completed the survey. While this may not be a substantial response, it is sufficient for the analysis to generate indicative themes upon which further work can be developed as part of NCVCCO's Supporting Smaller VCS Organisations work.

In addition to an analysis of all responses, emergent subgroups were also examined, including organisations which:

- have paid/no paid staff
- are involved/not involved in influencing structures, such as groups that advise or decide on local plans for children’s services, commission services, evaluate and/or monitor services or distribute funding
- are members/not members of local, regional and national support organisations
- have over/under £50k annual income
- work with black and minority ethnic children
- work with disabled children.

The responses can broadly be grouped into three themes:

- the precariousness of funding for services and staff
- the impact of Every Child Matters on smaller organisations
- participation in strategic work, or influencing structures, outside of traditional service delivery.

After describing the characteristics of survey respondents, we will examine these three themes in more depth.

The organisations that responded

Size

Every English region was represented in the responses, and there was a good spread of organisations of various sizes with annual incomes less than £250k. For the purpose of analysing difference between the responses of larger and smaller organisations, responses were broken down by those that have annual incomes of over and under £50k. Sixty-four organisations had incomes under £50k and 41 over £50k; three did not respond to this question. See Graph 1 for a breakdown of organisations’ annual income.

Graph 1 – What is your current annual income?



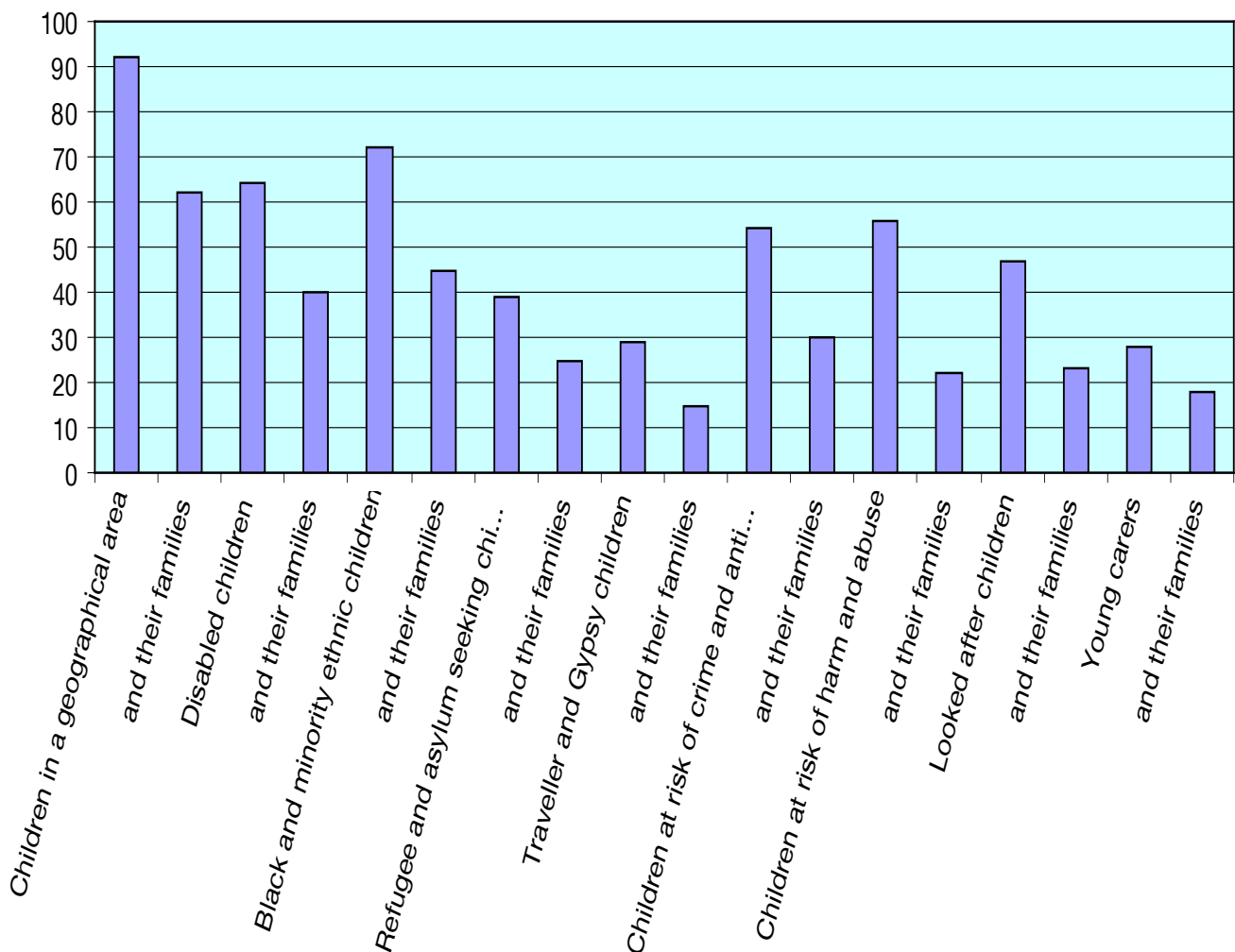
Children

The survey asked organisations about the children they work with and whether families are included in their services. Ninety-two organisations (85%) worked with children in a set geographical area, such as a neighbourhood or a borough. Seventy-two organisations (67%) reported working with black and minority ethnic or refugee children, with 16 working solely with black and minority ethnic or refugee children. Sixty-four organisations (59%) included disabled children in their service and 11 worked solely with disabled children.

Over half of organisations overall (58%) reported working with families as well as children. See Graph 2 for a breakdown of the children and families with whom respondents worked.

An analysis was carried out to determine if organisations working with black and minority ethnic or refugee children or disabled children showed any different trends in the answers they gave to survey questions. There were no discernable differences between either of these groups and the general group.

Graph 2 – Which groups of children are included in your services?



Funding issues

Respondents were asked a range of questions designed to explore issues around funding. These included questions about the support and training needed to manage finances and raise funds and about any changes experienced with the funding of their organisations. Respondents were also asked about the effect of these funding changes, either positive or negative, on their services.

Some key findings

- Most organisations (92%) surveyed would like more support and training around financial management.
- Almost 10% of organisations surveyed are closing or under serious threat of closure.
- Reported funding changes over the previous 12 months included increased, more stable funding, as well as decreased, shorter-term funding, with some organisations expanding their services while others have closed down completely.

Training and support

When asked how important it was for their organisation to receive support in managing finances and raising funds, 67% of organisations said it was 'very important'. There was no discernable difference between the answers of any of the sub-groups of respondents.

Respondents were also asked what training they had been offered, what they had attended and what they would like to attend. Six per cent said they had been offered training on financial management but had not attended, 17% had attended such training, and 35% would like to attend such training.

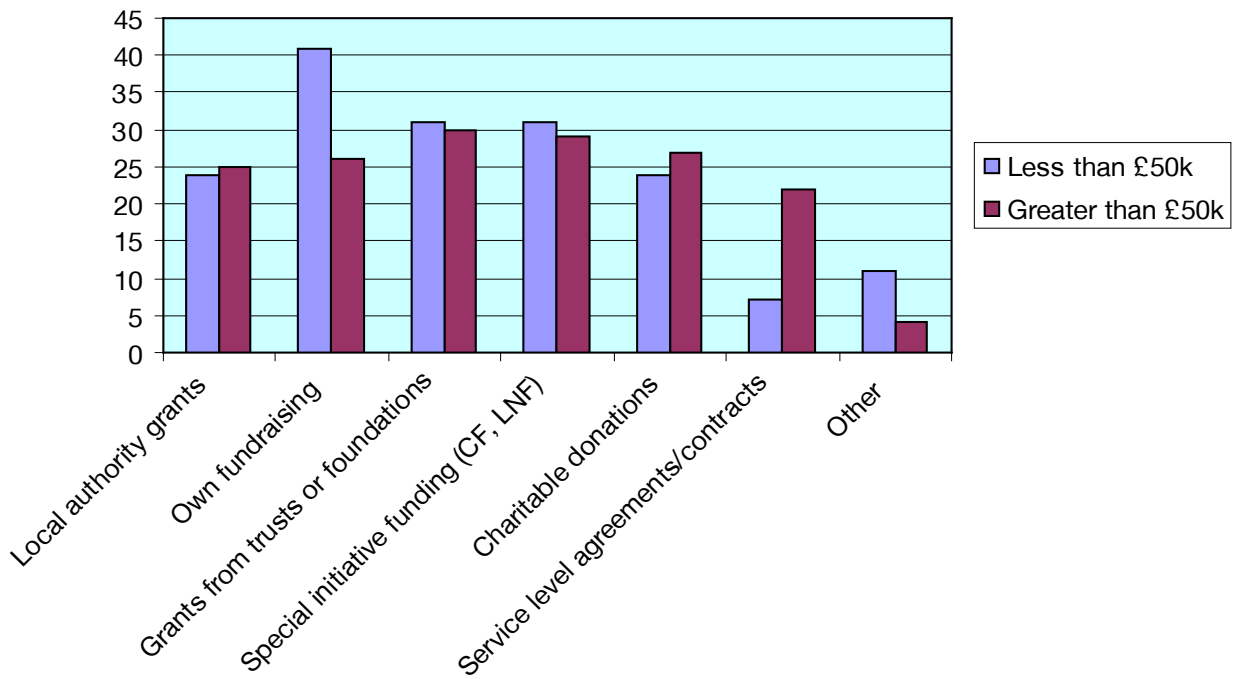
Diversification of funding sources

Overall, 66% of organisations had between two and four sources of funding. Only 14 organisations, or 13%, had less than two sources of funding; two of these are organisations which recently closed down due to lack of funds. Twenty-one per cent of organisations reported five or six sources of income.

One difference that appeared between larger and smaller organisations was that larger organisations had a greater diversity of funding sources. Organisations with an annual income of under £50k had an average of 2.6 sources of funding per organisation. Organisations with an annual income of over £50k had an average of four sources of funding per organisation.

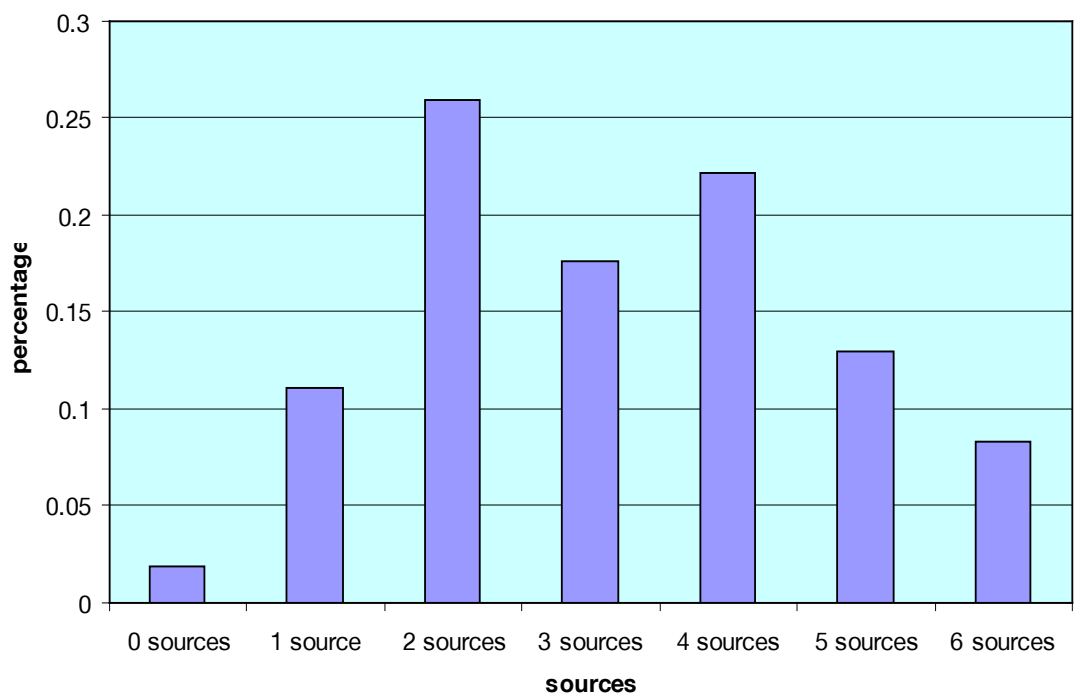
This diversification of funding sources may allow organisations to ride the waves of funding regime change better than organisations that rely on only one or two sources. See Graphs 3 and 4 overleaf.

Graph 3 – What are your current sources of funding?



CF: Children’s Fund
LNF: Local Network Fund

Graph 4 – How many different sources of income do you have?



Funding changes

In the previous year, some groups experienced increased or more stable funding, which had facilitated increased service provision and improved services. Other groups spoke of decreased funding, short-term funding, a lack of core funding or problems accessing funding; many of these organisations were worried about closure. Of the 73 organisations who responded about funding changes over the previous 12 months, 36 (49%) experienced a negative change in funding, 13 (18%) experienced a positive funding change and 24 (33%) felt that there had been no change.

“We have found it difficult to access funds to support the sustainability of our setting. We are a small charity and have tried to access The Big Lottery and Children in Need without success.”

“We received an LNF [Local Network Fund] grant in 2006; this has meant we have been able to provide more instruments and learning possibilities for the members of the band.”

“There is less funding about and confusion around commissioning.”

“There seems to be a lot of confusion as to what fund to go to, and a lot of the statutory and high-profile organisations seem to have better information and access to funding.”

“There appears to be more local funding available.”

The survey results showed no discernable differences between the types of organisations that experienced easier funding situations and those that experienced more difficult funding situations over the previous year. Larger and smaller organisations (over £50k and under £50k), those who provide services to disabled children or those who provide services to BMER children all had similar experiences of funding trends.

Of those respondents who had not noticed any recent changes in the way organisations are funded, many of them commented on the continuation of poor funding practice, ie funding that is inadequate, short-term, or does not address core expenses. Although respondents often expressed frustration at these circumstances – one respondent said the only change she noticed relating to funding was more grey hairs – many comments reflected the resourcefulness of the VCS.

“There has been a huge decrease in funds, [which] makes it more difficult to provide an array of services. However, it has meant that we have shared skills with other similar organisations in our locality. Staff have pulled together to still provide quality and much-needed services with very little resources.”

“Reduction in level of funding without warning, which put a huge financial strain on the Association, but which was overcome by some serious fundraising and by selling some assets.”

Effect of negative funding changes

The responses to the survey echo the themes in the literature reviewed about small organisations: the destabilisation of funding security, whether through funds being cut or decreased or through only short-term funding being offered, has impacted significantly on how the VCS functions. One respondent summed up the situation by saying,

“The funding we were promised last year has this year been cut, leaving us in the embarrassing situation of having expanded and developed. Now we have to wind down services because of changes in personnel. Newly trained volunteers will have to be discarded, families offered support will have to see services withdrawn, the management committee is frustrated and left looking foolish, and the trustees have lost all confidence in local authority pledges.”

More time spent chasing funding

Although the time and money organisations have to spend looking for funding is an age-old complaint, many respondents felt that the situation had worsened.

“...much more increased competition and much more time spent on looking to sustain project work that is making an impact on the ground.”

“...funding that lasts only 12 months, and it is considerable work to reapply; I really would like to see a change in this culture, it restricts planning.”

Cutting back services

One response to decreases in funding has been for organisations to scale back work by offering fewer or less comprehensive services. Of the 36 organisations who reported a negative funding change, eight said they had to cut back services.

“We have been offered a much reduced amount of CF [Children’s Fund] funding; we are told it is because the funding has been reduced in the final year. These changes mean that children will have to be turned away owing to less funding for staff. Equipment: we are unable to replace broken items or purchase new items. Trips will have to be kept to a minimum or only children that can afford to pay the full amount will be able to go, which seems to defeat the object of the project (Every Child Matters).”

Threats of closures

Of the 36 organisations who reported a negative change in funding over the last year, ten are either closing or have serious worries that they will have to close.

“Closure. We are an infrastructure provider but no one is prepared to fund our work – everyone referred us to the children’s trust but it is not really ready.”

“We might not be able to continue the programme after the summer if we don’t receive funding.”

“It is very hard to receive funding, especially when the organisation is not big. Now that our main funding will be coming to an end in March 2008 we are worried and trying to secure more funding elsewhere, but have not yet succeeded.”

Services expected to run on less money

Some organisations felt that they were increasingly expected to do more for less money.

“Our funding from county council goes down every year, but we seem to be doing more and more and accessing more children with less funding. We offer more services than we did a year ago but are expected to do so on little money. We find it more and more difficult to find funding for core services; we can find funding for individual projects but no rent for the building to run them in.”

Commissioning

Very few organisations spoke of commissioning as a helpful development.

“Many voluntary and community sector grants have been withdrawn. ‘Commissioning’ has been dangled like a carrot for too long with no firm assurances of when or how much money will be available.”

“Absolute inertia in respect of commissioning has allowed some voluntary sector bodies to fold whilst waiting for the mythical ‘children’s trust commissioning’ to actually occur.”

“There has been a lack of consistency from commissioning services.”

One organisation did mention that it had benefited from the commissioning process.

“[We had] a cut in our Sure Start grant and a rejection of a grant aid application from one local authority, but a similar amount was gained through the commissioning route. Children’s Centre funding came online. A much larger variety of services were offered to, and taken up by, parents. There was greater stability in the staff group and greater partnership working with statutory organisations. There were better resources for the nursery, crèche and groups – and because of this, greater participation from parents. Increase in nursery places by about a quarter in one year.”

Effect of positive funding changes

Thirteen organisations reported positive funding changes over the previous 12 months. There were various reasons for these changes, including the implementation of extended schools, winning new, longer-term funding bids and restructuring services.

“With the extended hours we have more funding. This will enable us to train staff more and open more hours.”

“Our grant from the Social Services Children with Disabilities team has increased from £5k to £10K from a total budget of around £28k. The remainder is raised from fundraising and charitable grants. We are able to offer places to more children.”

“We are funded for two years through the local authority Children’s Centre budget, which has meant more integrated local service provision, more stable funding.”

“Within the last year I have secured core funding for the organisation for the next five years. I integrated the after school club into the funding proposal – previously it had been separate and funded by LNF [Local Network Fund].”

Positive difference that a change in funding practices would make

Finally, when respondents were asked what would improve services to their target groups and what would help their organisation to deliver a better service overwhelmingly organisations spoke of better funding practices. Sixty-nine organisations (78% of those who answered the question) mentioned increased, more stable and easier access to funding.

Every Child Matters

Every Child Matters: Change for Children (ECM) aims to improve outcomes for children, young people and families by developing more effective and accessible services focused around their diverse and specific needs. ECM is part of the government's strategy to support and improve the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19. This approach is centred on all children having the support they need to:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being.

The ECM programme introduces a number of changes to the way in which all organisations – whether voluntary, statutory, private or independent – work with children and young people. Children's trust arrangements are one of the main vehicles through which services will be delivered by an array of agencies. The VCS is a key partner in delivering services for a range of children, young people and families, both through contracts for public services and by developing innovative projects to engage with 'harder to reach' children.

Some key findings

- Organisations that have paid staff or are part of influencing structures are more likely to be 'very well' informed about the ECM agenda.
- Organisations with no paid staff or that are not part of any influencing structure reported significantly fewer changes to their services because of ECM.
- When organisations did report changes in response to ECM, very often they were around how outcomes are described and reported; very few reported significant change to the content of services or how services are run.

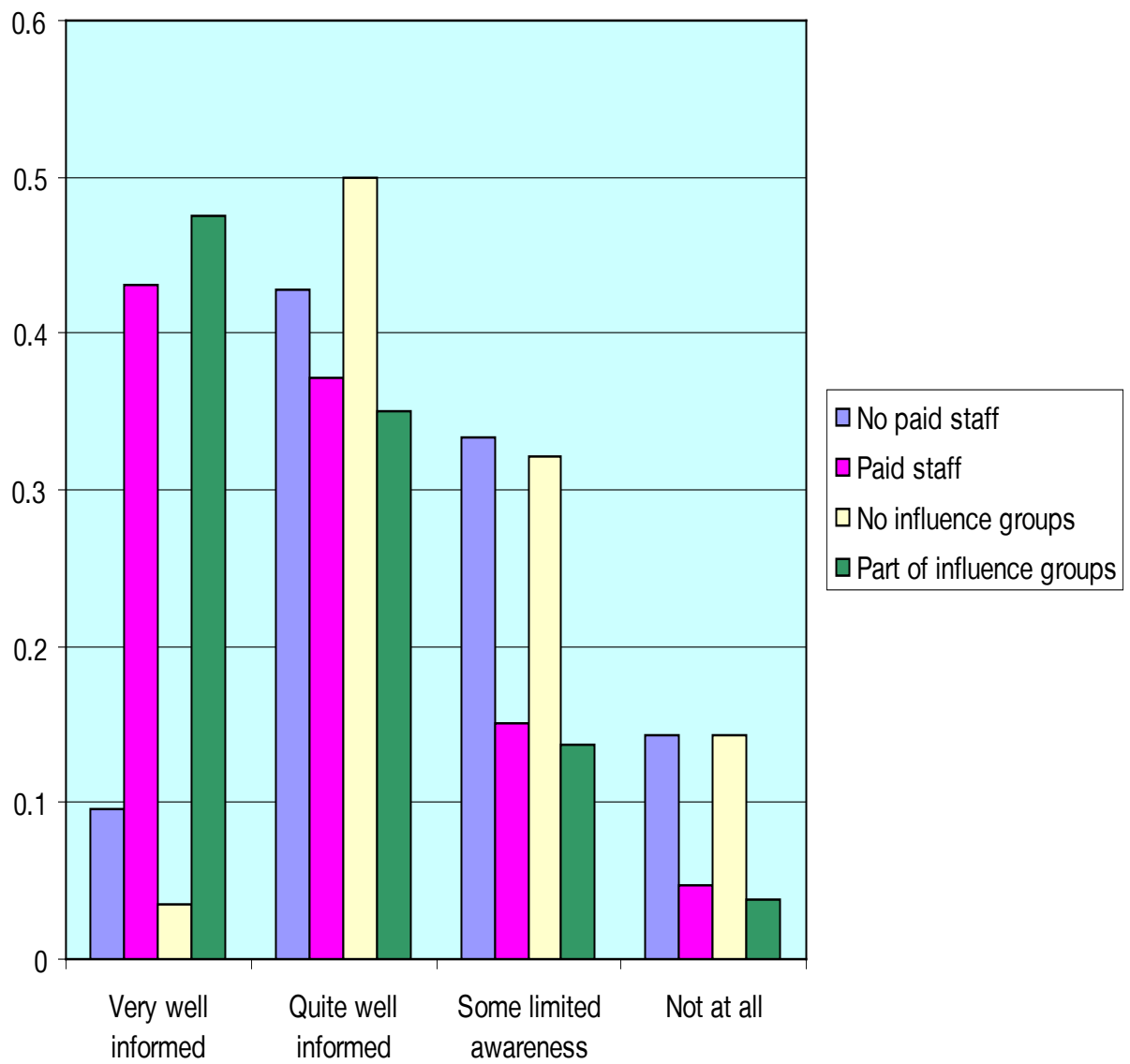
Awareness

Organisations with paid staff or that are part of influencing structures are far more likely to be 'very well' informed about the ECM agenda. Eighty per cent of agencies with paid staff versus 53% with no paid staff, and 83% of agencies involved in influencing structures versus 53% who have no involvement, felt they were well informed about Every Child Matters. See Graph 5 overleaf.

Service changes

Overall, 44% of organisations reported that the ECM agenda had not changed their services. When broken down in subgroups, no real differences were found between organisations with incomes over and under £50k. However, ECM was significantly less likely to change organisations' services if they had no paid staff or were not involved in influencing structures; 82% of organisations with no paid staff and 71% of organisations not involved in influencing structures had not changed their services. This compares with 49% of organisations with paid staff and 45% of organisations that were engaged in influencing structures that reported no changes.

Graph 5 – How aware are you of the ECM outcomes and the Change for Children agenda?



How ECM changed services

The most often reported change was the way in which organisations monitor and evaluate their services. Thirty-eight out of 44 organisations that had reported changing their services also changed their monitoring and evaluation processes. Referring to actual service delivery, however, comments suggest that many organisations changed how they described and reported their outcomes, but had made little change to the content of services or how they are run.

“Policies have been reviewed to ensure they meet ECM. Self-evaluation is now dependent on the five outcomes.”

“We have changed the evaluation to some extent – to comply with new regulations. However, it is fairly cosmetic because we are constantly evaluating our services – but in the past we have not written them down in the now prescribed format.”

Other reported changes were around networking and partnership working.

“We have found it easier to link with other agencies in planning and managing our scheme.”

“We have been able to negotiate better partnerships and contracts because we can offer evidence of being able to meet the five outcomes.”

Some organisations spoke about how policies surrounding ECM made it more difficult for them to run their services.

“While we see these issues [such as new safeguarding policies] as very important and there is some good sense in these policies they have tended to make things much more bureaucratic and time consuming in a way which discourages volunteers. One result is that we are less enthusiastic about anything slightly adventurous such as taking groups of kids down to the local park.”

Why ECM did not change services

The most reported reason for not changing services because of ECM was that the organisation’s services already contributed to the outcomes without needing to change; 35 of the 44 organisations (80%) that reported not changing their services gave this reason. Some comments suggest the ECM framework has changed the way outcomes are described or reported but not the content of service delivery per se.

“We have always had the same outcomes in mind well before the slogans were designed.”

“Most of what we do already fits into the outcomes, though the reports I provide to the Children’s Fund now focus more tightly on the ECM targets.”

“We have not altered our service but have realigned our outcomes with the ECM five outcomes.”

Some comments suggest that the ECM agenda fails to meet the needs of all children.

“We already work toward and cover four of the five Every Child Matters outcomes. The one thing we were able to do was highlight the barriers to some of the ECM outcomes that our young people face because of their situations.”

“ECM failed to recognise the needs of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transexual people.”

Twenty-five per cent of organisations who reported that ECM had not changed their services said this was because they did not know about ECM or how it related to their work.

“We feel we meet the outcomes, but as yet we haven’t received specific training or acknowledgement [about] the outcomes and our performance against them.”

“We have not been informed fully as yet.”

“There has been a lot of communication but we’re still not sure of the key concepts of ECM.”

Local changes

Fifty-two per cent of all respondents had noticed changes locally as a result of new approaches to children’s services. There was, however, a difference in the type of organisation which had noticed changes, with 60% of agencies involved in influencing structures noticing changes and only 21% of those not involved in such structures noticing changes. The difference was less pronounced when comparing organisations that do or do not have paid staff, but all the same it is interesting to note that 52% of groups with paid staff compared to 38% with no paid staff noticed local changes. See Graph 6.

Of those organisations that had observed local changes because of ECM, a wide variety of changes were mentioned, mostly positive. Of the 54 organisations who noticed local changes as a result of ECM, 46% had positive things to say about the changes compared to 24% who had negative comments to make and 30% who reported either a mixed situation or made no judgement.

Positive changes

Improved partnership or multi-agency working:

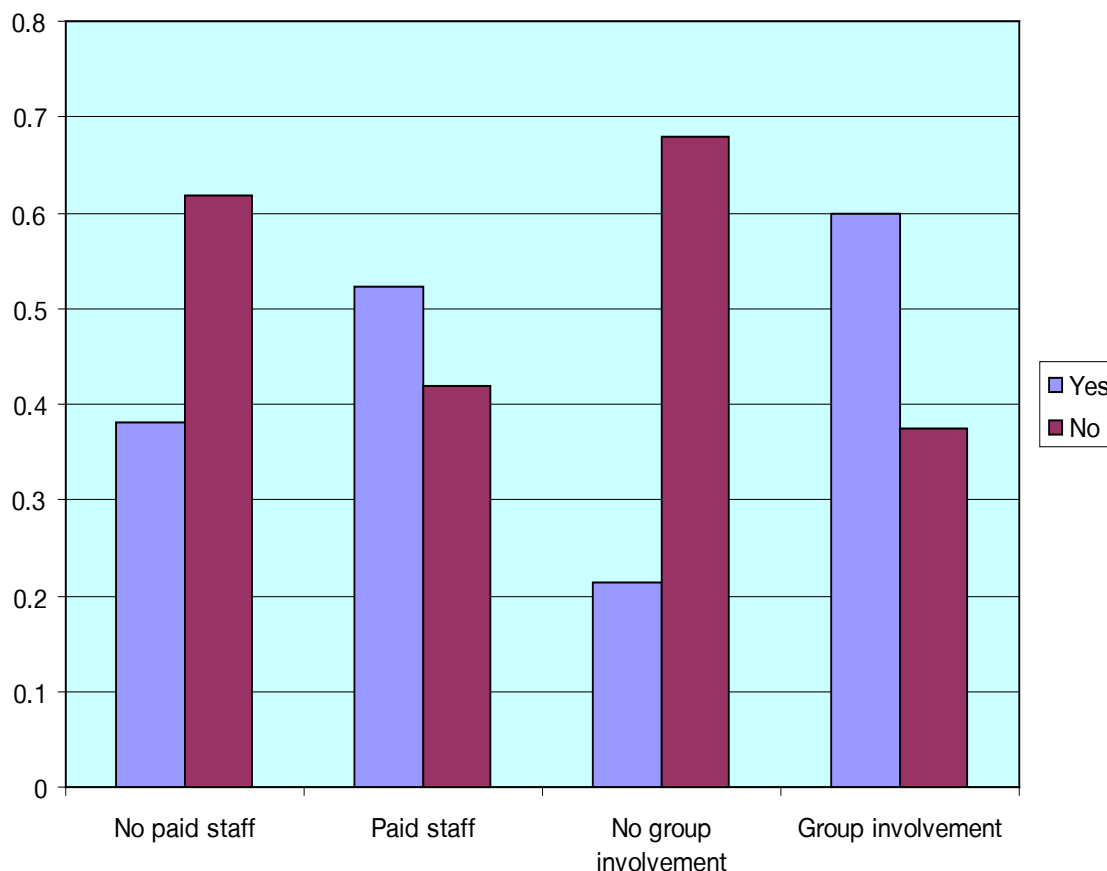
“General improvement in the behaviour of a core group of young people – this has been achieved by a multi-agency approach.”

Greater involvement of the VCS or improved cross-sector working:

“Increase in partnership working between statutory and voluntary organisations and between voluntary organisations themselves.”

“I think the statutory services are finally recognising that the voluntary sector has a huge part to play, that they offer some very good, professional services.”

Graph 6 – Have you noticed any changes locally as a result of the new approaches to children’s services?



Shared approaches, practices and planning:

“More focus on engaging service users in the planning of activities and evaluation of their results. Statutory agencies are providing training regarding information-sharing policies.”

“[A London borough] Play Strategy (which is being written at the moment) has incorporated inclusive play and play for hard to reach families.”

“We have been operating for ten years but it feels like children’s voices is now on the agenda.”

Improved networking, referral and sharing of information:

“Other organisations in the borough have become more prevalent. Groups we have struggled to engage with have contacted us to share knowledge and referrals.”

“I feel that there has been stronger links between the different youth providers and this has benefits for all involved.”

“Better networking and information sharing.”

“More emails inviting us to conferences and meetings. More contact with umbrella organisations such as CVS.”

The impact of specific initiatives, including Children's Centres and extended schools:

"Children's centres are becoming a lot more established with the taboo slowly being abolished about what our type of organisation is about. More professionals are cross-working, which leads to better communication – which benefits families."

"More children's centres [have led to] more opportunities to work in partnership with other organisations."

Negative changes

Not all the survey respondents reported positive local changes. Their comments reflect a varied situation, including confusion and lack of clarity about how changes are being implemented. There were also comments revealing particular challenges of being a smaller group and highlighting a lack of awareness among funders and the statutory sector of their position.

Lack of clarity:

"Chaos. Currently, restructuring is going on in [the local authority] and you may as well try to work in partnership with swarming bees."

"New departments in the county council and voluntary/community sector budgets being cut until it is 'decided' what will be commissioned. With exception to 'early years' intervention, I have seen little or no impact to delivery and the services received by young people."

"There is some confusion and some groups seem more up to speed than others. There is a huge change in culture. Lots more focus on evidence and outcomes. Money is very scarce. There is no stability with jobs and funding."

Difficulties for small groups:

“The expectations on small services to have a similar infrastructure as a major organisation have increased.”

“There seems to be a will for there to be more joined-up thinking but this is only just starting in [the area]. Small voluntary organisations are not always invited to consultation sessions and only hear about them in a roundabout way – again these tend to be held during the week – even after school is very difficult for us.”

Difficulties with the set-up of children’s trusts:

“A deep resentment amongst those who are working in children’s services (health, education, social services) with regards to the children’s trust. Jobs have been changed or cut. New posts have been ring-fenced. Teams have been split up. At the moment they seem to be less inclined than ever to take a whole child and family approach and work together. Waiting lists for vital assessments are growing, and families are being left without vital help.”

“The children’s trust produced a list of its remit, which included child contact, but it was unaware of our existence and had no real understanding of what it entailed – they hadn’t thought beyond looked after children.”

Loss of VCS voice:

“Extended schools are taking over all the work that we are already doing – without consulting us.”

“EYDCP [The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership] seems to be very outward looking, but there is not enough continuity into play. Voluntary play services seem to be depreciating because of the constant lining up of children’s activities to crime.”

Involvement in influencing structures

For the purpose of this report, 'influencing structures' refers to groups that identify needs and plan services, groups that advise or decide on local plans for children's services, groups that commission services, groups that evaluate and/or monitor services, and groups that distribute funding.

This was a particularly interesting area of inquiry. When responses were split between those organisations who were involved in influencing structures and those who were not, there were often significant differences between their answers. These differences can be said to be indicative of wider differences, though caution must be exercised in making more general statements; there is scope for further research to be undertaken in this area.

Some key findings

- Twenty-six per cent of organisations surveyed reported not being involved in any kind of influencing structure.
- The majority of surveyed organisations not involved in influencing structures were organisations with incomes of less than £50k.
- Most organisations involved in influencing structures only represent their own organisations. Organisations that represent other organisations as well as their own are likely to have incomes greater than £50k.

Influencing groups

Eighty organisations (74%) reported being engaged in one or more influencing structure; on average they were involved in 2.7 different types of group.

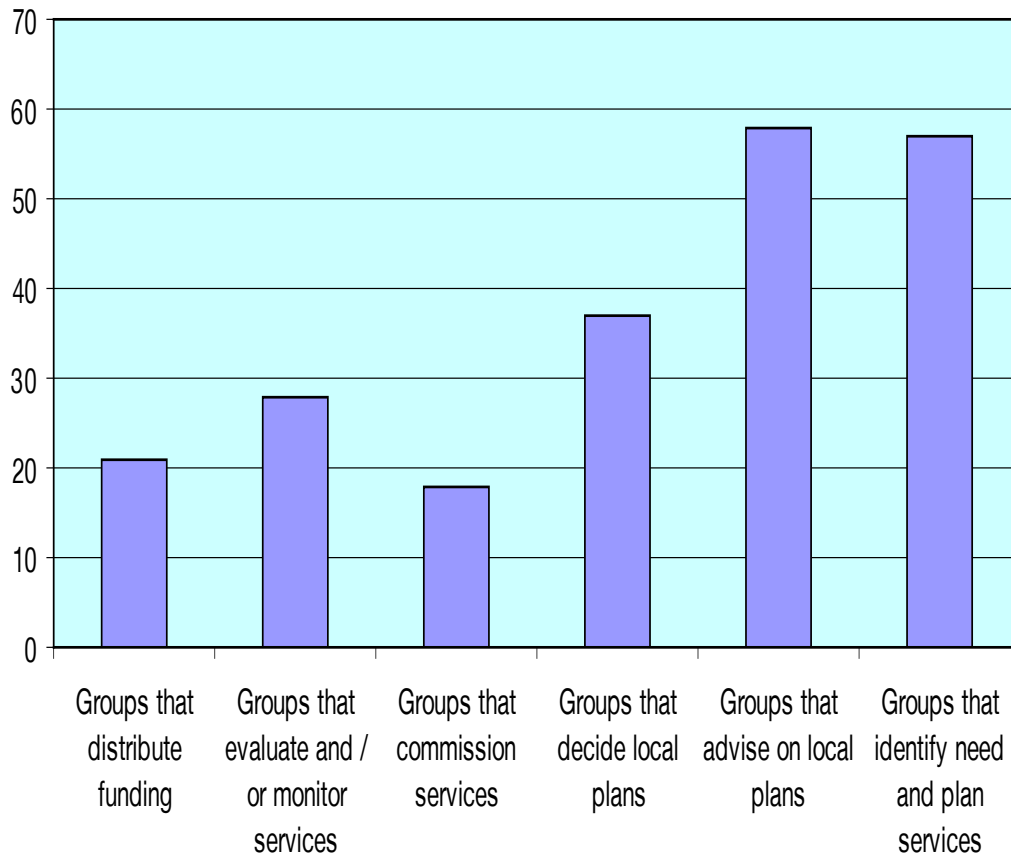
The most common structures for organisations to be involved in were groups that advise on services and groups that identify needs and plan services. Groups that commission services and groups that distribute funds were the least likely structures in which organisations would be involved. See Graph 7.

Of the 28 respondents who were not involved in influencing structures, 23 were agencies with less than £50k annual income.

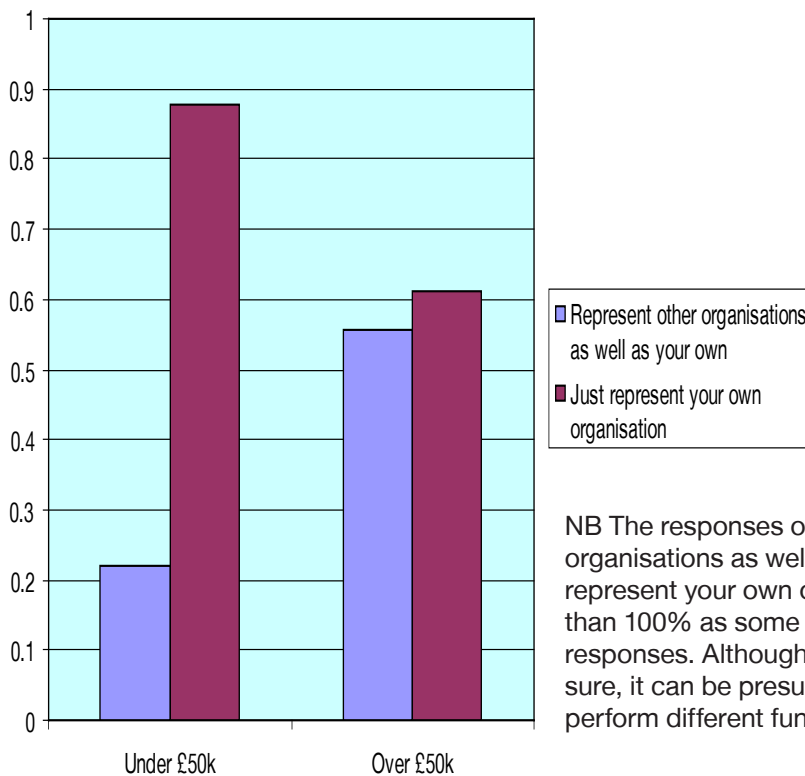
Seventy-six per cent of organisations involved in influencing structures only represent their own organisation. Larger organisations, over £50k, were more likely to represent other organisations (56%); only 22% of organisations with incomes under £50k represent other organisations. See Graph 8.

Respondents reported a range of experiences around their involvement in influencing structures, from very positive and enthusiastic to quite negative and, often enough, a bit cynical. Of the 36 respondents who commented on their involvement in influencing structures, a third made positive comments, over half made negative comments and the rest had mixed things to say, mostly about the difficulty finding time to attend meetings.

Graph 7 – Are you involved in any of the following influencing structures?



Graph 8 – If you are involved in any groups, who do you represent?



NB The responses of 'represent other organisations as well as your own' and 'just represent your own organisation' equal greater than 100% as some respondents ticked both responses. Although it is not possible to say for sure, it can be presumed that this is because they perform different functions in different meetings.

Positive forum experiences

The majority of positive comments about influencing structures relate to the usefulness of keeping up to date about what is happening locally and the good opportunities to network with other groups. These sharing opportunities have, in turn, allowed groups to be mutually supportive and make new plans.

Local knowledge

“It’s been useful to know where the thinking is behind some of the plans. I have felt valued, worth spending hours at meetings!!!”

Good networking opportunities

“It is very useful for networking and keeping in touch with the local agenda.”

Opportunities to give and receive support

“It’s been great to get the chance to share information and achievements and offer support/resources to other groups.”

“The groups ... are very supportive and welcoming. We can have the support we ask for especially in the areas of training.”

Opportunities to work together

“It is very helpful to network with other groups and support each other. As a result we are completing our QIP [Quality in Play] with two other clubs.”

One respondent felt as if the meetings were useful and effective, but doubted how much influence the VCS actually had.

“Sometimes it feels that decisions have already been made and we are merely invited out of lip-service, but they are effective.”

Negative forum experience

There were a range of reasons why organisations felt participating in influencing structures was a negative experience.

Difficulty finding the time to attend meetings

“Attendance is difficult due to most of our project leaders having other jobs.”

“My job includes children and young people, but I also have to run a community centre and fundraise – time management and prioritising.”

Comments about how meetings are run

“Quite often the Chair assumes we’re all aware of and understand agenda items and uses too much jargon.”

“[Meetings] are usually dry and protracted.”

Comments about relevance

“Too many – they need some sort of ‘bringing together’ to ensure they don’t overlap on agendas and are relevant.”

“It’s time consuming and sometimes what’s discussed is completely irrelevant to what we are doing and our needs.”

Structures are not effective

“Lots of consulting – not much ‘doing’.”

“It’s like banging your head on a brick wall. It all comes down to finance in the end.”

“We have been involved with all types in the past, both on planning services and funding. Nothing got done, only talking about it.”

“Seems to be all about governance and organisation of groups and nothing seems to get done. Seems far removed from what is happening.”

Tokenism or marginalisation

“As a voluntary sector representative I am totally marginalised.”

“It seems to be just ticking the consultation and stakeholder inclusion boxes, but no notice taken of your views or real local need.”

“Although it is important for the voluntary/community sector to be represented, it often is a token gesture with little impact.”

Not feeling valued

“Sometimes feel we are not as valued as statutory groups, and that they have too great an influence on funding.”

“Often the voluntary and community groups are not represented at the high end of the scale.”

“Very often meetings are very cliquy, and very often the voluntary sector representatives are selected instead of welcoming all.”

Ideas for improving influencing structures

Respondents were asked to give their ideas for improving local opportunities for sharing skills and knowledge.

More themed opportunities to share

“Forums concentrating on specific areas. Inviting wider parties of expertise. Also, involving families more and taking heed of their opinions and needs directly rather than organisations claiming to be speaking on their behalf.”

More multi-agency opportunities to share

“We had a MAPS group (Multi-Agency Parent Support) which was temporarily disbanded when the organiser’s contract ended. Since then there is only a similar local group in one area. It used to be good because we met many others from voluntary and statutory organisations and shared info and experience.”

“More meetings that involve all organisations, eg housing or drug and alcohol groups, so that we can work with the whole person and be aware of other organisations that can offer help in situations that arise but which we, as arts workers, are unequipped to deal with.”

Fund networks

“Our local play network works well and is successful, but it looks as if funding is coming to an end in 2008. This service should be made available to all localities and funding should be made available as part of the ECM and extended schools initiatives.”

“There needs to be more encouragement (support and funding) for community groups to enter into independent partnership working and less influence and interference from the statutory sector.”

Support service user participation

“One of the things that has come out of much discussion is that if you want to find out what people need or want then GO TO WHERE THEY ARE, rather than plan meetings for people to come to you. For instance, parents who attend a group already will feel more at home in that setting, less threatened, and there is already a group of people there. Meetings need to be thought through – for instance, there is a group meeting for early years – and they want parent representation – but the meeting is regularly on a Friday from 2 to 4pm. Not thought through. Then parents are accused of not wanting to be involved. But again I would say that a lot of issues are being tackled in the borough and there is a desire for change and to do things well.”

“Listen to parents/carers.”

Build on models of good practice

“We aim to work closer with the black and minority ethnic community and to extend the project further into [the county] and extend during term time. Of course this will depend on funding opportunities.”

“Both our CVS and Skein [Skills for Economic Inclusion Network] have been very supportive in networking with the groups who are in the differing themed groups of their organisations. Having themed group seminars is a very good way of sharing skills and knowledge.”

“I am on the steering group for the migrant workers group, and have helped to organise quarterly meetings on specific subjects. This is to enable decision-makers to be better informed, but also to help people working at the front line to feel less isolated. We laid on a meeting last autumn about education, which was well attended by teachers. Within my own organisation, I have set up monthly training sessions for volunteers to which we invite a person from a statutory body such as Jobcentre Plus. They come to explain a particular form or subject; this allows our volunteers to ask questions. Our volunteers are largely migrant workers, and the person from the statutory body also gets a better idea of the problems people have to confront when they come here. It has improved service and access for our volunteers and clients.”

New ways to disseminate information

“Brief mail out to groups. Making meetings brief and to the point.”

“A local website might be useful where anyone can leave useful information, ie successful funding applications, local resources, events and fun days, etc.”

More networking opportunities

“Speed dating style conference of all organisations to say a few things about what each one does – networking is vital and having a face/contact in an organisation helps considerably when trying to get things done, developed, etc.”

Build a database that includes all organisations

“Sponsor a very reliable and effective database that will include all voluntary organisations. At the moment a lot of them are excluded from receiving information because the bodies are not aware they exist.”

“A database or directory of all the different youth service providers would be useful. This would need to be kept up to date. This would enable youth service providers to liaise more easily and would lead to an overall improvement in youth services provided.”

Specific suggestions for small organisations

“Conferences and training opportunities for small organisations to offer knowledge and practice; this can be used as a means of fundraising.”

“More research into how to make these opportunities more accessible to smaller organisations.”

“Each organisation should run a workshop in the skills and knowledge they do best.”

Better working relationship between VCS and statutory services

“We have to be involved in the local decision-making.”

“It would be more effective if more voluntary organisations took advantage of the opportunities to be involved offered by the local authority.”

“Real and meaningful consultation, not tokenism.”

“If the local statutory agencies were truly wanting voluntary sector involvement they would support through various provisions – eg helping with Criminal Records Bureau at a reduced cost, reimbursement for attending meetings, etc and this would pave the way for a sharing of skills. Until then, the stated agenda to include the voluntary sector remains tokenistic.”

“That the statutory agencies acknowledge the value of the voluntary/community sector for real, and stop just paying lip service to it. That they visit more of these providers and understand how well we do things, that we are able to offer a commercial, professional and viable service.”

Finally ...

The survey finished by asking respondents two 'blue skies questions'; in other words, how things would be in an ideal world. They were asked about what would improve services generally for the groups of children and families they work with and what would help their organisations provide a better service.

Not surprisingly, many responses were around the need for more, better funding, particularly long-term, sustainable funding that allows organisations to plan and improve services.

“More funds to be able to establish mid- and long-term plans for our service and to create a more secure work environment where contracts may be for longer periods of time.”

“Long-term funding would enable us to plan well in advance rather than looking for funding, in some cases, on a yearly basis.”

Among those respondents who spoke about funding as the key to improving services and outcomes for children, young people and families, most elaborated on specific things that more money would allow them to do.

“More and better equipment, ie decent folding tables, multimedia projector, table-tennis table, modified heating system (radiators instead of electric wall fires) to give us freedom to play ball games, broader insurance so that we could have outings and cookery evenings.”

“More money for our [local and national] support agencies so they could work more closely with us.”

“Funding streams to build capacity and address gaps in provision from regional or national government not local government.”

“Having a core funded manager for our organisation would enable us to be more effective in networking and raising the profile of our service in the developing children’s trust and carrying out monitoring & evaluation of the organisation as a whole.”

“Having the means to employ a fundraiser to work with us would enable the staff to be more motivated and not scared that by the end of the year they have to look for another job.”

“Parents’ room to hold meetings. Give them opportunities to meet for coffee and access IT for information.”

It is about much more than funding, however, and respondents had many ideas about how their services, and the local situation, could be improved in order to ultimately improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

“More informal, locally based, generic youth work, with drop-in youth centres that have secure long-term support, not short-term special project funding.”

“More information set in a way that is understandable to volunteers and which relates to their understanding and experiences.”

“Having experts on board who have a lot of knowledge of voluntary organisations and who are working in bigger organisations to help us.”

“Awareness of who we are and what we do.”

“More joined-up work and outreach.”

“More information in form of developments, government initiatives and training.”

Conclusions

This report has mainly focused on responses around three broad themes:

- the precariousness of funding for projects and staff
- the impact of Every Child Matters on smaller organisations
- participation in strategic work, or influencing structures, outside of traditional service delivery.

Funding challenges

Organisations continue to function under extremely precarious funding circumstances, with many reporting decreased, shorter-term funding. Survey responses reflected the stress that workers are under to plan for what is in the best interest of the children and families who use their services with little guarantee of future funding. This fragility is despite a number of special-initiative funding streams that have been available for smaller VCS organisations working with children, young people and families, such as the Local Network Fund and the Children's Fund. Significantly, many organisations reported relying on special initiative funding and spoke of the negative impact on their services of the cutbacks to or dissolution of these funds.

An additional difficulty comes from the number of funding sources organisations have to rely on. The smaller organisations replying to the survey had fewer sources of funding than the larger organisations and were often relying on only one or two pots of money. The reliance of the larger organisations on many sources of funding to cover costs can be equally destabilising, requiring significant time commitments to chase money. Most organisations responding to the survey expressed concern about having enough money to continue services; neither having many small sources of funding nor too few sources is ideal for the smooth functioning of the VCS and the stability of their offer to children, young people and families.

This preoccupation with funding, with trying to keep projects 'ticking over' while under constant threat of closure, may be preventing smaller VCS organisations from effectively engaging with the Every Child Matters agenda. If organisations are unable to plan their services beyond 12 months, it is unlikely that they are going to be in a position to proactively engage with the complexities of this agenda.

Engaging with Every Child Matters

The survey responses indicate that a significant number of smaller organisations either do not know enough about ECM to engage with the agenda or else they feel that it is not relevant to their work or necessary to implement changes to their services as a result of it. This is particularly true of organisations not part of influencing structures or with no paid staff. For example, only 38% of organisations reported having attended safeguarding training. That number dropped to 14% for organisations with no paid staff. Keeping children safe is a fundamental part of ECM, and the implications of this lack of skills and understanding could have grievous implications for children and young people, as well as for organisations.

Organisations without paid staff reported training and meetings taking place when their volunteers were working at their day jobs, making it difficult for them to attend and keep up to date with what was happening within the children and young people's agenda. Some respondents spoke of the jargon and a lack of easily accessible information as a further barrier to engaging with ECM.

Another potential barrier to groups accessing ECM is likely to be the current dependency on computers and technology to disseminate information. There is a general assumption that most people have access to a computer and an email account, and know how to surf the net and trawl through information to find what is relevant. Although this was not a specific area of inquiry in the study, evidence suggests that this assumption is very often incorrect. This was corroborated when we were exploring ways of disseminating the survey to small groups. One local infrastructure organisation told us that only half of more than 500 organisations working with children, young people and families on its contact list had regular access to email.

There is no doubt that there is a lot of information on the web that would address some of the needs of the surveyed group, from details of ECM to keeping abreast of local networks and developments. Problems arise when this information only exists electronically and when organisations lack the skills necessary to access it. This situation imposes a double disadvantage on groups: first, not having the information and communications technology (ICT) capacity to access the information; and second, the general assumption that they do have this capacity, which means that those producing information may not even be aware that there are many groups who are not accessing it.

Even when organisations reported being informed about ECM, very few had made significant changes to their services as a result. The most reported change was around how outcomes are reported, particularly with respect to monitoring and evaluation using the five ECM outcomes. This suggests that VCS organisations are adept at conforming to new requirements in order to receive funding and have had to 're-badge' their services, but they have made few significant changes to the way in which they deliver services to children, young people and families.

Involvement in influencing structures

One key indicator of groups being well informed about ECM, and changing their services in response to it, was being involved in influencing structures. Further inquiry is needed, however, to explore issues around influence and representation. For example, it would be useful to understand how organisations that are not part of influencing structures, that is, organisations that are not actually sitting around the table when meetings take place, are networked into those groups.

The majority of respondents who reported being part of influencing groups only represent their own organisations. This calls into question how well networked the VCS actually is, how well it ensures an effective system of representation and how well networks are supported and sustained. Additionally, it was mostly larger organisations (over £50k annual income) who reported being involved in influencing groups and representing other organisations as well as their own. This suggests that there may be a real capacity issue preventing smaller organisations

being involved in influencing and representation and that innovative ways of addressing this need to be explored.

This may mean that despite what is being done to implement Every Child Matters and ensuring that organisations across the board engage with it, some groups are missing out entirely. The structural changes instigated by ECM, such as the move away from grant funding and the development of children's trust arrangements and local partnerships, may be too much of a barrier for many smaller VCS organisations.

In the current working environment of children's services, organisations need to engage with the structures surrounding ECM in order to continue receiving funding for their services. However, there are serious capacity issues preventing organisations from being part of these partnership structures, which adds greater emphasis to the need to have effective means of representation in place linking organisations into local networks.

All of this has created an extremely complex working environment that may present too great a challenge for organisations that specialise in working with children, rather than engaging with complex statutory processes. These organisations play a vital role in preventive services (a government priority) – and if too many of them close or become isolated from the broader children's sector then the impact on vulnerable children, young people and families will be enormous.

Recommendations

Local commissioners

- Funding cycles should be longer term to allow organisations to plan for the best interests of their client groups. This is supported by the government's commitment in the final report from the Third Sector Review to make three-year funding cycles the norm for third sector organisations from April 2008. While this will apply at central government level, for the first time both central and local government will have three-year aligned budgets. This means that each will know how much money it will have until April 2011, which should enable local authorities to pass that certainty on to the VCS.
- Local authorities should maintain some form of grant funding within children's trust arrangements. This is a move supported by many in the VCS, with reasons for this outlined in greater depth in the document, *Sustaining Grants*, which was published by a coalition of voluntary organisations in 2007 (available at www.navca.org.uk/publications/sustaininggrants/)
- Local authorities should look at how they resource and support representational networks to ensure effective routes of communication and consultation between itself and the VCS. This would help local authorities to fulfil the new performance indicators for stronger communities and improving the environment for a thriving third sector, and is supported by developments such as the creation of local area agreements and local strategic partnerships, which place a duty on local authorities to co-operate with their local partners.
- Local Safeguarding Children Boards and children's trusts need to ensure that organisations have greater access to training on safeguarding. There need to be clear routes and resources to support the VCS to understand their responsibilities vis-à-vis safeguarding and speaking out. There also needs to be practical support in place to help ensure that national guidance is implemented. This would help to meet the national priorities outlined under the Every Child Matters 'stay safe' outcome and the recently announced cross-government public service agreement target to improve children and young people's safety.
- Funding agencies should recognise core costs relating to ICT, including equipment, training and system maintenance and support.

Children's Workforce Development Council

- As part of its role to ensure that the people working with children have the best possible training, qualifications, support and advice, the Children's Workforce Development Council should look to the flexibility and affordability of training and development opportunities to help ensure that staff and volunteers in smaller organisations benefit.
- As part of its work, the Children's Workforce Development Council should examine ways of getting basic ICT skills and understanding into the sector. This is backed up by national priorities to improve skills in the UK workforce as outlined in the 2006 Leitch Report.

Voluntary and community sector

- VCS infrastructure organisations should review the support they give to small organisations in responding and adjusting to complex policy changes, and ensure they are reaching all groups and adequately addressing their needs.
- The VCS needs to explore issues of effective representation, including the development and support of networks and finding innovative ways of ensuring groups with less capacity are still involved in developments. A programme of training and development for representatives could be developed by building on protocols and examples of good practice that already exist.
- The VCS should explore ways of sharing ICT support costs, such as pooling resources between organisations.

Central government

- Central government should monitor and evaluate how policy is implemented at local level to ensure that small organisations can continue to provide essential services to children, young people and families.

All agencies

- All agencies, including statutory departments and national organisations, need to be aware of the disadvantage at which small groups are put when disseminating information solely by electronic means and should examine alternate forms of communication.

Areas for further research

- How effective are representational structures and how can good representation be supported to ensure the participation of smaller VCS organisations?
- How much are the structural changes created by Every Child Matters a barrier to the smaller VCS engaging with the Every Child Matters agenda?
- How will the structures of Every Child Matters and changes to the way organisations are funded impact on how the VCS can deliver services to children, young people and families?

NCVCCO supporting small organisations

NCVCCO will continue working to improve support for small organisations working with children, young people and families by:

- producing easily accessible information on key, challenging topics of the Every Child Matters agenda such as commissioning, representation or safeguarding
- facilitating training aimed at and tailored for small organisations
- organising conferences or events by and for small organisations
- championing the value and expertise of small organisations
- campaigning for the maintenance of small grants
- supporting knowledge-sharing and collaboration, particularly between large and small organisations, through buddy schemes and networks of interest
- finding innovative ways of working together with organisations such as NAVCA to improve local infrastructure support for small groups working with children, young people and families.

For further information

If you would like any further information about the study or about this report, or if you have any feedback to give, please contact Jordan Thompson at jordan@ncvcco.org or on 020 7833 3319.

