



Small Voluntary Organisations & Children's Services

Reflections and lessons from developing a strategic forum for voluntary and community organisations working with children and young people in Kirklees.



The Children's VAN

www.childrensvan.org.uk

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Funded by Change Up, through NCVCCO/NCC.

May 2006

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Introduction

This report describes the development of the Children's VAN (voluntary Action Network) forum, and offers reflections and learning from that experience.

Purpose of report

This report is part of regional (Yorkshire and Humber) work which aims to identify good practice in engaging the voluntary sector in children's trust arrangements, children's centres and other developments in relation to children's services. This work is funded by Change Up and managed by the National Children's Centre in Kirklees.

The report will:

- Describe and reflect on the process of developing structures in the voluntary sector which improve and increase participation from the sector;

It will present some conclusions from Kirklees as a contribution to the wider work of understanding the sector regionally and sharing good practice.

Limitations

The description and reflections on the development of the strategic forum for voluntary organisations are written by the network coordinator alone, and so can only represent this perspective.

Background/context

Here is my perception of the situation when I began working as VYON Kirklees Coordinator in July 2004.

There was no formal network of voluntary organisation working with children and young people. There were other networks (a Community Empowerment Network, equalities networks), which brought together those from voluntary organisations who were interested in working together on strategic agendas.

There had been some work done to develop a 'VYON' database of organisations working with young people in 2002. This database was available, but was not maintained and so was significantly inaccurate. It had around 70 contacts.

Connexions West Yorkshire was well established and had contracts with a number of voluntary organisations. There was a regular meeting (at which attendance varied) of these organisations that discussed Connexions related issues.

Surestart was relatively strong in Kirklees, with several programmes, some run by voluntary organisations, and all engaging voluntary organisations to varying degrees. The Kirklees Youth Service had been through some changes, and the budget had been increased after several years of relatively low allocations for the service. The service had several contracts or service level agreements with voluntary organisations. Children's Fund Kirklees was well established and commissioning both statutory and voluntary organisations to do preventative work with 5-12 year olds.

Kirklees Council was beginning to consider the implications of Every Child Matters and the Children Act 2004, and by 2005 had set up some structures to progress this work and engage a range of partners.

The government had repeatedly made it clear that the voluntary and community sectors should be involved in the Change for Children agenda, as partners in planning and delivery. The detail was still evolving.

Development of the Kirklees Children's VAN

Listening and testing ideas – Shaping the VYON

The Children's VAN (VAN is an acronym of Voluntary Action Network) grew out of listening to those who work (paid and voluntary) in voluntary and community organisations working with children and young people in Kirklees.

I began work as VYON Coordinator in July 2004, and after several months of settling in and listening to people from a range of voluntary and statutory organisations I presented my understanding of the needs of the sector and how I thought the network should work, at a series of 'Shaping the VYON' events in December 2004. These sessions were subtitled: "Knocking into shape some initial ideas about how a network of voluntary youth organisations might work best".

The feedback from those from the sector who came to the Shaping the VYON events helped me clarify who could join the network and what its purpose was, what it could provide - given limited resources and the clear need for it to be independent of statutory agencies. Effective, fair and open strategic influence was seen as a priority for the network:

"Kirklees has been starved of a point of reference for the voluntary and community sector youth services"

"Where does the sector need to be represented? What bodies or committees or groups are there?"

"VYON needs to focus at a strategic level, and needs to influence process of commissioning and the priorities."

"Voluntary sector not invited to the table – just to rubber stamp decisions."

(Shaping the VYON Feedback, March 2005)

There already existed the Kirklees VAN (Voluntary Action Network) which had a steering group and an e-group. The e-group distributed emails to all those who joined, and the steering group selected voluntary sector representatives onto the Kirklees Partnership (the local strategic partnership). The Kirklees VAN was for all the voluntary and community sector, not just those working with children and young people.

Beyond the Kirklees VAN, existing mechanisms for voluntary sector involvement in strategic planning were relatively weak in terms of accountability, transparency and sharing of information. The notion of 'representatives' of the sector was discredited with the perception being that they used the position only to benefit their own organisation. There was an acknowledgement that the sector would be stronger if it could come together. Those attending the sessions were keen to know the detail of how those who would speak up for the sector would be selected and how they would be accountable.

"Voluntary sector is fragmented and not always seen – need to bring it together."

"Diverse, autonomous and different organisations will not all have shared priorities and values."

"Watch out for self-appointed reps working for their own agenda/benefit."

"Transparency promotes trust and relationships."

(Shaping the VYON Feedback, March 2005)

It was clear that there was a need to improve relationships, to increase trust between those involved in the sector and to develop structures and systems which had credibility with both the sector and statutory partners.

The proposal at 'Shaping the VYON' was that we form a panel of six to ten people from the sector who could respond to strategic planning consultations, or raise issues from the sector to those in strategic positions. This panel would be the voice of the voluntary youth and children's sector.

This proposal generated the most feedback of all. How the panel would be selected? How long they would sit on the panel for? A year? How much work and time commitment would be required? How do we ensure we get a diverse group reflecting the sector? How do we get new people involved and not just the usual suspects? Also there were concerns about accountability:

"Where panel members are speaking for the sector they need to be sharing information with the network – we need to know what they are doing."

There was recognition, though that there was a need for some sort of 'reference point' for the sector.

At the Shaping the VYON events I also presented the priorities for the sector as identified by the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services:

- **Effective Partnerships** between statutory and voluntary organisations
- **Developmental Commissioning** of services to help develop organisations
- **Fair Contracts** recognising full cost recovery

These were recognised as key aims for larger organisations who were engaged in contracting and service level agreements, or who hoped to be.

Smaller organisations were more concerned to secure practical support from people who could help them find grants, support volunteers, sort out problems and help them run their groups more effectively.

What they wanted from strategic planning was for their contribution to be recognised and for the kind of support they wanted to be provided. They didn't want lots of meetings, or lots of paperwork and information. In fact, they wanted me as the network coordinator to filter information and help them to understand what was going on and what they could or should be doing.

"Paid workers and volunteers need different things – as do small community groups and large voluntary organisations. Need to include both."

"Summarise information so we don't have to read everything."

(Shaping the VYON Feedback, March 2005)

Developing the Children's VAN

By April 2005, it was therefore clear that we needed something to strengthen the strategic influence of the sector, but that it needed to engage people from a wide range of organisations, improve communication and relationships and provide a contact point for statutory agencies and the sector.

I began meeting with two people who were experienced in voluntary sector strategic planning in Kirklees: Richard Sorton (from NCH which manages Children's Fund Kirklees) and Simon Cale (National Children's Centre) to develop these ideas.

We bounced our thoughts off others in the sector – particularly Sue Shaw who coordinates the Kirklees VAN which ensures and supports voluntary and community sector participation in the Local Strategic Partnership (Kirklees Partnership), and Helen Minett (SHAP) who has been involved in Connexions and other partnership arrangements.

Eventually, we agreed the current model, which was presented at a launch event in June 05, and accepted by those present as the way forward.

The Children's VAN model (see appendix one for more detail)

The model has four elements

- network (Voluntary Youth Organisations' Network Kirklees)
- forum (Children's VAN)
- links (Voluntary Sector Links)
- panel (Children's VAN Panel)

The network (VYON-K) is open to anyone involved in planning the work of voluntary or community organisations working with children and young people in Kirklees. They join by sending information to the VYON Coordinator along with data protection permission to store and share the information. All network members get newsletters and regular email bulletins. They are also 'in the loop' for consultations and updates on policy and planning developments, locally and nationally. There are specific email bulletins on funding sources and useful diary dates.

The forum (Children's VAN) meets twice a year, and aims to inform and organise voluntary sector participation in strategic planning. At the time of writing there have been two meetings – the first to present the model and the reason for working this way, the second to receive reports from 'links', a progress report from the VYON Coordinator and to begin to identify priorities for the forum.

'Voluntary sector links' are people who go to identified strategic planning meetings and agree to write a summary of key points from the meeting to distribute to the sector. They are not 'representatives' in that they are not elected, nor expected to consult with others and represent their views. However, by reporting back, and attending Children's VAN meetings they have ways of letting others know what they are doing and ways of others letting them know what is important to them.

The 'links' is the key element of this model, and it is still evolving. It's not yet clear how the Children's VAN will react to those who have committed to be 'links' but have not produced the link reports – will they want someone else to do it, or will they just let it go?

Link reports are published on the website www.childrensvan.org.uk along with key strategic documents from local and national government, research, useful links and other documents.

The panel has not been formed, though there was a panel of sorts (though not called the panel) formed to consider drafts of local area agreement and Kirklees children's plan documents. These one off meetings produced feedback from the sector to those developing the documents.

Elections to the Local Public Service Board (LPSB) for Children and Young People

In November 2005 the structure of the Local Public Service Boards had become clear – there would be two places for the voluntary sector.

Staff at Voluntary Action Kirklees, who were involved in supporting the Kirklees Voluntary Action Network and themed networks around health, older people and children, got together to consider how to support the sector in filling these places. Consultation with those involved in the Children's VAN had earlier suggested that a postal election would be the preferred method of selecting people.

Time was extremely tight – we had two months before the first meeting of the first LPSB, and managers in the local authority were keen that all places were taken up so that they could get to work quickly.

Four LPSB's would be created, relating to different Local Area Agreements. Each would have two places, and so there would be eight representatives in all.

We decided that sending all the information about all LPSBs and all election processes to all our contacts in Kirklees would be a phenomenal waste of paper and money, given that most contacts would either not be interested in strategic level planning, or would only be interested in one or two LPSBs.

Therefore we sent 1600 people an invite to register to vote. They could say which LPSB they were interested in, and whether or not they were interested in receiving information about what the board would do and how to stand as a candidate.

320 people registered to vote, from a wide range of organisations. We decided that each organisation would only have one vote in each of the LPSBs that they could demonstrate they had an interest in. For Children and Young People, this meant that 102 people were on the register to vote, with 39 requesting information about how to stand as a candidate.

Candidates for each LPSB were asked to write a limited word statement about why they should be elected, and these statements were sent out with ballot papers to all those who had registered to vote for that LPSB.

9 candidates stood for the two places on the Children and Young People's LPSB, and two were elected, with votes being allocated using the single transferable vote system.

Comments

This was the first time the Kirklees voluntary sector had organised open postal elections for representatives onto strategic bodies. There had been elections before, but within groups rather than open to all to participate. Those who were elected said that they felt they had a real remit to represent the sector as a result of it.

However, it was far from perfect. The timescale gave little leeway – with only two weeks for people to respond to invitations to register, applications for candidates and to return ballot papers. As a result, those with slow administration systems or who needed to check things with others before deciding may have missed the deadline. Similarly, there was little opportunity to talk to people about the process, about LPSB's and to encourage participation – awareness raising and promotion was limited to paper and email communication, and this doesn't suit everyone. If someone did not understand the paperwork, they could phone, but this is not ideal as people do not like

to say “I don’t understand”. Such people probably just ignored any paperwork they found difficult.

Participation in the children and young people’s theme was highest of all – most voting, most candidates, most registered to vote. This is partly because of the high profile of the Change for Children agenda, but also because the network and forum were most developed, and because there was a network coordinator actively promoting and encouraging participation.

In future, timescales will be longer, and there will be more opportunity to support and encourage all who are interested in getting involved. Also, there will be a better understanding of how LPSB’s work and the role of voluntary sector representatives as we’ll have had a year of experience.

LPSB representatives and Link Reports

Like all other ‘Links’ those elected to the LPSB produce short reports which are published in the same way. The LPSB is seen as just one way that an issue can be raised with statutory partners, with direct communication with managers and other partnership bodies sometimes being more appropriate and more effective.

The network uses email to share information and concerns, and one of the roles of the network coordinator is to identify themes and opportunities and initiate ways in which the sector can engage or act on them collectively.

However, as identified by the report on research in Kirklees, the motivation and the resources for participating in strategic planning are limited in small organisations.

Reflections and learning

There has been significant progress in the nearly two years since this work began. There is now a ‘point of reference’ for the sector – for those within it, and those who want to engage with it. There are some structures in place to ‘inform and organise’ the participation of the sector in the strategic planning of children’s services.

However, these are at an early stage in their development. It’s not yet clear how the local statutory agencies will engage with these structures, especially if the sector begins to meaningfully challenge the decisions and actions of statutory agencies and partnerships planning children’s services.

My approach to this work has been heavily influenced by my previous work as a community development worker. My aim is to encourage people to see what they have in common and the advantages in working together, and then to encourage them to learn from the experience of working together in order to be more effective at working for change, more inclusive of others and improve their abilities and influence.

However, this process is slow because people involved in separate voluntary organisations do not meet informally very often, and so relationships take longer to develop.

Much of the ‘relationship building’ part of this work is done through post and email – a necessity given the time pressures on those working in the sector. A key role of a network coordinator is to keep channels of communication running smoothly and delivering high quality communication.

This is more than just sending ‘data’ – it includes ‘soft’ information about useful contacts and sharing of problems and solutions; it includes analysis

and interpretation of officialese and jargon; it includes filtering, summarising and editing the large amounts of information available to make it digestible and useful.

Part of the approach has been to make the network 'cost effective' to people – providing more benefits to being on the mailing list than the 'costs' incurred by going to meetings, filling in forms, reading emails etc. Many small organisations are stretched and rely on one or two key people – therefore time has to be 'spent' wisely on things which help the organisation do its work and develop. VYON-K has tried to minimise the time cost of being a member.

So, for example, when someone says they would like to be a member, their joining form is sent to them with their name, address etc already filled in. If someone sends apologies to a meeting, then they get all the papers sent to them. Emails are 'bundled' into bulletins to help them manage them.

Similarly with the development of the Children's VAN, there has been a real effort to make benefits higher than costs. The requirement on 'links' to do a short report from meetings has been difficult for some – it requires summarising and writing up notes from meetings, and writing and thinking time for links, and then time for the VYON Coordinator to put them on the website. It's not yet clear whether this is too 'costly' to sustain. However, this kind of information sharing and accountability really helps keep the structures working.

It seems to me that these concepts are key to the successful organising of the voluntary sector – firstly, that it is about building trust and relationships (which come through genuine communication, clarity of purpose and keeping your promises); and secondly, that the network should offer a service which is good value in terms of the time and energy it requires and the information and benefits it offers.

The real test will be if and when there is a significant disagreement within the sector about our collective response to a situation or issue – this may occur if these structures are seen to have real influence and individuals' competing agendas come to the fore.

It also depends how the statutory agencies engage (or not) with the structures. They are designed to be flexible enough to respond to changes in partnership structures, and changes in personnel in the voluntary sector. Some agencies have engaged well with VYON-K and the Children's VAN, while others have not.

Summary of learning

My main learning has been that it is possible to provide a structure and system to 'organise and inform' the voluntary and community sectors involvement in strategic planning.

Also, perhaps surprisingly, people in small voluntary organisations are interested in strategic planning and do want to participate. However, they need support to do so. Some other learning includes:

- There are big and small voluntary organisations, and community groups. They have different needs, interests and abilities.
- Small voluntaries rely heavily on one or two people.
- It's a competitive environment and levels of trust can be low in the sector. However, relationships – between individuals active in the voluntary sector – are key to making the network work.
- Networks need coordinators to sustain contacts and broker relationships.
- Good networks + good relationships = good communication
- Opportunities often come from national or local government changes in policy or procedures – therefore good relationships with key managers and politicians are key to accessing these opportunities.
- Good communication + opportunities = possibility for cooperation for mutual benefit
- Too much information can be as much of a problem as not enough.
- Summarise and explain things in plain language. Jargon is useful only to the initiated.
- Keep structures simple, clear and be willing to change them if they are no longer effective or if the costs of them are too high for participants.
- Consider the costs and benefits to voluntary organisations in 'involvement': time is a key cost to small voluntaries. Make it 'cheap' and easy with lots of benefits.
- Give new ways of working time to settle in and for the word to spread.
- Formal processes, such as elections, have expectations built in. They need clear paperwork which make clear the importance of the process, and need to be supported by time to publicise and encourage participation.
- Share learning and learn from others.

Appendix one

The Children's VAN model.

Known as	"VYON"	"The Children's VAN"	"Links"	"The Children's VAN Panel"
Full name	The Voluntary Youth Organisations Network	The VAN forum for Children, Young People and Families work in Kirklees	Voluntary Sector Links	The VAN Panel for Children, Young People and Families work in Kirklees
Who	Anyone working (paid or unpaid) in the voluntary sector who is involved in planning organisations work. Organisations work with and for children, young people (0-19) or families in Kirklees.	Each organisation in the sector can attend the forum (organisations work with and for children, young people (0-19) or families in Kirklees, which are not for profit, have volunteers and not managed by a statutory body).	Individuals who take on the Link role, and are recognised by the Children's VAN as 'Links'	Links come together to form Panel meetings
Purpose	To network voluntary organisations working with children, young people and families.	To inform and organise voluntary sector participation in the planning of children's services.	"To participate fully in strategic meetings and decisions, raise issues relevant to those in the voluntary and community sectors, and provide a summary of key points from the meeting to others in the sector."	To influence the strategic planning of children's services
Elements	Membership system which produces database. Members receive newsletters, and are involved in consultations, sector analysis work etc. The database links with KINFO to produce a directory of voluntary sector organisations working with children and young people. There is a VYON e-group which facilitates email communication among members.	Meets twice a year. Meeting includes: Welcomes and information sharing; Presentation of summaries from Voluntary and Community Sector Links; Presentation of other information of interest to the sector (e.g. good practice, funding sources, policy dev't) Open space for people to share news, introduce new workers etc. Recognising 'Voluntary and Community Sector Links' Networking time and food Written updates for those who cannot attend	Links should be VYON members, so that the VYON Co-ordinator is able to share their contact information with enquirers. The following groups (as a minimum) would have a Link: the Children, Young People and Families Management Board, Children's Services Strategy Group and the VAN Steering Group. Other groups needing a Link to be decided by the forum (Children's VAN).	The Panel will meet as required. Examples might be when a draft plan is being consulted on or major changes announced. The panel will meet to comment and feedback.
Support work done by	VYON Co-ordinator	VYON Co-ordinator and the Community Empowerment team	VYON Co-ordinator	VYON Co-ordinator
Who might fund the support work?	Connexions, Kirklees Children's Services (hopefully)	Connexions, Kirklees Children's Services (hopefully) Kirklees Partnership	Connexions, Kirklees Children's Services (hopefully),	Connexions, Kirklees Children's Services (hopefully) Kirklees Partnership