



# Evaluating engagement with the VCS

Self-evaluation toolkit (SET)

Authors: Celia Watson and others



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This report has been produced by NCB following work undertaken for VCS Engage, a programme funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), to strengthen the engagement of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in delivering the Every Child Matters: Change for Children agenda.

VCS Engage ran from September 2006 until the end of March 2008, and during that time the programme was steered by a consortium of VCS infrastructure and delivery organisations working in the children, young people and families' sector. It was also supported by a large number of individual agencies committed to the programme's aims.

This report was commissioned to gauge the current level of engagement between local authorities and VCS organisations. By providing a snapshot of activity across the nine government regions in England, it aims to show regional approaches to strengthening community involvement in Every Child Matters (ECM) and local services for children, young people and families.

It also identifies some of the benefits of self-evaluation, and how the VCS Engage toolkit can help all partners to carry out the evaluation process clearly and effectively.

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## Introduction

Recent years have seen a transformation in services for children, young people and families, thanks to the introduction of Every Child Matters, with its holistic agenda and its focus on partnerships.

Within this changing climate, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) has a crucial role to play. The benefits offered by the VCS include:

- contributing to a larger, more diverse and more competitive supply base for public services
- providing enhanced understanding of users' needs, and locally led, distinctive delivery capability
- offering valuable contributions to public participation, social inclusion and community engagement.

However, following the Children Act 2004, the VCS – in particular smaller organisations – faces significant challenges from the new commissioning environment. If local authorities are to benefit from their VCS, they need to engage with the sector more effectively.

Engagement is much more than developing communications or facilitating VCS involvement. It means taking a long-term partnership view, co-designing planning, commissioning and delivery structures, and ensuring that those structures are transparent, democratic and sustainable, with clear lines of accountability.

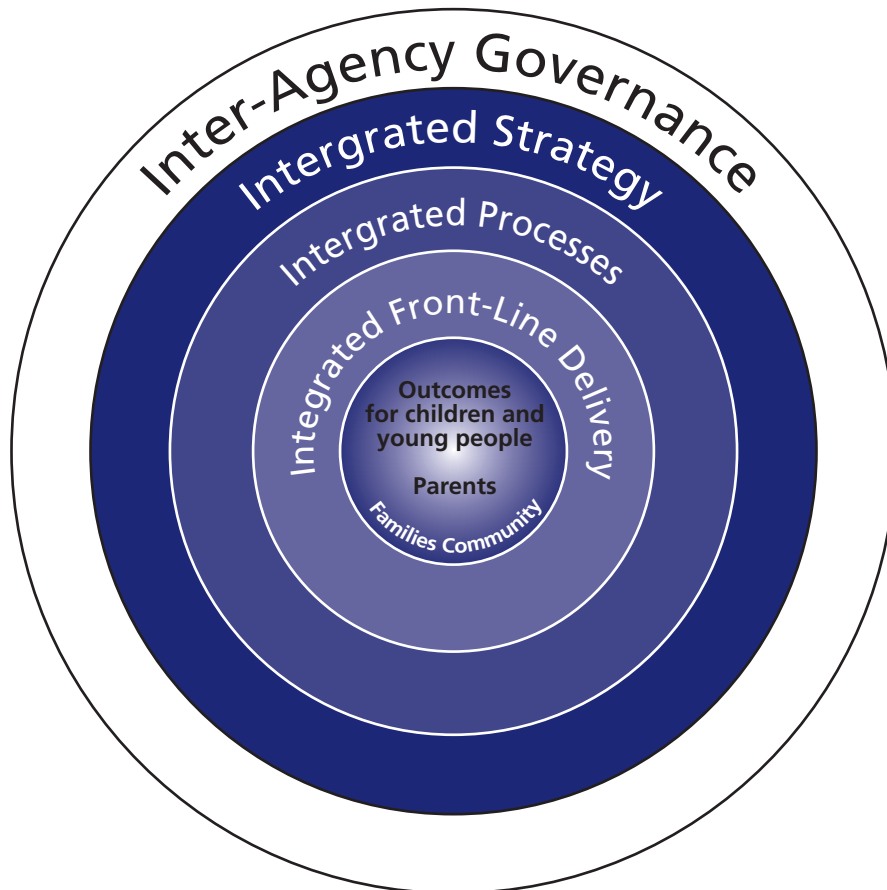
Working with key partners, VCS Engage developed its self-evaluation toolkit (SET) to support this aim. The toolkit enables representatives from local authorities, children's trusts and the VCS to assess existing levels of engagement and review current practice.

Drawing on their findings, they can then develop and implement a clear action plan that will embed local VCS organisations in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services for children, young people and families.

## How the self-evaluation toolkit works

The toolkit provides a questionnaire to be completed by key players within the local area, including senior representatives from local authorities, children's trusts and the VCS. This may be done with the support of an independent facilitator.

The questions relate to the performance areas outlined in what has become known as the DCSF 'onion':



- integrated governance
- strategy
- processes
- delivery
- outcomes.

Beneath each question is a description that sets out service characteristics at three levels:

- good to best practice
- meets minimum standards
- needs significant improvement.

'Don't know' is included as an option where participants consider they do not have enough information to provide an accurate score.

Using these descriptions, participants are able to score current local performance. They can also identify sources of evidence, comment on findings and make recommendations for the future.

Following the exercise, local authorities will have a completed questionnaire containing ratings for each self-evaluation area, with comments and priorities to be followed up. These priorities can then be translated into an action plan, including allocation of responsibility and timelines for delivery and review.

Once an action plan has been agreed, local authorities and the VCS can work together to address the barriers to engagement that have been identified. In the longer term this should lead to a healthier VCS that is better able to play a holistic role within local service delivery.

There are also immediate benefits for local authorities: for example, using the toolkit to address partnership challenges identified in statutory inspections such as Joint Area Reviews.

## Piloting the toolkit

The toolkit was piloted in two phases between October 2007 and March 2008.

The first phase, which involved four local authorities, explored different ways of bringing participants together to carry out the self-evaluation exercise. Findings then informed the second phase, where the aim was to pilot the toolkit with 27 local authorities in England – three from each of the nine government regions.

Learning from this second phase fed into the development of the final toolkit, while the experience and comments of participants are reflected in this report.

### Pilot phase one

Four local authorities took part in the first phase of the pilot during August and September 2007:

- Bedfordshire
- London Borough of Enfield
- London Borough of Islington
- Peterborough.

In each authority a structured meeting took place, where a facilitator – someone perceived as neutral by both the local authority and the VCS – led participants through the evaluation questions, encouraging them to discuss their findings and agree an action plan.

Meetings usually involved the following:

- at least one senior local authority officer, such as a head of commissioning or assistant director with responsibility for commissioning children's services
- at least one key VCS representative, normally involved at board level within the children's trust or partnership.

Variations to suit local circumstances included:

- separate facilitated meetings for the local authority, statutory bodies and VCS organisations
- a larger joint meeting of key local authority and VCS organisations
- the inclusion of others with expert knowledge or a key intermediary role, such as children's fund officers.

A minimum of two hours was allocated for the initial meeting, with additional time where more than three people were involved. A number of findings emerged from the first phase of the pilot:

- The impact of bringing parties around a table should not be underestimated. It was evident that while there might already be strong communication channels between the statutory sector and the VCS, the self-evaluation exercise provided a unique opportunity to review the challenges of engagement in a systematic way. In all four of the authorities involved, statutory representatives identified issues they had not considered before and that they were keen to address.

- Two formats for carrying out the evaluation proved most effective: the joint approach, bringing together the local authority, children's trust and VCS; and the separate approach, where individual meetings with the VCS and the local authority/children's trust were followed by a second, joint session to consider their collective views and draw up an action plan. With some variations, these two approaches were used in the second phase of the pilot.
- Multiple representation from both the VCS and the local authority is important as this results in more information to support the overall agreed score. It also provides more weighting to any discrepancies in scoring, which became an emerging theme in the phase two pilots.

## Pilot phase two

In its second phase, the self-evaluation toolkit was due to be piloted in three local authorities, in each of the nine English regions: 27 authorities in all. However, for a number of reasons, only 25 authorities were able to take part in the process.

As with the first phase of the pilot, a lead facilitator was responsible for bringing together representatives from the VCS and the statutory sector in order to complete the evaluation and, where possible, to develop an action plan.

For a summary of the findings from the pilot, see page 9.

## Learning from the pilot

As a result of learning from the pilot phase, a number of changes were made to the self-evaluation toolkit.

The original toolkit consisted of 17 detailed questions and sub-questions. In this format it was essential to have a lead facilitator guiding participants through the process.

Following the pilot, it was felt that the need for a facilitator could be a barrier to undertaking self-evaluation. To overcome this, the toolkit has now been condensed to 12 key questions under four key headings. This gives local authorities, children's trusts and the VCS greater choice over whether or not to use a lead facilitator when carrying out their evaluation.

The scoring system has also been amended. For the pilot, respondents were asked to give A, B or C ratings. In line with current practice, this has now been changed to a 'traffic lights' system:

- Green – good to best practice
- Amber – meets minimum standards
- Red – needs significant improvement.

'Don't know' remains an option where participants do not feel they have the information to provide a score. The use of this option may highlight communication problems or other areas where action is needed to improve.

## Delivering the toolkit

A number of delivery considerations were raised by those piloting the toolkit:

### Getting the timing right

The major part of the self-evaluation exercise was undertaken between October 2007 and March 2008. Some felt it was the most inappropriate time as VCS organisations were in the process of finalising funding arrangements while local authorities were agreeing new budgets. Others, however, found that the timing enabled them to develop practices and shape delivery before the commissioning process began, and to implement action plans in the new financial year.

**Recommendation:** Each local area will need to consider the best time to undertake self-evaluation and schedule it accordingly.

### Allowing enough time

Many participants thought the five months allocated was too short, and that more time was needed for the full cycle, from gathering the right mix of people to reviewing actions taken.

**Recommendation:** Six to 12 months would allow the process to be most effective.

### Ensuring that the correct people are involved

In a few areas, the local authority, children's trust or consultants selected individuals from the different sectors whom they thought would be best placed to undertake the evaluation. However, when going through the questions, it was found that other staff or partners were better able to provide a considered response.

**Recommendation:** Consider building in some preparation time to ensure that the exercise is engaging the correct people.

### Deciding who should lead on the process

VCS Engage used a mixture of VCS organisations and consultants to deliver the SET in participating areas, based on feedback from regional VCS teams. Regions that put forward three or more sub-regions then had to decide whether to use a single lead facilitator, or separate facilitators for each local area.

**Recommendation:** Whatever the status of the lead facilitator, they should understand Every Child Matters and the children's trusts agendas, while being impartial to the interests of both local authorities and the VCS. They should also have the skills to negotiate agreement on scoring and action plans.

### Ensuring the self-evaluation process is linked to other planning mechanisms

A number of participants expressed the view that self-evaluation needs to be meshed with other activities, such as the preparation or review of the Children and Young People's (CYP) Plan. There were several reasons for this. Some felt that unless the evaluation process was embedded within robust planning mechanisms, the implementation of action plans would fall by the wayside. Others raised the issue of 'consultation fatigue', which can make it hard for key players to give time and commitment to self-evaluation.

**Recommendation:** Partners should consider how delivering the self-evaluation toolkit can be meshed with existing planning and consultation mechanisms, to avoid duplicating activity and to enhance the robustness of action plans.

## Findings from the pilot

During the pilot, the evaluation process identified some innovative approaches to engaging the VCS in children's services. However, there were some general areas of concern that were common across the majority of local authorities.

This section of the report summarises the responses to each of the questions within the self-evaluation toolkit.

### How the scores were reached

As far as scoring for each question is concerned, the pilot explored a number of models:

- a single score negotiated and agreed by the local authority, children's trust and VCS
- separate local authority and VCS scorings
- a separate score by each individual participant.

The pattern of scoring suggested that local authorities were more optimistic about levels of engagement and the VCS more cautious. In context, it was felt that the lower score was more likely to reflect the true picture, particularly with the high number of 'A' scores given by local authorities versus 'C' scores from the VCS. For this reason, where the VCS and the local authority gave different scorings, the lower score has been used and the differences highlighted.

Where the individual score approach was used, a high majority responded as 'Don't know'. In these cases data was not used as part of the analysis, although any useful comments have been used in the report.

In cases where several respondents have given individual scores for each question, the majority response has been used as the main finding, except where that response was 'Don't know'.

A different approach was taken in the North West Region, where seven local authorities jointly undertook the evaluation and came up with a generic set of recommendations.

### How does the children's trust or strategic partnership ensure meaningful representation of the VCS at strategic level?

There were 15 usable responses to this question, with four authorities rated A, ten B and two C.

Two areas used dual scoring, resulting in different ratings. In these cases the local authorities rated themselves as A and B, while the VCS ratings were B and C, respectively.

Evidence presented to support the A ratings included:

- resources allocated to develop the capacity of the VCS in order to ensure appropriate representation
- a high number of different types and sizes of VCS representatives on the trust board.

However, concerns raised in two of the A-rated evaluations suggest that the scores may have been ambitious. In one case it was felt that lack of resourcing was affecting representation, while in the other evidence stated, 'whilst representation is across board and sub-groups, communication is limited mostly to the shadow board'. Other issues were raised about the timeliness of receiving board information, which may have an impact on the ability to contribute to the discussion.

The issues identified as evidence of a C rating included the following:

- In several cases it was felt that the quality of engagement was tokenistic, or that the trust used larger VCS organisations who were representing themselves rather than the sector.
- The administration processes for meetings as well as the manner in which they were conducted and serviced caused problems for the VCS.
- In some instances it was felt that there were too many meetings, which in itself became a barrier to engagement.

In general, meaningful representation was one of the main areas identified as needing further development. In most cases this was because the many local authorities were keen to enhance an existing service, rather than creating something new in response to an identified gap. However, in several cases the VCS raised concerns about lack of representation on the trust or strategic partnership. This was a particular feature where the VCS and local authorities gave separate scores.

Some regions have already provided the resources for a part- or full-time post to link with the children's trust, local authority and VCS, as well as coordinating local networks. Other regions have identified this as an area for future development. The majority of action plans included the resourcing of such a post as a future outcome of the SET.

One action plan stated the intention to develop a method of engagement for the VCS to increase meaningful representation. Another suggested the development of representation guidelines, including an open and transparent election process and wider involvement from the VCS within the trust arrangements.

### **How does the trust/partnership ensure that the diversity of voices in the VCS is heard in the continued development of the vision for ECM and in the agreement of priorities for the CYP Plan?**

Out of 17 responses, four authorities were rated A, 17 B, and three at C. This was one area in which both the VCS and the local authority frequently agreed higher ratings, and where the local authority (LA) and VCS gave separate ratings, there was the highest level of agreement within this category.

In five cases the dual scoring system was used, coming up with separate scores from the VCS and the local authority:

| Number of SET responses | LA rating | VCS rating |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1                       | A         | C          |
| 2                       | A         | B          |
| 2                       | B         | C          |

The evidence produced to support the A ratings included the following:

- VCS representatives had been involved in the trust's vision statement and will be involved in its review.
- Widespread consultation on the CYP Plan had been undertaken.

In one case, concerns were raised about the lead members' limited engagement with the VCS, raising questions about whether the authority warranted an A rating.

The second A-rated evaluation suggested that, although consultation was widespread, the authority would be unable to continue it at the same level the following year. The third A-rated evaluation suggested that more work was needed on engaging so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups: in this case, lesbian and gay youth. These two examples imply continuing difficulties in engaging diverse voices.

The issues identified across all C ratings included the following observations:

- The VCS was not engaged in the continued development of the vision for ECM: documentation was handed to them for comment without the opportunity for input.
- In one instance the allocated post was seen by the VCS as paying lip-service to engagement.
- It was felt that statutory partners had difficulties in exploring and addressing engagement issues raised by the VCS.
- There was more engagement with larger VCS organisations than with smaller ones.

Most of the areas raised in the SET were also highlighted within action plans. These focused on increasing representation by smaller VCS organisations, and on developing systems through which larger VCS organisations could provide a conduit of information between the trust and the local VCS or advisory/support agencies.

### **How does the trust/partnership ensure that all partners, including the VCS, are involved in developing shared values and a shared ethos, which underpin the vision and working practice of all partners?**

This was an area where it was generally agreed that there were shared values and ethos. A few participants felt that additional work could be done to ensure local compacts were better understood, but out of 15 evaluations, most ratings were A (four) and B (10). Two evaluations scored a C rating.

There were two examples of different scoring by the local authority and VCS. In one case the local authority, which rated itself as A, had a 'Don't know' score from the VCS; the other had a B from the local authority and a C from the VCS.

There are a number of threads running through the evidence for all four A-rated authorities, which suggests that B may be a more realistic score. This is evidenced by the following observations from both statutory and VCS participants:

- A clear commitment to engagement and effective partnerships is limited due to resourcing issues.
- Communication can sometimes be a weak link.
- There are elements of reservation within this large and complex sector and it is hard to see how this can be shared across all partners: how can organisations not within the trust know about developments?
- An insufficiently wide cross section of the local VCS has had the opportunity to participate in the development of values and ethos of the partnership.
- Although there is representation of the sector across boards and sub-groups, communication is limited mostly to the shadow board.

These examples show the importance of ensuring that VCS representatives actually have a voice, and that engagement begins at the concept stage.

In areas where the rating was C, supporting comments suggest that either the VCS had no involvement in the development of shared values, or that engagement was tokenistic. Worryingly, one example showed a perception that, because the VCS is not named as a 'statutory partner' within the trust, there is no obligation to engage the sector when developing ethos and vision. Another evaluation noted that 'the VCS has unfortunately not been seen as a starting point, but more of an add-on'.

## How has the VCS been involved in shaping the commissioning strategy?

This area received the most negative comments about development and delivery from both the VCS and local authorities. It was also one of the few areas that consistently featured in the resulting action plans – a clear sign that participants were keen to improve.

Most scores for this area were within the B (8) and C (7) ratings. One evaluation rated the local authority as A.

There were three examples of different scorings from the VCS and the local authority. One authority put forward an A rating where the VCS scored it as B; two authorities rated themselves as B, while the VCS gave them a C.

In addition, one local authority scored itself as 'Don't know', as at the time of the evaluation it had not yet started commissioning.

The evidence produced to support the A rating includes the following:

- The commissioning framework was developed with VCS input.
- The VCS was represented on assessment panels to allocate funding.
- The scoring system used on assessment panels had been developed in partnership with the VCS.
- Local commissioning workshops had been held to raise awareness.

A number of examples of good practice emerged both from the A-rated local authority and two that were B-rated. These included:

- early engagement with the VCS in shaping the commissioning framework
- pilot commissioning where the VCS took a lead role
- VCS representation on commissioning panels
- a joint role for VCS organisations in disseminating commissioning arrangements to the children's trust, local authority and wider VCS.

Key evidence identified for C ratings included:

- lack of commissioning strategy and lack of clarity about commissioning priorities
- little or no involvement of the VCS in designing the commissioning framework
- little or no training or support to prepare the VCS to complete expressions of interest or commissioning applications
- messages given to the VCS about the need to consider collaborative bids, but no guidance or support around the considerations or intricacies of managing a partnership
- frequent failure to invite the VCS to the table for deliberations around commissioning
- lack of planning and strategy to prepare the VCS from the move between grants and commissioning.

In one evaluation it was noted that delays in merging budgets across PCTs and the local authority had hampered the development of commissioning.

The action plans had several approaches to address the problems identified in the evaluations. These included:

- revisiting decision-making structures
- reviewing current commissioning frameworks in partnership with the VCS
- designing and delivering joint training on commissioning
- undertaking workshops to support commissioning applications.

### **Has the VCS been involved in preparing and updating the CYP Plan? Has the VCS contributed to the needs analysis underlying the CYP Plan? Has the work of VCS organisations at a local level been taken account of in resource mapping?**

In many cases the VCS was involved in preparing and updating the CYP Plan, and/or played a role in local needs analysis. The scores for this section were mixed, with an almost even number of As (jointly agreed), Bs and Cs.

A varying amount of evidence was provided to support an A rating. Local events were the main method of engaging the VCS, followed up by final consultations, which enabled VCS participants to identify their contributions clearly. Some responses gave evidence of revisiting plans, to ensure that they were still relevant.

For C scores, the problems that were identified included:

- inconsistent engagement across individual local areas
- little or no engagement of the VCS in planning, updating or resource mapping
- little or no involvement of the VCS in the needs analysis
- unrealistic deadlines, making it difficult for the VCS to respond.

In one case, the local authority conducted the needs analysis internally, commenting that 'resource mapping was conducted through the ECM, although the VCS may not know they were involved'. In another authority, lead staff had not contacted the VCS to check local providers, thereby excluding many from the process.

Most importantly, one of the key complaints, regardless of the scoring, was about the use of acronyms and official language in strategic documents, which made them hard to understand and therefore to respond to.

## How does the VCS contribute to the work of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB)?

The scoring for this area was again quite evenly spread, with five As, seven Bs and four Cs.

The A scores provided the following evidence:

- clear guidance available on roles and responsibilities of the LSCB
- VCS representation ensured on the LSCB, with additional representatives on sub-groups/committees
- training available on LSCB issues, including child protection, with e-training learning support for those who cannot attend sessions
- nominated leads from the VCS and the local authority who act as advisors on safeguarding issues
- joint VCS/local authority information sharing protocol.

Where there were C scorings, the issues raised included:

- lack of clarity about the roles of representatives
- having one or two representatives from larger VCS organisations only, who represented their own interests rather than those of the VCS as a whole
- ad hoc arrangements for sharing information
- excessive use of jargon and acronyms.

## What role has the VCS had in developing and implementing a shared children's workforce strategy?

Only one area was given an overall A score, although some local authorities or trusts who assessed themselves as A were given a B or C rating by the VCS. There were 10 B scores and four C scores.

The main evidence provided to support the A rating was the plan to develop a qualification that will be flexibly available to the VCS.

Issues identified in C scorings included:

- no VCS involvement in the strategy
- no representation of VCS in the workforce skills audit
- insufficient training places, with a limited number of places available to VCS organisations
- training that focused on safeguarding rather than workforce issues
- missing out sectors – for example, VCS childcare workers – as part of the workforce audit.

One area raised concerns about capacity, as supporting evidence suggested that the person leading on the children's workforce strategy also had responsibility for a number of other, potentially conflicting, work areas within the local authority.

In another area, lobbying to promote VCS engagement had taken place, and the local VCS had carried out its own workforce development strategy in the hope that the local authority would include it as part of the overall audit.

One action plan recommended a VCS workforce skills audit, which would be included within the local authority's skills audit.

## What has the VCS's role been in the development and implementation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF)?

Of 17 responses, five scored an outright A, nine were assessed as B, and three were assessed as C.

The evidence of best practice provided by the A scorers included:

- VCS staff taking a lead role in strategy, including acting as chair
- a dedicated CAF coordinator in post
- local training that included the VCS in service delivery.

A few areas had started work on Common Assessment Frameworks in early 2008 – later than the majority of areas. This meant that while many were implementing their CAF, some were still at the pilot stage.

The most common concern across all action plans was to ensure that the identified lead professionals were of a high calibre, and that the VCS was not overlooked as part of the selection.

## Are information sharing protocols in place and do they include the VCS?

Of the 15 responses there was one agreed A score, nine B scores and five C scores.

Two areas that were given B and C ratings were just beginning to develop information sharing protocols, so had not yet agreed the approach. In addition, although one area had recognised – and praised – methods of informal information sharing, no formal process was in place.

Most worryingly, one local authority respondent did have information sharing protocols, but these were for 'VCS with statutory responsibilities, and statutory providers, not the mainstream VCS'.

The overall picture showed that despite many pockets of good practice, key sections of children, young people and family services still had to catch up in terms of information sharing protocols, with several evaluations naming schools as a priority for action.

In terms of best practice, several areas have designed and delivered training in information sharing, from which the VCS has benefited.

### **What involvement has the VCS had in a partnership asset management plan to support the most effective use of property?**

This section elicited the highest number of C responses across the entire evaluation analysis (11). Based on the responses, the issue appeared to be both misunderstood and controversial.

In the main, joint thinking about partnership asset management was only considered as a result of the self-evaluation exercise. The question prompted respondents in one or two areas to think creatively about the use of buildings and room bookings, based on localised best practice.

There were some examples of sharing buildings, including one where a local youth service provider already gives VCS organisations access to its premises. There were also examples of local authorities and trusts charging the VCS to use properties for meetings and their own business. One authority had undertaken an audit of premises that included the VCS, while another had recognised the importance of asset management to the VCS within extended schools, and intended to explore this further in the future.

However, the responses suggest that there is little will to act on this issue. In more than one instance both the VCS and the local authority rated joint asset management as C, yet decided it did not merit inclusion in their action plans. It is clear that government guidance will be needed to ensure that this area is given greater priority.

### **What has been the VCS involvement in the development of a communications strategy for integrated children's services?**

The responses to this question were evenly spread, with four authorities assessing themselves as A, and six each graded B and C.

Of those who rated themselves A the evidence provided included the following:

- There is a trust communications and engagement strategy.
- A quarterly publication is disseminated to the VCS, local authority and the community.
- The VCS contributes to events to develop and ratify the communications strategy.
- Reviews have been undertaken of existing communications strategies, with the VCS playing a key role in the process.

In terms of the C grades, three of the six were jointly agreed grades, and both the VCS and the local authority were in the process of developing a communications strategy. In one case, the VCS felt it was best placed to lead on the strategy, as it

was already providing communications via its own newsletter. In another area there were plans to create a post to take forward the communications strategy, to be jointly advertised by the local authority and the VCS.

The other three areas took the separate grades approach, with the VCS awarding C grades and the local authorities A or B grades. The concerns outlined included the following:

- Information sharing initiatives tended to be framed in a statutory context, which was not accessible to VCS organisations.
- The current communication strategy did not involve all partners.
- There was no organised way of gathering VCS views.
- Communication with the VCS was sporadic and tended to relate only to VCS issues.

All these issues were picked up in the action plans concerned.

### What has the VCS involvement been in developing a quality assurance and performance management strategy for delivery of the CYP Plan?

This area also had a high number of C responses (10). Three authorities were rated an agreed A, and two rated as B.

One of the A ratings had been jointly agreed despite an admission that VCS organisations had not been fully involved, which suggests that the reasoning behind the final score should be further explored.

For the other A ratings, evidence produced to support grades included the following:

- The local authority had met training costs to ensure the VCS can contribute to quality assurance development.
- VCS representatives had been trained as quality system moderators, verifiers and assessors.
- The VCS had been involved in agreeing performance measures.
- There was shared performance data on delivery.

Of the 10 C ratings, four resulted from different ratings by the local authority and the VCS. In all but one case, ratings were at the opposite ends of the scale: that is, scored A by the local authority, C by the VCS.

Concerns raised across all C ratings included the following:

- The VCS was asked to sign up and contribute to a system without a clear understanding of the performance measures.
- No arrangements were in place to support VCS involvement.
- Performance management frameworks needed to be established and agreed for the area trust.
- A variety of standards were used across the local authority, and these needed to be streamlined.
- The tone and language of systems appeared to discourage VCS engagement.
- Only larger VCS organisations were engaged in the development of standards, placing them in a better position for future commissioning.
- In one instance the VCS queried whether statutory bodies actually understood performance management, as 'they only focused on it at the end of the year'.

In one authority there was a tie between C and 'Don't know' (not used as part of the analysis), which highlighted the need to agree standards for measuring performance across the local authority.

Finally, although one authority had rated itself as a C, this area was not included in its action plan.

## What role has the VCS had in gaining the involvement of children, young people and families in ECM?

This question elicited the highest number of B scorings across the evaluation (12), with three A ratings and one C rating.

Evidence to support the A ratings included the following:

- The VCS was supported to seek the views of children, young people and families, working with statutory agencies.
- There were examples of partnership work between the VCS and statutory agencies to facilitate involvement.
- The VCS both provided and took part in training on engaging children, young people and families effectively.

Although a great deal of evidence was produced about the involvement of children, young people and families, there was little to show what part the VCS had played in bringing this about.

One evaluation with an A rating used the example of how a large VCS organisation had been commissioned to provide training on engaging children, young people and families. Although the evidence is valid, it raises questions about the involvement of other local VCS organisations. It appears to be another example of how larger VCS organisations are regarded as more viable providers, and how they may be seen as representing the VCS as a whole when this is clearly not the case.

The C-rated evaluation was a result of separate scoring by the VCS and local authority, which rated itself as B. In this instance, while there were again examples of involving children, young people and families who were local residents, the role of the VCS was unclear.

## How does the partnership/authority actively encourage the VCS to play a bigger role in the delivery of integrated children's services?

This is an area where grading was low across the board, with significant differences where a separate scoring system was used. There was only one agreed A and one agreed B rating; the rest (10) were rated C.

For the A grade, the evidence included:

- reviewing contract regulations and building in longer timescales for the VCS to respond to commissioning
- adopting new methods of advertising
- regular funding updates and opportunities sent to VCS providers.

Additional evidence provided to support different B ratings included the following:

- The VCS was commissioned to provide briefing sessions to other VCS organisations on the new commissioning arrangements.
- The VCS led on the provision of youth services, consisting of around 120 contracts, while one-third of all early years providers were from the VCS.

Four of the C ratings were jointly agreed. Of the remaining six, four local authorities graded themselves as A and two as B, but were all graded C by the VCS.

The issues relating to the C grades included the following:

- Little or no support was offered to the VCS, particularly smaller organisations, to help them to respond to new commissioning requirements.
- No account was taken of the ability of small VCS organisations to compete for bids to deliver services.
- Concerns were raised about the lack of guidance in specific commission specifications, compared to grants and other methods of securing funds.
- The VCS often received information about commissioning very close to deadlines.
- A lack of joined-up working resulted in 'multi-commissioning' across different departments for similar services.
- Only a small number of larger VCS organisations were encouraged to play a larger role in service provision: in one area it was felt that engagement is very much a 'closed shop'.

### What action has been taken by the partnership/ authority to support VCS organisations to improve the sustainability of their services?

Of the total responses, there were no outright A ratings, and an even spread between the B and C scorings (seven each).

Of the seven C grades, five were disputed, with two local authorities scoring themselves as A and three as B.

Concerns relating to the C grades included the following:

- Trusts should consider developing the skills of the VCS during the life of contracts.
- In some cases local authorities or trusts decided not to take action that would have supported VCS sustainability.
- Questions were raised about whether volunteering is valued locally, and how collaboration for future commissioning tenders could be supported.
- Some VCS organisations felt that, despite pockets of best practice, some areas needed serious improvement, including a greater understanding of the sector in order to support sustainability.

A number of areas were still awaiting the results of first round commissioning and had, therefore, not reached the point of considering sustainability, while lack of clarity around commissioning arrangements was clearly causing problems.

However, despite the bleak picture, several VCS respondents indicated that some trusts were making a positive move from one-year to three-year funding. In addition, one authority, self-rated as C, had plans to launch a collaboration hub across service providers.

## What has been the VCS role in locality working and developing area networks?

Of the total responses, one was rated A by both the VCS and the local authority, seven were rated B and eight as C.

Evidence produced for the A rating included the following:

- The VCS was linked into children's centres and extended schools.
- The VCS was involved in needs analysis for each of the area's children centres.

However, the evaluation raised concerns about taking the lead professional role forward, which had resourcing implications both for the VCS and the local authority.

For the C ratings, five were jointly agreed, while in two cases the local authorities rated themselves as B, and in one case as A. One authority, rated C by the VCS, did not address the question at all as work had not yet begun on the locality model, although the VCS suggested that this would be further developed by the following year.

Areas of concern included the following:

- There was no consistent rationale for VCS involvement, or for embedding the VCS in the management of locality teams.
- The VCS was involved in some locality teams but not in others, showing a lack of consistency.
- Engagement at local level was difficult where work covered several areas within the region.
- In two areas there was a 'top down' approach with little or no engagement at strategic level.
- VCS representatives found it difficult to play an active role in all the groups and subgroups.

## How are VCS organisations helping to ensure improved outcomes for all children (universal services) and improved outcomes for vulnerable children and those with acute needs?

Of the 17 responses, two had an agreed A rating, ten were rated B and four as C.

Evidence for the A rating included the following:

- A selection of representative VCS organisations took part in developing and agreeing methods for improving outcomes.
- A self-review framework to assess improvements was being used by the VCS and statutory partners.
- A VCS organisation was involved in Ofsted inspections (although it should be noted that the organisation concerned was a large one).

From this evidence it was not clear why the authorities merited the high score, as the practice described was similar to the guidelines for a B rating. Meanwhile, a notable example of best practice emerged within the B scores, where one area celebrated the success of VCS organisations in achieving improvements.

Of the three C ratings, two were a result of separate scorings, with one local authority rating itself as A, and the other as B.

The issues identified within the C ratings included the following:

- The practice of involving VCS in improved outcomes was not yet embedded.
- It was not generally recognised that the VCS can contribute to all five outcomes, and the sector was not trusted to carry out a self-review of achievements against targets.
- The VCS was not fully involved in meetings to support the improvement of outcomes.

## Local area evaluation data

The self-evaluation tool was due to be piloted in three local authorities in each of the nine English regions: 27 authorities in all.

In the event, a total of 25 authorities took part, for a number of reasons:

- In the North East, three local authorities were identified but it was felt that they needed additional time to engage in this process, which meant they could not contribute to this report.
- Two authorities identified within the South East were unable to begin the process within the designated time frame so were unable to be involved.
- On the plus side, in the North West a slightly different approach was adopted. Six local authorities were invited to undertake the SET jointly and come up with some common action points (see page 27).

Authorities were chosen through a range of criteria, which varied from region to region. Some were invited to apply via an informal process; others were approached by regional teams based on known best practice or potential to improve. A few put themselves forward in order to evaluate their current engagement with the VCS and to set a baseline for the future.

The 25 local authorities taking part in phase two of the pilot were:

| Region                   | Participating local authorities                              |
|--------------------------|--|
| London                   | Croydon, Harrow, Hillingdon                                  |
| South East               | Wokingham  |
| East of England          | Hertfordshire, Luton, Thurrock                               |
| South West               | Gloucestershire, North Somerset, Swindon                     |
| North West               | Bolton, Cheshire, Lancashire, Manchester, Warrington, Wirral |
| East Midlands            | Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottingham                   |
| West Midlands            | Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Worcestershire                   |
| Yorkshire and Humberside | Calderdale, North Yorkshire, Wakefield                       |

Not all the local authorities taking part were able to provide full feedback on the self-evaluation process. This analysis of local data, therefore, reflects the information available at the time of writing, with particular emphasis on examples of good practice.

## London region

### Facts about London:

- The population of Greater London is estimated at 7.62 million.
- Thirty-two per cent of all Londoners belong to a minority ethnic group. The largest non-white ethnic groups are Indian (6.6 per cent) and black African (6 per cent). Forty-six per cent of all children and young people in London are from a black and minority ethnic (BME) group.
- London's children are more likely to be living in a lone-parent family than children elsewhere in England: 28 per cent, compared to 23 per cent. In inner London this figure rises to 36 per cent.
- It is estimated that London has 40,000 voluntary and community sector organisations.

### Summary of findings

Three of London's 33 boroughs were selected to take part in the pilot: Croydon, Harrow and Hillingdon. Other boroughs were keen to participate, but for a number of reasons, including the timescales involved and lack of funding, were unable to do so.

Overall, it was felt that the SET was a useful tool for ascertaining a baseline for VCS engagement, and for beginning the dialogue between the local authorities and the VCS.

In all three boroughs, the local authority and VCS generally agreed on the areas to be included in the action plan.

A number of factors emerged from the evaluation:

- Greater clarity on commissioning arrangements is needed. None of the three boroughs had established a commissioning strategy at the time of the evaluation, which meant that most VCS groups were unclear about their future funding. One authority recognised the value of gaining an overview of good commissioning practice from other boroughs, while the need to keep the VCS updated on commissioning arrangements was also acknowledged.
- The local authority and the VCS had to consider the issues around moving towards area-based commissioning, taking developments forward post-Children's Fund funding. These factors have an impact on the stability of the VCS.
- Resourcing was needed for networks and forums to support the VCS around engagement and becoming commission-ready. This support should include targeted training for VCS organisations.
- In at least one authority, engagement was dependent on existing good relationships between key staff. Clearly, more robust mechanisms are needed to ensure consistent VCS involvement.
- It was recognised from the outset that action plans would need time to become embedded.

## South East region

For a number of reasons, only one local authority from the South East was able to participate in the programme: Wokingham.

### Wokingham

- Wokingham has been assessed as the third richest local authority in England and Wales, with a large and successful commercial sector. Unemployment is among the lowest in the UK.
- The economic profile of the area makes it difficult for the Council for Voluntary Services to attract additional funding, since it scores low on indices of deprivation. Nevertheless, the area has an active VCS, with around 400 agencies working together through a voluntary sector forum.
- The VCS has been engaged in Wokingham's Children's Trust since its inception through the children's services policy board. A new structure for the trust was put in place in March 2008, and the VCS is exploring how it can have a stronger voice within that structure.

### Summary of findings

Owing to time constraints, it was not possible for Wokingham to follow the full process of self-evaluation. As a compromise, the toolkit questions were discussed by a senior local authority representative and the chief executive of Voluntary Action Wokingham Borough. The priorities they agreed will form the basis of ongoing work between the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the VCS.

There was a clear willingness on both sides to improve processes for involving the VCS within the children's trust. Interaction currently happens on multiple levels between a number of different people, and it was agreed that a more streamlined structure for engagement needs to be developed.

The initial task was, therefore, to establish joint structures and processes, which can be communicated across the VCS. The best practice suggestions in the self-evaluation toolkit can then be used to support further development over the next 12 months.

## East of England

### Facts about the East of England

- The East of England is one of the fastest growing regions in the UK, with an increasingly diverse population of approximately 6 million.
- Challenges faced by the region include its rapid growth rate and educational attainment. Meeting the different needs of rural communities in the north east and urban areas in the south west is also a challenge.
- The children and young people's VCS in the region includes more than 10,000 organisations, with at least 100,000 staff and volunteers, contributing around £275 million to the local economy.

### Summary of findings

Three local authorities in the East of England took part in the programme: Hertfordshire, Luton and Thurrock. All were keen to improve their performance and provide meaningful support to the VCS.

For a number of reasons each of the three authorities undertook the evaluation process in a different way. Bringing together large-scale mixed groups – the approach taken by one authority – appeared to make it harder to complete the evaluation, although the immediacy of the mixed-group workshop had its benefits.

The most effective approach was where the exercise was linked to other work, and could be seen as a continuum of support to shape real investment, rather than just another plan that was unlikely to be implemented.

The experience of self-evaluation has been a positive one for the region, with all three boroughs reporting a benefit. In particular, the exercise has helped to galvanise the VCS and the local authority to work harder at making improvements.

Specific points raised within the evaluations included the following:

- It was recognised that longer-term commissioning would need time to develop and implement. During this time 'hand holding' will enable the VCS to compete for service delivery on a more equal basis. One authority noted the value of a commissioning framework that builds VCS capacity as well as ensuring the delivery of services.
- Support was needed to encourage VCS engagement, including a 'bottom up' approach that involved the smallest VCS groups. It was also recognised that statutory partners need the help of the VCS in delivering services to hard-to-reach areas.
- While, in general, representation was good, more work was needed on the structure and development of local VCS networks.
- Communications emerged as a key issue. This focused on the need for a coherent communications strategy on VCS engagement as well as on the importance of using clearer language, with fewer acronyms.
- One authority stressed the importance of performance management that is sensible and manageable, rather than measuring for measurement's sake.
- In some areas the energy and commitment of local champions was acknowledged, while the importance of celebrating successes was also recognised.

## South West region

### Facts about the South West

- Geographically, the South West is the largest of the nine English regions at 23,837 square miles – more than 18 per cent of England. It has the highest percentage of rural land in any English region.
- Between 1996 and 2006 the South West had one of the fastest growing populations in England, at 6.9 per cent. Its population is now just over 5 million, and is expected to grow by almost half a million by 2018.
- The region has the highest percentage of people of retirement age and over, while only 18.3 per cent of its population are aged 15 and under, compared to 19.1 per cent for England as a whole.
- The non-white minority ethnic population is low: 8.2 per cent of residents in Bristol and 7.5 per cent in Gloucester classify themselves as non-white.

### Summary of findings

The three local authorities selected to take part in the evaluation were Gloucestershire, North Somerset and Swindon.

In general, the experience was a positive one: in at least one case, it was felt that the local authority gained a better understanding of the actual challenges facing the VCS as a result of self-evaluation. The action plan was also viewed as a useful catalyst for increasing recognition of the VCS and for improving services for children, young people and families.

A number of issues were raised in the evaluation and subsequent action plans:

- Several examples of existing good practice were identified within the authorities. These included the involvement of the VCS in workforce strategies, the CAF and the local safeguarding board.
- Once again, the need to establish clear commissioning structures was emphasised, as well as ensuring that the VCS understands the impact of changes to commissioning arrangements.
- One authority was aiming to bring funding streams together to simplify processes, and to provide advice sessions on funding to the VCS, including one-to-one guidance for individual organisations.
- It was believed that implementing the action plan will increase VCS sustainability and provide opportunities to involve smaller, newer, and hard-to-reach groups as well as the established VCS.

## North West region

### Facts about the North West

- The North West has the second largest population of the English regions: 6.7 million inhabitants. Four-fifths of the region is rural, but the majority of the population – 60 per cent – lives in Greater Manchester and Merseyside.
- The region has the highest proportion of children and young people aged 0–15 in England: 19.3 per cent, compared to the average of 19.1 per cent.
- Some 94.4 per cent of the population are from a white ethnic background, and proportions of minority ethnic groups are smaller than for England as a whole. Of these groups, 4.6 per cent describe themselves as from South Asia, 1.2 per cent as black African or Caribbean, 0.7 per cent as Chinese and 0.4 per cent as from other groups.
- Economic trends are varied. The region's two large cities – Manchester and Liverpool – are enjoying strong growth, but some parts of the North West lag far behind the national average.
- The region performs poorly on social indicators such as health inequalities, including life expectancy, and low demand housing. On these measures it is ranked eighth and ninth, respectively, out of the nine English regions.

### Summary of findings

The North West took a different approach to carrying out the evaluation. All 22 local authorities within the region were offered the opportunity to attend a two-day self-evaluation workshop in Manchester, to which local VCS and children's trust representatives were invited.

The response was excellent, with six authorities taking part: Bolton, Cheshire, Lancashire, Manchester, Warrington and Wirral.

The main concern was that as this is a new and emerging agenda, it will take time to win over hearts and minds, especially as many people have competing demands on their time and resources.

Other findings and messages emerging from the workshop included the following:

#### *Progress to date in VCS engagement:*

- setting up and developing local VCS forums
- setting up safeguarding and training structures
- improved dialogue and communication
- a strategic VCS post now embedded, with increased resources for 2008/9
- development of a VCS engagement plan
- better understanding of the VCS.

#### *Major challenges and obstacles to VCS engagement:*

- capacity of the strategic lead post to engage with all organisations wanting to be involved
- capacity of VCS to continue supporting the level of representation requested
- the diversity of the VCS
- the need for a shared vision for shaping and engaging the VCS, recognising that some organisations will choose not to come on board
- managing VCS expectations
- setting up genuinely transparent processes.

### *Priorities for 2008/9*

These were many and varied, largely reflecting measures to address the challenges identified to VCS engagement. They included:

- delivering training to the local VCS on issues such as protocols, Every Child Matters, safeguarding and commissioning
- developing clear and transparent commissioning processes, to be shared across the VCS
- developing more effective communications systems, including coordinating useful information
- developing clear and transparent representation structures
- sustaining and embedding the relationships that have already developed between the statutory sector and the VCS.

Specific priorities for children's trusts included:

- boosting the capacity of the VCS by providing resources, including building support for VCS representation into contracts
- involving the VCS in actions such as commissioning and strategy development and reviewing children's plans
- building inter-agency teams across the borough including the VCS, with a shared mission to improve the lives of children and young people
- making a philosophical commitment to the VCS and valuing its work.

Priorities for the VCS included:

- providing a joined-up approach across the VCS, including the engagement of smaller organisations
- strengthening communications systems and network representation
- engaging in joint target setting and data sharing
- recognising their involvement in children's services and the role they need to play.

## East Midlands region

### Facts about the East Midlands

- The estimated population of the East Midlands is 4.36 million, of which 90 per cent of inhabitants live in rural areas, while around 6.5 per cent categorise themselves as belonging to black or minority ethnic groups.
- The major urban centres, including the cities of Derby, Leicester and Nottingham, have highly ethnically diverse populations and some of the highest rates of deprivation in the country, while some of the more rural areas are among the most affluent.
- In the region, there are an estimated 760,100 children aged 0–14 – 17.4 per cent of the total population – and 295,300 15 to 19-year-olds.
- The VCS plays an important role in the region, particularly in urban centres where it is highly developed and professionalised. In rural areas VCS activity tends to comprise smaller, volunteer-led initiatives for the benefit of the local community.
- There is reasonably strong VCS infrastructure in most parts of the region, although this varies considerably by area. However, the VCS has become divided in some places and revolves around certain themes, making it hard to engage with the sector as a single cohesive unit.
- Estimates suggest that there are between 20,000 and 36,000 VCS organisations in the region, employing around 28,000 people. The region has around 11,603 registered charities with an estimated income of £878 million.

### Summary of findings

Three local authorities took part in the evaluation: Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Nottingham.

In all three authorities, initial separate meetings took place with senior local authority officers and with VCS groups. Comments from the first round of meetings were captured and integrated into a matrix format for all participants to consider ahead of joint meetings bringing the authorities and the VCS together. At these joint meetings the ratings were reviewed, noteworthy issues discussed, and priority areas were agreed in order to develop an action plan.

In general, the local authorities tended to be optimistic about levels of engagement, while the VCS was more apprehensive about the future. However, the process of evaluation helped in bridging this divide. In one area, disagreements were quickly reconciled at the joint meeting: the VCS recognised that misunderstandings had arisen from poor communication, while the local authority officer acknowledged VCS fears. In another area, although local authority officers felt they were aware of the VCS's concerns, the evaluation highlighted a number of new issues – an important outcome in itself.

Common issues raised across the authorities included the following:

- Representation and engagement of the VCS was limited beyond the larger organisations. The VCS considered this inadequate as crucial services are delivered by smaller community organisations.
- There were anxieties regarding roles and expectations under the CAF, especially where funding-led professional work is concerned.
- Improvements were needed in communication, particularly with regard to actions planned by the local authority and the future of commissioning.

- It was considered that values, ethos and working practice still depend largely on 'who you know'.
- Individuals were not empowered to make decisions on behalf of the partnership or to impose action on member agencies, which can limit action planning and slow implementation.
- The cost of VCS engagement, both financial and in kind, still seemed to fall on the VCS itself. Given that the sector is made up of many separate organisations, there was a need for dedicated time and resources to make engagement a reality. In particular, the involvement of smaller VCS organisations will not be achievable unless the local authority takes on some of the associated costs.

A number of issues raised around delivering the evaluation include the following:

- Time is a key factor. This applies not only to competing activities around which meetings have to fit, but also to the need to gain the involvement of VCS organisations that do not already engage with the local authority. Adequate time is also needed if local authorities and the VCS are expected to reach consensus on ratings and action plans.
- Evaluation needs to be tied into the development of the CYP Plan or other review processes, to reduce the risk of action plans falling by the wayside.
- The effective engagement of Children and Young People's Partnerships needs to be considered in depth, to ensure that the evaluation process does not lack the authority to make recommendations for change.

## West Midlands

### Facts about the West Midlands:

- The West Midlands is a region of contrast, particularly between urban and rural, encompassing Birmingham – England's second city – and sparsely populated counties such as Herefordshire and Shropshire.
- The population is 5,365,000, of which 19 per cent is under the age of 16.
- Average pay levels are lower than in all other English regions, except the North East, and Yorkshire and Humber. Unemployment is just above the national average.
- There are over 18,300 VCS organisations in the region and – assuming national trends are followed – around 7,500 of these focus on children, young people or families.

### Summary of findings

Three local authorities took part in the evaluation: Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent and Worcestershire. Each was selected to reflect something of the region's diversity. It was also decided to work in areas with a strong local VCS.

In each area it was determined locally how the process would be managed and the local children and young people's VCS network was contracted to deliver the evaluation. In two areas the networks undertook the work themselves, while in the third a consultant was employed.

Two seminars were also held for VCS Children's Trust representatives from across the region, providing the opportunity for those in the pilot areas to discuss their plans and share their experiences.

The evaluation process acted as a catalyst that is expected to have lasting impact beyond the pilot phase. In all three areas there was a strong commitment from both the local authorities and the VCS to continue the work, developing, implementing and reviewing action plans.

One issue that emerged in the evaluations concerned the inconsistency of evidence for scoring: in some areas excellence was accompanied by undeniably poor practice, or key indicators were missing, despite otherwise exemplary progress. It was also noted that practice was sometimes in advance of written strategies and policies.

In addition, in one authority there was ambivalence from both sides about the asset management plan, and whether this was actually a good thing. In particular, concerns were raised over continued VCS independence, should assets be pooled.

Priorities identified in the action plans included:

- developing a strategy to ensure VCS engagement in all processes within commissioning
- raising the profile of the VCS as service providers, including developing a prospectus on children and young people's voluntary services
- identifying local authority officers to play the role of link person and champion of VCS organisations
- developing and piloting innovative and collaborative projects both within the VCS and with partners
- raising awareness of the training available within the VCS, as well as joint training events and activities within the Children's Trust
- promoting the active participation of children, young people and families in the design, delivery and management of services.

## Yorkshire and Humberside

### Facts about Yorkshire

- Yorkshire and Humber area covers some 15,400 sq km, of which 20 per cent is National Park. It had a population of over 5.1 m (8.7 per cent of Great Britain) in 2006 – an increase of 3.5 per cent since 2001.
- Nearly 2 million of the population of the region are aged 16 years and under.
- Some 5.6 per cent of the region's population come from BME communities, of which 30 per cent are also aged 16 and under.
- Studies suggest that there could be as many as 48,000 VCS organisations operating within the region.

### Summary of findings

Three local authorities from this region took part in the evaluation: Calderdale, North Yorkshire and Wakefield. In all three areas separate evaluations took place with the local authority and the VCS, with the two being brought together to formulate an action plan.

The key findings from the action plans included the following:

- Local trusts/strategic partnerships need to ensure that all voices in the VCS are heard, particularly in regard to children's services, where there is more diverse need, and among hard-to-reach groups.
- An integrated commissioning framework should be developed, with specific and agreed commissioning requirements, including clarity and transparency, ensuring the involvement of the VCS in the design, delivery and evaluation processes.
- Work needs to continue to encourage elected members and officers to regularly seek the views of smaller VCS organisations, and to value these views once gathered.
- More imaginative solutions to VCS and statutory provider collaborations, which are mutually acceptable, should be encouraged, taking into account the strengths and experience of the VCS.
- Resourcing of smaller VCS representatives for travel, expenses and time to engage in trust/partnerships and local decision making may make the difference between participation/involvement or exclusion for disadvantaged or smaller VCS organisations.

## Conclusions

The self-evaluation pilot proved to be a valuable exercise in gaining a picture of current levels of VCS engagement across the country, identifying a number of urgent priorities for the future as well as areas where progress has been made. It was also found that the self-evaluation process in itself could help in increasing engagement by bringing key partners together and encouraging clear, honest dialogue.

The following key points arose from the self-evaluation pilot:

- Commissioning emerges as one of the most crucial areas where progress is needed. This includes involving the VCS within all aspects of the commissioning process, from designing frameworks through to the delivery of services. In a number of areas new commissioning arrangements had not been established or there had been little communication with VCS partners, increasing uncertainty and instability within the sector.
- Representation of the VCS needs to be strengthened. In some areas it was felt that representation was tokenistic, and that the VCS was not fully engaged at strategic level. There was also a tendency for local authorities to work with larger VCS organisations, who often represent their own interests rather than the sector as a whole. This frequently results in the exclusion of smaller, grass-roots organisations from both the design and the delivery of children's services.
- Resourcing remains a critical factor in ensuring effective VCS engagement. This includes strengthening local VCS networks as well as developing effective training and communication strategies. Encouragingly, many local authorities were proposing to create dedicated posts to work with the VCS, while at least one authority noted the value of a commissioning framework that helps build VCS capacity along with delivering services.
- The development of joint asset management plans is an area of concern. Although in several authorities this element received a C rating, it was not included in subsequent action plans, while the financial implications of sharing assets caused concern to the VCS. It appears that without clearer guidance this issue is unlikely to be given priority.
- A number of regions reported positive, professional relationships between the VCS and local authorities, commenting that these relationships made it easier to carry out the evaluation and to negotiate disagreements. However, it was also noted that different aspects of VCS engagement depended primarily on 'who you know'. Clearly stronger and more far-reaching mechanisms are needed to ensure that engagement is both robust and transparent.
- There were signs of strong progress towards VCS engagement in two areas. These related to the VCS's contribution to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB), and the development and assessment of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF).

In many areas, the actual process of carrying out self-evaluation and developing an action plan brought its own benefits, with participants frequently describing it as a catalyst for improvement. Specifically, the exercise helped in promoting dialogue between partners, while in a number of cases VCS participants felt that they had been able to raise concerns of which the local authority was not aware.

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