

Consortium development – The Zone, Plymouth

There are at least two formal ways in which The Zone (Plymouth) supports, advises and interacts with smaller organisations:

- It is formally part of the Change Up Consortium in Plymouth, and
- The Zone is a founding and key organisation of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector (VCS) forum.

There are more details below, on the background to how The Zone, as a service provider and not an infrastructure body (an organisation providing support to voluntary and community organisations), became involved in these areas of work. It stemmed partly from dissatisfaction with the opportunities for representation on, and support from, infrastructure organisations in the city for those VCS organisations working with children and young people.

One of the initial actions was to set up an informal forum to bring together VCS organisations interested in looking at partnership and collaborative work. Ruth Marriott, chief executive of The Zone, describes in more detail:

“Plymouth has poor VCS infrastructure generally in the city. Traditionally, there had only been two organisations that offered infrastructure in the city: the Guild which professed to support mid to large VCS organisations working either with volunteers or within the social and health arenas, and the Plymouth Community Partnership (PCP) membership organisation which was viewed as supporting the smaller grassroots organisations.

Around four or five years ago [2005 to 2006], I was vocal in the city as I felt that as the leading VCS organisation in the city delivering services to children and young people, and as a mid to large VCS organisation, we were not getting either need supported effectively.

Initially, I and another chief executive (from Harbour, a local drugs service) set up an informal forum to bring together interested VCS organisations of a larger nature, which were interested in looking at partnership/collaborative work. This grew and became more active when we had a better focus. In the autumn of 2006, key organisations in the city working in the voluntary and community sector with children and young people, brought the group together to focus on the lack of voice at the strategic level for this part of the sector.

Collaborate for Commissioning was funded by the IDeA under the National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning (NPTSC).

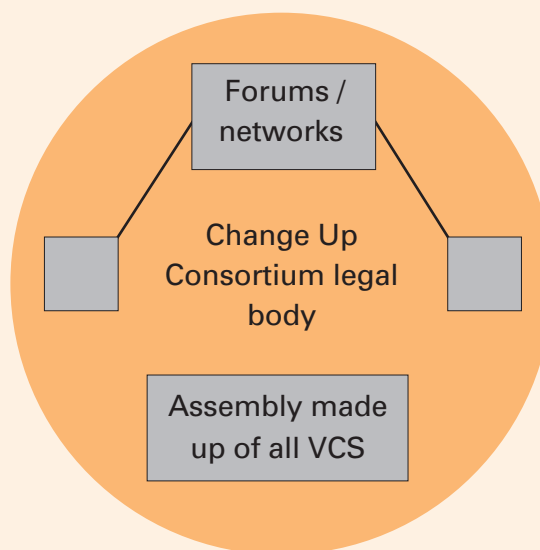
Collaborate *for* Commissioning



We built on the only representation we had through a PCP representative on the developing executive of the Children's Trust board. We were able to legitimise the principle from the local authority, through this forum, that there should be VCS representatives, at every level, for the developing Children's Trust and the commissioning process.

As the chief executive of The Zone, I was vocal about the lack of engagement from the Change Up Consortium either in relation to the VCS work with children and young people or any communication about what was happening locally. This led to me and a colleague from Routeways, being asked to join that group.

The Change Up Consortium has undergone rapid change as a direct consequence of PCP folding last year. The Zone is still a part of the Change Up consortium and the model Plymouth is developing looks like this:



The Assembly consists of all VCS organisations that wish to be involved. The Change Up Consortium is a legal entity (so that it can tender for contracts) and has representation from organisations that meet the Change Up definition of an infrastructure body, and elected representatives from networks within the forum. Local strategic partnership (LSP) representation will be voted on by the assembly from this grouping.

The Zone is a key member of the children and young people VCS forum and is one of two elected representatives to sit on the Children's Trust board.

The Zone sits on a number of strategic groups in its own right as a service provider and on behalf of the VCS in an informal way (for example, on the Local Implementation Team (LIT) for Adult Mental Health through NHS Plymouth).

Both the VCS representation at the Children's Trust and the LIT, means that we are involved in the commissioning process. Although, where there are conflicts of interest we have to be clear about that. I think this is still an issue that the statutory sector needs to get to grips with, as they have service providers sitting round the table with commissioners and they still do not appear to see that this is the same paradox the voluntary and community sector faces.

Strengths

The strengths of these models are different in different contexts.

- *The VCS children and young people forum and representation at every level for the strategic, executive and board of the Children's Trust is quite a powerful model.*

A smaller group of us have got together to develop a Community Interest Company which will enable us to tender collaboratively. However, the strength of this aspect of the development has not yet been put to the test. The acid test will be if we can agree to put a collective bid in for future work and all be prepared to get a smaller share of the cake potentially rather than the whole cake or none at all.

- *The Change Up Consortium is going from strength to strength as it is viewed within the sector and externally by funders from the statutory service as a much more robust mechanism. It is not there yet, but it is moving towards a much more open, honest and transparent way of working which does not just rely on the same old faces being involved.*
- *The LIT is also in a new phase of structure. There are four VCS reps who share the two places on the LIT between them. So far there have only been two meetings held under this format, but it does mean we can share the responsibility around and the capacity to attend meetings between us. We have been very clear though with the primary care trust that we cannot claim to be representatives of the sector, but merely representatives from the voluntary and community sector that provide services locally for adult mental health.*

- *Opportunities for smaller VCS organisations to work collaboratively in a range of different ways: partnership, CIC or mergers.*
- *Ability to put forward collaborative bids that build on the individual strengths of particular organisations, their track records, and expertise.*
- *Added value*
- *Greater collective ability to prevent national competition delivering local services.*

Weaknesses

- *Accusations of empire building from fellow VCS colleagues*
- *Lack of trust in our own sector*
- *There has not yet been a successful tender to show how this might work and alleviate some of the perceptions and fears of mistrust*
- *Communication*
- *Age old concerns about who, and which organisations, are representative of local communities*

Suggestions

There is definitely still a need to develop local training around commissioning and the strengths and weakness of doing so. One of the difficulties is that the voluntary and community sector needs to be clear within itself how to do this, without it feeling like another competition or a case of 'who can get most knowledge'. Unfortunately, more difficult financial times tend to bring out vociferous voices that only represent themselves in a bid to keep their organisations funded."