



# Small Voluntary Organisations & Children's Services

Researching experience of contracting and strategic involvement in Kirklees

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## Contents

Introduction	3
Purpose of report	3

Limitations and the sample	4
Background/context	5
Findings	6
Organisations	6
Organisation structures	6
Resources	7
Service delivery and activities	7
ECM outcomes	8
Effective Practice – contracting and commissioning	8
Experience	8
Contracting - What works?	9
Networking /Opportunities	10
Networks & Affiliations	10
Locally:	10
Regionally:	11
Nationally:	11
What do you get from networks/support?	11
Strengths of the sector	11
Weaknesses & Challenges in the sector	13
Partnership/Decision Making	14
Barriers to involvement	14
Experience and feedback	15
Conclusions	15
Contribution of small voluntary organisations	15
Pressure on small organisations	16
Costs and benefits	16
Supporting key individuals	18
Contracting experience	18
Recommendations	20
Appendix one	22

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this report is: “To study the experience of small voluntary organisations (less than 10 staff) and identify their strengths and challenges that the Change for Children agenda poses for them, identify the support that they currently have and what they would need to help them engage with the new agenda.” (Project brief)

The report is the result of a series of interviews with small voluntary sector organisations. They were asked about their experience and views of contracting/commissioning, where they get support from and about their involvement in strategic planning.

## **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:

- Collate views from small voluntary sector organisations on their experience of contracting, being commissioned and participating in strategic decision making.

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

## Methodology for research

As a starting point, I used the headings and questions used by Reshma Spafford at the National Children's Centre to develop questions which would structure interviews. This included gathering information about the services and activities of the organisation. The list of questions is available in appendix 1.

These questions were only asked in structured interviews, and were not used as written questionnaires. Face to face or telephone interviews were done with key contacts in organisations which were known to have fewer than 10 employees. This was mostly local independent organisations, though it included some small local projects which are affiliated to or part of national organisations but which were managed locally.

I contacted them to arrange interview times and dates, and usually went to their office base to conduct the interview.

Several of the first interview appointments I made were cancelled due to unexpected circumstances or crises. Given the short deadline for the project, this created some difficulties in completing the research on time, and meant the work was not finished by the end of April as planned.

### Limitations and the sample

The number of interviews is small – just 16 interviews, and such a sample can give distorted findings. However, there are probably no more than 100 voluntary organisations working with children and young people, which have 1-10 paid workers, in Kirklees. This is therefore a reasonable sample.

Each interview was with one person from each organisation. Others in the same organisation may have different perspectives or understandings.

Interviews were informal, though structured. There was little quantitative data collected, and so interpretations are largely subjective.

Several of those interviewed asked for confidentiality to be maintained. Therefore, each individual's replies are not available for independent analysis.

## Background/context

The voluntary, community and faith sector is very diverse and has a wide range of perspectives and experiences within it. In order to better understand how the sector works and what support needs it has, it can be useful to categorise it as follows:

- Large voluntary organisations – these have 10 or more full time equivalent paid staff, and so usually have management and administrative infrastructure. They are often engaged in contracting and strategic planning. They may also be part of and supported by a national organisation or infrastructure which includes a national board of voluntary directors or trustees.
- Small voluntary organisations – these have less than 10 full time equivalent paid staff. These are usually independent organisations, working locally or providing a specialist service. They have a local management committee or trustees, and may work with several communities. They are likely to have had some contracts, but also receive grants.
- Community organisation and groups – these are volunteer led and run, and focus on a particular community (of interest or geographical area). They have no paid staff and rely on grants, volunteer time, fundraising and other resources to function.

Faith organisations can be any of these three, depending on their scale and functions.

The '10 staff' figure is fairly arbitrary, and there is a big difference between those who have one and those who have nine staff. Also, some volunteer led organisations have many volunteers and can draw on the support of a national structure – the Scouts and the YMCA for example.

However, it is useful to differentiate between large and small voluntary organisations and community organisations. They have different support needs, and often a very different style of working due to the governance arrangements and cultures that develop in the organisations.

While large organisations often have the infrastructure and flexibility to respond to change, and community organisations are often able to continue regardless, small voluntary organisations are increasingly expected to engage in contracting, commissioning and strategic planning, while rarely having adequate resources to do so. Therefore they are the focus of this research.

The government has been consistently clear in legislation and guidance that the voluntary, community and faith sectors are to be seen as partners in improving outcomes for children and communities – and so should be fully involved.

## Findings

### *Organisations*

All organisations interviewed had at least one and less than ten paid members of staff – many had only one or two full time equivalents. They were:

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Description of service</b>
Central Youth Club	Open access youth club offering informal games and sports, mostly.
Pakistani Youth Forum	Helping young people develop skills around decision making, and to develop a sense of responsibility.
SPACE	Football academy & citizenship work
Manasamitra	Traditional South Indian arts and dance.
Huddersfield Pluspoint	IT skills development, life skills, arts, outdoor education.
Barnardo's Missing in Yorkshire Service	Return welfare interviews, plus follow up support
Fieldhead Community Centre	Manage a community centre and support work to meet local needs, particularly young people.
Thornhill Lees Community Centre	Mostly open access youth club, some study support, dance projects, community events and issue based work.
Suga Brown	Dance, drama, poetry, performances, community events and youth training
Communities United Project	Sports, music, dance, performing arts. Also issue based sessions, training and volunteering.
Rawthorpe Amateur Boxing Club	Boxing training, keep fit.
Fit for Life	Entry 2 Employment/ Volunteering, qualifications in basic skills, confidence building, IT etc
Open Art	Arts work in communities
Taleem Community Centre	Youth work sessions, working with mosques and madrassahs
Purlwell Project	Youth work sessions, plus aerobics, sewing, mums & grandmothers projects
YWCA	Training and informal learning, support and groupwork

### Organisation structures

The most common legal structure was a Company Limited by Guarantee, most commonly they were also Charities.

Some were unincorporated associations and some described themselves as social enterprises.

In deciding what legal structure to use, some had been advised by support organisations or other advisors and had made a conscious decision – others had not understood that there were several options, each with its strengths and weaknesses.

A key concern was to have a structure which would allow them to operate flexibly, with as few restrictions as possible, and to access a range of funding. Those that described themselves as social enterprises also described themselves as not-for-profit – that is, they were clear that individuals could not take money out of the organisation as a profit, beyond their salary. In some organisations volunteers also did some paid work when funding allowed.

With the exception of the Barnardo's project and the YWCA, all were independent local organisations.

### Resources

These sixteen organisations have 71 volunteers doing at least 232 volunteer hours each week on a regular basis. This gives an average of 4 volunteers per organisation, each doing 3+hrs/wk.

These organisations employ 49 staff (some part time), with the average being 3 staff per organisation. Freelance workers are also contracted by some organisations, for particular projects.

Of course, some of the organisations have lots of volunteers and no staff, and some have more staff than volunteers. In some cases staff work extra hours as volunteers.

Most organisations rented the spaces they used as office bases and those they worked with children and young people in. Few had significant assets or reserves, but some did. Where there were significant assets, the organisation felt more able to 'ride out' short term difficulties or pressures to change their service.

### Service delivery and activities

Seventy-one regular sessions a week are provided by these 16 organisations, mostly with children and young people aged 8-20.

The organisations interviewed offered a wide range of activities and services to children and young people across Kirklees, including:

- Counselling
- Advice and support
- Advocacy and mentoring
- Signposting and referral to agencies
- Information Technology skills development
- Skills for work and employment
- Study support
- Accredited training
- Social and interpersonal skills
- Social space to meet friends
- Sports activities, training and/or competition
- Volunteering opportunities

- Outdoor activities
- Arts, dance and poetry activities/performance
- Singing and music activities/performance
- Keep fit
- Support to parents
- Personal development
- Entry 2 Employment/Volunteering,
- Basic skills development
- Training to get involved in communities and decision making

Some organisations worked only with vulnerable children and young people, who were referred through statutory agencies, and some provided services through other organisations such as schools. The other services were open to all.

### ECM outcomes

It is evident from this list that contributions are being made to all of the Every Child Matters outcomes.

All were clear about the need for activities to be safe, and for their organisations to have good policies and procedures around safeguarding. Some were concerned specifically with health, while others saw health benefits as an outcome from increased confidence, activity or good relationships.

Enjoy and achieve is the outcome that these organisations make the largest contribution to, with 'positive contribution' a close second. Several organisations said that they saw work with children and young people as a contribution to the wider community – supporting parents, reducing friction between generations and helping young people to be positive and effective citizens. On economic well being the contribution is smaller, with most being limited to signposting and brokering relationships with other organisations. However, there were several reports of arts, sports and volunteering experiences inspiring young people to seek careers in these fields.

### ***Effective Practice – contracting and commissioning***

#### Experience

Most organisations have had some experience of different funding arrangements beyond grants. They have had contracts, service level agreements and commissioning agreements with a range of organisations, including:

- Kirklees Young People's Service
- Primary Care Trust
- Social Affairs and Health services
- Arts Council
- Government Office Yorkshire & Humber
- Schools
- Colleges
- Connexions West Yorkshire
- Children's Fund Kirklees
- Other charities/organisations/trusts
- Probation

- Police
- Huddersfield Pride (SRB project)
- Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing
- Community History Service
- Arts Council

This has included contracts to deliver services such as use of meeting rooms or buildings managed by voluntary organisations.

### Contracting - What works?

Most respondents had both good and bad experiences of contracting. Some positive comments about contracting included:

*“Good to get ‘exposure to the market’ – we’ve steadily got more commissions.”*

*“The process was a real learning curve. Lots of work for a small organisation, though we did learn a lot from doing it.”*

*“Some Local Education Authorities haven’t had written contracts, it’s been pretty informal. That’s ok if nothing goes wrong.”*

*“They seemed to understand the needs of our organisation – they didn’t make lots of demands about copyright or branding. They had a contracts manager and a clear and open process. The language of the contract was clear – not legalese. They even encouraged us to look at raising funds through other use of the materials produced – they saw it as helping sustain the service.”*

*“They negotiated with us, as equals. It wasn’t about us just delivering a pre-planned service.”*

*“Three years of funding – and included running costs!”*

*“Contract has been renewed each year for several years. Relationship has developed through communication and dialogue.”*

*“A partnership group exists which involves a number of agencies, several of which put funds into the project and others help in kind.”*

However, most had experience of contracting or commissioning that had been difficult, frustrating or over bureaucratic:

*“Lots of organisations offer to help with plans or advice, but few offer practical support or funds for running and development costs. We don’t have time.”*

*“We’ve got a contract for 3 months, but now they’re saying that they are ‘not sure’ whether they want it, or even when they’ll decide!”*

*“We designed and bought some specialist equipment to do the sessions, but the contract said that any capital items were owned by the funder. They’ve got it but don’t use it, but we could if we had it available.”*

*“They used all our statistics without acknowledging us, and planned to use our photos as examples of their service – we said ‘no’.”*

*“The contracting organisation reduced the amount we’d agreed, but wanted the same outcomes.”*

*“The timescale was all too short – we couldn’t offer staff and freelancers work in time, we couldn’t plan.”*

*“Too much bureaucracy”*

*“They expect a lot for the money. Our costs weren’t recognised – we need full cost recovery to be a reality.”*

*“They treated us like part of their service – not independent.”*

*“The pressure to cover our costs is intense. This colours any contract negotiations – even with small groups that we’d like to support, but have to ask them to pay.”*

*“Finding the time to do lots of small proposals/bids is difficult.”*

Other comments on contracting included:

*“Open tendering could be a good thing – especially if there was a three year contract. But it could be a threat, too – we might not get it.”*

*“We try to build up trust – develop a relationship – with anyone we have a contract with. We get returns and reports in on time, and try to go the extra mile. It’s all about relationships.”*

*“Statutory and voluntary organisations need to understand one another, to share information. ‘Voluntary’ and ‘community’ organisations are different and have different needs. Statutory organisations need to understand the contribution that voluntaries make.”*

## **Networking /Opportunities**

### Networks & Affiliations

All were part of the Voluntary Youth Organisations Network for Kirklees (as all contacts came from this database). Many respondents quoted this network as their main source of information and support.

Many of the respondents found this a difficult question. They did not necessarily see joining an organisation, and receiving information from them, as ‘support’. Networks were not seen as a way of gaining support from others in the network, but perhaps only through the network coordinator or other staff.

It seems that the most valued support is seen to come from individuals, rather than organisations or structures. The position of the person who gives support, and whether they offer it personally or as part of a role, is not seen as important.

Several respondents described how individuals had helped them with funding proposals, advice, practical help or had advocated on their behalf in order to enable the organisation to develop or overcome a problem. This ‘personal’ approach to support is most valued, and most likely to be accepted.

More professional or distant relationships were sometimes perceived as meeting other agendas or targets, and not really there to respond to the needs of the organisation.

Respondents also had links with the following organisations and networks:

### Locally:

- LOCA (Cultural Development Agency – KMC)
- CIDA (Cultural Industries Development Agency)
- Voluntary Action Kirklees
- Kirklees Voluntary Action Network
- Children’s Voluntary Action Network

### Regionally:

- GOYH

### Nationally:

- Dance UK
- National Association of Clubs for Young People

Respondents also said that they got support from:

- Local Councillors
- Groups for Growth (VAK)
- Multi-agency forums
- Community Support Services (KMC)

### What do you get from networks/support?

Networks and support agencies offer information about “what is going on” – both in terms of what other organisations are doing, and what is changing in the local and national environment – funding, policies, priorities etc.

Several respondents said they valued the link that a particular network coordinator or support agency had to the highest levels of decision making in statutory agencies, and that a ‘voluntary sector’ perspective on local and national developments is valued.

Responses to this question included:

*“Finding out what’s going on”*

*“Information/ideas sharing”*

*“Overview and insight strategically (LA & wider)”*

*“Links/knowledge of other organisations, what they are doing”*

*“Newsletter, legal advice, updates”*

*“Link to higher up the hierarchy, policy etc. and having a say and to adapt what we do”*

*“Information and updates. Every child matters, common assessment framework, funding. Knowing who’s doing what and what opportunities there are for working together.”*

### Strengths of the sector

Respondents were proud of their organisations work and keen to talk about it. When asked what difference the work made or what was the unique selling point of the organisations work, some points were made repeatedly:

*“It’s about relationships with communities and young people.”*

*“We go the extra mile.”*

*“The staff and volunteers believe in what they do, develop good rapport, understand their concerns.”*

*“Belief and passion in it”*

Others commented on the style and approach of the work, explaining how they 'go the extra mile' or on their focus on particular client groups:

*"Informal, no pressure to get qualifications, easy to access by public transport."*

*"We provide a place for boys (who are often the problem for communities)."*

Cross generational relationships, because we involve the whole community.

*"Able to work with all communities, confidently."*

*"Passion for and competence in the arts and for bringing people together."*

*"Giving Pakistani young people a chance, a choice, a voice."*

*"Understanding how families think and the culture enables us to really engage with them."*

*"Ability to connect at grassroots level, particularly locally where we know the families - three generations."*

*"Not open access – we work with identified young people."*

*"We have a commitment to quality; we don't want people to be disappointed."*

*"We use health & fitness to engage with young people, and then work on education, drugs, confidence, basic skills."*

*"We compose our own music and develop our own workshops and performances, and we go out and talk to people to identify what they want and need."*

*"Working with those that big organisations can't reach or engage."*

*"Every week we talk to every family and/or young people at home!"*

The staff and volunteers were highly valued, and often given considerable autonomy and supported to develop their abilities:

*"The way we work is to give staff freedom and support to take on projects and learn/develop their skills."*

*"Unique delivery style. Exceptional."*

*"We have personal experience of deprivation and discrimination, and so understand."*

*"We have a young workforce, and are flexible and responsive to local needs".*

*"Style of staff – able to get alongside young people, get on their side, be flexible and responsive to young people's needs."*

They were clear that their work makes a real difference to individuals and communities:

*"Letters from referral agencies say it makes a difference - their confidence, self esteem, communication skills."*

*"They get direction and focus. Builds self-esteem through new experiences. Promotes social cohesion - through a very mixed group of young people".*

*"We're about the well being of child, not just focusing on their particular problem or difficulty."*

*"How many feel better – we ask them."*

*"70%+ of those we work with stop going missing or reduce how often they have gone missing."*

They also emphasised working with young people, not just providing activities or a service to them:

*"We have a young persons steering group for the organisation, involved in selecting staff and directing the organisation, for example."*

*"Young people decide what they want to do, what they want to get out of it."*

*"The 'A-Crew' are really committed as a team, and are now applying for their own funding. They started off coming to one of our workshops".*

*"Not a limited time period, can stay till they are 16."*

There were some concerns that a move to tightly specified services, with high value for money expectation would mean a more basic standardised, minimum service would be expected.

There were also concerns about maintaining trust and organisational autonomy as young people learned that organisations were required to share information with statutory agencies as part of the change for children agenda, and work in closer partnerships.

### Weaknesses & Challenges in the sector

Funding is obviously a major concern for small organisations. Many take 'project' funding without negotiating in core costs or development costs, and then struggle to maintain the infrastructure and development of the organisation:

*"Rising costs of heat/light/power has hit us hard."*

*"Finance - only get project funding"*

*"Project funding only. Children's Fund and YPS don't recognise costs involved."*

*"Sustainability and growth is a challenge. Difficult to plan in current environment; difficult to predict/respond to changes with limited resources."*

*Some identified particular functions that they recognised they weren't good at, but that they didn't have the resources to improve:*

*"Don't have admin workers, often don't cost in these costs into proposals to keep price down."*

*"Need help with Marketing/publicity/HR."*

*"Marketing support needed - what really works?"*

*"Need for office base to develop organisation - small office & computer."*

*For many small organisations this is frustrating, with needs identified and them being in direct contact with children and young people they could work with if they had the resources and staff. One organisation made the link between insecure funding, late funding decisions and difficulties in retaining and recruiting staff and volunteers:*

*"Local funders only tell us the year before about funding continuing or not – affects staff morale and so retention of staff. Difficult to recruit qualified staff, so more staff development costs. Growth & shrinkage pattern – insecure means lots of redundancy processes."*

Volunteering has changed – with more volunteers looking for a positive learning experience, with adequate support and a clear role, often to improve a CV and future job prospects. This means that recruiting and supporting volunteers requires plans, policies

and so a greater investment of time from the organisation. Similarly, the increased paperwork, monitoring and reporting required by contracting arrangements, and the pace of change, is a challenge to small organisations:

*“Policies and procedures around working with young people, and keeping up to date on legislation and national developments. If we are to continue, we need to secure resources to meet outcomes, and show we understand what we are achieving.”*

*“Challenge? Just keeping going! Currently looking at how we work, trying to get into contracts.”*

There is some need for organisations to improve their ability to manage resources, plan, market and cost their services. However, many funders and commissioners have not developed clear and fair systems and processes which small organisations can engage with.

Small organisations need relatively small amounts of money – and need to be able to access funding, resources and support in order to continue providing, and develop their ability to respond to changes. It’s clear to me that a mix of small grants and contracts will better enable small organisations to ‘keep going’, and that there is a need for umbrella organisations to develop affordable services around personnel, administration, legal services, marketing and publicity to support them.

### ***Partnership/Decision Making***

There is interest in strategic decision making, and all small organisations were keen that the sector participates – some weren’t sure if they had the capacity and ability to do so themselves.

Many small organisations have had some involvement in strategic level processes. This might be just keeping up to date on strategic developments, but in some cases it means attending meetings, responding to consultations and participating in decision making.

Only two organisations said that they would not be interested in Kirklees wide planning, with half of the rest saying “Yes”, and the other half saying “Ideally, but only if we have time.”

### **Barriers to involvement**

Time was the main reason that respondents gave for not getting involved strategically, though there were other comments:

*“Fear of not being listened to as a little organisation.”*

*“Committees are often a huge waste of time. Meddling at a strategic level can be counter-productive, especially when it’s trying to micromanage.”*

*“Can feel out of depth.”*

*“I have a small voice and the system is slow to change.”*

*“It might be years before any change in perception of the issue is achieved. Very long term.”*

Some small organisations are not convinced that getting involved in strategic issues is a good use of their time – and they often feel intimidated or not influential anyway.

Involving small organisations in strategic issues therefore requires them to be effectively supported and informed, and for them to be clear about what is changeable as a result

of their involvement. Plans and strategies are fine, but what are the implications for small organisations?

Those of us who support the sector in this way need to work out when and how small organisations are best involved, and support them in finding a way which is appropriate, effective and time efficient.

Unfortunately, the strategic planning process is often not clear to senior managers in large organisations or agencies who are engaged at a strategic level, or is changed in response to political manoeuvrings.

The Children's VAN has been welcomed as a positive development by most respondents, though several have said that they are waiting to see if it can really make any difference – if the big agencies will listen and respond.

The strength of the Children's VAN model is that it is time efficient (two meetings a year) and promotes communication (Link reports, website) on strategic issues. It also provides a point of contact for those who want to ask questions about how strategic decisions are made.

### Experience and feedback

Some respondents said that relationships with key individuals who understood or were part of strategic planning processes were more important than particular meetings or consultations.

As with 'support', some people in small organisations tended to develop relationships with key individuals who were supportive of the organisation's work. If I understand it correctly, this means that when strategic plans are being developed, these key individuals are more likely to make sure there is a reference to the kind of work being done by the organisation.

Most recognised the value in sharing information about what's going on at a strategic level, and were willing to play their part in 'feeding back' through link reports which go onto the Children's VAN website.

Other comments about the Children's VAN included:

*"Finding out about planning – who's doing it and when. Reports back from strategic groups."*

*"Feeling supported around the voice of the voluntary sector"*

*"Good opportunity to get together"*

*"Needs focusing on priorities – not so broad"*

*"Need to be recognised by statutory agencies as real structures. This will take time. Need champions in the sector."*

*"Not really been involved so far. Keeping an eye on it to see how it develops."*

*"Wouldn't mind finding time to get involved."*

## **Conclusions**

### Contribution of small voluntary organisations

To review the statistics collected:

- 16 small organisations offer 71 sessions each week of group activities.
- 71 volunteers do 232 hours of voluntary work each week.

Nearly all of these regular sessions will have at least 15 young people at them, and some will have many more. If an average attendance of 15 is assumed this gives a total of over one thousand regular contacts with children and young people each week.

Organisations offer a wide range of activities and support, contributing to all Every Child Matters outcomes for Kirklees children and young people. The numbers above are in addition to individual counselling and support, workshops, playschemes and events which are delivered where funding allows.

The VYON Kirklees database has contacts in over 200 voluntary organisations working with children and young people. At least half of these would be described as 'small voluntary organisations'.

If these 100 small organisations have the same characteristics as this sample, then my estimate would be that Kirklees small voluntary organisations are offering:

- 443 regular weekly sessions with children and young people
- 1450 hours of voluntary work, done by over 440 volunteers
- Over 6000 weekly contacts with children and young people

From work done in 2005, we know that uniformed organisations have over 1200 volunteers working with children and young people in Kirklees, and so will be working with many more children and young people. The contribution of other community organisations and large voluntary organisations has not yet been collated.

It's clear that the sector makes a significant contribution to improving outcomes for children, though further research and collation is necessary to understand this further and to increase awareness.

### Pressure on small organisations

When I started this research project, I identified 25 organisations and sent some emails asking if they would be interested in being interviewed. I quickly made appointments with people from eight organisations.

However, four of those interviews had to be rescheduled (plus one through my mistake). Of the other interviews, several had to be rearranged as other demands took priority, or as people were ill.

This is an indication of the pressures that the key individuals who do much of the work in these organisations. From phone calls and emails I receive as VYON Coordinator, it's clear that many key individuals in small organisations are finding it difficult to juggle the demands on their time and skills.

### Costs and benefits

The experience of small organisations in Kirklees is best understood by looking at their available resources and the demands on them. It is clear that many small organisations currently have limited ability to engage in consultations, strategic decision-making processes, and to respond to changes in funding, contracting and commissioning processes. Where they do, it is at a cost to them, which is not recognised or resourced.

- Many small organisations often do not have significant management infrastructure – many have voluntary management committees, and sometimes it is these people who are engaged in networks, consultations and contracting. Any staff time is taken up with direct work with children and young people. Where is it paid staff who do this work, it is often in addition to their responsibilities for direct work.
- Raising funds is more complicated than it used to be, as there are some grants, some service level agreements, some contracts, and various procurement and commissioning processes. Small organisations often have to engage with several of these processes, and build relationships with several agencies and individuals.
- The conditions of these different funds may mean that the organisation needs to target particular children, or to offer particular activities. This can add to planning, delivery and evaluation time and costs.
- The drive for value for money, and proving that services make a difference to beneficiaries' lives, means that there is significantly more monitoring and reporting than there used to be. Several different funders/contracts means more paperwork, and so higher time and financial costs.
- Other responsibilities – legal, good practice, child protection, recruitment, insurance, health and safety – also add to the administration 'costs' of small organisations.
- Participating in conferences, consultations and strategic planning is 'costly' in terms of time and has unpredictable 'benefits' for each organisation. They may learn something which can help them develop, or they may help to shape policies which benefit the sector, but these are potential and long term benefits which do not necessarily practically help the organisation continue and develop in the short or medium term.

A useful starting point for this is to understand what the 'costs' of different activities are for small voluntary organisations. Below I have identified four resources which can be depleted or improved by activities and situations – time, money, relationships and morale:

- Time – volunteer and worker time – is a key resource for small organisations. Meetings, application processes, consultations, large documents, recruitment and training can all be costly in terms of time. Where the benefits are high, this is a worthwhile investment, but it is often difficult to judge which meetings, processes, documents and training are good value in terms of time. Also, paid worker time is disproportionately expensive in terms of money to small organisations, and so ineffective use of their time is particularly costly.
- Money – some activities have direct costs which, though relatively small, can begin to impact on a small organisation. For example, sending all documents by email can mean that the organisation has to spend more on computing power, printing consumables and internet connections. Full cost recovery in contracts helps organisations to plan for and cover these costs.
- Relationships – key individuals in small organisations rely on supportive relationships with a few people in umbrella organisations, other voluntary organisations, private sector and statutory agencies to get and understand information, and to work through problems. Trust and good relationships with volunteers and beneficiaries are part of what holds small organisations together, and enables them to keep going.

These relationships can be strained by too much change or constant need for support, but they are strengthened by successful partnerships, two way communication and mutual appreciation of the others contribution.

- **Morale** – as key individuals are so vital to small organisations, their morale is an important factor. The fast pace of change, increased bureaucracy and legal issues, short term funding and a lack of recognition can undermine morale, and make it more difficult for organisations to retain and recruit good staff and volunteers. Seeing positive changes happen as a result of activity, gaining recognition for the work, receiving appropriate and timely support and successfully solving problems, improves morale.

### Supporting key individuals

Small organisations rely heavily on particular individuals – whether staff or volunteers – who are experienced, multi-skilled and well networked. These key individuals are often multi-tasking – writing funding bids, dealing with crises, managing staff and volunteers, and dealing with complex paperwork.

The difficulties of securing adequate long term or repeated funding means that sometimes organisations lose these key individuals – perhaps to a new project that has funding, perhaps to a statutory agency which can offer more security. Where an organisation does not have the ‘resilience’ to cope with this kind of change, it may have to suspend its service to children and young people. This in turn can affect the confidence that funders have in the organisation, and in extreme cases to organisations folding.

Supporting small voluntary organisations means supporting these key individuals. When asked where and how they get support, these key individuals identified other key individuals – in the voluntary sector and elsewhere – rather than particular organisations. Support and umbrella organisations have given considerable support to individuals and small organisations, but this is often described as coming from particular workers within the support organisation. Some people in small organisations have said that they have had no support from support organisations, but have had support from individuals who work within them!

Therefore, networks and one to one relationships are most useful to people in small organisations. Key people in small voluntary organisations are used to working on a personal level, and are more likely to seek support if there is a named individual to contact; who they have some trust in. Tools such as websites, emails, handbooks and advice lines are useful for gathering information, but will not satisfactorily replace supportive individuals.

### Contracting experience

Experiences of ‘being contracted’ vary. Where there was a genuine engagement with the organisation, and the contract recognised their strengths and values, then organisations were usually happy with the process.

Where contractors were more prescriptive about the detail and style of the service, and where the value of the contract was little more than the marginal cost of delivering the service, or where contractors negotiated other terms or requirements after the contract was signed, then organisations were far from happy with it.

Small organisations are willing and able to contract with a wide range of agencies and organisations, including schools. Few saw any major challenges in contracting with schools and children's centres, other than the complexity and bureaucracy involved in different agencies having different systems.

## Recommendations

These recommendations are not aimed at any particular agency or organisation. They are intended to stimulate thinking about how we can support and maintain a diverse range of small voluntary organisations which are engaged in preventative work, service delivery, and community development and are also engaged in strategic planning.

- Monitor and research current contracting and commissioning processes to identify good and poor practice.
- Develop and promote good practice as outlined in the Kirklees and national Compacts, including full cost recovery, proportionate administration, developmental commissioning to help organisations grow into a service delivery role and transparent commissioning processes.
- Collate and publicise further information about the services offered by voluntary sector organisations working with children and young people, including who benefits from these services, and information about the capacity of those organisations.
- Celebrate the achievements of organisations and key individuals through publicity campaigns and perhaps an award scheme, to give recognition and raise awareness among decision makers and the public.
- Develop affordable specialist services appropriate to small voluntary organisations, including:
  - Legal advice on contracts
  - Advertising of tender and contracting opportunities
  - Marketing and publicity, including websites
  - Recruitment, selection and personnel support
  - Consortia development and coordination
  - Monitoring, recording and evaluation services
  - Fundraising, sponsorship and grant application support
- Develop a standard application, monitoring and reporting format which is useable by small voluntary organisations, but acceptable to a range of funders and commissioning agencies. This would enable organisations to simplify much of the administrative process.
- Agree a clear, standard 'passport' criteria and validation process which allows voluntary and community organisations to demonstrate that they meet at least minimum standards for governance, legal structure, policies, financial systems, charity or company registration etc. This could be used to streamline tendering and contracting processes, and to clarify requirements for new or developing organisations.
- Develop the Children's VAN and Kirklees VAN work, focusing on making a difference on a few key issues and providing support to small organisations who find it difficult to have any strategic influence. Consider developing smaller sub-

groupings to work on particular issues or localities, as these can strengthen relationships and support networks.

- Develop links with businesses to improve sponsorship, payroll giving and 'in kind' support to small voluntary organisations.
- Campaign to protect small grants programmes and maintain simple application and monitoring processes.
- Ensure that meetings and events attended by people from small organisations, maximise the benefits and minimise the costs to small voluntary organisations, by:
  - Being clear about the purpose and potential benefits of the meeting or event for small organisations, and meeting costs where possible.
  - Being time efficient, chaired well, focused, understandable, accessible and lead to action.
  - Providing options for how people can get informed and involved if they cannot attend meetings and events.
  - Providing clear, accessible information in a form that can easily and usefully be shared with others in their organisation.
  - Providing time and information to promote networking and help build supportive relationships.

## **Appendix one**

### **Questionnaire: Individual voluntary and community projects – research by VYON Kirklees**

#### **About the organisation**

1. Name of organisation
2. Contact details: name, role, phone, email (if not a VYON-K member)
3. List staff: names, job title, no. of hours /wk. and how funded
4. Vols: Number, roles, hours/wk
5. Legal structure/organisation type

#### **Service delivery**

6. What is the service/activity? What do you do?
7. Who is the service for?  
Area of benefit  
Age, sex, condition etc
8. Which of the five outcomes does it best fit with? Safe, healthy, enjoy/achieve, contribute, economic.
9. What difference does it make? Examples? Case studies? Annual report?
10. Unique selling point? Particular strengths?
11. Challenges/weaknesses/development needs/ sustainability issues?

#### **Effective Practice – commissioning**

12. Which agencies or organisations have you been commissioned by or had contracts with?
13. What has been good and bad about your experience of contracting/ commissioning?
14. Do you know of any good practice of commissioning or contracting, or do you have any ideas about improving commissioning? If so, please give details.
15. Can you identify any likely challenges in providing a service to a Children's Centre or Extended School?
16. What do you think about forming a consortium or partnership in order to access contracts or commissioning opportunities?

#### **Networking**

17. Where do you get support from?

18. Which networks, umbrella bodies or other organisations have you joined/used?  
Local, Regional, National?

19. What do you get from networks/umbrella orgs?

20. What else would you like to get from them?

## **Partnership/Decision Making**

21. Are you interested in influencing strategic or long term planning of children's services? Is there anything which makes it difficult or puts you off getting involved?

22. Are you on any strategic planning groups? If so which?

23. If not, how are your views represented on planning groups relevant to you?

24. Any comments/feedback on the Children's VAN?

## **Anything else you would like to say about anything at all?**

Comments below: