

Collaborative working: building a consortium

Author: Anita Kerwin-Nye

This report is produced by 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 is steered by a consortium of infrastructure and delivery organisations working in the children, young people and families voluntary and community sector; and is supported by a large number of individual agencies that are committed to working as part of the programme.

The report was commissioned as part of the VCS Engage work concerned with strengthening collaborative approaches. By identifying and refining models of collaborative working, VCS Engage aims to facilitate collaboration and cooperation across the VCS and with strategic partners and providers in both the public and private sectors.

Members of the consortium are:

- National Children's Bureau (NCB)
- National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO)
- National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA)
- National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS)
- Parenting UK
- Family Welfare Association (FWA)
- NCH

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Introduction

This report follows I CAN's initiative to develop a communications consortium for organisations working in the field of children's speech, language and communication. It details the steps undertaken and aims to draw out the key lessons for other organisations who are considering entering into a collaborative working approach.

I CAN wanted to facilitate a joint working initiative that could bring partners together for a longer term, and in particular address the challenges of workforce development for small providers.

In pursuit of this aim, I CAN began to bring together a number of organisations that work in the field of children's communication to form a consortium with the aim of:

- increasing reach (with 500,000 early years workers in a 7-million strong children's workforce, the VCS needs to work together to reach them all)
- sharing costs and increasing efficiencies
- making the offer clearer for the end user
- making better use of the expertise of small organisations who are often the lead source of information in the particular areas of communication.

VCS Engage agreed with I CAN to support the set-up of the consortium, providing financial support for:

- dedicated project management to take the work forward
- encouraging the involvement of smaller organisations in the consortium
- creating two capacity building mechanics:
 - a CACHE assessment centre, through which smaller organisations in particular could run endorsed training options, and
 - a shared electronic marketing brochure sent in a joint mail-out, to secure a larger reach (particularly for smaller organisations) and increased likelihood of take up.

Why form a consortium?

There had been talk for some time on collaborative work in the field of communication disability, with the intention of building on the 'Talking Point' information service and the Joint Professional Development Framework. While these programmes were successful examples of collaboration they were project focused and offered no long-term basis for joint working.

It was clear that there was an increasing need for further partnership working, particularly in the field of workforce development. The discussions identified eight drivers for joint working in workforce development around children's speech, language and communication:

1. the increasing challenge of achieving take-up for training, with budget cuts in health and challenges in education
2. the belief from most charities working in the field that a skilled workforce is of critical importance
3. the potential for shared costs around marketing, assessment centres and even booking, training, venues and delivery
4. the increasing demand from funders for joint working
5. massive developments in the policy frameworks, which are difficult to track – the larger organisations struggle, most of the smaller organisations are not even in the loop
6. the overhead costs of running workforce development programmes especially where take-up is low (marketing, administration etc.)
7. the need for accreditation or kitemarking of good programmes to help encourage take-up (this is being forced by purchaser demand and is, on the whole, something that only the larger organisations or private providers are able to provide)
8. knowing which are the best routes to market – who, in the changing marketplace, should programmes be marketed to and how to reach them, given the costs of marketing.

How the consortium was developed

The stages of the process:

1. The process started with significant **discussions** between Afasic, I CAN and Council for Disabled Children (CDC) on developing a joint working model, and some informal discussion with a wider audience on collaborative working.
2. I CAN sent out an **invitation** (Appendix 3) to the whole CDC Network, I CAN 'Make Chatter Matter' sign-ups and to all of the experts associated with I CAN, to send on to their contacts.
3. I CAN received back **expressions of interest** from a number of organisations.
4. Individual **negotiations** were held with each of these organisations which:
 - confirmed the key challenges that were driving them to potential joint working
 - ruled out an audit tool as an immediate priority, but replaced this with a need for sharing intelligence on developments in the policy world – particularly in relation to children's speech and language and to workforce development
 - agreed that a marketing brochure would be a useful tool but that some work was needed on building trust before this could happen – also that any such brochure would be better placed going out in October/November
 - set an agenda and structure for the first formal meeting.
5. **First meeting.** This provided an opportunity for everyone to:
 - introduce their organisation and their workforce development programme
 - receive an update on the policy agenda from the Vice Chair of Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC)
 - participate in a briefing on the Communication Trust developments
 - explore who else should be involved (with all newly identified partners receiving an invitation to the next meeting)
 - discuss openly, the opportunities and problem areas associated with coming together in a consortium (listed below).

Potential opportunities and problem areas identified at the first meeting

- gaining a stronger voice for influencing agendas and key agencies, for example, Every Child Matters (ECM) and Ofsted (inspection recommendations)
- benefiting from sharing information, for example, funding sources, research and evaluation
- creating the potential environment for joint funded projects
- joint awareness raising – maybe using a marketing brochure
- receiving a clearer picture of the sector and its users
- finding out more accurately what people want – establishing the need
- potentially developing an effective and sustainable model for training
- combining training modules into a wider programme (would this increase uptake in schools?)
- potentially addressing the issue of quality monitoring – a kitemark system – which clearly spelt out the 'level' of the training provided (in relation to national frameworks)
- signpost to training for continuous professional development (CPD)
- making specialist training available to a wider audience

- potential for evaluating/evidencing the impact of training
- providing advice to campaigns on training needs
- addressing the training and development needs of Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs)
- joint work on elevating the status of parents as consultants to schools/health service.

Potential areas of concern

- status of the consortium: How would it exert influence? How will decisions be made?
- membership: If membership is confined to the voluntary sector, this will mean that the picture is always a partial one
- the relationship with private sector provision – SERCO, Capita etc.
- a threat of too much uniformity – could squeeze out innovation and quality from small, independent providers
- might miss out on smaller charities that work across sectors, for example, Communication Matters
- the issue of a 'shared vocabulary' – need to get agreement on language if the consortium is going to work
- possible buy-in from the Training and Development Agency (TDA)?

6. **Developing a shared vocabulary.** This was the first piece of joint work identified by the consortium. Without this, the marketing brochure and other joint working activity would become difficult to achieve. The group started to form a classification of the terminology used in communication support needs. This piece of work was particularly important in taking the consortium forward as it allowed each organisation to see where their user groups, and thus their specific interest and expertise, fitted into the work of the consortium as a whole. It is also a key tool in:

- supporting the consortium, and ultimately the Trust, to identify particular areas of expertise within each member organisation and then signpost people needing communication support to the appropriate organisations
- collecting data on how many children and young people have communication support needs, across the range of disabilities, as it was felt by the consortium to have potential both for campaigning and service design and delivery
- exploring co-morbidity (where children experience multiple disorders) and potentially helping to secure more funding for this area of work through a pooled budget approach
- helping users explain and explore their needs.

7. **Second meeting** (three months later). Here, the consortium agreed three main joint working actions:

- A consultation document would be developed and shared with the wider sector engaged in working with the target audiences. This would focus both on agreeing a shared vocabulary and evaluating the accuracy of the developing classification. The aim is to engage the 100-plus VCS groups who have an interest in this work, plus families and individual members of the children's workforce.
- Comments and contributions would be made to the Communication Charter being developed by the Communication Forum.
- A potential funding bid would be made for the consortium based around the Communication Support Needs model.

8. Next steps

- refining the terms of reference (TOR) for the consortium and consolidating the links between the consortium and the Communication Trust
- ensuring each member of the consortium is reporting to his or her management team (supported by letters from the I CAN CEO to the CEOs of the member organisations)
- exploring the communication support needs model, completing the consultation and looking at ways to disseminate and use the results
- completing the funding bid and looking for other potential joint funding opportunities.

What was achieved?

1. The consortium gained the commitment of 14 organisations – considerably more than the original target of three to six organisations. Additional organisations will be invited to join during the latter part of 2007. In addition, the three core members have entered into a formal relationship as the Board of the Communication Trust.
2. Members felt it was too early to look at any formal governance structure and instead opted for a 'joint venture' model, that is, agreeing shared aims and objectives, with I CAN providing the secretariat and arranging bi-monthly meetings with working groups when needed. This joint venture model used the invitation note as the TOR for the group and agreed a bi-monthly meeting agenda, with the identification of working groups for specific projects (the first being the shared vocabulary).
Bilateral arrangements are positively encouraged as part of the consortium and individual organisations are already spring-boarding from the consortium into their own models of joint working (for example, National Autistic Society (NAS) and Treehouse are developing an Autism Trust; Afasic and Contact a Family are exploring models for joint support for parents).
3. One of the key objectives was to develop the virtual training assessment centre. The assessment centre is up and running, although how the consortium uses it is still being developed. A parallel initiative is being developed under the DCSF Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP), which is looking at the potential sharing of an assessment centre by training organisations.
4. The need for the marketing brochure was confirmed by the consortium group. Some work on the quality dimensions is under way, reflecting feedback that it must include standards for inclusion. Copy is being gathered from interested partners. The print/design schedule was agreed for a September 2007 release. This has been augmented by the work on a shared vocabulary that will help set the tone and standards for inclusion in the marketing brochure.
5. Consortia members felt strongly that creating an audit tool to help, particularly smaller organisations, assess whether they have both the need and skills to offer accredited training was premature. Instead, they wanted additional training on the policy context for communication disability and on workforce development. An initial training session was organised with further sessions planned for the second half of 2007. In addition I CAN has arranged for members of the consortium to receive regular policy briefings.
6. All members of the consortium agreed that having regular space just to share progress, frustrations and ideas was in itself of tremendous value. The emerging training programme and working groups creating tangible outputs are real added value for all participants in the communication consortium.

Learning

How to build a successful consortium

Setting objectives

While it sounds obvious, being clear on why you want to work together and what you want to achieve is the starting point for good working. At the early stage this can include objectives about exploring possibilities and sharing experiences rather than concrete work programmes. For the communication consortium this was important as the first six months revolved around understanding each other's work, styles of working and exploring potential joint working opportunities.

However, those leading a consortium should not be afraid of putting down a few concrete programme ideas at an early stage. Providing it is clear that these can be adapted/replaced as the work develops, people sometimes find it easier to respond to ideas rather than start from a blank piece of paper. For the communication consortium, the idea for an audit tool (in the original funding proposal) was replaced. The wider group felt that receiving tailored policy briefings was a higher priority. The marketing brochure in the original proposal was welcomed but delayed until the work on a shared vocabulary was developed.

Creating a legitimacy for joint working

Many charity consortiums come together for funding bids or for campaigning activities. The joint working is legitimised by a shared purpose supported by an external focus. These groups can be very effective. However, they are often time-limited and if bids are not successful (or even if they are) they do not always generate long-term joint working benefits.

The VCS Engage programme, and the interest of the DCSF in the work, provided legitimacy for working together which attracted organisations to take part in exploratory discussions. While the VCS Engage funding helped (to pay expenses for participating organisations, to pay for someone to coordinate the work, to develop the capacity building mechanics that the organisations could use), it was only a small proportion of what this joint working programme would actually cost in the long term.

Create an imperative

To encourage individuals and organisations to explore the possibility of joint working, it is important to demonstrate to consortium members the benefits of joint working and to explain why now is the time to start. In this case, the drivers for forming a consortium provided the focus, and the chance of funding support created the opportunity.

Be open to all

Be open to all that fit into the terms of reference of your work – but choose your terms of reference carefully. There can be a tendency in the VCS to try and create tools, approaches and programmes to suit the needs of the entire sector. While many of these are of great value, the desire to make them meet everyone's needs means that they are often too generic to meet the needs of individual organisations in any real depth. Consider limiting your group to a theme or a programme that is specific enough to have real meaning to a significant group of organisations. For the communication consortium, that meant narrowing the remit to communication disability and workforce development. We estimate that this is the core work

programme for around 20 national VCS organisations and a substantial part of the work of around 180 other VCS organisations.

Once TOR are agreed, then the way to successful working is a transparent invitation promoted to the widest possible audience. For the communication consortium, that meant a mail-out to over 200 organisations in the first instance and regular follow-up over the first six months to pursue organisations that should really be included, but may have missed the initial mailing. Five minutes at each meeting is spent reviewing who needs to be involved in the communication consortium's work – either as a member or as a stakeholder.

Creating trust

VCS organisations are in competition – for funding, for PR, for influence, for volunteers. This competition is passionate and losing the competition can mean the end of services for users, potential job losses for staff and, at worst, the closure of an organisation. The only way to work collaboratively is to acknowledge this; to be open about the challenges of collaborative working in a competitive environment and to create simple ground rules (e.g. if an area of discussion is commercially sensitive, then say so at the earliest possible opportunity, declare interests openly, share as much information as can be shared, accept that there are some things that people cannot share).

The communication consortium was also fortunate to have secured the services of the Vice Chair of CWDC as a neutral facilitator. While I CAN is hosting and driving both the consortium and the Communication Trust, it was important for people to see that I CAN would not be dominating discussions or the agenda.

Develop a shared vocabulary

From a practical point of view, developing a shared language helps to avoid misunderstandings (for example, at the first meeting of the communication consortium, the term 'primary disability' was being used with three very different meanings).

The process of developing a shared vocabulary encourages exploration and, subsequently, understanding of different organisational approaches, philosophies and programmes. Within the communication consortium, this speeded the 'storming and norming' process by encouraging healthy debate towards a shared goal.

Taking it beyond the personal

Personal relationships are the key to any joint working. However, to avoid the group collapsing when individuals leave, it is important to embed work in the wider organisations. To achieve this, the consortium group will revisit the consortium's TOR and the links to the Communication Trust at the September 2007 meeting. Individuals will be asked to report these back to their wider organisation. I CAN's Chief Executive will follow this up by writing to the CEOs of each of the organisations within the consortium. This is important. While the success of any consortium is often down to the passion, commitment and expertise of the individuals who support it, for a consortium to work well, to have longevity beyond life of its members and having authority to take action, it must have the buy-in of the senior staff in each member organisation.

Incentives for joining a consortium

Beyond the strategic opportunities falling out of joint working (joint marketing, joint funding bids, shared backroom costs etc.), the communication consortium offers its members a number of very specific and tangible opportunities, many of which can be ascribed a cash value and all of which build organisational capacity.

These are as follows:

- This could involve understanding the policy context in a way that is specific enough to their area to matter (through presentations from experts, for example, the Vice Chair of CWDC, Head of BT Government Affairs etc.; through hearing from other members and through the sharing of policy documents specific to the field of children's communication such as I CAN Talk and Scope's review work).
- Afasic and CDC are able to access I CAN's daily parliamentary monitoring in the field of children's communication, while others are able to get summaries and early notification of important policy debates (for example, members have been given early notice of forthcoming adjournment debate on children's communication).
- Provides access to information and consultations that they would not otherwise have been able to see, for example, consortium members have been asked to review a CWDC consultation on workforce development and Special Educational Needs (SEN) that would otherwise have been restricted to CWDC board members.
- Provides opportunities to have their work promoted through the Communication Trust (in essence, access to a £1 million marketing and awareness-raising programme to support their work and raise the profile of their cause).
- Provides access to the expertise and networks of the consortium group members (for example, Scope are using the group's networks to get the widest possible circulation for their latest survey).

Additional tips for joint working

1. Be prepared to change your mind about what is needed – for example, while initial discussions with potential communication consortium members pointed to a joint marketing approach, more in-depth discussions showed that without a shared understanding of each other's positions this was not going to be possible.
2. Maximise opportunities for bilateral discussions – the communication consortium is acting as a 'marketplace' encouraging small group working.
3. Don't underestimate the administration time needed for joint working – diary management, chasing inputs and getting sign-off are all more complex when working with multiple organisations.
4. Make sure you put additional management time in for any joint funding proposal – joint projects take more management time and normal management charges often do not take into account the additional meeting and preparation time.
5. Consider bringing in neutral facilitators, otherwise there is a danger that the lead organisation is perceived as the dominant presence.
6. Consider developing shared professional development programmes – for the communication consortium this was not only a bonding experience, but also meant that training to meet the specific needs of the group could be organised more cheaply than organisations could do individually. Coming together as a community of interest has provided the opportunity to develop a training programme specific to the field of disability and to communication within this. This still represents a potential training audience of 50-plus organisations.
7. Use less jargon – horizontal integration, VCS, etc. are not helpful terms – they mean little to the wider sector and can become exclusive.
8. Do not avoid the 'elephants in the room' – there are some things that have to be faced up to within joint working. We do compete for funding, volunteers, PR time etc. and for collaboration to work this must be out in the open and managed.

9. Explore differences and be clear on what these differences are. Are there differences in organisational objects or policy, or do differences exist only because you have never talked? Resolve the latter and agree to differ on the former with a clear understanding of why the differences exist.
10. Don't be dominated by the big players! If there is to be a mature and vibrant voluntary and community sector, then recognise the worth and value of smaller players (remembering that small is relative). The communication consortium did this well both through the open invitation process and by making it clear from the start that some of the smaller organisations brought in the real expertise and proximity to users.

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VCS Engage
8 Wakley Street
London EC1V 7QE

Tel: 020 7843 6356
Email: info@vcsengage.org.uk
Web: www.vcsengage.org.uk



Appendix 1: Background information on I CAN

I CAN is the children's communication charity. It aims to foster the development of speech, language and communication skills in all children, with a special focus on those who find this hard: children with a communication disability.

I CAN has long had a training arm delivering training to professionals across the children's workforce and has recently developed this training to fit more closely with the National Qualifications Framework, the emerging work of the Children's Workforce Network and the movement towards a common core and the Integrated Qualifications Framework.

I CAN has, as a key aim, the development of a children's workforce skilled in supporting children's communication. This is a key theme of the organisation's Make Chatter Matter campaign.

Appendix 2: The Communication Trust and its relationship to the communication consortium

The Trust was launched in June 2007 and its aims are to:

- raise awareness of communication disability
- increase the demand for workforce development programmes that skill the children’s workforce in supporting and including children with communication disability
- improve the efficiencies of delivering training to the workforce.

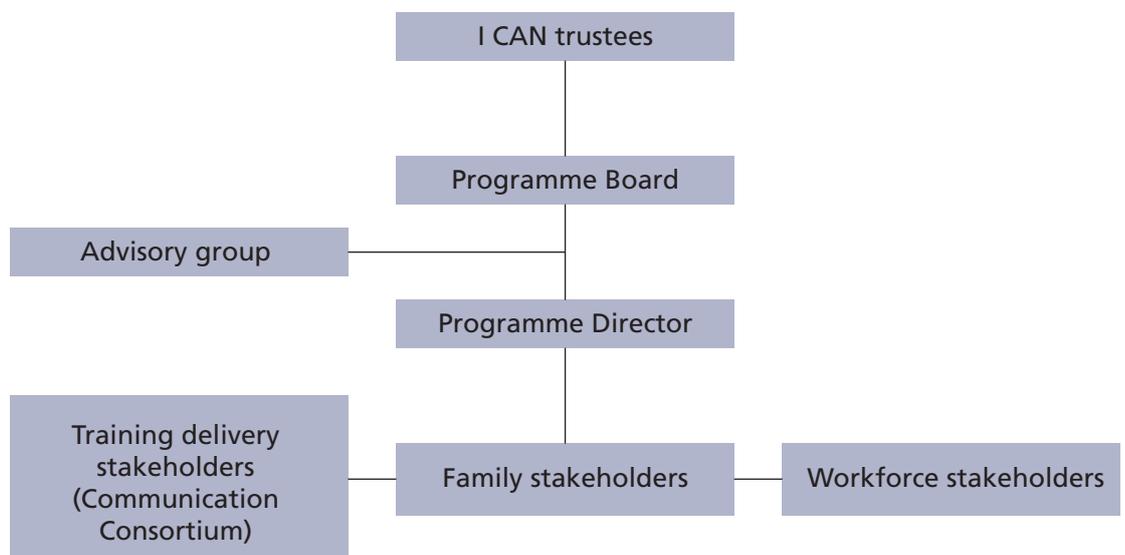
The Communication Trust model brings together the lead voluntary sector organisations working in the field of children’s speech, language and communication development and disability, to form one point of contact.

I CAN hosts the Communication Trust Programme, whose funding is paid to I CAN and runs through I CAN’s accounts. The I CAN trustees are accountable to funders for all aspects of the programme and can delegate authority to the Programme Board which consists of the CEO of I CAN and representatives from Afasic, CDC and BT.

The Programme Board is chaired by the Programme Director (seconded two days a week from I CAN) and while the Board sets the programme the Director has delegated authority to run the Trust on a day-to-day basis.

Board organisations invoice I CAN for both the pieces of work that they undertake in pursuit of the programme and management costs associated with being on the Programme Board.

The Programme Board has several separate stakeholder groups. The communication consortium is developing into the stakeholder group for training delivery organisations.



Appendix 3: Inviting membership of the consortium

Supporting children's communication development – forming a consortium to support workforce development in schools

It is the intention that this group become a stakeholder group for the Communication Trust.

An invitation to submit an expression of interest

With one in ten children having a communication disability and, in some parts of the UK, upwards of 50 per cent of children entering primary school without the language skills that they need to achieve, it is essential that the children's workforce is skilled in supporting children's speaking, listening and communication development.

And yet upwards of 60 per cent of teachers says they feel ill-equipped to support children with communication difficulties. The 2006 Education Select Committee Report on Special Educational Needs (SEN) identified systematic staff development as an essential step to improving both inclusion and the wider quality of provision for children with SEN.

The Communication Trust has, as a key aim, the development of a children's workforce skilled in supporting children's communication. This is a key theme of the organisation's Make Chatter Matter campaign. We have been working to bring together a number of organisations that work in the field of children's communication to form a consortium with the aim of:

- increasing the reach of existing training and consultancy services to the schools' and wider children's workforce (with 500,000 early years workers and a 7-million strong children's workforce, the voluntary and community sector needs to work together to reach them all)
- auditing existing training and consultancy services, assessing need and seeking funding for potential joint development of new products and materials to plug gaps
- Sharing costs and increasing efficiencies, for example, through joint marketing
- making the offer clearer for the end user
- making better use of the expertise of small organisations who are often the lead source of information in particular areas of communication.

With the first strand of the DCSF Inclusion Development Programme focusing on communication and communication skills featuring more prominently in both the Primary National Strategy and the Early Years Foundation Stage, the time is now right to take these initial discussions a step further.

Expression of interest

Our ultimate aim is to focus the consortium's work on training and consultancy services for schools, to support the communication needs of all children. However, in the first instance we are inviting expressions of interest from organisations who:

- have training and/or consultancy services
- have expertise in supporting children with communication disability or difficulties where the communication disability/difficulty is the key factor in accessing the curriculum
- have expertise in helping the children's workforce to include children with communication difficulties/disabilities in mainstream settings.

Appendix 4: VCS organisations involved with the consortium

Ace
Afacic
Barnardo's (although limited involvement in meetings)
Chailey Heritage
Children's Society
Communications Matters
Contact a Family
Council for Disabled Children
Early Support Programme
I CAN
National Autistic Society
Scope
Treehouse
1 Voice

Attendees of September 2007 meeting

Michael Palin Centre for Stammering
British Stammering Association