



# Supporting Middlesbrough's Children and Families: A VCS Contribution

Tracey Brittain  
Senior Strategic Development Officer  
Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA)

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**Between April 2016 and March 2018 MVDA undertook a piece of work to explore the opportunities for the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to support the development of Middlesbrough's multi-agency Early Help Hub.**

Middlesbrough's Early Help Hub (EHH) was responsible for tracking and supporting early help support offered to families from a range of agencies to ensure the best outcomes for Middlesbrough's children and young people. The EHH would review and triage those cases, referred by agencies and the public, into safeguarding where the safeguarding threshold was not met. In addition, the EHH offered information, advice and guidance to any agency identifying concerns around children and young people. Since undertaking this piece of work, what was the EHH is now known as the Family Partnerships Team and is undergoing a number of ongoing changes.



## What we agreed we would do:

- Increase access to local VCOs
- Develop VCS pathways
- Better understand the needs of children and families and how these are currently being met
- Support VCOs with capacity building
- Identify opportunities for collaboration and innovative solutions to increase support for children and families

## What we did:

- Provided development support to VCOs
- Facilitated opportunities for collaboration
- Promoted and delivered training and development opportunities
- Identified additional resources and funding
- Contributed to strategic engagement and planning
- Explored innovative approaches
- Supported the EHH to understand the contribution of the VCS

We focused the early part of this work on becoming embedded in the multi-agency EHH, developing relationships with key staff and learning about the day to day work, identifying the key agency partners and understanding the pressures within the Hub.

As the work progressed, EHH practitioners became more aware of the range of VCOs able to support families and the focus of the work shifted. More time was spent working directly with VCOs and engaging with partnership forums, responding to issues and themes emerging from the information gathered from cases referred into the EHH.

*“Tracey’s support in the hub has helped me to really think more broadly about which services are out there, what families might respond better to and, which ones are most likely to be able to respond in a way that’s helpful for the family situation right now. Tracey’s knowledge of the voluntary sector has really helped in creating bespoke support pathways for children and families which, without Tracey’s support would not have been possible. What has been really helpful is that children and families have been able to access grassroots support more quickly whilst waiting for other services, often with waiting lists, to become available”*

Sally Hazelwood-McNair  
EHH Practitioner

# MVDA supported:

- An **increasing number of consultations** to practitioners working in the children’s workforce (schools, health, VCOs) across a range of partners for discussion about cases and broader VCS solutions.
- Attendance at EHH team meetings which supported the **exchange of information** regarding VCOs, new services and, or changes in VCO referral pathways and ways of working. This forum provided the environment for dialogue with practitioners about VCOs, especially where there were problems or issues to address around partnership working.
- **Brokering** the attendance of VCOs at EHH team meetings. This contact between EHH practitioners and VCOs was instrumental in raising awareness of organisational roles, ensuring families could access the most appropriate services or support from communities at the right time for them.
- Attendance at multi-agency Early Help Forums, where practitioners can bring cases for discussion where single agencies have got stuck with supporting the family, we were able to **offer solutions from the VCS** to support families and partnership working. These meetings have been particularly useful in helping practitioners from other agencies understand the contribution that VCOs can make to supporting families.

# Community Intelligence

Due to the relationships that develop between VCOs and the people they work with, **VCOs gather a significant amount of information about the needs and impact of unmet needs on children and families.** Much of this information is anecdotal, based upon the lived experience of those sharing it and is not formally recorded or reported, but **this information is invaluable in helping us to understand the needs of families and their motivation and barriers to engagement with a range of services.**

**Believe in Families VCS engagement events** provided a space to share and explore re-occurring themes for families with:

- Supported and emergency housing providers
- Kinship Care Groups
- Refugees and Asylum Seeker Groups
- Youth Work Providers
- **Faith Sector Groups**



One example of the impact that gathering community intelligence can make, came from our collaboration with Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland; bringing together local churches working in communities across a wide range of projects and activities. It was particularly helpful in dispelling the assumptions many VCOs and volunteers working across faith groups had around the fear of local authority contact where there were concerns around families' capacity to cope and thrive.

## **Resulting work included:**

- Promotion of Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland's 'Feast of Fun' holiday activities with food programme across children's workforce
- Direct contact between EHH and faith groups to access activities and identify gaps and areas for development
- Contribution to My Family Plan
- Employment of a families worker at North Ormesby which incorporated a partnership with early help as part of the job description. This worker has agreed to complete My Family Plans with relevant cases and is providing a community-based link with the North Ormesby community.



# Strategic development work

Information gathered from the EHH and VCOs identified a range of issues we wanted to review further to improve things for children and families. We commenced some **focused discussions** with VCOs and wider partners to raise awareness of some of these issues, which included:

- The impact of kinship arrangements on children and their carers
- Middlesbrough's Youth Offer
- Holiday hunger.

MVDA's core business includes identifying new VCOs and gaps in provision. We work with VCOs to support capacity at organisation level and in partnership with others to meet identified needs. MVDA has regular contact with VCOs and provides a good level of communication with VCOs around training and development available to support their work. MVDA supports the development and sustainability of VCOs and often works with other training providers to facilitate this. MVDA works with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) to ensure safeguarding and other relevant training is promoted across the local VCS.

MVDA has delivered **training and development support** to VCOs which includes:

- Early help awareness sessions (in partnership with Middlesbrough Council)
- Introduction to door step sports
- Sports activator
- Supporting resilience in young people training as part of our children and young people's wellbeing work
- Action learning set approach to leadership development
- Find a Funder.

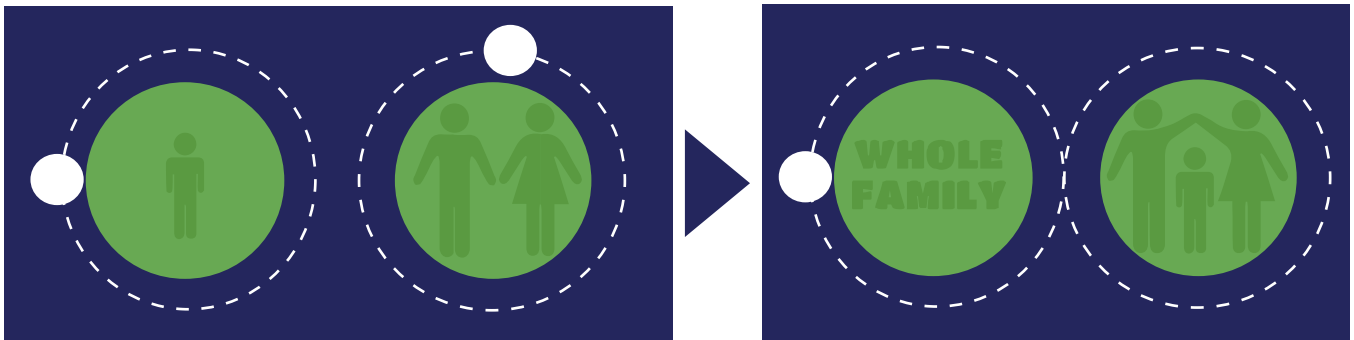
*"Tracey has helped broker a range of conversations with VCOs including, Junction, Community Campus, Foodbank, Grandparents Plus amongst others where we have been able to resolve issues that have strengthened the way that EHH practitioners work with VCS partners. Tracey helped us to think about the role of the VCS and, to broker some direct involvement with VCOs in our development of the My Family Plan. Tracey was instrumental in developing the connection between the EHH and Grandparents Plus to strengthen our approach to early help for kinship carers and to Together Middlesbrough and Cleveland which has increased our understanding of what churches are doing to support families in local communities"*

John Scadden  
EHH Team Manager

# What we learned:

Agencies rely on directories of services that are often out of date and unhelpful in identifying the range of available resources and the bespoke solutions to families' needs and preferences. Practitioners were generally familiar with VCOs contracted or directly funded by the public sector to deliver children and families services but an awareness of the vast range of VCOs with a contribution to make around the wider family unit or at a preventative, resilience building level was generally poor.

Whilst the narrative around early help practice is 'whole family integrated approach' the focus of assessments most often focuses upon key issues identified in the early help referral at the exclusion of addressing broader, often softer issues at an earlier opportunity.



The system does not support a whole family approach. Organisations focus upon the role and criteria for engagement at a silo level. There are real barriers around integrated approaches which leave families being bounced around services or contact with services being delayed due to access criteria not being met at an early enough or serious enough level.

We identified that practitioners were unable or reluctant to think more innovatively due to organisational cultures and constraints. Families were not viewed as a whole unit with inter-dependent issues rather, practitioners from some organisations were unable to implement a response to needs based upon system wide barriers.

# Working together challenges

A key issue for the early help system is the challenge of multi-agency involvement and working together in synergy to better support children and families. Recognising that children and families are a whole unit that require a range of early help responses from a range of agencies is well understood at an individual level. However, in practice the responsibility for coordination, leading on assessments and brokering of support from services was a significant cause of disagreement between EHH practitioners and partner agencies.

Issues identified include:

- Disagreement on the interpretation and responsibilities of working together between different parts of the system
- Reluctance on the part of wider partners to share lower risk, needs-based information at an earlier opportunity
- Capacity pressures in different parts of the system
- Delays in support which could prevent the escalation of more complex issues that become more costly to support in the long term
- Repeated referrals and time wasted on cases which do not meet criteria for some services but are not being directed/engaging in universal services
- Possibilities available within the VCS subject to funding and capacity landscape

Most agencies have understood that, in response to issues of concern being raised around a child the EHH would identify and manage the outcome of cases referred in for support. However, the premise of the multi-agency EHH is that all partners, formal or informal, together form the early help support.



Whilst expectations around leading on assessment and coordination of support is easier to achieve within statutory and directly funded VCOs, difficulties arise where those agencies disagree on their role in responding to the identified needs. This frequently results in conflicting expectations about who is responsible at agency level, with a detrimental impact on the children and families in need of support. For example, where a school raises concerns around a child because of the impact of adults needs, the EHH practitioner would advise that the school lead on the assessment and coordination of early help support services. Where that support is in direct response to adults needs and adult services, a school will often argue that their responsibility is to the child, not the adult. Clearly the impact of supporting the adults needs has an impact on the child but it is often difficult for organisations to act outside of their perceived remit as a child-focused organisation.

Such issues are further exacerbated when VCOs are involved. Statutory services often have expectations of the role VCOs will play, or not play, in early help. VCOs often experience significant capacity challenges and often have the trusted relationship with children and families. Statutory agencies sometimes exclude VCOs and fail to recognise their value in achieving engagement, especially where families are reluctant to engage with statutory services. Much of the brokerage we did between VCOs and EHH has significantly increased awareness and value of the VCS, enabling more bespoke ways of working together that meets the different needs of each organisation.

# What's the difference

**We consulted on individual cases and offered bespoke responses** which enabled the offer of community resources in addition to those services able to respond to the families' needs.

**We increased the awareness, understanding and respect for the VCS in EHH practitioners** increasing contact between families and VCOs at a preventative level.

**We supported an increased understanding of the diversity and value of the VCS offer** and how volunteer-led grass roots community groups differ from larger charities funded to deliver services, helping practitioners understand that VCOs need to be understood individually rather than as a homogenous group of organisations. The VCS covering Middlesbrough is a rich and diverse range of organisations of varying sizes and structures. MVDA has a contact list of over 800 voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) with around 200 of those offering support directly to children and families.

**We supported EHH practitioners and broader children's workforce partners with a more developed understanding of the context in which the VCS operates.** Highlighting the current pressures around capacity and demand management, the funding climate, dynamic changes and value- informed approaches within VCOs that impact upon access, capacity and willingness to engage with statutory sector processes.



*"...I always think about one of my referrals where a lady was completely isolated, depressed and had mobility problems. The recommendations provided by Tracey enabled her to access Community Connect. Feedback from this service was extremely positive and encouraging, she is now engaging with local community groups and making friends who can support her. This has had a real impact on her ability to cope and to better manage her child"*

Jo Caygill  
Substance Misuse Social Worker  
(Based in the EHH)



# Understanding what the VCS can contribute

One of the key areas of improved understanding about the VCS in EHH practitioners has been around their understanding of the wide range of VCOs, especially their knowledge of local community-based grass roots groups. It is often these volunteer-led groups that are able to build resilience in children and families which support the wider VCS and other services working with children and families.

In addition to this, EHH practitioners have a much greater understanding of the context in which VCOs operate and how this impacts criteria and waiting times.

The VCS is able to offer a range of solutions which support the broader system and this is work in progress across a wide range of themes as highlighted earlier in this report in relation to engagement we have achieved both with individual VCOs and across thematic groups.

It is also important to note that there have been numerous requests of the VCS which demonstrate gaps in provision and potentially could be deemed inappropriate. Requests for services that need to be purchased, such as transportation, cleaning and child minding, are potentially an indication of how the VCS is understood and valued.

Engagement events between VCOs and the EHH have identified a range of issues, many which have initiated problem solving discussions between services to improve support for children and families at an operational level.

The wider work MVDA has been involved in around children and young people's wellbeing has increased the support to families in a more generic, community-focused way but there is still much to do. Whilst the VCS is keen to engage more meaningfully with the local authority on supporting children and families it will be important to manage expectations of statutory agencies on what VCOs are able to provide. Increasing understanding of the funding climate and the capacity and demand pressures within the VCS will also be critical to the success of any discussions around the contribution the VCS can make to being a credible partner in the prevention agenda.

## A VCS-led response

Following the work undertaken with the EHH, MVDA is facilitating a range of ongoing conversations with key VCOs working most directly with children and families in Middlesbrough. These conversations, based on the perspective of VCOs and their work with children and families has focused upon:

- what life is like for Middlesbrough's children and families
- what future we want for Middlesbrough children and families
- what we can do collectively, as the VCS, to close the gap between current and improved experiences

These conversations have resulted in a VCS-led project group coming together with a desire to work towards a stronger VCS offer of early help, preventative support for Middlesbrough's children and families.



Email [tracey.brittain@mvdauk.org.uk](mailto:tracey.brittain@mvdauk.org.uk) for more information