



ContactPoint VCSO Workshops November 2007



Acknowledgements

NCVYS and NCVCCO would like to thank the regional partners who helped organise the ContactPoint events:

- Barnardos
- Children's Links
- East Start Associates
- North West Regional Youth Work Unit
- South West Regional Network of Voluntary Youth Organisations
- Spurgeons
- VYON (Yorkshire and the Humber)

1. Introduction

Throughout November 2007 the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) and the National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO), in conjunction with regional partners and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), hosted nine regional events to engage the voluntary and community sector (VCS) with ContactPoint. The events also aimed to provide information and an opportunity to discuss directly with central and local government and National Partner representatives (5 VCS organisations and 2 statutory bodies) what ContactPoint means for the VCS.

398 delegates from 305 different VCS organisations attended the events in total. These included representatives from a diverse range of VCS organisations including:

- regional bodies of national organisations such as Spurgeons, Children's Society and Save the Children UK;
- Councils for Voluntary Services (CVS);
- family based organisations including St.Vincent's Family Project, Family Welfare Association and Coram;
- other participants represented The United Reform Church, Warrington Disability Partnership, After Adoption and Nottingham Community Housing Association.

Feedback from the events highlighted that the VCS appreciated the opportunity for face-to-face discussion with DCSF and Local Implementation Managers which enabled some questions to be answered on the spot. Participants also appreciated DCSF taking questions back if they could not be answered at the time.

This report will summarise the main themes and discussion topics that arose from the nine regional events. Prominent issues included the level of understanding, or lack of it, that the VCS and service users have about ContactPoint and how small VCS organisations will be engaged and supported to use ContactPoint. Further issues were around the barriers to VCS engagement, in particular training, funding and IT capabilities, and the relationship between the VCS and Local Authorities (LAs).

It became clear that knowledge of ContactPoint is varied within the VCS and more information and guidance needs to be disseminated ranging from basic information about what ContactPoint is to more detailed information about access, training and technicalities. Information also needs to reach service users who quite possibly unknowingly have their information recorded on ContactPoint.

Although much information was shared at the events some unanswered questions remain and are given in Appendix A.

2. ContactPoint and the VCS, who knows what?

Knowledge of ContactPoint by participants at the regional events varied from those who had no knowledge and had come to find out what it was all about, those with some awareness and those who were already up to speed with ContactPoint and wanted technical clarifications. The events offered a well received opportunity to clarify details regarding topics such as access, security, ownership of records and information held. At all of the events there was an overwhelming sense that service users are on the whole unaware of ContactPoint and that they need accessible information, in different languages if necessary, on what ContactPoint is and what its benefits are. Service users also need information about what their rights are and who will be able to access information on them. NCVYS and NCVCCO recognise their role, and that of other infrastructure bodies, to ensure that information is successfully reaching VCS organisations and service users.

3. Will ContactPoint be a useful tool for VCS organisations?

Opinion varied on whether ContactPoint will be a useful tool for VCS organisations. The emphasis being on the word 'tool' as ContactPoint does not replace existing data sharing practices, it is only another aid to achieve joined-up working and the effective safeguarding of children and young people.

3.1 ContactPoint will be a useful tool

The majority of participants recognised that ContactPoint would be a helpful, supportive system that would enable users to easily find out basic information about a child or young person and whether a CAF had already been made. ContactPoint should also reduce duplication of information and provide more accurate information about them. It will also be much easier for practitioners to identify the amount of intervention that is going on with other agencies and provide a chronology of involvement.

ContactPoint might raise awareness of VCS services and promote the unique and valuable work that the VCS does with children and young people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds. ContactPoint might help forge links and networks, thereby positively developing multi-agency services and support for young people. It could provide the basis of an online directory of services available for young people. For LAs ContactPoint might help with inspections and performance management frameworks. It was recognised that ContactPoint should help children and young people to be supported earlier as workers have easy access to information. It should also be advantageous for traveller children who are usually registered at birth to be able to claim benefits. ContactPoint should allow information on traveller children to be gathered and shared more effectively. Attendees generally recognised that

ContactPoint could promote the holistic approach to working with children and young people, which has been a principle on which the VCS has developed much of its work over many years..

3.2 ContactPoint will not be a useful tool

Although the majority of participants could see the advantages of ContactPoint, some issues did arise to challenge the benefits.

ContactPoint relies on people using the system correctly with a consistency in application across boroughs. There was some doubt as to whether this could be achieved.

While it was felt that ContactPoint might be a vehicle for raising the profile of VCS organisations, making them more visible, there would be no guarantee of this. It might, in fact, place further demands on the sector to share information, without a reciprocal sharing on the part of the statutory agencies.

ContactPoint's usefulness could vary according to the access rights of the VCS organisation, for example if a charity is not a user and does not have strong links with the LA they may not be engaged with ContactPoint at all. There was also a sense that ContactPoint would be more useful to large organisations not small organisations (see point 6 of report). It was felt by some that while ContactPoint is a tool, and is not intended to *replace* existing information sharing processes, there could be a risk that inappropriate conclusions are drawn from viewing information on ContactPoint. For example, by seeing that a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) had been undertaken, or that a particular agency was engaged with a child or young person, a practitioner might assume (falsely) that they did not need to do anything more, and that any concerns they might have were being addressed by others. Knowledge of ContactPoint is essential for the system to work properly and currently there is a lack of awareness and engagement throughout the VCS.

4. Chief barriers to VCS engagement with ContactPoint

The main barriers to VCS engagement with ContactPoint were reiterated across all the regional events. Common barriers were issues around security and access, lack of information and knowledge within the VCS, and cost of training and engaging with ContactPoint. Further barriers were based on the assumption of a need to have the right IT facilities to accommodate ContactPoint and the technical knowledge to support the running of the system. These concerns are included below along with other examples of barriers to VCS engagement:

- lack of VCS knowledge and awareness of the benefits of ContactPoint;

- achieving a consistent approach to implementation and engagement across boroughs;
- funding:
 - VCS organisations often rely on upfront investment and will need to be supported in this with long-term funding;
 - implementation timelines need to be adhered to so that VCS organisations can budget accordingly;
 - LAs may invest in the short term to provide training but will VCS organisations be motivated to participate if they think they will have no agency funding at the end of the year (highlighting the fragility of the funding of many local VCS organisations who still rely on one-year contracts/grants);
 - costs to cover additional training or possible increased staff work loads
- training:
 - Time;
 - funding support;
 - backfill resources;
 - identification of staff to be users (VCS generally do not seem to have been engaged in LA staff audits or estimates)
- IT barriers:
 - incompatible systems;
 - cost of changing systems if necessary;
 - the assumption that all VCS organisations have access to the internet;
 - cost of additional IT training
- communication – knowing who to contact, how and when if you have a concern or problem
- gaining permission to share information from users
- a need to manage expectations to avoid initial users giving up on ContactPoint because the information is not yet there or relevant;
- successful working may require a shift in thinking from the VCS
- the VCS provides a person focused, non-stigmatised independent service, and participation in ContactPoint could compromise this
- lack of confidence in technology, using the system and inputting correct information
- lack of confidence in government database programmes following various loss of data scandals
- fear of confidentiality and misuse
- how to get young people involved and aware of ContactPoint
- many voluntary organisations allow clients to opt out of their own database systems but young people will not be able to opt out of ContactPoint. It could be confusing trying to explain the different systems to young people
- lack of general public knowledge of ContactPoint and/or public misinformation about the nature and content of ContactPoint

5. Implications for VCS

Many of the barriers listed above identify implications for the VCS around costs, resources, and IT issues. Training will have major implications for the VCS and to be included in LAs budgets to receive training it is important that VCS organisations register their interest with their LA now. LAs also need to provide funding for travel and childcare costs. The need for training in ContactPoint procedures and safeguarding issues was highlighted and will be one of the main aspects of the training provided by LAs. At one of the events it was suggested that to speed up the training process the VCS could be trained to train other VCS organisations who are not directly involved with their LA. Good practice needs to be shared to ensure continued learning and development after the initial implementation phase. VCS organisations need to be part of a multi-agency national programme provided on a local basis. ContactPoint will need to be embedded in the policies and procedures of VCS organisations which will take time and resources.

6. Engagement and support of small voluntary organisations

The issue of engagement and support of small voluntary organisations was of concern at many of the events. Many of the barriers and implications for the VCS as detailed in points 4 and 5 above could be exacerbated for small organisations. Lack of awareness about ContactPoint and knowledge of how to engage could be a fundamental problem for small organisations. Furthermore issues around cost, training, resources and process changes could all prove more difficult to deal with for small organisations. A concern around the provision of data was raised with regards to small organisations who still maintain paper records highlighting another possible gap in data and issues about resources, funding and support.

To provide support for smaller VCS organisations there may be a role for regional and national infrastructure bodies to act as a source of information and reference. Furthermore there is a need for LAs to actively engage all VCS organisations, not just the ones they currently have links with. At one event it was suggested that there could be a possible role for LAs to play in co-ordinating the collection of data to put onto ContactPoint.

7. VCS and the relationship with LAs

The relationship between the VCS and LAs was seen to be a decisive factor in the successful implementation of ContactPoint and engagement with VCS organisations. VCS organisations who have a positive and well established relationship with their LA saw ContactPoint as an opportunity to build on this foundation and develop partnership working. However for VCS organisations who have little or no dealings

with their LA, ContactPoint might just highlight this and create further tensions over training, access to information and obtaining contracts to become users. For all VCS organisations it is important that they are engaged with LAs as early as possible and are fully aware of the timetable for rolling out ContactPoint across boroughs.

Whatever the quality of the relationship between the VCS and LAs, effective communication and identified points of contact will be key in implementing ContactPoint. Furthermore both the VCS and LAs need to be proactive in engaging with each other. LAs need to be aware of all the VCS organisations in their area and small VCS organisations may need to make sure that LAs are aware of their existence and the services they provide. There could be a role for local infrastructure organisations to support the relationship and exchange of information between LAs and the VCS.

Issues around funding need to be clearly communicated by LAs to the VCS giving timelines and expectations. Concern was expressed that funding from an LA will come with an expectation for the receiving VCS organisation to use ContactPoint. At one event it was suggested that service level agreements and funding from the statutory sector to other agencies needs to include negotiated procedures for ContactPoint.

Another concern expressed by participants identified possible mistrust at government initiatives involving databases and information. Concern was expressed at the events around whether government monitoring and auditing information would be used in other ways outside of ContactPoint. For example questions were raised around whether engagement with ContactPoint would influence LAs decisions regarding commissioning and contracting practices.

8. Potential flaws or complications

Throughout the seminars participants identified potential flaws or complications that could reduce the effectiveness of ContactPoint. These included:

- there is no facility to track siblings who are not co-residing. Sometimes agencies are working with one child or young person and are not aware that there are others in the family living elsewhere
- ContactPoint will only apply to children and young people in England which leaves a gap in terms of those born outside and who do not present for a universal service
- another issue related to children and young people who are taken over the border from England to other countries
- being an England only system raised questions about UK co-ordination with other UK administrations

- ContactPoint does not hold data on work undertaken with families which can affect children, e.g. parent receiving a substance misuse service. This leaves a gap in knowledge about services that may have been previously provided
- a robust system needs to be in place to deal with staff turnover, both paid staff and volunteers. Mechanisms need to be in place to deregister people as users when they leave
- there needs to be an appreciation that the VCS will have a disproportionate number of sensitive services, with the name of some organisations being easily traceable and indicative of the service that the young person is receiving

9. Further information

Although the events were an opportunity to exchange a great amount of information regarding ContactPoint, there were some suggestions of what further information would be useful for the VCS and service users. This would be beneficial to promote awareness of ContactPoint and alleviate some of the concerns of the VCS, service users and the general public.

Further information for the VCS:

- knowledge and clear controls about who has access to the information, especially around sensitive services
- clarity about mediated access
- guidance on case management systems (CMS) and IT requirements
- infrastructure bodies should be able to provide good practice guidelines
- more information on security and dealing with misuse
- more information about engagement with traveller and gypsy communities
- need to reinforce that ContactPoint is not replacing existing data sharing procedures and the need to use Social Services if there is a concern of risk
- more information on young people leaving care and disabled people (up to 25)
- further information about how ContactPoint works across boroughs; who owns the record, who trains the VCS organisation if they deal with more than one borough?
- more detail about how ContactPoint will work in relation to adoption. Adoptive parents would not want the name of birth parents to be made available
- statutory guidance on shielding
- clarification about training

Further information for service users:

- knowledge that all users are following CRB procedures correctly
- assurance that only a name would appear if the young person is involved with sensitive services
- information provided in different languages
- that every young person is on ContactPoint, being on it does not stigmatise young people

Further information for the parents/general public:

- basic information about what ContactPoint is and what processes are in place, especially if things go wrong
- proof that organisations are putting correct information on the database and have robust policies around this
- an audit trail available of who has accessed a child's information
- information provided in different languages
- information about what role does the parent/carer have in giving consent
- need to communicate to the general public in clear, jargon-free language

10. Conclusion and next steps

Overall the VCS is positive about ContactPoint and fully appreciated the opportunity to discuss directly with central and local government leads and National Partners from the VCS. The events were also beneficial for the implementation leads as they provided valuable feedback that can now be used to influence the implementation of ContactPoint, especially around the provision of clear, concise information.

The VCS raised major concerns about ContactPoint, many became key themes throughout all of the regional events. A major concern was the lack of awareness about ContactPoint, not only for the VCS but also for young people and the general public. Although the events helped to clarify many questions some remained unanswered (see Appendix A). Other issues arose around funding, training and IT requirements and support.

It became clear that both government and the VCS need to communicate clearly and effectively to aid the implementation of ContactPoint and ensure essential VCS engagement. ContactPoint is recognised by the VCS as an opportunity to develop relationships with LAs but this will vary according to current relations. The positive, initial communication that is currently taking place will need to be continued to ensure future success of ContactPoint. There is also a need to look forward and consider effective sustainability of VCS engagement.

The role of infrastructure organisations in sharing information and offering support to the VCS, especially to smaller organisations, was recognised as a key way of developing VCS engagement with ContactPoint. NCVYS and NCVCCO will continue to work with DCSF in taking forward ContactPoint and provide an avenue for the VCS to have its voice heard.

Throughout each of the events, it was stressed that ContactPoint was a tool to aid interagency co-operation. Information sharing was highlighted as the vehicle for improved service provision to children and young people. Voluntary and Community sector organisations will need to be supported to improve, update or develop appropriate information sharing protocols, alongside their safeguarding and whistleblowing policies. Both NCVCCO and NCVYS would be willing to work with the DCSF and other national, regional and local infrastructure agencies to facilitate this.

Appendix A – Unanswered questions

1. Is the funding sustainable in the long-term? E.g. data clean and transfer, training new staff.
2. Will case studies be developed to show good practice?
3. How will the audit trail be monitored?
4. What are the timescales for the roll out across boroughs?
5. What is the definition of a 'universal service'?
6. What happens if the data manager refuses to give consent not to place a sensitive service on ContactPoint?
7. What if a VCS organisation has paper records and wants to share information with ContactPoint?
8. How do VCS organisations deal with information that is held on the same database as the ContactPoint data but is not for the eyes of the LA?