



Information for the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government

The Lyons Inquiry thus far has focussed on and unpacked the most pressing issues confronting local government, its relationship to central government and the desire for a sustainable and fair system of central and local government for the 21st century, which help achieve:

- A more prosperous society
- A more cohesive and engaged society
- Better outcomes from public services.

This submission presents a very brief outline of work undertaken over the past six years by The Big Wide Talk Children's Project funded by the Gatsby Charitable Trust and European Social Fund. The work has developed a new model of service delivery, which can be applied across the range of local services affecting places and communities. We believe it has enormous relevance to the Lyons Inquiry in that it is demonstrating a mechanism which engages even the poorest people, reinvigorating collective responsibility and providing a new kind of local, democratic, commissioning hub which addresses the twin concerns of 'post code lottery' misconceptions and the real demand for highly tailored, locally specific services.

The model has been developed in close partnership with groups of parents and practitioners across England and combines qualitative and quantitative information in place-specific sets. Robust databases and web-based technologies are used to enable the model at the very local and local authority levels as well as regionally and nationally.

The starting point for this work was a concern to improve services for disadvantaged children especially those with special educational needs on the basis that services do have the power to make society and the economy more equitable. The work speaks to parents as citizens rather than consumers and has sought to identify ways in which the direct involvement of parents in practice, planning and monitoring can address service improvement and poverty itself. A blueprint for engagement with parents was drafted as a means of initiating the work by a small working group of experts drawn from a range of services including health, social services and education with strategic, academic and practice skills.

Essentially parents and practitioners are brought together in locally specific groups to do exciting things with children and then, together, to explore what children actually do and say. The shared understandings including questions which result are co-authored as research stories in the light of what is known about the local way of life including the services and spending available. Consensus is not sought rather a clear articulation of needs against resources is sought which acknowledges difference. This work is not simple and our local animateurs who spark the process are all good graduates with significant experience of delivering services. All parents and practitioners take part in a networked system of research and learning.

Web-assisted technologies are used to enable participation at local level with all participants having a private login and access to electronic devices for recording their contributions outside of meetings.

The resulting research stories are then aligned with data from the Office for National Statistics at lower layer super output area level with policy and planning data at every level of government through to the Comprehensive Spending Review. Each group of parents and practitioners then has at their disposal an archive of sophisticated commissioning information, which can be used for many purposes including arguing for the customisation of services at the very local level.

This work is contributing to Joint Area Reviews, service improvement in specific settings and is being explored on a strategic basis in the development of the Every Child Matters agenda in York and Plymouth where Big Wide Talk has established strategic partnerships.

We are also developing the use of exhibitions in which parents and practitioners do exciting things with children as a means of driving change. We have done this successfully at the very local level engaging whole schools and the surrounding community but we have also done this on a citywide basis in Plymouth and next month we shall be running a countywide exhibition for Cornwall, 'Our New School'. Both Devon and York are expressing interest in similar work.

We are now able to site many examples of the beneficial effects of this work at community and individual level. Overwhelmingly we are demonstrating that parents even from the poorest areas wish to be part of the development of the services, which they want to have for their children.

The significance of this successful model is that it offers a generic first level service in a place specific way. It does not embody a one-size fits all approach rather it provides a common, manageable and measurable framework within which meaningful commissioning can take place. But this information also serves as intelligence for local people about the micro markets surrounding children's needs including childcare which they are often best placed to service and we are beginning to develop our groups as collective self employment entities. (See Everyday Enterprise BWT Review 2005-06) At the same time the Big Wide Talk method encourages people, as parents, grandparents and residents to be excited by the energy of children and to be drawn to ask deep questions about their future within the community. This is the stuff of democracy, regeneration and redistribution.

I am enclosing a copy of the Big Wide Talk Review 2005-2006, which describes some of the work in more detail. Further reports of recent work can be found at www.bigwidetalk.org. We would be happy to answer questions of interest in more depth.

September 2006