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Developing the Children and Families Forum Communications Strategy

Introduction

This paper explains the motivation behind and the proposed communication strategy for the Suffolk Children and Families Forum (The Forum).

Research recently undertaken by the East of England Regional VCS identified that little or no infrastructure existed for children and families work focusing in the 5-11 ages range. Provision in Suffolk for this age range lies with The Forum which currently survives on a minimum of goodwill support. Therefore, when funding from the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) became available to support the involvement of private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector employers in local and regional workforce activity, Young Suffolk, as the independent voice of the voluntary children and young people's sector and, as a key member of The Forum, was deemed the appropriate organisation to hold the contract. The main focus will be on developing and building the capacity of the existing Forum in order for it to play an effective and active role in supporting the Children's Trust and implementing the CYP Plan: delivering integrated services to improve outcomes for children and young people. CWDC aims to improve the lives of children and young people by ensuring that the people working with children and young people have the best possible training, qualifications, support and advice. It also helps children and young people's organisations and services to work together so that children and young people are at the centre of all services – very much the ethos of Young Suffolk.

Developing the Strategy

Developing the strategy was a two way communication process between Sarah McNaughton, Communications Manager for Young Suffolk, and Lorraine Ward, Children's Commissioning Administrator, Suffolk County Council. Two meetings were held to establish appropriate mechanisms to facilitate an effective integration of The Forum's and Young Suffolk's current communications strategies. The key discussions were around:

- How to defend, once fully integrated, itself, and its members, from 'communications sludge' and duplication
- How to refine the current strategies and ensure that members are well informed and supported.
- How to add value rather than create overload - too much communication about the wrong things is just as problematic as too little communication about important things.
- Deciding what, when and how much to communicate, and by being target specific

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- How to establish good communications and information sharing as an integral part of the strategy's ethos
 - Encourage more VCS organisations to join Young Suffolk
 - Encourage partners and stakeholders
 - Statutory Sector
 - Create Media/local newspapers links

Young Suffolk currently deals with an enormous amount of hardcopy and electronic information that is filtered and shared, with members and supporters from both the voluntary and statutory sectors. This is via Stop Press ebulletins, FLASHeMAIL, regular newsletter and through the website. Young Suffolk has a number of emailing contact groups but has two main groups (totaling over 200 individuals and groups) to send out the bulk of its regular information to.

The Forum similarly deals with a large amount of information but it is currently sent out as it arrives, and often, as is the case with many 'global' email groups, is duplicated. The Forum has no website or newsletter facility.

Connecting Ideas – Delivering Results

The agreed action plan:

- Identify separate email groups for information regarding children and families; youth and those who would like both. They will be called
 - Stop Press Youth (SPY)
 - Stop Press Children & Families (SPCF)
 - Stop Press Youth AND Children & Families (SPYCF)
- Cross reference and input the Forum's contacts within the Young Suffolk database
- Create simple interrogation techniques to identify the Forum members
- Create a website page within the Young Suffolk website and become a conduit and an enabler for the Forum under the brand of Young Suffolk
 - Upload The Forum's Business Plan (Kevin Garrod)
 - Upload agenda's and minutes of meetings
 - Publish details/links of those Forum member's who become members of Young Suffolk
- Integrate the Forum's news into production of articles for internal and external publications
 - raising The Forum's profile

Things to watch for:

- generating excess information
- indicators of problems and changes

The emergent communications strategy will be monitored to measure its effectiveness, capture key lessons and to change direction if necessary. This will be done when membership is renewed annually via questionnaire and if needed, by follow up phone call.