

Multi-agency work with young people in difficulty

There are many inter-agency groups dealing with children and young people in difficulty and with special needs. However, a lack of structured co-ordination is limiting their effectiveness, according to new research. The study, by Caroline Roaf and Cathy Lloyd, found that:

- f** Young people have multiple needs and require the services of more than one agency but no one agency has responsibility for co-ordinating services for this group.
- f** Young people are defined according to how they fit into the work of agencies rather than by an analysis of what they need; they therefore tend to be seen either as on the margin, or outside of, any one particular service.
- f** Each agency has different statutory responsibilities and may not always be clear about the limits of their responsibility. Individual practitioners may, in turn, be unsure as to how their work relates to that of other specialist services. Young people and their families may also be unaware of their rights and responsibilities.
- f** There can be lengthy delays in assessing the needs of a young person. Substantive work by other agencies may be put on hold pending the results of an assessment by one service.
- f** Practitioners continue to feel threatened by, and anxious about, inter-agency collaboration. Where conflicts arise these are often attributed to personalities and individual agency difficulties rather than to the lack of a structure which would support and validate collaboration. There is little perception that effective joint working might alleviate the problems of the agencies as well as those of the young people.
- f** There are few mechanisms for the joint exploration of issues arising from individual cases or for feeding this into strategic planning and preventative work.
- f** The researchers conclude that a formal structure promoting inter-agency collaboration would encourage agencies to innovate and to provide a fully co-ordinated service for young people needing more support than can be provided by any one of them.

The study found that young people particularly at risk of falling 'through the net' are those who are:

- carers
- on the verge of criminality
- having mental health problems
- homeless
- from minority ethnic groups
- out of school for any length of time
- experiencing education difficulties whilst in local authority care
- from families in stress
- experiencing delays in assessment under the 1981 Education Act.

Problems faced by young people

Despite the wealth of agency provision for young people, parents and young people are often bewildered about how to access specialist support.

'He was offending while truanting from school. A mixture of the two. In the end, we felt like tennis balls because education said it was a social problem and social service said it was an education problem, and we were just going backwards and forwards from one to the other.' (parent of 14-year-old boy)

Parents often resort to 'desperate measures' to get the help they need. In several instances, an emergency request had been made to social services to initiate care proceedings.

Young people and their families are often unaware of their rights and responsibilities and conflicting legislation can confuse the situation. For example, the Children Act carries a statutory duty to seek the opinion of the young person before making any decision, whereas under education legislation it is the parent who has sole rights. Some parents and young people had difficulty accessing statutory provision and were unaware of their rights when they were turned down. Several cases were cited where the young person had been excluded from school and was not being accepted by any other schools:

'It's like taking your overdraft around to the banks - who wants it? I feel powerless to get him back into another school and no one seems able to help.' (parent)

Problems are compounded for older children as different agencies have different responsibilities for young people at 16.

There are sometimes lengthy delays in assessing the needs of a young person. This time can often be critical, especially if the young person is out of school. However, in many cases no other substantive work is carried out by other agencies pending the results of an assessment.

Sometimes young people get 'lost in the system'. For example, Bill was seen by a psychiatrist while in

foster care but, when he returned home, the psychiatrist had left and his report had not been passed on to anyone. Bill's case was sent to a different social work office which closed the file; his behaviour deteriorated.

'I could see the whole thing happening again, just like it started before ... if they had just talked to each other instead of going through us, making us go here and there, maybe things would have got done a lot quicker.' (parent)

Problems faced by agencies

Agencies all agreed that co-operation was needed but found it difficult. Previous attempts at 'inter-agency' working have left many frustrated with the process and the results and there is a general feeling that this is just creating:

'more and more meetings and not real work with young people.' (practitioner)

Problems of working collaboratively are often put down to problems with individuals or a particular agency. A whole agency may be made a scapegoat for the failure of an inter-agency project. The hostility and suspicion that develops further hinders successful co-operation; workers retreat to their own 'patches' where they feel safer and more able.

Defining responsibilities

A wide range of special resources are available to practitioners, for example, psychiatric social workers, youth counsellors etc. In some instances, several of these possibilities were tried in rapid succession; in others, decisions were based on practitioners' greater knowledge of one than the other, rather than because one was more relevant or suitable. Specialist resources were often only brought in if an individual worker was aware of the skills available in a particular agency and could access them through an informal contact, such as a school nurse with a particular interest. Each discipline within each agency has problems defining what they offer in relation to each other.

Agencies can spend too much time working on their own with young people with multiple needs and too little time in co-operation with other agencies to make effective joint plans. Many agencies find it difficult to define their role in relation to agencies providing different forms of support.

Agencies also find it difficult to agree joint procedures for action, especially concerning the education of a young person in care. For example, one young person was seen by the school to be more stable while in foster care and wanted social services to ensure he stayed there. Social services wanted the family to stay together. Neither agency could accept the other's view-point.

All the primary care agencies have legal responsibilities to fulfil and the possibility of using court routes to ensure a family's co-operation. However, all these operate to different criteria. For example, in one case study, the young person concerned did not fulfil the criteria in relation to health and therefore there was no legal obligation on the young person or parents to use the health provision service agreed. However, both social services and the Education Social Work Service had to go through a GP if they wanted to refer to the medical psychiatric services. This created problems maintaining support: in several cases, the family had dropped out of family counselling - run by the Psychiatric Unit - stating problems with transport, time and childcare. However, neither the ESW or social worker were made aware that the family had stopped using the health resource until much later when a crisis arose.

Lack of co-ordination

Each agency has its own culture, language, aims and priorities. This makes it difficult for practitioners working together to see the young person as a whole and to offer a 'seamless service'. Different agencies use different screening methods before accepting a case: the number of 'gatekeepers' can number up to twelve. At an individual level, workers may find it difficult to co-operate due to different pressures.

Sometimes a referral was made and then lost because the referring agency did not have the time or the authority to chase the initial referral. If no agency took the lead role, then it would be assumed (sometimes wrongly) that the referral agency would take the responsibility for ensuring that something happened with the case, even if they were not intending to do anything themselves.

There is limited understanding of what inter-agency work means in terms of skills and practice and of its potential to alleviate the problems of the agencies as distinct from those of the young people. Building co-operation between agencies can involve a great deal of time. However:

'There is agreement that co-operation is needed but when resources are involved (time and money), there might only be lip service paid to it.' (practitioner)

Practitioners continue to feel threatened by, and anxious about, inter-agency collaboration. Where conflicts arise these are often thought to be the result of personalities and individual agency difficulties rather than structural problems. The management structure of many services means that any inter-agency groups/projects tend to have an informal status and lack power and authority. These projects therefore struggle for recognition and funding.

Lack of strategic planning

Very few mechanisms exist for exploring the issues arising from individual case work so as to inform strategic planning and the development of preventative work. Agencies do not hold the same information and have difficulty passing information to one another. The issue of 'confidentiality' is often used to block joint working. Even when families agree to agencies sharing information, some find it difficult to do so.

Conflicting legislation and financial constraints have created additional barriers. Each agency holds its own budget and few mechanisms exist for joint financing. Agencies are still uncertain about their roles, particularly in the context of purchasing and providing. Joint commissioning is a new development for many agencies which lack skills and practice in inter-agency work. Partnerships between schools are beginning to develop and they will have an important role in planning and managing local education provision. The ability of schools to form partnership between families and other agencies will be essential to their development.

Working to better practice

The study examined an already successful model of inter-agency work, the Elmore Community Support Team (ECST), operating in Oxford City for those over-18s described by the relevant agencies as 'difficult to place'. All agencies admitted difficulty in maintaining consistent support packages for them. The ECST works with all agencies to ensure that an individual is appropriately maintained in the 'system of care'. This involves carrying the main responsibility for a case if necessary and liaising with other agencies.

Problems frequently centred on a number of critical points when the management of a 'case' could cause concern. These were:

- Access and referral
- Identification and assessment
- Transition, particularly post 16/ closing a case

For the agency to whom the referral is being made the key question becomes: Can this agency meet this person's needs from its own resources or is support needed from elsewhere? This is the point at which practitioners most need an inter-agency structure.

Looking at young people, this project identified many of the same problems the ECST deal with in relation to 'difficult to place' adults; this suggests that the model could, in principle, be transferred. This would involve the setting up of:

- A **Youth Policy Group** to oversee policy and practice and joint finance and develop good practice.
- A **Youth Support Team**, staffed by a co-ordinator and seconded workers.

- A 'Network' for 12 -18 year olds, enabling all practitioners to explore the issues arising from individual casework, for example, gaps in provision, as well as maintaining a directory of local resources.
- The further development of training opportunities for those working across professional boundaries.

The research suggests the following characterise good practice for inter-agency working:

- Formal commitment and support from senior management and from political to practitioner level.
- Formal and regular inter-agency meetings to discuss ethical issues, changes in legislation and practice, gaps in provision and information-sharing at all levels to develop short- and long-term strategies.
- Common work practices in relation to legislation, referral/assessment, joint vocabulary, agreed definitions, procedures and outcomes.
- Common agreement of client group and collective 'ownership' of the problems, leading to early intervention.
- Mechanisms for exchange of confidential information.
- Framework for collating data and statistical information across the agencies that can inform all practice including ethnic monitoring.
- Monitoring and evaluation of services in relation to inter-agency work.
- Joint training in order to understand each other's professional role.

Conclusion

Although the potential of inter-agency action to maximise resources and improve services is great, the perceived threat it poses to individual agencies inhibits its development. In order to gain experience of it away from these pressures, independent funding is needed to ensure that the work is not aligned to any one agency. Although the nature of the problems identified are complex and involve large agencies in change, effective and innovative solutions can emanate from small-scale, inexpensive inter-agency

projects. The research found similar projects elsewhere which had all received independent funding as 'starter grants', though projects were later taken on by the local authority. When agencies agree to collaborate over individuals with complex difficulties, they bring their collective experience and determination to bear. The creative solutions which arise generate improvements in practice for everyone.

About the study

The researcher contacted 70 agencies in Oxford City, working with young people. In the first year 15 young people were interviewed in-depth and 30 young homeless people contributed to the research by sharing their past experiences with different agencies. In the second year, the researcher chaired a pilot inter-agency panel for young people with multiple educational needs which received 16 referrals in the five months of its existence.

Further information

The full report is to be published by Oxford Brookes University. For further information, contact Sylvia Eaton, Education Services, Oxford Brookes University, Wheatley, Oxford OX33 1HX, Tel: 01865 485913, Fax: 01865 485838.

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Social policy

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For further information on these and other Findings, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line for publications queries only; an answerphone may be operating).



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