

## Inter-agency initiatives as a response to domestic violence

In 1995, the Home Office, on behalf of the Inter-Departmental Group on Domestic Violence, issued a circular encouraging inter-agency co-ordination as one of the principal planks of government policy on domestic violence. A national study of inter-agency responses to domestic violence, by Ellen Malos, Gill Hague and Wendy Dear, found that:

- f** Inter-agency responses often take the form of forums bringing together all relevant statutory and voluntary sector agencies. There are at least 200 forums nationally.
- f** Initiatives develop differently depending on local conditions. There is no one model. In some areas, informal liaison can be as effective as more formal approaches.
- f** Statutory agencies vary in their involvement. The police have been particularly active in encouraging forums.
- f** There could be a tendency for statutory agencies to dominate groups at the expense of voluntary agencies.
- f** Participants from Women's Aid and the refuge movement were particularly likely to be marginalised, as most of their energies are devoted to emergency work.
- f** Women and children experiencing domestic violence rarely know about or are involved in inter-agency initiatives.
- f** Interviewees identified lack of resources as the single biggest obstacle to multi-agency co-ordination. Where resources were lacking, inter-agency work could appear as a way forward, while in fact nothing really changed.
- f** Where resources were available employing a co-ordinator frequently transformed the initiative. However, there was concern that resources should not be diverted from emergency provision.
- f** Interviewees expressed a need for clearer guidance on priorities for work on domestic violence from government departments other than the Home Office.
- f** The research indicates that those involved in inter-agency responses to domestic violence need to be aware of:
  - the ways well-developed forums prevent the views, policies and practices of voluntary agencies being overlooked or diluted;
  - evolving new practice which ensures that women and children are involved;
  - fully involving participants from Women's Aid and the refuge movement;
  - the danger of forums taking on too much at once or getting stuck at the networking phase.

## Introduction

Domestic violence forums and inter-agency initiatives are currently in operation, or are being set up, all over the country. At least 200 now exist, and more are being established all the time. This development represents a major new policy direction in domestic violence work.

The study found that forums were often initiated by a combination of agencies. These included the police, specialist local authority units (eg Women's Equality or Community Safety Units), Women's Aid and local refuges, social services or housing departments, probation, Victim Support, voluntary sector agencies and private solicitors firms. Health services were very frequently absent and the research found evidence that their greater involvement would be widely welcomed. The Crown Prosecution Services, magistrates, judges and court personnel were rarely represented. The police, on the other hand, had engaged particularly actively in inter-agency domestic violence work since the publication of Home Office circular 60/1990 and other guidance. Many forums were initiated by the police. A great deal of variety existed between initiatives.

## Structure

Multi-agency initiatives aimed to bring together all relevant agencies in a locality. Informal inter-agency liaison could be effective and valuable and had often continued for many years. However, more formalised domestic violence forums worked best if there was consistency of attendance and if they were structured. Most commonly, they had a Steering Committee and Terms of Reference, including Guiding Principles, Aims and Objectives, and Equal Opportunity Policies. Some were situated within or were 'hosted' by a statutory agency, and some were independently constituted projects within the voluntary sector. The structure of the forum, and its position in the voluntary or statutory sector, had clear implications for the management of any employed workers.

Many initiatives had sub-groups handling specific tasks within set timetables, eg organising a specific project such as an advice line or a conference. Alternatively, some sub-groups covered a specialist area of work, eg housing and legal issues or issues for black or disabled women.

## Work taken on

Many forums acted specifically as groups for networking and sharing information. The study showed that, beyond such basic networking activities, the most important aim for any domestic violence forum was to attempt to increase the safety of abused women and children. Work undertaken included:

- co-ordinating agency provision, assisting in developing good policy and practice guidelines within individual agencies, providing domestic violence training;
- public education and awareness-raising work, eg Zero Tolerance and poster campaigns;
- preventative and educational work, eg programmes for male perpetrators, education work in schools;
- direct work on improving services for abused women and children, developing task groups on children's needs etc.

Given the unmet need in this area deciding on priorities for action can be a difficult task and there can be a tendency for forums to take on too much at once, or to become stuck at the networking phase.

## Statutory agencies

For inter-agency work to be effective, the research showed that the police, probation, the relevant local authority departments, and other statutory agencies needed to assume a committed role. These agencies currently participate actively in inter-agency initiatives in many localities, and many have developed good practice guidance and other domestic violence policies. However, the research showed that commitment at management or policy-making level was often absent in some agencies, for example social services and probation. The police had more consistently taken on this work at policy-making level, although the power of the police and the sensitivities of the issue had resulted in difficulties between the police and other agencies in some localities. In the study, police-initiated projects usually worked best where the police subsequently adopted a facilitating, rather than a directive, role.

The study concluded that senior management and policy-making commitment was required in order to develop a co-ordinated local domestic violence strategy. This has not been as evident in agencies other than the police, perhaps owing to the absence of specific guidance from relevant government departments of the kind issued by successive Home Office circulars to the police.

Some initiatives are currently attempting to develop strategy-making multi-agency bodies at county level, with practitioner forums feeding into them, but various problems were identified with this approach which remains in its early stages. Statutory agency involvement in multi-agency work is essential, and there are debates about the best level of seniority of participants. However, it is also important to maintain the grass-roots, practitioner and community base which gives many domestic violence forums their creative and dynamic edge.

### Power and equality issues

The study demonstrated that power differences between agencies, and the development of a common understanding of, and 'political' attitude towards, domestic violence, could be problematic. There could be a tendency for statutory agencies to 'take over', almost by default. The views, policies and practices of less powerful voluntary agencies could then be overlooked or diluted beyond recognition so that a lowest common denominator approach to domestic violence might well be adopted. However, the most well-developed forums had evolved ways of dealing with this problem.

### Women's Aid and refuges

Women's Aid and other refuges have been at the forefront of providing services and of campaigning against domestic violence over the last twenty years. However, staff are often over-worked and constantly engaged in crisis intervention. They may have little energy to put into inter-agency work. In some localities in the study, they were marginalised within multi-agency forums or had to struggle to make their voices heard. The study indicated that some forums have developed strategies to overcome these difficulties and to enable Women's Aid to remain centrally involved. These included reserving places on management committees, or asking the local refuge group to take the chair of the organisation as a matter of agreed policy. The Women's Aid federations may wish to develop national guidelines encouraging refuge participation in multi-agency work. In areas without a refuge, inter-agency work often appeared to proceed with little participation from the voluntary sector, although this could lead to a skewed response. Assistance from other areas or from national bodies could be of help in this situation.

### Equal opportunities

While many local initiatives surveyed in the study had not started to take on issues of equal opportunity, some forums had attempted to develop good equalities practice. This could include translating all publicity material into minority ethnic languages spoken in the area, large print and audio-tape, researching and attempting to meet the needs of specific groups of abused women (eg disabled women) and taking up issues of discrimination in the provision of services. Projects emphasised the challenging nature of attempting to evolve good equalities practice on a multi-agency basis and produced suggestions for how this work could be developed.

### The involvement of abused women and children

Of 70 women interviewees who had experienced domestic violence, only five knew of their local inter-agency initiative, eight thought they might have

heard of it and only two were involved in any way. Domestic violence forums are now developing new practice in this respect. In some areas, Women's Aid and local refuges were taking an active strategic role in relaying information between women residents and the local forum as a matter of agreed policy. In various locations, new Survivors Advisory Groups were being developed. These groups consist of women who have experienced violence, and take an advisory and monitoring role in regard to forum activities. While such ad hoc groups cannot be representative, they mark a new development in inter-agency domestic violence work. Women interviewed for the study suggested a range of ways in which survivors of domestic violence could be more involved in multi-agency initiatives.

### Resourcing

The single most prominent and problematic issue singled out by interviewees in the study was the lack of resources for multi-agency co-ordination. Without resources, multi-agency projects could rarely develop beyond the networking stage. However, the vast majority of domestic violence forums had no resources at all, beyond what participating agencies could contribute or share.

Where multi-agency groups in the study had funding, this had usually been obtained from a range of sources including the local authority, the police authority, partnership initiatives and special government schemes.

When projects had been able to employ a co-ordinator, the multi-agency work undertaken had generally been greatly enhanced. There was some agreement that the minimum basic employment needs of a multi-agency project were for a co-ordinator with some administrative support.

Best practice appeared to be that, where a multi-agency initiative found itself to be in competition for funding with local refuges or other direct services, it should act to support the refuge application. In general, study interviewees pointed out that such competition should be avoided where possible. There was some general concern that multi-agency projects could inadvertently act to filter resources away from refuges and emergency services.

### Government policy

The study indicated that, where resources were lacking and where services were being reduced, inter-agency work could appear as a way forward, while in fact nothing really changed. In addition, some concerns were expressed that multi-agency co-ordination could lead to greater surveillance of abused women's lives and that some legislation and government policy was having a negative impact.

While the Home Office has been identified as the lead co-ordinating Ministry in domestic violence

policy, greater commitment is also needed from the other Ministries, in the light of recent government emphasis on the multi-agency approach. Participants in the study expressed a need for clearer guidance on priorities for work on domestic violence from government departments other than the Home Office.

Clearer government guidelines and policy are also required to improve the provision of refuges and other services, in order to ensure a co-ordinated national strategy on tackling domestic violence. At the moment, refuge provision remains fundamentally inadequate to meet demand and there is increasing pressure on other necessary services. If service provision and government domestic violence policy were further developed, inter-agency work could then work hand-in-hand with the delivery of direct services to build a co-ordinated, multi-faceted community response.

At the moment, however, multi-agency projects, refuges and other services may find themselves in competition, as noted. While the 1995 Home Office circular has clearly been of help, there is a lack of more specific guidance from government in terms of how inter-agency initiatives can be resourced and further developed.

This guidance could include such topics as: building multi-agency domestic violence work into employee job descriptions; formally 'releasing' employees to enable them to participate; making sure that representatives of statutory agencies are in a position to facilitate change within their agency or in local domestic violence strategy; availability and standard access to resources as part of national domestic violence policy; appropriate levels of management and policy-making commitment within agencies to build a co-ordinated domestic violence strategy across a local authority or a locality; the extent of commitment expected from agencies; guidance on and recognition of key role of the refuge movement.

### About the study

The study surveyed inter-agency initiatives on domestic violence nationally, using a pluralistic methodological approach. A nation-wide mapping survey in 1994 was followed by detailed fieldwork during 1995 in three localities, Cleveland, Derby and Walsall. Seventy-five women survivors of domestic violence were interviewed. Fieldwork was also conducted in five further areas: North Wales, South Yorkshire, Bristol, Dorset and the London Borough of Greenwich. In all the fieldwork areas, research methods included extensive interviewing with a wide variety of key agencies and personnel, observation of meetings, and analysis of policy and other documents.

### Further information

For more information about the research, contact the Domestic Violence Research Group, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, 8, Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1TN, tel: (0117) 928 8521/2/3.

A full report, **Multi-agency work and domestic violence: a national study of inter-agency initiatives** by Gill Hague and Ellen Malos with Wendy Dear, is published by The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (price £11.95).



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