

Inter-agency work and the Connexions strategy

Inter-agency partnership working has been one of the guiding principles behind the Connexions Strategy, described by the Prime Minister as “our front line policy for young people”. Yet little is known about the practical problems involved in successful implementation of inter-agency work, what such an approach means for the daily tasks of front-line workers, or how effective it is in dealing with the complex problems faced by many young people. This research, by Bob Coles, Liz Britton and Leslie Hicks, examines the problems involved in inter-agency work at a time when UK youth policy itself is under review. The main findings are:

-  Staff in partner agencies were confused about the variety of different roles played by Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs) and unclear about PAs' legitimate roles, responsibilities and authority.
-  Lack of clarity, particularly in schools, resulted in a continuing suspicion that Connexions had not brought the radical changes some had hoped it would.
-  Many PAs were effective advocates for young people, acting as “powerful friends” in dealing with other organisations. However, PAs found some providers difficult to work with because of conflicting priorities and working practices.
-  The use of case conferences to co-ordinate different professionals' work with individual young people was rare.
-  Despite some progress, there was little systematic or effective information sharing. This was most likely to occur within multi-disciplinary teams working from the same base.
-  Failure to share information sometimes resulted in an incomplete assessment of needs and inappropriate patterns of support.
-  The researchers identified the following gaps in organisational structures where support for effective inter-agency work was needed: better management support for front-line workers, clarification of protocols on joint working, and mechanisms for troubleshooting conflict between agencies.

Background

Since the 1997 General Election the encouragement of inter-agency partnership working between different professional groups has characterised the development of policy in areas such as youth offending, teenage pregnancy and support for young people leaving care. The Connexions Strategy followed this trend with Connexions Partnerships, piloted during 2001, and operating throughout England by 2002-3.

Connexions seeks to co-ordinate support for young people aged 13 to 19 years by allocating them a Connexions Personal Adviser (PA). Although intended to be a universal service for that age group, Connexions is especially targeted at young people aged 16 and 17 who are not in or are at risk of disengaging with education, employment or training.

Connexions partnerships have been allowed some local autonomy in their development. This research was conducted in three of the forty-seven partnership areas and involved an intensive examination of the development of inter-agency work.

The research examined:

- the *policy intentions* - the aims and objectives of particular approaches to partnership development – as gleaned from interviews with stakeholders; and
- the *routine practices of front-line workers* – as illustrated by case studies of work with young people, broadly matched across the three partnership areas to include work with different age bands and special groups.

Issues and challenges in inter-agency working

Determining the inter-agency networks for Connexions work can, in part, be signalled by national guidance given to the sub-regional partnerships about the composition of their Partnership Boards and (local authority-wide) Local Management Committees. Two other levels of operation are also important:

- Local managers, working across the range of services, are crucial to the development of protocols of joint working, procedures and practices on information sharing and ensuring that all these are well-known and implemented.
- Good working relationships between front-line staff: in the absence of formal protocols these relationships may be established through practical experiences of working together and are often based on friendship, co-operation and trust. But the most effective were supported by formal agreements.

"The first two months has really been networking and promoting the role because there is politics ... And so it's kind of like having to break down professional barriers because you're working with people from other organisations ... I just think the message hasn't got out there to other partnerships really."

The basis of effective intervention was identified by interviewees as a relationship of trust between the PA and the young person; many described how such a relationship was established and maintained.

"I do think the quality of the relationship is crucial. I do try and invest a lot of energy in that, because that's going to sustain us through all the ups and downs" (Personal Adviser)

Procedures and processes of referral to Connexions workers varied considerably. Because the networks were only just beginning to be established, many referrals were informal (based sometimes on a single telephone call). Sometimes these conveyed little background information about the young person. Informal referrals could present difficulties for workers in terms of workload and caseload management and often ran the risk of slow and sometimes inappropriate intervention or placement. Often formal referral processes were slow to develop.

"... when I was new in post I didn't even know that there were special forms for referrals because nobody told us ... You find out things bit by bit, by accident..." (Personal Adviser)

Assessment of needs was crucial to successful interventions. Connexions training for Personal Advisers covers assessment, planning, implementation and review - known as APIR procedures. Some PAs were sceptical about the value of the formal assessment procedure and there were sensitivities around how and when it should best take place.

"I think you have to be very careful how and when you use it." (Personal Adviser)

However, where it had not been undertaken, the case studies did highlight aspects of need which had escaped the attention of PAs. From April 2004 APIR was made mandatory for work with all young people thought to have acute or complex needs.

Information sharing between different professionals working with the same young person was contentious, allied to issues concerning *confidentiality and record keeping*. There was general

agreement that information should not be shared without the young person giving explicit consent and that sharing information with other professionals should be only done on a 'need to know' basis. Because the latter was ill-defined, in practice information sharing varied greatly. Some voluntary sector organisations, especially when dealing with sensitive issues, specifically forbade it. Sharing information, assessments and records was most likely where PAs were located in multi-disciplinary groups, such as within Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). Here the information was often restricted to team members rather than made more widely available across the Connexions Service, even though there was evidence that PAs may need information which is not available to them. There were also concerns about the accuracy and completeness of information stored electronically, whether it was kept sufficiently up-to-date, and the time taken to input and access it on to systems.

"It's mainly for Personal Advisors but then again some admin staff need to be able to know those details, so some people are extremely guarded, even within the company ... what they put on the system."
(Personal Adviser)

"You'll get a completely wrong view of somebody ... someone again hasn't updated the information they've put on. And that's another problem."
(Personal Adviser)

Brokerage was a key part of the work of PAs. Arranging a suitable placement or pattern of support required the PAs to be knowledgeable about local provision across a range of services - such as training and education, housing, benefits, health - and a range of issues - such as drug rehabilitation and anger management. Sometimes brokerage was far from straightforward; PAs found some providers (housing, social services and financial support being often quoted examples) difficult to work with because of their own priorities and working practices.

Shortage of training and education placements and/or inflexibility of start-dates also led to considerable delay in placement, with young people left in the meantime with little constructive to do.

Advocacy was a highly important role, played to great effect by PAs. Young people described this as offering them a "powerful friend" in dealing with other agencies. Sometimes this involved challenging other workers or agencies about their failure to deliver appropriate services or support - commonly financial support or other entitlements. Sometimes other professional workers, including those working

in voluntary sector projects, took on this role. The need for repeated and persistent advocacy by individual workers sometimes indicated a structural weakness in partnership arrangements, and required negotiation between the managers of services, although this level of intervention was little in evidence at the time of the research. This meant that some PAs thought they were sometimes left working alone with insufficient supervision and management support.

Divisions of labour and confusion of roles.

Many PAs employed by careers companies delivered a universal service, offering careers education and guidance to large caseloads of young people (often through group work) in schools and colleges. Some schools expressed disappointment at opportunities missed in the development of Connexions and felt Connexions provided little change or a reduction in some services. A headteacher in one of the research areas, for instance, commented:

"I feel totally frustrated and fuming that all this money was supposed to be coming. ... There is no difference to the way the services are delivered, it's just a change of label." (Headteacher)

"I'm never quite sure if I'm doing the right thing by the school, by Connexions or by the young person."
(School-based Personal Adviser)

Some PAs carried out more targeted work and so had much smaller case-loads allowing them to undertake individual assessment and intervention in order to meet needs.

"We've got about twenty young people each between myself and Gina, and ... we're trying to dwindle the numbers down really because you can't do what you want to do with that amount of young people ... so the pressure's still on, but what we do, we look through the referrals and, if it's an urgent case then we'd refer them straight to the One-Stop-Shop." (Personal Adviser)

Some of PAs worked in the voluntary sector, sometimes on special projects, and often as part of multi-disciplinary teams. There seemed to be little cross-referral between the different teams of PAs. It was especially notable that those PAs with high case-loads did not refer young people with complex needs to specialist teams.

Case conferences to agree divisions of labour between professional workers - rather than as a mechanism for ensuring inter-agency co-ordination - were rare.

Being clear about the purpose of Connexions both to other partner organisations and within Connexions itself was also important in determining success in inter-agency working.

Conclusion

Connexions is a relatively new service and this research took place in the early stages of its development: two of the three partnerships studied had been fully operational for only just over a year.

The researchers identified a need for:

- clarification of roles;
- better systems of referral;
- improved communication to all agencies about the legitimate responsibilities of PAs;
- more developed and consistently applied systems of information sharing and case conferencing; and
- better systems of support, supervision and management for PAs.

In all three areas the local authorities had also been developing a Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership in parallel to Connexions development. These were much broader than Connexions in both the age ranges they covered and the range of services encompassed.

The Green Paper *Every Child Matters* and the subsequent formation of Children's Trusts will also have implications for the future organisation and management of Connexions. Guidance already issued suggests that Children's Trusts should act as Connexions Local Management Committees, and that the total resource available to local authorities from Connexions should be made clear to each of them and Connexions Business Plans signed off by the Trusts before submitted to ministers. This signals some rebalancing of power between the sub-regional Connexions Partnerships and the local-authority-based Children's Trusts. Children's Trusts are also being charged with developing information, referral and tracking systems which may aid the process of integrating information systems between agencies. The Green Paper also calls for discussion about workforce reform so that professionals should be better able to work across professional boundaries. A further Green Paper on Young People due in the Autumn of 2004 may also lead to a reconfiguration of Connexions in the near future. Based upon the findings of this research, early and careful negotiation between the Connexions Partnerships, Children's Trusts and Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership are recommended on a number of fronts. This is both a vital and urgent next step if

the progress made in advancing the Connexions Strategy and building effective inter-agency work with young people is to be continued.

About the project

The research was conducted by a joint team from the University of York and the London-based Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. It covered three Connexions Partnerships. The researchers interviewed Personal Advisers and their managers, young people with whom they worked, and other professionals involved in partnership working, members of the Partnership Boards, Local Management Committees and managers of services in each of the three areas. This was followed by a series of matched case studies of work with young people with acute and complex needs.

How to get further information

The full report, **Building better connections: Inter-agency work and the Connexions Service** by Bob Coles, Liz Britton and Leslie Hicks, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 661 1, price £13.95).