A study of a multi-agency childcare network

The importance of supporting families and young children through open-access, mainstream services is now widely recognised. This study by Valerie Wigfall and Peter Moss sets out to ‘tell the story’ of the Campus, an innovative model of a multi-agency childcare network. The Campus is distinctive as a type of network of family and children’s services created from a public/private partnership, co-ordinated and headed by a voluntary organisation. The research found:

- In its first two years, Campus participants had learned how to work together more effectively, and were beginning to derive mutual benefits, such as easier referrals and shared resources, but were not yet exploiting fully the opportunities for joint working and training.

- The complex organisational structure of the network made integration more difficult. Individual services had endeavoured to strike a balance between retaining their autonomy and establishing a collective identity.

- Coram Family had created the vision for the Campus and had worked with senior managers of Campus services to develop a shared value base. However, this did not appear to have generated changes in individual practice. Among practitioners at field level, there was less awareness of an overall Campus vision.

- Management structures had effectively co-ordinated Campus services. For example, the Community Services Manager, as the key link person, had played an important role. Opportunities for lower level staff collaboration were more limited. At all levels it was hard to find time or space to work in a joined-up way.

- Partnerships with local authority statutory services had varied outcomes, the most successful being the integration of the child psychology service into the Campus setting. Joint working required flexibility and often a different approach. Agencies were still learning how to adapt to the new arrangement.

- Although the Campus network has the potential to operate as a ‘one-stop shop’ across services, the majority of families had used only one service provider, though many accessed several services within one provider.

- The researchers conclude that, though difficult to set up and still some way from becoming ‘more than the sum of its parts’, there are aspects of the Campus network which might be usefully incorporated into partnership programmes more widely.
Introduction
The launch of the Coram Community Campus in 1998 was timely, as government began to accord priority to services for the youngest children. It also coincided with a growing push toward multi-agency working, within which integration has become an acknowledged part of initiatives such as the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, the Early Excellence Centres, and SureStart projects.

This project describes the findings of a two-year study of the Coram Community Campus, aimed not so much at assessing the effectiveness of multi-agency working, but rather exploring how it can happen and the difficulties it must address. The researchers have taken an in-depth approach, seeking to examine how the Campus functions within the context of a world which is not ‘joined up’, where resources are scarce, where services come from different positions of strength, and social exclusion is still a fact of life for many of the users. They probe the lessons to be learned from the Campus experience for planning and implementing multi-agency working, in order to indicate some of the conditions that might contribute to successful outcomes.

The Campus
The Coram Community Campus is a group of voluntary and statutory organisations working together in the King’s Cross area of London. The multi-agency network is founded upon an organisational arrangement in which all of the parts are linked together, working in partnership to a common purpose. It aims to provide comprehensive, open access and flexible services to meet the needs of parents, carers and young children in the local community.

Within the wider context of multi-agency working, there is nothing in the Campus that is inherently new. What is distinctive is the idea of bringing mainstream services, supplied by a range of public sector and voluntary agencies, into a network of more closely integrated relationships, co-ordinated by one agency, Coram Family, as the catalyst and facilitator.

Throughout the study, the emphasis was on the Campus as a whole, endeavouring to assess the degree to which, in bringing services together, the Campus has become ‘more than the sum of its parts’. For both practitioners and users this wider ‘Campus’ perspective was at times a difficult concept to hold on to.

The organisation
There is a complex organisational structure underpinning the Campus model. Though rooted in a partnership, the partners are not equal, nor do they share common accountability. Coram Family is the lead agency and has been significant in creating and co-ordinating the Campus network. Its size, coupled with its power as landlord to many of the service providers, has generated tensions. Most service providers on the Campus are accountable to their own management bodies, and have come to the Campus with a degree of independence and autonomy, which they wish to preserve. The fact that providers are not under the same management makes it harder to be integrated or to engage in joint working.

The vision
The overall goal in establishing the Campus was for a ‘one-stop shop’ for families and young children, with multi-agency services offering high quality, open access, mainstream provision. Coram Family was responsible for creating and holding on to this vision. The vision has had to be broad in its scope in order to accommodate the wide range of family services on the site. Senior managers generally felt they shared the same vision.

Similarly, the Campus principles, which were formulated jointly by Coram Family and senior managers, and which later became Campus aims and objectives, have operated as a broad, shared value base. Some providers consider them to be a description of good practice for any service working with children and families. As such, there was no evidence of changes in practice resulting from services signing up to the Campus principles. Lower level staff and users were less aware of the Campus vision, or of the Campus aims and objectives.

Enabling factors
Service providers in the Campus network are connected in different ways, some more closely than others. Some have established formal links, such as the nursery and the parents’ centre which together share status as an Early Excellence Centre. Some share overlapping client groups, such as the two projects for homeless people. Such connections facilitate a greater degree of collaboration and cooperation between the services in terms of referrals and joint working. A growing identification with the Campus seems to have lowered boundaries generally.
Projects are learning how to work together to exploit the potential which the network offers, but of necessity reconciling this with individual priorities.

As the key link person, the Community Services Manager has been instrumental in pulling the network together. The ties are closest at higher management level, where the organised structures appear to work more effectively. In terms of communication and consultation, a Campus Co-ordinating Group made up of senior managers representing all of the service providers played an important role, contributing to the general planning and administration of the Campus. It has been less effective as a vehicle for strategic planning.

Below management level, opportunities have existed for staff to come together, though with varying degrees of success. Increasingly, resources and activities are being shared, and joint training is beginning to happen, enhancing the prospect of collaboration across boundaries.

Coram Family, in its role as co-ordinator, has endeavoured to be democratic and inclusive, consulting all the stakeholders in the process of developing the Campus. It has taken time to build up the trust both of agencies in the network, and also with external organisations in the local community.

Constraining factors
Lack of opportunities for informal interaction, absence of dedicated ‘non-contact’ time for reflection and planning, and pressured individual workloads have constrained attempts at working together. Services tend to be overburdened with their own schedules and deadlines, leaving little time to devote to the common good. With such busy agendas, clear and open lines of communication are needed to maximise opportunities, both on the ground and at a strategic level.

The absence of any form of common data collection on users has further constrained the Campus network from establishing a collective identity. While there are practical difficulties to be overcome in order to achieve this, its introduction would certainly assist the Campus in management and ongoing self-evaluation.

Voluntary/statutory partnership
Securing senior level support of the statutory services – health, education and social services – has been critical for moving the multi-agency network forward. The process was helped by:

- Coram Family as a strong voluntary organisation. This status placed it in a powerful position to initiate and co-ordinate such a partnership, the main advantage being that it was not in competition with any one agency.
- A local authority which was already committed to integrated childcare and education. Together with the general impetus for joined-up working, Coram Family was ‘pushing on an open door’.

At field level, joint working has been more difficult to achieve. It calls for flexibility and often a different working approach. The child psychologist has succeeded in establishing a popular and non-stigmatising service, reaching families who might not otherwise have accessed such support. Other specialist health services, as well as social services, have yet to exploit the full potential offered by the multi-agency network. Fieldworkers are still learning how best to use the opportunities in a way which will complement services based in the customary settings.

Accessible services meeting family needs
The Campus aims to offer high quality, open-access provision. For some services, accessibility was moderated by admissions procedures set by statutory authorities. For others, open access had to be balanced alongside endeavouring to reach the most vulnerable families. Networking was identified as the main route for local families to find out about services, although knowledge of the Campus in the community was not widespread. Outreach workers are beginning to target families in greatest need.

Although the Campus network has the potential to operate as a ‘one-stop shop’ across services, the majority of families had used only one service provider, though many accessed several services or activities within the one provider. There was evidence that, over time, the movement between services was increasing as staff gained confidence in making referrals and families themselves became more aware of what was on offer.

Whatever their pattern of take-up, users were extremely positive about the quality of services at the Campus. They valued the support they had been given, and felt services had made a real difference in their lives. Users acknowledged the importance of consultation and were generally satisfied with the opportunities offered for parental participation in planning and running services. More than half
expressed a willingness to be more actively involved. However, the concept of children’s rights, particularly for very young children, seemed harder for them to comprehend or comment upon.

**Conclusion**
Recognising that the Campus is still in its infancy, the researchers conclude that the creation of the multi-agency network is in itself a significant achievement, but it has yet to reach its full potential in terms of becoming ‘more than the sum of its parts’. Services are beginning to learn from each other, to share skills, and to enjoy a cross-fertilisation of ideas, but the process needs time to develop further. As the product of a unique set of circumstances, it is unlikely that the Campus model will ever be replicated in its entirety. However, the general concept of services working in collaboration, linked by a common value base, with some kind of overall co-ordination, is one which might be reworked more widely, to fit different situations, drawing on particular aspects of the Campus multi-agency network model.

**About the study**
The research took place between July 1998 and September 2000. The project encompassed seven individual service providers: two nurseries, a parents’ centre, a special needs charity working with disabled children, two homelessness projects, and a school for children with autism or related communication disorders. Outside statutory agencies represented in the network included an education authority, a community health trust and a social services department.

The methodology adopted was primarily qualitative. It included documentary analysis, observation and interviews. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with project heads, staff members, and parent representatives, as well as representatives from the statutory authorities and local community groups (42 interviewees in total). A further 18 in-depth interviews were completed with three groups of users – homeless families, lone parent families, and fathers in traditional families. These interviewees were selected from respondents who had completed an earlier user

survey administered in person to 137 individuals, randomly selected across the Campus, and representing approximately one in three users.

Additional quantitative data about Campus users was collected over a two-week period in the form of a Campus census, which covered 332 families. A brief five-minute interview survey (56 respondents) was also conducted in a number of locations close by the Campus, aimed at gathering data about non-users of Campus services.

**How to get further information**