

This essay will define multi-agency working within the social care sector, by exploring the humanity of social work on the front line and where human error and feelings can contribute to the challenges of working in collaboration. This essay will also explore the reform of children's services by the Children's Act 1989, and the criticism of the workers on the front line which have taken precedence over the reform by exploring personal boundaries. This essay will show that key events, such as the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, can influence policy and legislation and show the benefits of multi-agency working by comparing different models of working on a micro and macro level and how good practice within the practical element of social work can change silo working into a seamless multi-agency approach.

Multi-agency working can be described by The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (2010) as 'work across organisations to deliver services to people with multiple needs', and assert the importance of working in collaboration, as an essential service to those individuals needing support within an acceptable time frame, in a fluid manner, respecting the individual needs of the service users. SCIE (2010) outline key practice points to multi-agency working, suggesting that 'National Strategies' have been formed, such as personalisation in order to strengthen the links between health and social care and other services, including strategies on safeguarding, co-ordination and intervention, this in turn allows effectiveness of multi-agency working. However, multi-agency working can be a complex matter, being multiple agencies who do not necessarily work in the same way and where conflict can arise (Thompson, 2015). Lancashire County Council (LCC) (no date) suggest that multi-agency services can be put into three broad models. These are, multi-agency panel, multi-agency team and integrated service. All three support multi-agency practice, however, are all different. The most common model can be perceived as the multi-agency panel, which is managed by a coordinator and has a competent mix of multiple agencies including education, health and social care to represent the different sectors of work (Lancashire County Council, no date).

Multi-agency working has been described by Carnwell and Carson (2005) as a Post-Modernist theory, which critiques the 'modern' post-war 'one size fits all' forms of social health and welfare. Considering the macro level, with the creation of universal health and welfare provision, multi-agency working created an attempt to solve people's problems, however, has been critiqued heavily, many outlining the disempowering effects of professional solutions to social problems. This in turn produced the terms 'nanny state' or 'disabling state' which encouraged health and social care services to adapt and focus on clients or 'consumers' being

active consumers rather than passive recipients, emphasising that health and social problems have become more complex and multidimensional (Carnwell & Carson, 2005 p.4). Glasby and Dickenson (2008) argue that for health and social care practitioners to make a positive and practical impact upon the lives of the service users, they will come across a multitude of issues, which will always include working with other professionals and other organisations as each organisation will have their own priority and agenda, which can cause conflict of interest, subsequently working against each other within the panel.

Multi-agency working is considered in the 21st century to be a vital element of the health and social sector, Glasby and Dickenson (2008) consider that partnership working is quite literally a 'life or death matter' and without the collaboration there could be serious consequences for those involved. This is evident whilst looking at cases where collaboration was non-existent, as can be seen in the devastating case of Victoria Climbié. Victoria Climbié died in 2000, in which the failure in multi-agency working played a substantial part, which was recognised in Lord Laming's enquiry (2003) This presented the government with a difficult task to reform children's services and to promote more effective partnerships and networks to work together, acknowledging the perceivable barriers that will occur. Two years before Victoria's death, in 1998, the Department of Health issued a consultation document '*Partnership in action*' to highlight and outline the future relationships between health and social care. The document critiqued the silo agency ways of working, and proposed various ways of promoting partnerships between agencies

'All too often when people have complex needs spanning both health and social care good quality services are sacrificed for sterile arguments about boundaries, When this happens, people, often the most vulnerable in our society... and those who care for them, find themselves in no man's land between health and social services. This is not what people want or need. It places the needs of the organisation above the needs of the people they are there to serve. It is poor organisation, poor practice, poor use of taxpayers' money – it is unacceptable' (DoH, 1998, p. 3).

Observing the issues raised by the Department of Health in 1998, it is clear that records indicate a problem within the health and social care sector are already a concern. This questions why, in 2000, did the agencies involved with Victoria Climbié's death communicate so poorly, when multi-agency working was at the forefront of conversation within the Government.

The Children's Act (1989) came into force ten years prior to the governments publication of '*partnership in action*', in order to tie together a patchwork of Acts of Parliament, and was

described by the Acts author, Lord Mackay (1988) as ‘the most comprehensive and far reaching reform of childcare law which has come before parliament in living memory’ within the lords sitting on the 6th of December 1988. Mackay continues by airing the concerns that in 1988, the legal framework for children was given precedence due to the tragic and incomprehensible amount of child abuse cases by suggesting that appropriate legal framework should be implemented to give effective protection, and that of which is missing from 1988 childcare law. Mackay suggest that the state should be ready to help, especially when doing so lessens the risk of family breakdown, and should be executed in a way that is suggested by the Bill, which demonstrates the

Very real and practical advantages which can flow from government departments and the law commission working closely together (Mackay, 1988). Upon exploring the process and communications surrounding The Children’s Act 1989, it becomes apparent that the act was designed to diminish child abuse, provide rights for a child and also gave early suggestions that considered multiple agencies working together would benefit all involved with child abuse cases and most importantly, the victims themselves. Jenkins (2013) highlights the importance that the Act sets out, as it offers a solid standard of good practice within social work, by enforcing a directive for multiple agencies to follow when making decisions regarding the welfare of children. Mackay (1988) further explains multidisciplinary, or multiple agency assessments, should be considered best practice when a child’s safety is the concern, referring to it as a ‘case conference’. Mackay details that even though case circulars were commonly used to all concerned with a particular case, different departments have different management structures, which can influence the response from the departments, initiating protocol and procedures which was a criticism of the current system.

Criticism has foremost been a part of social work, with both the system and the people directly and indirectly involved with high profile cases in social work. Andy McNicoll (2016) argues that the ‘Government must end ‘unsubstantiated criticism’ of social workers and engage more on the reforms’ which suggests that the high profile media attacks on the social workers who work on the front line are causing problems with morale and, in turn, the services themselves, suggesting that poor multi-agency working is a result of fear from the individuals directly involved with the victims and the families. McNicoll continues that the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) called for ministers to start engaging reforms, by having honest conversations with social workers about the changes that were to be made. This in turn would create the positive side of social work, where multiple agencies work together, to help parents

to parent better and to allow children to thrive in a happy and healthy environment. Victoria's death however was not the first major case to initiate a reform within legislation. Peter Jenkins (2013, p. 87) describes child abuse as first being highlighted in the 1980's and the 1990's prior to the Victoria Climbié murder case in 2000, and was seen to be a widespread social problem, which made social workers the front line agents who were armed to manage the major issue that was child abuse. Jenkins argues that the process in which the social workers were obliged to follow in law were far away from the difficult human situations that social workers were faced with within their caseloads, resulting in the issue of child abuse growing in significance, as opposed to declining. This suggests that the fault does not lie with the social workers, it lies within the law that is set out in front of them. Considering the micro level, Dawl and Sawdon (1999 p. 17) suggest that concern within social work is greater, as the blurring of the boundaries with other professionals becomes more apparent within the social work field, as social workers fear that they are no longer social workers, more gatekeeping technicians or case managers, which can translate to a personal restrictive boundary to multi-agency working, in which the social worker may feel restricted within their own duties and protocol of their own particular agency in order to share ideas within a group setting and may be less responsive within a group setting due to fear of inadequacy or wrong solutions.

Atkinson, Jones and Lamont (2007) identify the most common benefit of multi-agency working as being an improved, or more effective service which provides joint problem solving and also the ability to take a holistic approach, which in turn provides a better understanding with an increase of trust between agencies. They also explore the personal positive and negative impacts of multi-agency working, with the main positive being that it is rewarding and stimulating with an increased communication, knowledge and understanding of other agencies, which in turn produces a more substantial collaboration and trust in order to work together more effectively. However, Atkinson, Jones and Lamont critique this positive in a negative aspect as multi-agency working was found to focus a particular uncertainty regarding the professional identities of those involved, and suggested that even with the ability to collaborate, the workload in fact increased for the professional, which then questions how multi-agency working would benefit a client if the professional had less time to give to a particular case, although access to the professional by the client was reportedly increased, it in-turn increased demands for the services as a greater focus was placed on prevention and early intervention, which reduced the critical need, and provided better support for not only children, but also the families as a whole.

Effective multi-agency practice can be highlighted within a model constructed by the Governments '*Every Child Matters*' (ECM) (2003) green paper in which sets out a children's trust model of practice, which involves a range of professionals that work together in an integrated way. However, multiple models have been produced to explain the process and define the 'rules' of multi-agency working, one of which is described by Percy-Smith (2005 pp. 28-29) as a model in which to describe the extent of multi-agency working by producing a hierarchical typology which is a journey or progression towards multi-agency working and consists of a ladder of partnership including an information exchange, or the sharing of knowledge and reviewing new methods of accessing information. By following the simplicity of this model, it can be seen that multi-agency working is being recognised globally as a strategic and effective way of promoting the well-being and safeguarding of children. The Children's Act 1989 created a pathway for all to follow, including the local authorities, in which policies are written to effectively promote multi-agency working. This can be demonstrated in the Welsh Governments *Theme 5: Developing community partnerships and multi-agency working* (2016) which highlights how multiple agencies in Wales are working together to ensure that families are getting the support that they need (The Welsh Government, 2016). By introducing a model called Families First and the Team Around the Family (TAF) as an 'innovative programme that promotes the development by all local authorities of effective multi-agency systems and support for families' (The Welsh Government, 2016) with a specific focus on those living in poverty by providing early intervention or prevention and are located in twenty two local authorities in Wales. The Welsh Government explain that TAF is designed to bring together a wide range of professionals to work as a unit in order to reduce overlap and inconsistency in the services received, which in turn ensures that the family's needs are supported at an early stage, specifically before reaching a crisis point. This is achieved by identifying the needs of the family and appointing the professionals needed in order to support them efficiently. The Welsh Government (2016) follows a model which consists of a Needs assessment upon referral, which allows the family to have a tailor-made package of measures which are suited to their particular needs. This assessment is called a Joint Assessment Family Framework (JAFF) which is then used to create a tailored plan of interventions to help families to overcome the problems that they may face, all of which are examples of good practice within multi-agency working.

Looking closer at Carmarthenshire County Council, a pilot review inspection was conducted in 2016 to ensure that the Welsh Government model was being implemented correctly within the local authority. In which inspectors looked at the quality of the outcomes with a specific focus on the quality of practice, decision making and multi-agency working constructed around the delivery of information, which resulted in a findings report produced by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) (2016). The report found that Carmarthenshire local authority had a strong commitment to supporting children and families alike and confirmed that the authorities Family support and Prevention Strategy promoted the least intrusive method of intervention possible which was consistent and in line with national safeguarding and appropriately advocated the importance of ‘engaging with children and families in the co-production of assessments and person centred planning’. However, disappointingly, multiple inconsistencies between agencies within children’s services were found, to which the CSSIW recommended that multi-agency work was greatly needed. With the inspectors looking closer at these inconsistencies it became apparent that regional multi-agency protocols needed to be updated within the local authority which could provide an answer as to why there was a lack of multi-agency working between agencies within the local authority. Furthermore, recommendations were made to establish and then strengthen multi-agency arrangements and operational plans to support effective co-ordination of the multiple agencies as the CCIW learned that cases that were not requiring statutory services were either signposted to single agency family support, and more complex cases were assigned a key worker in order to co-ordinate the multiple agencies in line with government recommendations (Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, 2016).

Safeguarding and protection is highlighted heavily within the inspection of Carmarthenshire County Council giving a clear definition of what the welsh government expects from local authorities,

Effective local safeguarding strategies that combine both preventative and protective elements where people are experiencing or at risk of abuse neglect or harm, they receive urgent, well-co-ordinated multi-agency responses. People are not left in unsafe or dangerous environments (Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, 2016 p.9)

The CSSIW reported its key findings, as generally providing the services in an appropriate timely manner, however, there was not always a consistent understanding of thresholds, and the confidence of the social workers whilst working directly with families needed to be more robust, and attention needed to be given to the professional risk assessments and care planning

(Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, 2016). Both of which suggest that a lack of confidence from the social workers is still at the forefront of the problem, it can be argued that social workers are uneasy about making decisions out of fear or getting it wrong and facing a tragic error, however surprisingly, considering how forefront multi-agency working is in 2016, the key findings report concluded that the multi-agency child protection thresholds protocol was in need of updating in order for it to be in line with the most recent Government guidance.

By looking at this timeline of events, from 1988, the change of the law to incorporate all acts to create the new Children's Act 1989, following through Victoria Climbié's death, and more recent tragedies, finishing with a report that is two years old that is still recommending Carmarthenshire County Council improve the multi-agency working, it creates the question as to why, if multi-agency working was identified thirty years ago as being a key element of child protection and safeguarding, is it not a thoroughly practiced area with a seamless boundary between services, and asks the question, how many tragic circumstances are we as a nation going to have to witness in order to provide the training and give the confidence to the agencies to do the job in which they trained for, without the fear of consequence or backlash from the media. Silo working appears to still be a very real way of working for multiple agencies, even though Governments have recommendations of models available to use, and theories in which appear perfect on paper, the practical element is evidently being ignored, which in turn creates an environment of uncertainty, and begs more research, training and effective communication through all services needed to protect not only the child from harm, but also families before they reach crisis point, in a manner that is deserved by the family and child, who deserve help from agencies who are able to work together and provide the service that they need.

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