

What do you consider to be the main benefits of and challenges for multi-agency working? Your discussion should focus on a specific sector of society and should include reference to good practice and theory.

This essay will be discussing what exactly multi-agency working is, and the reasons for its development. Also, this essay shall be identifying what are the expected outcomes for this practice, who this practice is supposed to support and any evidence to prove this practice is successful. This essay will be briefly identifying how good practice in multi-agency work is essential, to ensure that cases such as Victoria Climbié's case does not continue to happen in this day and age. This essay will also be exploring the positive and the negative aspects that multi-agency working can have on the individuals who are directly affected by the results from this way of working. Specifically, this essay will be focusing on victims of domestic abuse in relation to multi-agency work, exploring the range of agencies that will work with victims of domestic abuse. It will also be exploring the positive and negative aspects that multi-agency work has on the area of domestic abuse, referring to relevant case studies. This essay will also be identifying what policy and legislation relates to this particular area, and appropriate theory on how to best work with victims of domestic abuse.

Multi-agency work is considered to be a highly effective and an essential safeguarding procedure in regards to areas such as child protection (NSPCC, 2019). The ultimate goal and purpose of multi-agency working is to provide practitioners from a variety of sectors and different professions, working together to support children, young people and families. This form of working takes on different forms, in different situations, varying from working in a team around a particular child or family, on a panel discussing the needs of a child or as a family and having regular meetings (The National Archives, 2013). Multi-agency work is thought to be beneficial for those who are in need of it, due to the way support is given, being tailored to suit each individual in a way they are most comfortable with. Some of these benefits include easier or quicker access to required services, support for the parents which is more satisfactory, higher quality services, a more desirable engagement and achievement in education, the needs of the children, young people and families being addressed more efficiently, and a decrease in the need for specialist services (The National Archives, 2013).

Overall, the purpose of multi-agency work is to have highly effective positive results, however, an example of multi-agency work being ineffective and resulting in a very negative and upsetting outcome is the case of Victoria Climbié. In 1998, at the age of seven, Victoria Climbié came to the United Kingdom with her father's aunt, Marie-Therese Kouao, with her parents hoping that this would give her the opportunity to a better start in life. However, coming to the United Kingdom for the short time that she did would result in the early death of Climbié at just eight years old, due to one of the worst cases of child abuse and neglect at the hands of her aunt Kouao and her boyfriend Carl John Manning (The Victoria Climbié Inquiry, 2003). In relation to multi-agency work, it was not just the fact that Climbié was severely abused and neglected by Kouao and Manning which resulted in her life being cut so short, but the several medical professionals, four social services departments, two housing authorities, a specialist centre managed by the NSPCC, two child protection teams of the Metropolitan Police, all involved, enforced and entrusted by the government to protect children, in fact, massively let Climbié down and failed their duty to protect her from harm. In this particular case, Climbié's abuse was not hidden, professionals were very aware of the abuse due to Climbié's frequent hospital visits due to suspected deliberate harm (The Victoria Climbié Inquiry, 2003). However, regardless of the many professionals, organisations and agencies involved and entrusted to provide Climbié with care and protection, she remained in the care of Kouao and Manning, where the abuse and neglect only got worse over time, resulting in her death. It is evident that in this particular case, good practice and sufficient communication were majorly lacking, and those involved were unprofessionally performing in their job roles (The Victoria Climbié Inquiry, 2003). Had there been better communication amongst the professionals involved, good practice, led better and better funding, perhaps these awful events may have been different. This entire case represents a gross failure of the system and very poor communication overall, which demonstrates the substantial need for effective multi-agency work, to ensure that situations like this do not continue to happen (The Victoria Climbié Inquiry, 2003).

Focusing in on Domestic Abuse in relation to multi-agency work, domestic abuse is a very relevant and continuous issue that is going on not just in the UK, but worldwide. Domestic abuse consists of coercive, controlling, degrading, threatening and violent behaviour, which can include sexual violence, and is often caused by a partner or an ex partner, or in some

cases a family member or carer. Usually, perpetrated by men, and experienced by women. (Womens Aid, 2019). There are multiple organisations and agencies that will work with victims of domestic abuse within the UK, including one of the best known organisations in relation to this area, Women's Aid (Womens Aid, 2019). Womens Aid offer victims of domestic abuse multiple services including online support, information for Refuge accommodation, Outreach services, Floating support, which is designed to support women who wish to remain in their own homes, Aftercare and resettlement support schemes, and Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy (IDVA), where their purpose is to provide victims of domestic abuse support and information, and should they require it, further support if they make the decision to take their abuser to court (Womens Aid, 2019). As already stated as a form of support to women experiencing domestic abuse, there are Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVA's) who play a vital role in this particular area, and provide further services which include, creating safety plans, accompanying clients to court and pre trial visits, supporting clients when giving evidence and writing victim impact statements, applying for special measures in court and liaising with social workers and child protection services (Refuge, 2017). IDVA's work directly with agencies such as the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, providing them with key training, which is considered to be essential and highly effective in the way in which they react, directly handle and conduct cases of domestic violence (Refuge, 2019). Also, IDVA's work with many other agencies in regards to a court setting, with the aim to bring perpetrators to justice, supporting their client throughout the entire time, advocating on their behalf and keeping them safe through the process (Refuge, 2019). It is quite apparent that Independent Domestic Violence Advocates work in a way that is similar to that of multi-agency working, as they work directly with the organisations who provide support and guidance for the women who are experiencing domestic abuse, such as Women's Aid (Womens Aid, 2019), and also directly working with the police and Crown Prosecution Services, to ensure that they are providing clients with the best support and to be knowledgeable on this particular area (Refuge, 2019). Evidently, this seems to be an effective, positive and beneficial form of multi-agency working for all those involved.

Exploring further whether multi-agency working has a positive or negative effect in regards to domestic abuse, an example of a positive effect is the Multi Agency Risk Assessment

Conference (MARAC), which is where high risk cases are discussed and it is victim focused, also focusing on information sharing and risk management, and is attended by all vital and key agencies (Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse, 2019). Those who attend the meeting include police, independent domestic violence advisors, homeless team, mental health, local drug and alcohol services, specialist domestic violence services such as Women's Aid among many others, health representatives, children's social care and children and family court advisory and support service (CAFCASS) (Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse, 2019). MARAC's initial purpose is to monitor, facilitate and evaluate effective information sharing in order for suitable action to be taken to ensure and heighten public safety. MARAC collaborates all of the up to date risk information, along with an assessment of the victims requirements, linking them to the provision of suitable services for those who are involved in domestic abuse cases, which include the victim, children and the perpetrator (Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse, 2019). The entire course of action of this project began in Cardiff, Wales, in 2001, which determined over 40% of survivors who were subjected to a domestic abuse MARAC had in fact no longer had to endure any further abuse after one year, repeat victimisation had dramatically decreased city-wide from 30% to under 10%, the number of victims who had previously refused to make complaints after police being called out had decreased from 54% to 14%, individuals who continued to receive further abuse reported it much sooner than had been done previously, in 2001 there had been 11 domestic abuse related murders on women, whereas in 2006 there were 5, and there had been a 17% reduction of children going on the Child Protection Register, and for a shorter period of time (Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse, 2019). These statistics clearly identify that due to MARAC's successful project, more individuals are coming forward to report abuse instead of just living with it, and there have been major reductions in repeat victimisation in general, which leads to the indication that domestic abuse is becoming less stigmatised, with more and more women speaking up about it and more services being made available to provide the appropriate support and course of action (Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse, 2019).

With all the positive outcomes of MARAC being identified, there have been negative aspects that have been investigated too. A home office review of MARAC revealed that there were good practice when it comes to administration and information sharing in this regard, however, also identified noteworthy challenges in examining and recognising high risk cases,

action planning and handling the high volume of referrals (The Guardian, 2015). Since the review, it was revealed that MARAC were handling even more case-loads, where in 2014, 76,335 cases were being discussed at MARAC, which was a 17% increase in relation to the prior year (The Guardian, 2015). With more research undertaken and revealed by The Guardian (2015), it came to light that meetings being held were discussing on average 20 cases, where each were given a time slot of no longer than 10 minutes, often chaired by police, and victims being discussed were not invited to come along to the meetings regarding themselves. It was also revealed that a number of victims had no comprehension of the meetings being held at a conference, and that their personal circumstances were being discussed among them, often feeling misconstrued and confused in regards to MARAC, confusing them with their independent domestic violence advocates (The Guardian, 2015). It was also revealed that practitioners, who are supposed to attend MARAC were in fact deterred from attending, as it came to light that they would more than likely end up holding up and hinder the conference, viewing them as possibly wanting to advocate for the service user (The Guardian, 2015). It has also been found that there have been repercussions due to the high volume of case-loads, and the pressure of time limits, that unfortunately MARAC have become somewhat managerialist in their reaction and way of handling a personal crisis (The Guardian, 2015). From these negative findings, this would suggest that MARAC does not work as well as it did when it was initially created back in 2001, with its high volume of cases and limited time on each case, there seems to be nothing personal or human in regards to dealing with such matters. It is as though every individual, each service user is just that, a service user. They are not looking at these individuals as real human beings with genuine feelings, instead seen more as a number or an object, clearly not providing them enough information of what a MARAC consists of. It is also disheartening for it to have been revealed that most service users are confused between a MARAC and their IDVA, once again indicating that there is a major lack of communication among the staff and client. The idea behind a MARAC is one of good purpose and achieving good and positive outcomes, however with these revelations, it would seem that they are unable to quite handle the amount of cases they are currently handling, causing the service user to be the one who suffers the most (The Guardian, 2015).

While on the topic of services that are available to individuals who have been subjected to domestic abuse, it is also important to be aware of what policy and legislation is relevant and accessible for those who are working with victims of domestic abuse, and how it can support them in a variety of scenarios. Relevant to Wales, there is the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, which although is a fairly new Act, the purpose behind it is very important and should ensure to help attempt to prevent further domestic abuse from continuing. The motive behind the Act is to prevent gender based violence, sexual violence and domestic abuse from taking place, and to also protect victims of these specific crimes. This Act also aims to support victims who have been affected by any form of sexual violence, domestic abuse and gender based violence (Legislation, 2015). Evidently, this Act will be a massive support for women and girls who have previously or currently been victims of domestic abuse, as it is specifically aimed at supporting, preventing and protecting them from sexual violence, domestic abuse and gender based violence as it states. It is highly beneficial that this Act is there for those who need it in Wales, with it also stating that this Act encourages and enforces an improvement on arrangements that are made to protect women and girls from these crimes, and to positively enhance arrangements for prevention (Legislation, 2015).

It is important to highlight that a more recent draft bill has been passed, known as the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which was published in January 2019, and is considered to be one of the most effective forms of tackling domestic abuse, aimed directly at supporting the victims of domestic abuse and their families, and also pursuing the offenders (Gov, 2019). In order to take on and tackle this ongoing crime, this new piece of legislation aims to ensure that all individuals, including the victims, fully know what the meaning of what is considered as abuse with the initiation of the first ever statutory definition of domestic abuse, with the hopes of encouraging more victims to come forward (Gov, 2019). This Act also aims to provide a Domestic Abuse Commissioner, more policies including Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Domestic Abuse Protection Orders, in order to protect the victims and to restrict the actions of the offenders, also, to formally forbid cross-examination of the victims within the courts by their ex partners who abused them and to ensure all victims are entitled to special measures in courts to support the victims when giving evidence, rather than having to make the request (Gov, 2019). This Act aims to empower victims of domestic

abuse, and to encourage these women and girls to come forward to put an end to it, rather than continue living with it. It could be considered as a positive step in the right direction to eradicating domestic abuse within the United Kingdom, giving these women a form of self agency and support of this Act behind them to legally put an end to it.

Clearly, the topic of domestic abuse in relation to multi-agency is a controversial and complex one. There seems to be both positive and negative aspects to it, with the purpose behind projects like MARAC being positive, empowering for the victims and to decrease domestic abuse. With in the early years of its use, there are evidently positive outcomes with the majority of the statistics displaying a decline in domestic abuse, and a rise in women coming forward sooner with their complaints (Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse, 2019). However, this seems to be contradicted with the The Guardian (2015), stating that more recent research indicates that MARAC are inundated with case loads, not giving nearly enough time and thought into each case, merely viewing each individual as a number to get through, rather than a human being with individual emotions and may possess their own feelings and thoughts about the decisions being made in regards to themselves. With both aspects contradicting one another, it is unclear what is the best outcome in regards to multi-agency work when it comes to victims of domestic abuse. If more time and thought went into each victim and their individual specific needs and requirements, then projects like MARAC would be highly beneficial to victims of domestic abuse with the services they have to offer, and the many professionals they have at each conference with a different view and perspective, offering an alternative outcome which can sometimes be a good thing. To ensure the prevention of situations like that of Victoria Climbié do not reoccur, the many professionals, agencies and organisations involved in the protection and care of the victim need to be working together effectively, efficiently and taking the time to consider the feelings and views of the individual involved, to ensure that they have the best possible outcome for themselves. With Acts like the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 and the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill, there is hope that domestic abuse will be becoming less and less in the near future, with their aims to prevent domestic abuse from taking place, empowering women and young girls to speak up and ensuring that the appropriate support is given, the future is looking more prosperous in relation to eradicating domestic abuse.

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