

‘The Multi-Agency Model in Wales Promotes the Welfare of Children and Young People’: A Critical Discussion.

By Zoe Williams

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people in Wales increasingly depends on a genuinely collaborative, whole-system approach. The multi-agency model brings together a wide range of professionals—social workers, health practitioners, educators, police, youth justice teams and voluntary organisations—to respond to risks in a coordinated and holistic way. Over the past two decades, Wales has steadily strengthened this collaborative landscape through legislative reform, national policy development and the creation of operational structures such as Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH). These developments reflect a clear ambition: that no single agency should work in isolation, and that children receive timely, well-coordinated support shaped by shared responsibility rather than fragmented practice (Welsh Government, 2025). The National Multi-Agency Practice Framework reinforces this ambition by emphasising co-production, joint problem-solving and consistent engagement across services as essential ingredients for improved outcomes (Welsh Government, 2025).

Despite these strengths, the multi-agency model is not without its challenges. Persistent issues such as inconsistent thresholds between regions, difficulties with information-sharing systems, workforce instability and gaps in joint training continue to limit the model’s effectiveness (McManus and Boulton, 2020). This essay critically explores how multi-agency working promotes children’s welfare in Wales, drawing on legislation, policy, theoretical perspectives—including Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs—and practical examples such as the Bridgend MASH. While the model has undoubtedly enhanced safeguarding practice, further development is required to ensure that collaboration across agencies is consistently effective, evidence-informed and responsive to the complex realities of children’s lives.

The multi-agency approach involves professionals and organisations working together to meet the diverse needs of children and families. Welsh Government guidance describes multi-agency engagement as collaborative work across practitioners, organisations and sectors, drawing on shared expertise, joint decision-making and co-production to address complex needs (Welsh Government, 2025). The national Multi-Agency Practice Framework highlights the importance

of cooperation across local authorities, health, education, youth justice, police and voluntary services to deliver genuinely holistic support.

In practice, multi-agency working in Wales operates along a spectrum of integration. At its most basic level, constructive or coordinated working involves agencies operating separately but maintaining regular communication and information-sharing (Oliver and Charlesworth, 2016). A more collaborative stage is partnership or shared-process working, where agencies use common procedures to address shared concerns such as domestic abuse or child exploitation (Welsh Government, 2025). The most integrated form is the development of joint teams or services, where practitioners from multiple agencies work within a single structure, sharing assessments, interventions and resources. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) exemplify this highest level of integration, offering a unified space for rapid information-sharing and decision-making (Cwm Taf Morgannwg Safeguarding Board, n.d.).

Building on these varying levels of integration, the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding in Wales is further shaped by the legal and policy frameworks that guide professional practice. Multi-agency working does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it is anchored in a robust and continually evolving legislative landscape that sets out clear duties for collaboration and embeds a rights-based ethos across all child-focused services. The Children Act 2004 first established statutory responsibilities for agencies to cooperate in safeguarding children, laying the groundwork for more integrated approaches. This commitment is strengthened by the incorporation of the UNCRC (1989) into Welsh law, ensuring that children's rights are central to decision-making and service design. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 further advances this agenda by emphasising partnership working, early intervention and person-centred practice, requiring agencies to coordinate support in ways that promote well-being rather than simply respond to crises. Complementing these duties, the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2020) provide standardised guidance to promote consistency across regions, while the National Multi-Agency Practice Framework (2025) offers clearer operational expectations to support practitioners in delivering coherent, joined-up responses (Welsh Government, 2025). Although Wales has a strong legislative framework, there is still a noticeable gap between what policy promises and what happens in day-to-day practice. National frameworks can require agencies to work together, but they can't guarantee shared professional values, sufficient resources or consistent interpretations of risk. In reality, these policies can give the impression of a joined-up system while underlying structural problems continue to disrupt genuine collaboration.

Indeed, the evolution of safeguarding policy in Wales has been heavily influenced by findings from serious case reviews, where shortcomings in communication, coordination and professional curiosity have contributed to preventable harm. Reviews such as those led by Laming (2003) and Munro (2011) repeatedly highlight recurring issues: inadequate information sharing, unclear thresholds for intervention, fragmented assessments and a lack of shared accountability. Although Welsh Government reforms—particularly those following the 2014 Act—have strengthened expectations around collaboration, persistent challenges remain. Evidence from the Evaluation of Integrated Multi-Agency Operational Safeguarding Arrangements in Wales (2020) indicates that resource pressures, workforce instability, and the complexities of information-sharing legislation such as GDPR continue to hinder seamless practice. Regional inconsistencies in implementation further complicate efforts to deliver equitable safeguarding responses across Wales (McManus & Boulton, 2020). These ongoing challenges underscore the need for a stronger theoretical foundation to guide multi-agency practice, ensuring that collaboration is not only mandated by policy but also informed by coherent, evidence-based principles that support more consistent and holistic responses to safeguarding concerns.

Given these persistent challenges, turning to theoretical perspectives can help illuminate why multi-agency working is so essential and how it can be strengthened in practice. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) offers a particularly useful lens, highlighting that a child's development is shaped by multiple, interacting systems—from the immediate relationships within the microsystem to the broader social, cultural and political influences of the macrosystem. Multi-agency safeguarding aligns closely with this ecological view, recognising that no single service can fully address the complex interplay of factors affecting a child's well-being. Effective collaboration therefore requires coordinated contributions from education, healthcare, social care, policing and family support, each representing a different layer of the child's environment. The integrated processes within Wales' MASH hubs exemplify the mesosystem interactions Bronfenbrenner identifies as crucial, enabling professionals to share information rapidly and build a more coherent understanding of a child's circumstances (Bridgend C.B.C., 2026).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) further reinforces the rationale for multi-agency working by emphasising that children must have their basic physiological, safety and emotional needs met before they can progress towards higher-order development. Multi-agency safeguarding practice supports this holistic approach by combining joint risk assessment to ensure safety,

emotional and psychological support through services such as CAMHS, educational provision to promote stability and achievement, and family support services that foster belonging and resilience. Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight why coordinated, multi-agency intervention is not simply a policy requirement but a developmental necessity, offering a more comprehensive and child-centred response to safeguarding concerns.

Building on these theoretical foundations, which highlight the importance of holistic, needs-led and context-sensitive approaches to safeguarding, the practical benefits of multi-agency working in Wales become even more evident when examined in real-world settings. When agencies collaborate effectively, the impact on children and families extends far beyond immediate risk reduction. Welsh Government guidance emphasises that shared problem-solving, joint assessment and coordinated intervention not only enhance children's safety but also contribute to their emotional well-being, resilience and long-term developmental trajectories (Welsh Government, 2026). In practice, this means concerns are identified earlier, support is more precisely targeted and children experience greater continuity across the services involved in their lives. These improvements translate into better mental health outcomes, more stable school attendance, enhanced behaviour and emotional regulation, and stronger family engagement in support planning. Crucially, multi-agency working also enables practitioners to build a more comprehensive picture of a child's lived experience, ensuring that interventions are grounded in a fuller understanding of their needs and circumstances.

A central strength of multi-agency collaboration lies in its capacity to enhance information sharing and decision-making. The Bridgend Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) offers a clear illustration of this in practice. Within the hub, professionals from children's services, police, education, health, housing and the voluntary sector work in close proximity, enabling rapid access to information that would otherwise be siloed across separate systems. This integrated model supports more accurate joint assessments, earlier identification of risk and more timely protective interventions (Bridgend C.B.C., 2026). Regional safeguarding boards consistently report that such arrangements improve both the quality and efficiency of information sharing, reducing delays and supporting proportionate, well-informed responses to safeguarding concerns (Cwm Taf Morgannwg Safeguarding Board, n.d.). However, While MASHs improve information flow, they cannot compensate for wider system pressures such as high caseloads, inconsistent thresholds, or incompatible IT systems. Co-location may speed

up decision-making, but it does not automatically resolve professional disagreements or cultural differences between agencies (Foundations, 2025).

Beyond improving outcomes for children, multi-agency working also brings significant benefits for practitioners. By distributing responsibility across a network of professionals rather than placing it on individuals, collaboration reduces duplication, eases workload pressures and promotes clearer, more coordinated case management. This shared approach enhances professional confidence, supports reflective practice and contributes to more sustainable caseloads (Oliver and Pitt, 2013). Integrated environments such as MASH therefore not only strengthen safeguarding processes but also create more supportive and effective working conditions, reinforcing the value of collaborative practice across Wales.

Despite the clear benefits of multi-agency working, significant challenges continue to limit its effectiveness in Wales, particularly around information sharing. Evaluations of integrated safeguarding arrangements repeatedly highlight that, although progress has been made, barriers remain deeply embedded in everyday practice. Issues such as inconsistent interpretations of GDPR, limited digital compatibility between agency systems, the absence of a centralised national platform and uncertainty around information ownership all contribute to delays and fragmented responses (McManus and Boulton, 2020). When information-sharing falters, each agency ends up holding only fragments of the child's story, and no one sees the full picture. That's when risks slip through the gaps, cumulative harm goes unnoticed, protective action is delayed, and cases may be stepped down when they shouldn't be. Serious case reviews make it clear that these aren't minor administrative issues; they are patterns that have repeatedly contributed to avoidable harm. While MASH models help mitigate some of these issues by bringing professionals together physically or virtually, the wider national infrastructure still requires substantial technological modernisation to support real-time, secure and seamless information exchange (Oliver and Pitt, 2013). Without such improvements, the potential of multi-agency working cannot be fully realised.

Workforce instability presents another major challenge. Consistent staffing is essential for relationship-based practice, yet high turnover across social care, education and health services disrupts continuity and weakens the trust that underpins effective collaboration. Frequent staff changes can lead to gaps in communication, missed information and inconsistent application of thresholds, ultimately slowing response times and increasing the risk of harm (Munro, 2011).

This instability also places additional pressure on remaining staff, who must repeatedly rebuild professional relationships and re-establish shared understandings of risk.

Inconsistencies in thresholds and approaches across Wales further complicate multi-agency practice. Different regional safeguarding boards and local authorities may interpret risk levels differently, resulting in variable intervention thresholds and uneven safeguarding outcomes. Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026) stresses the need for clearer accountability structures, stronger expectations around data sharing and more robust multi-agency assessments to address these disparities. Without consistent national standards, supported by regular training, children may receive different levels of protection depending on where they live (Department for Education, 2026).

Finally, the availability and quality of joint training remains uneven across Wales. Effective multi-agency working relies on shared understanding of safeguarding responsibilities, consistent terminology and aligned communication methods. National procedures are designed to create consistency, but in reality collaboration still varies widely because local areas differ in their resources, leadership and digital systems. The result is an uneven safeguarding landscape, a postcode lottery that sits uneasily alongside the rights-based commitments at the heart of Welsh legislation. (Frost, 2017). Strengthening and standardising multi-agency training is therefore essential to improving the coherence and reliability of safeguarding practice nationwide.

In conclusion, the multi-agency model has become a central pillar of safeguarding practice in Wales, shaping how professionals work together to protect and support children. Grounded in a strong legislative and policy framework, including the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the National Multi-Agency Practice Framework, it encourages holistic assessment, timely intervention and a more coordinated response to children's needs. Practical structures such as the Bridgend MASH illustrate how this approach works on the ground, demonstrating clear improvements in information sharing, collaborative decision-making and the protection of vulnerable children.

Theoretical perspectives such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and Maslow's hierarchy of needs further reinforce the value of multi-agency working, highlighting how children's welfare is shaped by multiple systems and how their basic needs must be met before they can thrive. These frameworks help explain why no single agency can address the full complexity of children's lives in isolation. Bronfenbrenner's model highlights the importance of stable

relationships across systems, yet workforce turnover and inconsistent thresholds undermine this stability. Similarly, Maslow's emphasis on safety and belonging is challenged when children experience multiple social worker changes or delayed interventions due to inter-agency disagreements.

Although Wales has developed an ambitious policy framework to support multi-agency working, the effectiveness of these measures is uneven in practice. Legislative duties can mandate cooperation, but they cannot resolve deeper structural issues such as incompatible IT systems, workforce shortages or divergent professional cultures. As a result, collaboration often depends more on local leadership, resources and relationships than on national policy. When these conditions are weak, the system risks slipping back into isolated ways of working, with serious implications for children's safety. Serious case reviews repeatedly show that failures in communication and shared decision-making are not simply procedural gaps but factors that directly contribute to cumulative harm. This highlights a persistent implementation gap between policy aspiration and operational reality.

However, With a continued commitment to improvement, the multi-agency model has the potential to deliver consistently high-quality safeguarding practice and uphold the welfare, safety and rights of children and young people across Wales.

Reference List

Bridgend County Borough Council (2026), *Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)*. Available at: [Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub \(MASH\)](#) (Accessed 30th March 2026)

Bronfenbrenner. U, (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*. Harvard University Press.

Children Act (2004), Available at: [Children Act 2004](#) (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Cwm Taff Morgannwg Safeguarding Board (n.d.) *Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub*. Available at: [Safeguarding Board | Safeguarding, Cwm Taf Morgannwg](#) (Accessed 31st March 2026)

Foundations (2025), *How are multi-agency safeguarding services working to assess concerns of children's safety?* Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2025/jun/how-are-multi-agency-safeguarding-services-working-assess-concerns-childrens-safety> (Accessed 9th April 2026)

Frost. N, (2017) *Safeguarding and Multi-Agency Working*. London: Routledge.

Maslow. A, (1943), *A Theory of Human Motivation*, *Psychological Review*, 50 (4), PP. 370-396.

McManus, MA and Boulton, L (2020) *Evaluation of Integrated Multi-Agency Operational Safeguarding Arrangements in Wales*. Project Report. National Independent Safeguarding Board Wales. Available at: [LJMU Research Online](#) (Accessed 28th March 2026).

McManus. M and Boulton. L (2020), *Evaluation of Integrated Multi Agency Operational Safeguarding Arrangements in Wales*, Available at: [Evaluation of Integrated Multi-Agency Operational Safeguarding Arrangements in Wales](#) (Accessed 1st April 2026)

Munro. E, (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection*. London: Department of Education.

National multi-agency practice framework for children's services (2025), Available at: [National multi-agency practice framework for children's services \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#) (Accessed 1st April 2026)

Oliver, B. and Pitt, B., (2013). *Engaging communities and service users: Context, themes and methods*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Oliver. C and Charlesworth. J (2016) *Working Together in Safeguarding*. London Paigraive.

Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act (2014), Available at: [social-services-and-well-being-wales-act-2014-the-essentials.pdf](#) (Accessed 1st April 2026)

Social Care Wales. (2020). *Wales safeguarding procedures*. Available at: [https://www.safeguarding.wales/en/](#) (Accessed 3rd April 2026)

United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf](#) (Accessed: 3rd April 2026)

Welsh Government (2025) *National Multi-Agency Practice Framework for Children's Services*. Available at: [National multi-agency practice framework for children's services \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#) (Accessed 28th March 2026)