



multi-agency working

models, challenges and key factors for success

Mary Atkinson, Paul Doherty and Kay Kinder

National Foundation for Educational Research

ABSTRACT

This article relays the findings from a study of multi-agency working involving professionals from the Education, Social Services and Health sectors of local authorities, which are conveyed in two reports – *Multi-agency Working: An Audit of Activity*, published in February 2001, and *Multi-agency Working: A Detailed Study*, published in January 2002. This article focuses on models of multi-agency activity, together with the challenges and the key factors for their success.

KEYWORDS *education, health, interagency, joint working, social services*

introduction

As an integral part of the research, which was sponsored by the local Government Association, a literature review was undertaken and, within each section, some key findings from this are presented before moving on to discuss the main issues raised by the research. The data was drawn from a sample of 30 multi-agency initiatives which were chosen to reflect a range of target group focuses and different agency involvement, as well as different contexts, in other words, different sizes and types of LEA.

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different models of multi-agency activity

perspectives from the literature

Much of the available literature about multi-agency working describes it in the context of a single project or initiative where agencies come together to address a specific issue or concern – there has been very little in the way of debate about the broad models or types of multi-agency working. However, an Audit Commission report (Audit Commission, 1998) introduces several different types of partnership working – ranging from large-scale strategic partnerships, to small, local community partnerships. Within this range, four different models are described:

- Formation of a separate legal entity – where the agencies come together to form a new organization with an identity separate from that of any of the partners. The new organization employs its own staff and is particularly suited to large partnerships.
- Formation of a virtual organization – where a separate organization is formed, but without generating a new legal identity. One agency is responsible for employing the staff and managing resources for the new organization.
- Co-locating staff from partner organizations – where staff from partner organizations are co-located to work together, but are still employed by their own agency.
- Steering groups without dedicated resources – where partners come together as a steering group, but the group does not have its own resources and thus decisions are implemented through the individual partners' own agencies.

In contrast to the models identified by the Audit Commission, the NFER research identified five models – illustrated diagrammatically in figures 1–5 – of multi-agency activity based on their purpose:

table 1

Model	Purpose
<i>Decision-making groups</i>	to provide a forum whereby professionals from different agencies could meet to discuss issues and to make decisions
<i>Consultation and training</i>	for the professionals from one agency to enhance the expertise of those of another by providing consultation and/or training for them
<i>Centre-based delivery</i>	to gather a range of expertise together in one place in order to deliver a more coordinated and comprehensive service
<i>Coordinated delivery</i>	to draw together a number of agencies involved in the delivery of services so that a more coordinated and cohesive response to need could be adopted
<i>Operational-team delivery</i>	for professionals from different agencies to work together on a day-to-day basis and to form a cohesive multi-agency team that delivered services directly to clients.

figure 1 decision-making groups

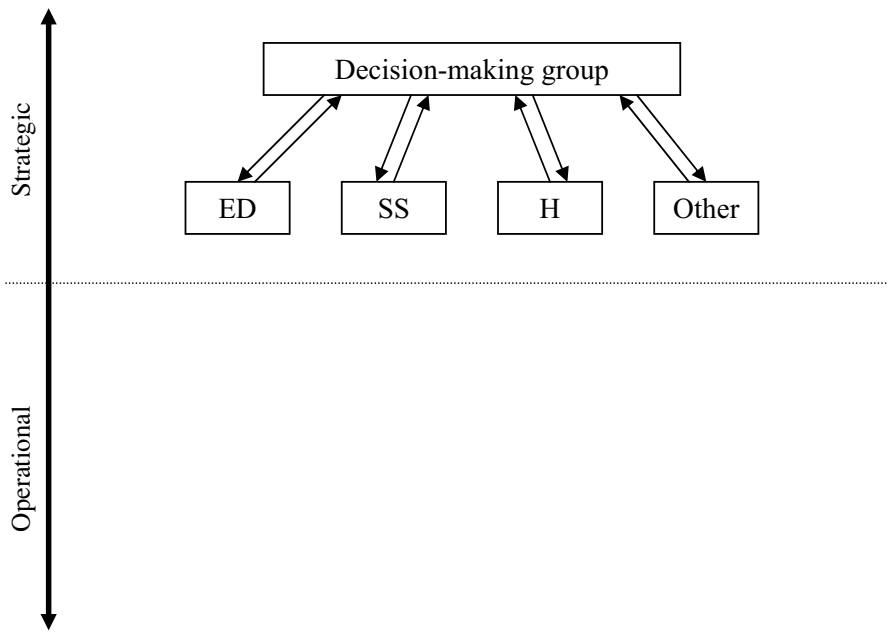


figure 2 consultation and training

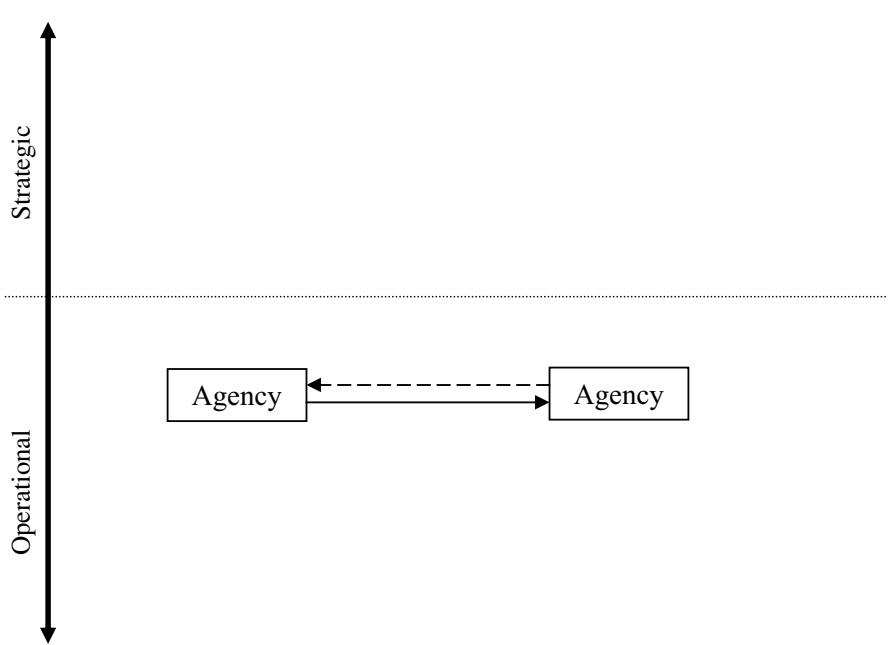


figure 3 centre-based delivery

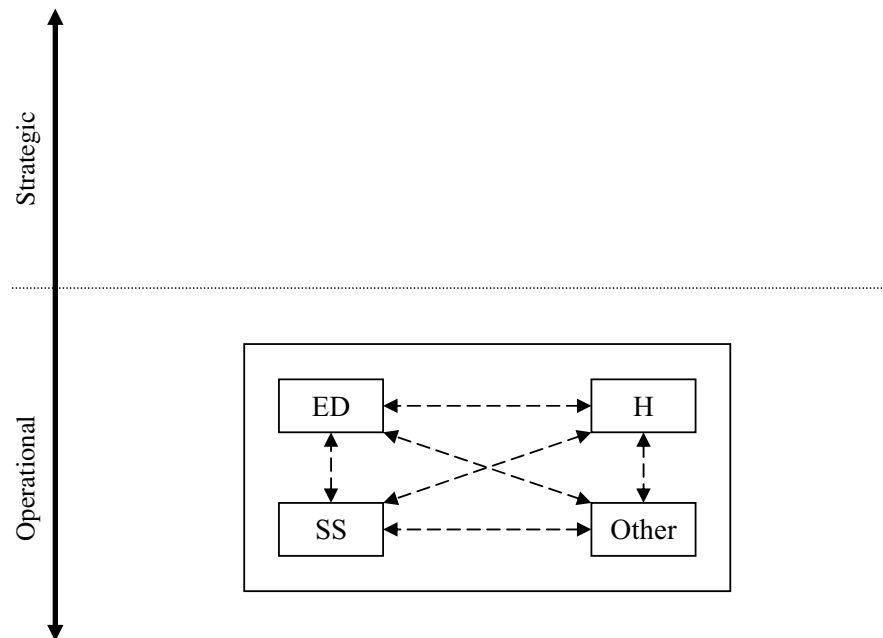


figure 4 coordinated delivery

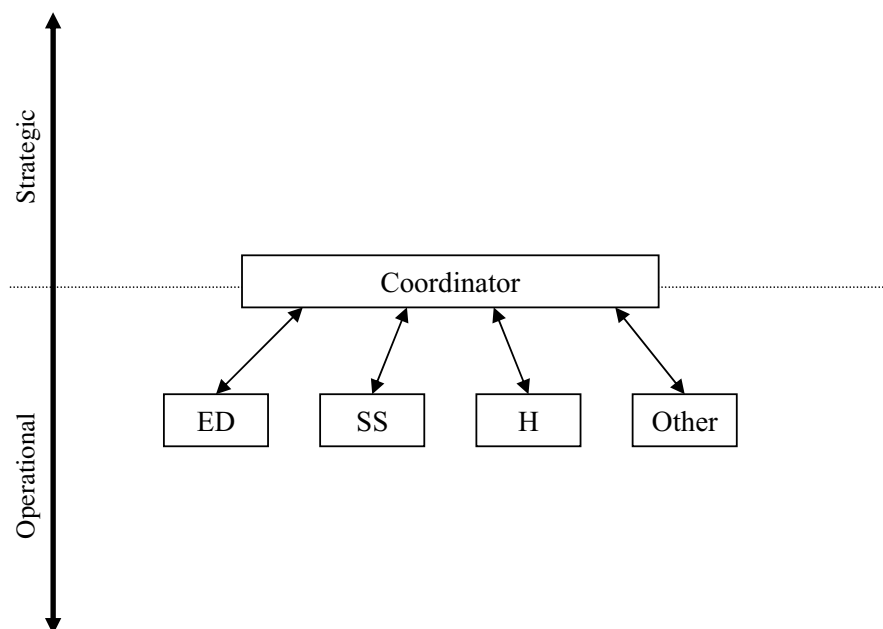
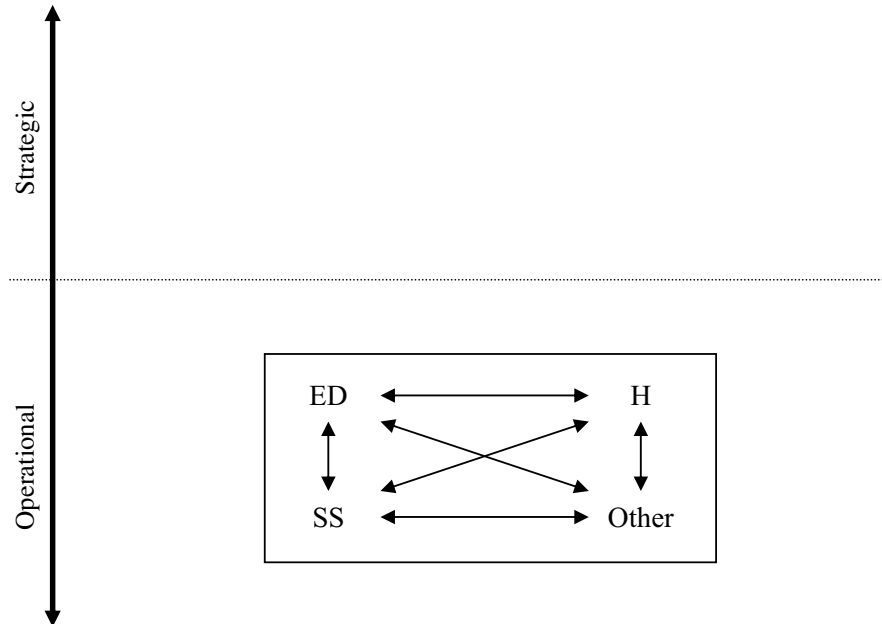


figure 5 operational-team delivery

Decision-making groups and coordinated delivery were the most frequent types of multi-agency activity encountered within the sample, whilst operational-team delivery was the least frequently encountered. Many initiatives were a conglomerate of these models, although classified according to the central model of service delivery.

challenges and key factors for success

perspectives from the literature

A wide range of factors impeding or facilitating multi-agency working was highlighted within the literature. Those commonly cited were agency differences: local authority structures and boundaries (e.g. Scriven, 1995); staffing arrangements and time investment (e.g. Normington and Kyriacou, 1994); individuals' and agencies' expectations and priorities (e.g. Easen, 1998); agencies' aims and objectives (e.g. Bloxham, 1996); budgets and finances (e.g. Capey, 1997); confidentiality and information sharing protocols (e.g. Maychell and Bradley, 1991) and the need for development of a common language, as well as joint training (e.g. Scriven, 1989).

challenges

The main challenges to multi-agency working identified by interviewees in the NFER study centred around eight key areas, which are discussed in rank order.

fiscal resources

Funding and resources emerged as the major challenge to multi-agency working, above all other issues. Within this broader challenge of funding, interviewees identified three main concerns: 1) conflicts within or between agencies; 2) a general lack of funding and 3) concerns about sustainability. The evidence suggests that a fiscal 'precariousness' was often associated with multi-agency working. At one level there was an acceptance that, under budgetary pressure, service providers often retrenched into a more minimalist role, at another level there was the perception that multi-agency working was a more effective use of resources, reducing repetition, or overlap.

roles and responsibilities

The second main challenge concerned the roles and responsibilities adopted by those individuals working within multi-agency initiatives. Issues around roles and responsibilities fell into three main areas: understanding the roles of others; conflicts over areas of responsibility; and the need to move beyond existing roles. Where, interestingly, there was a perceived need to move beyond existing roles to work in new ways this 'blurring the edges' was not without difficulty. For example, participants reported that it required a degree of reflection, or even a capacity for self-criticism on the part of individuals and, at the same time, questioned their sense of identity, gained through following existing practice or procedure.

competing priorities

Competing individual and agency priorities were also frequently cited as a challenge to multi-agency working. When asked about the existence of any conflict between the aims of their agency and the aims of the project, in the vast majority of cases, interviewees felt that agency and project aims were closely aligned. However, even so, most went on to describe 'different priorities' or 'tensions', for example, differences in the target group, different government targets and a focus on preventative work versus crisis intervention.

non-fiscal resources

Non-fiscal resources were implicated in sustaining as well as developing multi-agency initiatives. The 'right' staff had to be available and come together in order to work out any different perspectives on the same issue. Challenges concerning the allocation of time, the provision of staff and the physical space in which to work together effectively were highlighted.

communication

Poor communication within and between agencies was also cited as a major challenge to successful multi-agency working. Frequently, concerns were raised about the day-to-day communication between those involved. Within agencies there were reported to be problems between those working at different levels, in other words, strategic and operational level, whereas between agencies concern was expressed about communication being hampered by the different availability of service professionals. In addition, there was a perception that successful multi-agency working was being undermined by poor communication between government departments.

professional and agency cultures

Another challenge that was identified as having the potential to affect practice was the 'agency culture' within which practice took place. There was a perception that multi-agency working disrupted, or intruded on, existing agency cultures, in other words, values and protocols. Specific policy and procedural differences, such as different personnel and referral systems, were also reported to create challenges for those working in a multi-agency environment, whilst different data management systems had implications for sharing information.

management

One of the challenges raised by multi-agency working is how any single initiative is managed at strategic level. There was evidence that multi-agency initiatives had to be seen as strongly supported and promoted at strategic level in order to remain credible at operational level, yet that this strategic drive had in itself to be very carefully managed in order to carry along all the various participants. One of the challenges was to engage like-minded individuals at strategic level – 'creative entrepreneurs', who sought new ways of working in order to meet shared goals and who worked within, beneath and across existing management structures in order to achieve change.

training opportunities

Because multi-agency working could involve new ways of working, it posed challenges to those involved. There was therefore a perception among some participants that they required additional multi-agency training in order to meet the demands of any new or extended role, as well as training to enhance their knowledge and understanding of other agencies and the way they operated. Linked to this was a concern that those working within a multi-agency team missed opportunities for professional single-agency development delivered at 'base'.

key factors for success

The key factors identified by the NFER research centred around seven main areas, which are discussed in rank order.

commitment or willingness to be involved

The most commonly reported issue relating to commitment was that commitment at strategic level was crucial. Some interviewees considered that multi-agency working could not be sustained by commitment at strategic or operational level alone and that a 'bottom up' as well as a 'top down' approach was essential. When asked about what commitment meant, the need for participants to have a belief in multi-agency working and an active desire to engage with other agencies were identified.

understanding roles and responsibilities

When asked in more detail about understanding others' roles and responsibilities, for many interviewees, this was about all those involved having a clear understanding of what was expected of them. Also raised was the need to understand the constraints on other agencies so that expectations were realistic. Without clear roles and responsibilities it was considered easy for agencies to work on different agendas, to assume that a piece of work was somebody else's responsibility or for misunderstandings to develop. Interviewees also referred to having mutual respect for the professional roles of other agencies and to valuing each other's contribution. The research found that 'hybrid' professionals, in other words, those who had worked in a number of different agencies, were often key to empathizing with those from other agencies and understanding their priorities.

common aims and objectives

When probed in more depth about the need for common aims, some interviewees stated that there needed to be 'a unifying factor' or 'some common ground'. Others went further and described the need for 'like minded' people to get together or for there to be 'a coming together of minds'. Yet others stressed the need for shared goals to be ones which all those involved believed in. The importance of there being 'a real purpose' to joint working was noted, as was the need to be clear about what a multi-agency project was trying to achieve. Discourse indicated that setting priorities was not a simple case of clarity or prescription, but a complex negotiation of role and the creation of a context where 'what works' replaced any individual or agency-specific agenda, thereby requiring those individuals involved to assess the basis of their priorities. The common theme across initiatives, regardless of type, was a needs-led approach to service delivery.

communication and information sharing

The key factors concerning communication and information sharing centred around providing opportunities for dialogue or keeping lines of communication between agencies open. This in turn required communication skills, including listening skills; the capacity for negotiation and compromise; as well as the building of personal relationships and information dissemination. Procedures and systems of communication also needed to be in place.

leadership or drive

Many interviewees stressed the importance of clear direction at strategic level. They talked about having people who were 'dynamic', 'on the ball', who were able to motivate and encourage others, and having someone with 'authority' who is able to empower others to 'make it happen'. Two broad aspects of leadership were identified: leadership as a strategic drive and tenacity that could surmount any obstacles to progress; and leadership as a strategic vision that could bring together the team required in order to effect change, with effective leadership being considered to be a combination of the two.

involving the relevant personnel

The sixth most commonly identified key factor was the need to involve the relevant personnel from different agencies. In particular, involvement of those at the right level of responsibility was mentioned, that is having people

who could make the required decisions or activate the right services or mechanisms within their own agency. Involvement of the right people, however, was also felt to depend on the availability of resources and the priority given to the work by individual agencies.

sharing and access to funding and resources

Sharing funding and resources was the most common strategy identified for overcoming challenges. It was felt that resource issues were (or could be) overcome by adopting three broad strategies. Firstly, pooled budgets, where one or more agency met some or all of the costs associated with personnel from other agencies (or voluntary bodies), or provided 'in kind' resources. Secondly, joint funding, where resources were provided by all those involved in an initiative, often on an equal, or like-for-like basis. Thirdly, the identification and use of alternative or additional sources of income to pump-prime or enhance multi-agency services.

conclusion

The NFER study of multi-agency activity highlighted once again the complexity and also potential of 'joining up' services. New models of joint working, rarely evident in the literature, were identified and issues relating to the inhibiting and facilitating factors were extended beyond previous discussion. It revealed the investment in terms of finance, time and staff resources that is needed to develop new ways of working and interagency collaboration. Indeed, the attitudinal shift required in successful initiatives emerged as an important finding. The kinds of challenges and key factors inherent in all joint service activity have been clearly laid out and should provide a useful checklist to reassure professionals (at both policy and practitioner level) that multi-agency working is not easy nor easily achieved.

Equally, the study revealed a new and 'hybrid' professional who has personal experience and knowledge of other agencies, including, importantly, these services' cultures, structures, discourse and priorities. This understanding would seem to be a vital sine qua non for successful interagency collaboration. It may be that such familiarity needs to be offered to many others during initial training and in their continuing professional development.

Finally, the models of multi-agency working offered at the start of the article suggest the enormous variation in initiatives and practice that are operating under the name 'multi-agency'. It suggests there might be value in further refining how these are described in order to ensure a better understanding of multi-agency processes and how these relate to successful outcomes.

note

Multi-agency Working: An Audit of Activity (2002) by Mary Atkinson, Anne Wilkin, Alison Stott and Kay Kinder, is available, priced £10.00 from the Publications Unit, The Library, The National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ. Telephone 01753 637002. *Multi-agency Working: A Detailed Study* (2002) by Mary Atkinson, Anne Wilkin, Alison Stott, Paul Doherty and Kay Kinder, is also available, priced £19.50, from the same address.

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correspondence

The National Foundation for Educational Research (Northern Office), Genesis 4, York Science Park, University Road, Heslington, York YO10 5DG, UK.
[email: m.atkinson@nfer.ac.uk]