

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.

Multi-agency working can have multiple concepts, for example, if you type in 'Team Around The' into any internet search engine, the list of examples around areas of the UK is long. We have teams around the child, the family, more recently teams around the tenancy, all with one key principle word – Team. A team in this context refers to professionals from various sectors, education, social care, housing for example, coming together to achieve best outcomes for a vulnerable individual. This essay will define this multi-agency working within the safeguarding of children and young people landscape and critically evaluate some of the many challenges of the approach. It will reflect on a case study of fatal neglect to highlight these challenges, briefly discuss the theory of neglect and will offer a solution to the organisational bias that can impede on positive outcomes. It will take a look at the confusion surrounding data protection and when it is appropriate to share information about others and it will also use examples of practice from around the UK to show how, when working effectively, agencies working together can achieve good results. Lastly it will look at a positive aspect that multi-agency working can create for families and their children when dealing with social services. The essay will conclude with a brief look at the future of multi-agency working within the UK and suggest an area for future research.

In defining multi-agency working within the safeguarding sector, Walker (2008, p. 13) states, worker's from at least two organisations need to come together in order to combine their efforts and resources to respond to a child, or children, in need. This has been differentiated from multidisciplinary in that professionals come together from different services as opposed to one service with different specialities. Glendinning (2002, p.3) add that this partnership requires trust, equality and reciprocity for it to be effective. The sharing of information is vital within the practice of safeguarding children and, a specific area where information sharing is crucial within the prevention of abuse or significant harm. In Wales, safeguarding, understood as the protection of children, is reinforced in two key messages, the first, that the child and their best interests remain at the core of any support given and second, that all practitioners must not only work individually but collaboratively in their endeavour for positive outcomes, Welsh Government (2016). This approach is a statutory requirement, and in accordance with the

Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) regional safeguarding boards such as the mid and west Wales partnership, have a responsibility to undertake multi-agency child protection reviews in situations where a major incident has taken place and where abuse or neglect of a child is known or suspected, Cysur (2019).

In 2003 Lord Laming's report into the death of five-year-old Victoria Climbié, services were heavily criticized for their lack of information sharing. The Department for Education and Skills (2003) responded to this with '*Every Child Matters*'. This green paper proposed measures to transform care and improve information sharing. It was this document that introduced the concept of a lead professional, a named practitioner to take responsibility for coordinating and delivering appropriate services. In 2004 the aim of the newly published '*National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*' was to implement support that met the needs of parents, children and their families. A high-quality care provided, starting in pregnancy, through childhood and continuing into adulthood. Since that time, successive governments have strived to improve the system of partnership working and coordinate interdisciplinary teams across voluntary, public and private sector charities, agencies and services by introducing new legislation. Therefore, the multi-agency approach is currently a key component at the heart of education, health and social policy practice. What previously presented as a one problem-one agency approach is now approached with a more holistic philosophy designed to combine services together in order to collectively meet the needs of families as a whole, and provide multiple opportunities within that framework to allow members tailored support to meet their needs both individually and collaboratively. Gasper (2010, p. 2). This is beneficial in that support is personalised, however can also raise significant problems if combined services are not managed correctly or where cases slip through the net of services and end in tragedy.

To put this into perspective, in March 2015, Child B, died in hospital of severe neglect. Post-mortem findings indicated malnutrition, long term headlice infestation, long term diazepam toxicology results, dental cavities, vitamin/mineral shortage and both healed and fresh scabs over her upper body. She had older siblings and the head of their schools had reported concerns to social services numerous times regarding inappropriate seasonal clothing, personal hygiene and head lice. Child B died one month before her next planned review, four weeks before the universal pathway child health programme in Scotland recommends children are assessed. The Significant Case Review concluded signs of neglect were evident in all three children, that the family were clearly vulnerable but that the vulnerability was underestimated, that assessments

of siblings had not been adequately linked between services and that despite a large number of professionals involved with the family, information sharing and communication was unsatisfactory

Within the *'Every Child Matters'* (2003), green paper, consultation questions were asked, inviting views on its proposals. One question being 'how can we encourage clusters of schools to work together?'. Newport City Council (NCC) responded by developing a 'Team around the Cluster' approach within their county. This was an example of a multi-agency panel model, as described by Lancashire County Council (no date), combining universal services such as education and health boards, social care with children and young people's families and their schools. This would be a collaboration unique to each individual case. This approach encourages practitioners from each organisation to come together for one common goal and despite remaining accountable to and employed by their own home agency, a dedicated manager is available to facilitate co-working. A major feature of this approach was to group a secondary school together with its geographically assigned feeder primary schools and share information between them. This benefitted children and stimulated a whole family vision considering siblings within different educational settings. One of the findings here was that on raising concerns about a primary aged child at a panel meeting, the overarching secondary school could confirm that there were also concerns around the older sibling in their care. Using the previous example of Child B, it could be argued that the 'team around the cluster' model could have made a dramatic difference to the outcome, possibly saving Child B's life, had the reports from her older siblings schools been highlighted and connected to Child B as the younger sibling. This could have allowed for an early intervention to be planned, possibly preventing the family reaching crisis point and being in critical need of support. On referral, this family would have been assigned a lead practitioner with whom to contact and who would coordinate with the different organisations to determine and provide support. Panel would then meet to ensure integration and communication, therefore enhancing the support offered and reducing the duplication of services, the need for information gathering and lack of accountability for problems arising. Lancashire City Council (no date).

A disadvantage to this approach is its managers bias. Depending on which agency the individual is employed by will determine the budgets, policies and priorities. For example, a lead practitioner under the umbrella of the education authority may lean heavily towards attendance improvement for example, whereas a mental health practitioner may believe intervention is required before a child can attend education. This can lead to conflict within a

panel, a hierarchy that exists not only to hit the targets of the agency but a preciousness that their offered support is more important or required first. The NSPCC/SCIE (2016) suggest that this can be intimidating for other practitioners and that not all chairs effectively manage an equal contribution from all attending agencies. Within Child B's life, no less than seven services intervened, ranging from the family general practitioner to the Glasgow child protection committee. None of these practitioners appeared to have shared information about the family effectively. A suggested way to negate this would be to promote personal relationships, team building and training. Anning, Cottrell, Frost, Green and Robinson (2010) discuss regular team meetings, collectively reflecting on practice and a casual culture of chatting over coffee. Another solution could be to remove the organisational bias heading a multi-agency panel team, could be to feature an advocate as lead practitioner. Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) (2019a), have produced an '*Early Help Assessment*' (EHA) in relation to the English Government programme, 'Troubled Families'. 'Using the team around the family approach, the EHA model utilises a holistic calculation of both a child's needs, sibling needs, and the parent/carer needs to create an overall view of the whole family. This promotes a multi-agency provision, coordinating the requirements of all the individuals involved. The framework considers three main points, one whole family assessment, one whole family plan of action and one whole family lead professional. What is notable in this arrangement is the lack of a clarity on who a lead practitioner should be and from which agency. Oxfordshire County Council (2019b) argue that the only stipulations for the position are experience and confidence. The person should be informed by the 'wishes of the child and their family', be a person who can organise and maintain coordination of support and who can advocate on behalf of the family. OCC go on by clarifying that the lead professional need not be responsible solely for the whole family, need not be held accountable for the actions of other professionals in the team or need not have any particular qualifications. Placing an advocate with solely the physical and mental wellbeing of a child and its family in this position would serve to remove any institutional regard. It could remove any disagreement on what is in the best interest of the individuals from an organisational stance as an independent advocate only bias would be to their family.

An issue that places much confusion around information sharing within multi-agency working is confidentiality and the protection of an individual's personal information. One example in an article by Yvette Stanley of Ofsted (2018) tells of a teacher at a comprehensive school afraid to tell anyone one of the abuses a child was suffering at home without the consent of a parent.

Where organisations and agencies work together to share information it is of equal importance that the information is private and protected. '*The Data Protection Act (1998) General Data Protection Regulation*' does not forbid sharing or even collecting such information, but clearly define the weighing up of danger and legal obligation to report criminal activity. It advises that where possible, consent to share information should be sought, however, there are circumstances where a person or child well-being would be further threatened in doing so and in the context of safeguarding a child or young person practitioners should always regard information sharing decisions to be clear and accountable. *Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers* (2018) states that special category personal data, can be legally shared if it is in order to keep someone from emotional or physical risk. The guidance goes on to recommend that in all instances, records should be kept of all decisions made and the supporting reasons. These records should be accurate, dated and stored securely as to not disclose the owner of the information but to be reflected upon in future if necessary. Organisations will have their own policies and procedures on how this data is retained and reviewed.

Considering now a positive aspect of multi-agency working, Moran (2007) recorded a reduced stigma for families with involvement in social services and in receipt of support as a direct result of professionals working in a multi -agency fashion. Problems of labelling can often be identified when a person has intervention with support organisations, and an individual or family already feeling ashamed, or humiliated due to their contact with social services can identify as being socially rejected, feel discriminated against and labelled. Spiker (2011). The British Association of Social workers (2019) recognise that we live largely in a society that values consumption and wealth, that there is a pressure to stigmatise the less fortunate and our media systems reinforce negative judgments. The Race Equality Foundation (2015) report that internalising these feelings of discrimination forces an individual to conceal their circumstances and forfeit the chance of assistance. However, working together with third sector organisations, charities, private agencies in a setting outside of the normal social services climate can significantly reduce the anxiety and embarrassment of being seen needing help. Meeting in a school setting for example can alleviate some of the shame felt by those needing help. This multi-agency approach can be seen as providing a less intimidating environment and can create a shift in families perceptions of practitioners, therefore encouraging better engagement without families feeling threatened. Moran (2007).

Moving forward, it would appear that multi-agency practice can work well, and is a marked improvement from the agonising consequences of agencies working in silo, Gasper (2010, p.114) but the overwhelming feeling when picked apart is that a one size fits all model will not work for those involved. Many models similar to Newport's school cluster team have been developed and work well, however, what may work for one family within the local authority may not be of benefit to others in the same location, Ofsted, Schooling (2017). The English Government are already contemplating an overhaul of children's services. The '*Putting Children First*' (2016) paper declares that local authority safeguarding teams are 'not delivering consistently excellent practice'. It states that less than half of the teams responsible for multi-agency practice do so in a way which is 'good'. According to the Centre for Public Scrutiny (2017) alternative delivery models are being explored and creative ways to deliver services are being sought which will re-introduce a positive working structure, meaning future delivery may be procured by not for profit organisations or companies and outsourced from local authorities. The Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing (2017) argue however, that barriers only exist where the sharing practice has been diluted, confused and misunderstood and that the need for legislative approaches and a consistent language would improve information sharing policy. In comparing Scotland and Wales in terms of child abuse it can be seen that both countries have similar neglect statistics. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children NSPCC (2019) reported 1,170 cases in the period 2014-2018, compared to 1015 in Scotland in the same time scale, though this jumps to 1660 if you add the undefined 'non-engaging' family element to the total. With many recent changes to legislation in Wales, it is hoped that these figure in Wales will be significantly reduced. These changes have and the introduction of the '*Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014)*' have strengthened the powers for safeguarding children by delivering a framework for practice in Wales and highlighting a need for 'more control' and a 'stronger voice' within an individual's care alongside an endeavour to deliver a preventative approach with early intervention rather than relying on crisis management. More locally, Carmarthenshire County Councils (CCC) Children Services were inspected in 2016 by the Care Inspectorate Wales. One of the key focus points of the inspection was the use of multi-agency working within the delivery of services. The findings were gathered via case files, staff interviews and conversations with families, including children and young people. The report found that despite training on multi-agency working, the necessary protocols had not been updated since 2008. The policies made no arrangements for addressing cases of child sexual exploitation (CSE) or female genital mutilation (FGM) and 'rapid' intervention was required to bring this up to date. It would

therefore appear that CCC ticked the box in regard to training it's staff, however neglected to update policies which would suggest that it does not recognise the importance of multi-agency practice within the safeguarding of children arena. CCC Children's Service are not due another inspection any time soon, and therefore, there is no evidence to support or suggest that rapid action was taken, however, the inspectorate does state that the council was going through considerable changes at the time due to the implementation of the new social services act.

In summary, it would appear that the future of multi-agency working in the UK is uncertain. There is a consistent mood when the practice is scrutinised that leaves mostly inadequately trained staff, inconsistent and confusing models of working together with poorly financed, under resourced and mis managed teams unable to, with the best of their ability, realise where it went wrong. Little evidence of either success or failure can be found on the placement of an independent advocate as lead practitioner within multi-agency teams, however, this may change in the future as more trained advocates descend on the multi-agency safeguarding arena. It gives little reassurance to read within the conclusion of a case review that communication and information sharing is still the most probable cause of a child in need not being protected adequately by multi agency panels. Child B's case of severe neglect was flagged, Child B's death was preventable. What does appear to be heavily evidenced is the need for multi-agency practice to be transformed with guidance possibly becoming legislative, rather than statutory.

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