

# Enablers and barriers to joint working

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Briefing

## Key messages

- The combination of the complexity of children's and families' lives and the current organisation of services creates a demand for effective inter-agency working.
- Inter-agency working is complex, not easily achieved and takes time to establish.
- Strengthening working relationships is critical to effective inter-agency working. Issues to address include: establishing clear role demarcation, fostering commitment to inter-agency at all levels within organisations, promoting trust and respect between professionals, and raising awareness of the context, culture and remit of other agencies.
- Establishing effective and efficient inter-agency processes can influence success – clarity of purpose, communication, planning and organisational arrangements are key issues to address.
- Adequate resourcing, in terms of funding, staffing and time, is fundamental to the success of inter-agency working.
- Leadership and drive at strategic and operational management levels enhances inter-agency working.
- Inter-professional training can support the development of effective inter-agency practice.

## Introduction

In Scotland, the new, national approach Getting It Right for Every Child aims to improve outcomes for all children and young people by providing a framework for all services and agencies working with children and families to deliver a coordinated approach which is appropriate, proportionate and timely<sup>1</sup>. Delivering such a coordinated approach will require effective inter-agency working. Existing research and evaluation studies highlight that inter-agency working is complex, that it is not easily achieved and it takes time to establish<sup>2,3</sup>. It requires change at the level of individual practice, within agencies and at the inter-agency organisational level<sup>3,4</sup>. This briefing explores findings from research to identify strategies that can support the successful delivery of co-ordinated inter-agency services<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>.

The research literature draws attention to the plethora of terms that are used in studies and reviews, and the lack of clarity or consistency in their usage<sup>2,6</sup>. Analyses have attempted to distinguish between different types of interagency work, and it is argued that using a continuum framework may be useful for guiding the development of inter-agency working from decision-making to the integration of services<sup>5</sup>. Critical discussions of terminology, definitions and models of "multi-agency" working can be read elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. In this briefing, for the sake of brevity, "inter-agency" is used and intended to refer to where more than one agency or service works together in a planned and formal way. "Agency" is used to describe the range of organisations, services and professional groups who support children and their families, including, for example, social services, schools and health services. Inter-agency working can be at a strategic or operational level. At an operational level, it can be concurrent or sequential. It is important to bear in mind that agencies are likely to include different professionals from different disciplines, with different backgrounds and training.

## Why is this issue important?

At times in their childhood and adolescence, children and young people may experience needs that require to be brought to the attention of more than one service. Some children and young people may require additional help or support as a result of the effects of disability, impairment or illness, or as a result of their familial experiences or living circumstances. Indeed, research into and reviews of services have consistently stated that *more effective* inter-agency working is required to adequately and appropriately meet the needs of children and their families in a range of situations<sup>e.g.7,8,9,10,11,12</sup>. Lack of coordination of services, or communication between them, has also been identified as a factor that has endangered children's lives as children have "fallen through the net"<sup>13,14</sup>. Promoting effective inter-agency working is, therefore, an integral part of government strategies and guidance focused on improving the lives of children and families<sup>15,16,17,18,19</sup>. Introducing a duty to work together is also a key manifesto commitment of the current Scottish Government<sup>20</sup>.

## What does the research tell us?

The scope and focus of existing evidence is mixed. Attention is drawn to the level of "uncritical consensus" that exists within the literature with an apparently broad consensus that "inter-agency working is good in and of itself"<sup>6-piii,21</sup>. Limitations with existing research are identified as relating to the multiplicity and confusion surrounding the terminology used<sup>2,5,6</sup>, the lack of evaluation of relative merits and weaknesses of particular tools, structures and strategies in responding to specific circumstances, groups or issues<sup>6</sup>, and a lack of empirical evidence on its impact on the lives of service users<sup>2,4,6,21</sup> or on its cost effectiveness<sup>4,6</sup>. Research is strongest on its exploration and explanation of factors that enable and inhibit inter-agency working, and, consequently, what to address to develop or sustain effective inter-agency working arrangements<sup>2,4,6</sup>. One review classifies these as relating to: working relationships, inter-agency processes, resourcing, and management and governance<sup>2</sup>, which holds with the findings of other reviews<sup>4,5,6,21</sup> and individual studies<sup>e.g. 3,22</sup>.

## Strengthen inter-agency working relationships

Issues relating to working relationships are identified as central to effective inter-agency working, including role demarcation, commitment, trust, respect, and knowledge of other agencies<sup>2,4,21</sup>. A willingness to work together is critical, as is a commitment to inter-agency working by staff at all levels<sup>3,4,21</sup>; conversely, a lack of commitment acts as a barrier<sup>e.g.4</sup>. Clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities and a shared understanding and acknowledgement of how each role differs and what it contributes is important<sup>e.g.21,23</sup>. Role ambiguity and blurring of professional boundaries can act as a barrier<sup>24</sup>. The development of trust, mutual respect and positive regard for professionals in other agencies is also emphasised. Stereotypical thinking and failure to recognise the contribution made by other agencies inhibits inter-agency working<sup>2</sup>. Paying attention to and addressing issues of power, status and hierarchy is critical<sup>25</sup>. Understanding agency roles and contexts and the operation of different beliefs systems (e.g. professional values and theoretical frameworks) was also identified as important.<sup>e.g. 26</sup>

## Establish and review inter-agency processes

Inter-agency processes emerge as a key factor influencing how successful inter-agency working is. Inclusive planning, consulting with service users and member agencies on issues, needs and priorities was identified as important for the implementation of inter-agency work— for example, "extensive consultation will lead to bottom-up development and result in widespread commitment"<sup>27</sup>. Establishing clear and realistic aims and objectives that are understood and accepted by all agencies, developing a shared vision and having appropriate targets were found to be facilitative by providing clarity of purpose<sup>3,4</sup>. As we would expect, communication was highlighted as central. The absence of clear channels of communication or the lack of quality in inter-agency communication was found to threaten the success of inter-agency working<sup>4,26</sup>. Conversely, transparent structures for communication, maintaining constant communication throughout the life of a inter-agency group and technical platforms (i.e. adequate IT systems) for communication were identified as facilitative<sup>e.g.3</sup>. Organisational arrangements, such as systems, protocols and procedures, were identified as promoting an ethos of joint working and helpful for defining or explaining structures or models for inter agency work<sup>2,4</sup>. Continual reassessment and streamlining of pragmatic strategies regarding forms, procedures, and other processes was found to be helpful<sup>2</sup>.

### Provide adequate resources for inter-agency work

Adequate resourcing, in terms of funding, staffing and time, was found to be central to the success of inter-agency working. Financial certainty and equity was important, as were explicit agreements about how partnerships will pool or share resources<sup>2,4</sup>. Inadequate or time limited funding was identified as problematic. A rapid turnover of staff, recruitment difficulties and insufficient time allocated for interagency activity was also reported as potential threats to its success. Having phases dedicated to initial stages and start up of inter-agency groups and taking an incremental approach to joint working was found to be facilitate of effective working partnerships<sup>2,3,4</sup>.

### Ensure strong leadership in management and governance

In terms of management and governance, leadership was identified as the key aspect influencing inter-agency work. Leadership and drive at a strategic level, including vision and tenacity, enhanced inter-agency working. Clear managerial presence and support, and a specific leader or coordinator was also seen to be instrumental<sup>2,4,21</sup>. The absence of clear leadership, and a lack of support and commitment from upper management was found to be damaging to inter-agency

work<sup>2,4</sup>. Clear lines of accountability and a framework for governance was also highlighted as important<sup>eg.21</sup>. Performance management, monitoring and evaluation was identified as a facilitator for inter-agency work – “being able to demonstrate that a partnership is making a difference by designing and implementing evaluation frameworks to measure the impact of partnership activity was found to be important”<sup>3,21</sup>.

### Draw on existing good practice to foster effective inter-agency work

Overall, three aspects of good practice emerged throughout the literature as particularly important in that they were each identified as key to addressing a number of factors critical to the success of inter-agency practice<sup>2,3,4</sup>. These areas of good practice related to:

- Providing sufficient time for the development of inter-agency working
- The provision of joint training
- The agreement of joint aims and objectives

## Further resources

Effective inter-agency working is at the core of the national programme Getting it right for every child. Its framework, core components, and practice tools offer mechanisms to promote more effective inter-agency working. (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/childrenservices/girfec>)

Different local areas are at different stages in introducing and embedding the programme. Some have developed and are sharing resources and tools that can help with strengthening inter-agency working, such as:

Getting it right in Lanarkshire

(<http://www.girfecinlanarkshire.co.uk/>)

and For Highland’s children

(<http://www.forhighlandschildren.org/index.htm>)

The Scottish Government, drawing on the findings of the evaluation of the Highland pathfinder, have published a range of themed briefings to support implementation: (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/childrenservices/girfec/publications/EvaluationBriefings>)

The Getting it Right for Every Child community of practice is a community platform supporting professional social networks across the public sector. It provides a secure environment for knowledge development and sharing through online communities of practice (<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/landing-home.do?id=9312827>)

The Multi-Agency Resource Service “MARS-talk” is an online community and provides a secure environment for sharing of information relating to child protection policy and practice development in Scotland.

(<http://www.marstalk.org.uk/>)

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