Identify barriers and opportunities essay sample

Sociology, Communication

This report focuses some of the current literature addressing multi-agency working including issues relating to collaborative and multi-agency working primarily between Education, Social Services and Health. The rationale for multi-agency work, different types and models of multi-agency working and the factors which may impede or facilitate its effectiveness are considered There has been volume of literature written on multi-agency collaboration and each studies have tried to present different opinion including the advantages and drawbacks in working in multi-agency fashion. It is a common knowledge that the case for treating social problems in a holistic fashion is overwhelming. People know, in a simple everyday fashion, that crime, poverty, low achievement at school, bad housing and so on are connected. Therefore, multi-agency collaboration is essential to correct some social problems that seems difficult for one social arm of the social agency to cure. Working in collaboration is essential if individuals are to be offered the range of support they require in a timely manner.

Multi-agency working is about providing a seamless response to individuals with multiple and complex needs. In other words, Multi-agency working is about different services, agencies and teams of professionals and other practitioners working together to provide services that fully meet the needs of children, young people and their parents or carers. This could be as part of a multidisciplinary team or on an ad hoc basis. Effective working of multi-agency required each member to be clear about their role and responsibilities, and understand the different structures and governance of colleagues from other sectors, including the private and voluntary sectors, micro and direct employers, service user led organisations and brokers

assisting with support planning. Working across these boundaries is critical to planning and providing appropriate support.

Recent Government strategies have also supported the belief in multi-agency working. The Children Act (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1989), Quality Protects legislation and documents such as Working Together to Safeguard Children (DoH. HO and DfEE, 1999) have drawn attention to the importance of agencies working together in this way. This report states that: Promoting children's well-being and safeguarding them from significant harm depends crucially upon effective information sharing, collaboration and understanding between agencies and professionals. There have been many benefit of multi-agency collaboration highlighted by several authors. However, there is general consensus that multi-agency working provides benefits for children, young people and families because they receive tailor-made support in the most efficient way. Delaney (1994) also cites various authors who suggest other reasons why agencies may choose to collaborate. These include: increased efficiency in the face of declining resources and minimisation of client frustration when using the service (Whetten, 1982), and pre-existing networks or collaboration (Rogers and Whetten, 1982; Zapka et al., 1992).

A Fruitful Partnership: Effective Partnership Working (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, Formation of a virtual organisation, Co-

locating staff from partner organisations and Steering groups without dedicated resources Barriers to multi-agency collaboration

The main challenges to multi-agency working identified according NFER study centred around eight key areas, which are discussed below. 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'. Opportunities in working in multi-agency collaboration

The key factors identified by the NFER research centred around seven main areas, which are discussed below. 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 ' likeminded' 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