

Partnerships in the Delivery of Policing and Safeguarding Children

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Background

Problem-solving approaches to crime and community safety demand coordinated responses and joined-up solutions. Yet, the challenges of partnership working across organisational boundaries, cultures and established practices are considerable. Whilst a philosophy of partnership is strongly embedded within contemporary policy - notably in child protection and safeguarding - there remains much to learn in developing multi-agency collaborations that achieve real public safety outcomes for children, young people and the public. This report draws on research into policing partnerships with a focus on safeguarding children in Leeds.

Key Findings

- Contemporary policing by necessity is embedded in and dependent on a complex constellation of inter-agency and cross-sectoral partnerships.
- Effective partnerships cohere around and communicate a shared vision of the collaborative advantages that derive from joint-working and result in improved outcomes for victims and members of the public.
- Clear and consistent leadership and strategic direction are vital in promoting partnership working and have been evident in the context of Leeds Safeguarding Children Board across all key participating organisations in recent years.
- The importance of education, prevention and early assessment are pivotal shared partnership aims, intrinsic to which is early and effective information sharing.
- Multi-agency working relations have been enabled by a cluster model, developed largely between Social Care and education. However, the police do not emerge as having significant involvement in the clusters, reflecting a missed opportunity.
- Co-located and embedded multi-agency teams are often effective mechanisms to enable productive and transformative partnership working – the 'front door' team constitutes a crucial partnership structure in the context of children safeguarding.
- Perceptions by partners about the police focus on prosecution can act as an impediment to preventive safeguarding work with children and families.
- Managerial and frontline staff experience partnership relations differently. Trust relationships between partners are most developed and consistent at a managerial level, more so than at the frontline.
- For partnerships to play an evident role in changing and challenging organisational cultures, attitudes and behaviours within the police (and other agencies), inter-organisational relations need to be embedded and sustained in frontline practices.
- Frontline staff would benefit from dedicated training to enable them to better understand and prepare for partnership working in specific contexts.

Introduction

This study represents one strand of an ESRC funded 'Knowledge Exchange Opportunities Scheme' project that explored innovative models of research co-production and knowledge translation. The project was a collaboration of a team of researchers at the University of Leeds and West Yorkshire Police with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for West Yorkshire.

Background

Safeguarding children is a subject of considerable public concern and policy attention which, by its very nature, cuts across the responsibilities of diverse public and voluntary agencies. The risks, threats and harms to children have multiple causes, many of which are interdependent. Safeguarding children involves the police working with diverse agencies with contrasting cultures, priorities and working practices around sensitive issues: children's social work, health, education, youth services and third sector agencies.

The challenge for all partners is how to combine effectively the contributions of diverse knowledgeable and competent actors towards a clear understanding of the problems and confidence in delivering appropriate interventions. It demands effective, open and mature partnerships.

Leeds Safeguarding Children Board has provided the leadership, management and governance to partnerships delivering child protection that in recent years has drawn considerable praise from Ofsted (2015). The Front Door Safeguarding Hub is an integrated and co-located unit that brings together relevant partners. It is supported by the restructuring of social work services into a locality model based around 25 multi-agency 'clusters' across Leeds.

Methods and Data Collection

The study entailed a mapping of the nature and extent of policing partnerships across West Yorkshire and a case study of the safeguarding children partnership in Leeds. The case study focused on the nature and quality of relations between partners. The fieldwork entailed interviews with six senior managers and nine focus groups with a total of 50 frontline staff drawn from social work (20), police (15), health (7), youth services (5), and third sector organisations (3).

Partnerships across West Yorkshire

The range of policing activities and services delivered with and through partnerships is extensive. Partnerships now constitute a prevalent, considerable and necessary feature of contemporary policing. The form and consistency of coverage that partnerships take vary depending on the extent to which they derive from statutory responsibilities, contractual arrangements, organisational priorities or specific sources of funding. Beyond statutory partnerships, these tend to be more informal and uneven in nature. At the force level, oversight and coordination provides an important focus of partnership structures and relations. There are significant similarities in composition and coverage across districts, but with some key differences. Inconsistencies appear not simply to reflect differences in demand but also variations in organisational responses.

A key challenge is to ensure a joined-up approach both horizontally *between* strategic boards and district-wide arrangements and vertical communication *down to* sub-groups and local units charged with delivery on the ground. Cuts to funding that undermine partnership structures and relations may have a significantly detrimental impact on service delivery.

Delivery of Safeguarding Children

Shared values, a common purpose and an appreciation of divergent organisational priorities and cultures are the glue that holds complex partnership relationships together. The basis for effective and mature partnerships lies in creating shared understanding about the problems and a collective commitment to the possible means of resolving them.

Shared Vision and Practice

Leadership has been clear and consistent across all partners in promoting a message of joint working. The consistency of this message is believed to filter down to senior operational staff and to frontline officers. Senior management across all participating organisations are believed to provide appropriate leadership and strategic direction to safeguarding children.

The partnership model in Leeds fosters a culture of frank and open dialogue between partners in which difficult issues can be discussed and deliberated between partners with a view to resolving problems. Potential conflict is managed in a transparent and mature way – reflected in the commitment to a ‘professional conversation’ – and this is seen as necessary to successful child protection. This shared approach is understood by frontline staff who universally accept that they ‘can’t do this work alone’ and cannot work in isolation from partners. Most frontline officers agree that safeguarding children in Leeds has a clearly articulated shared vision. How this manifests itself varies somewhat from one organisation to another.

Working Relations between Partners

Close working relations between partners tend to occur more frequently and more extensively at managerial levels than amongst less frontline staff. Partnership relations at

the frontline are more uneven and inconsistent, in that sustained relations are often dependent on the coincidence of working with the same officer from a different organisation from one case to another case.

Relations between non-police partners in particular have improved as a result of the cluster model in some areas, as the cluster structure fosters closer partnership working and enables staff to get to know one another, build trust relations and share information. Not all clusters are similarly well developed. Some are more mature and better organised than others.

Police attendance at multi-agency meetings and case conferences tends to be perceived as inconsistent. The police are not viewed as significant contributing partners within the cluster model. The nature of police shift-working is seen by many as a significant hurdle to successful partnership working. The difficulties associated with contacting social workers outside of normal working hours are also identified by police and non-police partners as problematic.

It is perceived that the police operate with focus on detecting crime and pursuing prosecution. This is seen to be at odds with other organisations’ goals of ensuring longer-term outcomes for children and families. Non-police partners are often concerned with the detrimental effects of criminalising clients which foster an inclination only to contact the police when deemed absolutely necessary. A reactive focus of policing can inhibit early intervention where prosecution may undermine information gathering.

Inter-Organisational Trust Relations

Developing sustained and good quality interpersonal and inter-organisational trust relations takes time. The longer a relationship develops, the greater the scope for the

quality of trust relations. Shared experiences help to develop trust between partners. Staff at managerial levels as partnership relations are more likely often 'built-in' to everyday working practices. Sustained relations of trust are not as easy to build amongst frontline staff due to the inconsistent and uneven nature of inter-organisational working relations. Co-location between different agencies helps to foster greater understanding of mutual job roles, organisational pressures, professional capabilities and resources.

Information Sharing and Data Exchange

Data sharing and information exchange often remains one of the most intractable and contentious aspects of policing and community safety practice. Technological and cultural barriers to data exchange often undermine effective partnership work. Misunderstandings of data protection legislation persist and there exists reluctance on the part of some to share information, presenting difficulties for partnerships. Information sharing is frequently mentioned by partners as a significant source of possible tensions and problems. Despite acknowledging the importance of privacy and confidentiality, there is near unanimity from staff in all agencies that obtaining information from partners involves too much bureaucracy.

Skills and Training

Nearly all frontline staff claim never to have received specific training on partnership working. Some say they received training on related themes but this tended to be several years ago. Officers tend to place greater emphasis on personal experience and abilities in terms of developing appropriate skill-sets conducive to working in partnership. It was felt that training should focus on developing greater understanding of each agency's

feel that they are more able to build and establish trust relations

working protocols, pressures, capacity and resources to foster mutual understanding of what is and isn't achievable in specific contexts.

Conclusions

Increased demand and the changing nature of children's safeguarding - i.e. the pursuit of historical cases and growing social awareness concerning child sexual exploitation - present ongoing challenges for all partners. It is therefore important that partnership relations continue to be developed and steps taken to address some of the key challenges. The current public sector financial context provides both opportunities for innovative partnership working and novel challenges to be overcome. There are dangers that pressures on resources can impact negatively on partnership relations as participating agencies focus on core activities at the expense of shared ones. Conversely, fiscal constraint can prompt innovation and serve as a catalyst to work more creatively through partnerships.

Acknowledgements & Further Information

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<http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/research/projects/an-exploratory-knowledge-platform-for-policing/>