

CAAB Research Briefing Note: No. 3

Inter-agency Co-operation in Irish Children's Services: The Views of Some Stakeholders

1. What is the study's purpose?

The purpose of the study was to obtain information on the inter-agency co-operation experiences of workers in Irish children's services and to seek their views on how more effective co-operation can be achieved. The report was produced by Hibernian Consulting in association with the CAAB. It was guided by a steering group and was independently peer reviewed. The full report is available at www.caab.ie

2. How was the study undertaken?

The study involved consultations undertaken as part of a series of network seminars organised by the CAAB in May and June 2008. In relation to inter-agency work, the vast majority of delegates completed questionnaires (166) and 11 focus groups were held with sub-groups of the delegates (120). The focus groups were independently facilitated. A broad spectrum of organisations working with children attended and delegates were evenly spread across health and welfare, youth justice, education and the community and voluntary sectors. Seven out of ten delegates were female, two-thirds were aged 35 to 54 and most worked as front line managers/practitioners (57%) or as operational/senior managers (42%).

3. What are the key findings?

3.1 Involvement in Inter-agency Co-operation

The vast majority of participants had **direct personal experiences** of inter-agency co-operation. This was either in terms of direct client involvement, e.g. accessing other services to respond to clients' needs, or non-direct client involvement, e.g. participating on inter-agency management or other committees.

A common factor was inter-agency co-operation with young people with **multi-faceted and complex needs**. Specific areas mentioned include offending behaviour, welfare/child protection issues and educational participation.

3.2 Understanding of Inter-agency Co-operation

The **coming together** of providers was a common theme or aspect of focus group participants' understanding of inter-agency co-operation, as demonstrated by this selection of quotes: '*Linking in with other agencies*', '*... inclusive and useful model to get all agencies involved*' and '*We need to work with all services, we cannot do the work on our own*'.

There was recognition of **different types** of inter-agency co-operation. This included both the nature of





arrangements (formal versus informal) and the activity around which inter-agency co-operation took place (ranging from information sharing at one level right up to sharing of resources to deliver services at another level).

The participants also acknowledged that the term 'inter-agency co-operation' had **different meanings** for different people. This was felt to be due to the very broad nature of the term (as demonstrated earlier) and also the fact that different professionals frequently have different past experiences of inter-agency co-operation.

3.3 Views on Benefits

Focus group participants' felt that inter-agency co-operation places the **child at the centre of service delivery** and therefore can improve services both in terms of their impact and efficiency. It was also felt that agency **staff can benefit** from access to new tools, new learning and new opportunities.

'Agencies working together can lead to synergies in that new issues can be identified and addressed - the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts'

3.4 Views on Barriers

3.4.1 Overview

The **majority of delegates** (84%) indicated that they had experienced barriers when engaging in inter-agency co-operation. Barriers fell into four broad categories: information barriers, organisational barriers, resource barriers and barriers arising from 'other' services.

3.4.2 Views on Information Barriers

Participants noted that children and families are receiving services from multiple agencies in an **unexplained and uncoordinated manner**. This can lead to confusion for those families involved with multiple agencies and may in turn impact on the benefit of work for the families and young people supported by these agencies.

'Families are often confused; they don't know why they are working with you, who else is working with them and what it means.'

'I know of one family where 16 professionals are involved and they don't meet'.

It was noted that there is **limited awareness** of the range and roles of the increasing number and evolving nature of organisations providing services to vulnerable children.





'Lack of clarity of purpose, and lack of awareness about each other's roles and what each agency can actually do are barriers to inter-agency working'.

The absence of a shared understanding of **common terms** was said to make inter-agency co-operation more challenging and time consuming. Terms such as 'risk', 'needs', and 'assessment' are used by all agencies but they are often used from a different perspective, which can lead to confusion amongst agencies.

'... tried to pilot a common assessment framework but it hasn't worked.... People [from different agencies] had different interpretations of assessment and it made sense as to why a common assessment framework didn't work'.

Professionals noted concerns about **sharing information** across services. It was also noted that organisations have different approaches to sharing client information with each other.

'Data protection and confidentiality when working with other agencies are a huge concern for me... Should a challenge come from a decision made, you have to cover your own back. I would have concerns regarding info giving and sharing'.

An absence of **guidance and role models** was reported. Many participants said that while they worked on an inter-agency level, it was acknowledged that there were limited frameworks to guide this process and that sometimes it was dependent on individual personalities and 'goodwill'.

Respondents referred to overcoming their biases regarding particular agencies and 'putting themselves out there' in order to work with other agencies. Other participants noted there is not a tradition of sharing information across government departments and that there is 'no mirror image in government or no role models of excellence' on how to undertake inter-agency working.

3.4.3 Views on Organisational Barriers

For organisations it was felt that there was a **lack of shared visions**, purposes and objectives across services, especially at service delivery level. This can cause confusion for practitioners when trying to determine how what they do fits in with what others are doing in different services when involved in inter-agency co-operation.

Inter-agency co-operation was said **not to be a priority** for some organisations. If was felt that due to constraints such as limited budgets, many agencies focused on 'their own' remit.

Agencies not fulfilling their inter-agency commitments

commitments were reported to be a barrier. This was said to present barriers for other organisations involved in the inter-agency process, either through agency representatives not attending relevant meetings, or attending but not fulfilling their commitments.

'Agencies need to be at the table'.

'Not doing what they agreed to do at meetings'.

Some organisations have **different geographic parameters** and this was reported to cause barriers. In particular different boundaries and other geographic factors were felt to limit 'face-to-face' time between staff from different agencies.

Different **organisational cultures**, work ethos and goals and objectives were reported as concerns. These differences can present themselves as barriers to effective inter-agency co-operation, as participants referred to '*different cultures*', '*risk averse cultures*', '*passing the buck*', and '*professional snobbery*'.

Participants commented that organisations' **systems do not typically recognise** inter-agency co-operation activity by staff nor do they capture its benefits. This is seen by staff as a disincentive for workers and organisations, as one participant noted: '*what gets measured gets done*'.

Some participants said that staff feel they cannot work in an inter-agency manner due to a **lack of training, support and clear mandate** to undertake inter-agency working.

'Allow for direct work with children, rather than working "around" the child'.

3.4.4 Views on Service Barriers

The length of **waiting lists and gaps in service provision** were viewed as barriers to co-ordinated services.

A lack of services available **outside of 'normal office hours'**, was cited as a barrier to effective co-ordination of services. This was reported to present difficulties for young people and their families as well as other organisations in accessing supports.

The **crisis-driven nature of services** was said to be limiting levels of involvement by some professionals/services. Some agencies and organisations were seen as withdrawing their services once the immediate risk to the child or young person is reduced, making it difficult for other agencies to continue to be involved in inter-agency co-operation and to deliver co-ordinated services.



Dependence of referral procedures on social workers

was said to be a barrier. This was felt, in many cases, to result in delays and a young person's needs becoming worse while they were waiting to be seen by a social worker and referred to a service.

A lack of planning for the co-ordination of different services was said to be problematic. This was said to be an issue even in cases where the need for co-ordination would seem obvious, e.g. the housing needs of a person turning 18 and leaving residential care.

The traditional focus of services on 'activities' rather than on the needs of service users and what would best benefit the client was said to act as a barrier. It was reported that a more productive inter-agency meeting tends to be one where the focus is placed on the needs of the client.

Participants noted that there is not enough focus on or investment in **early intervention services**,

preventative services and family support services. It was said that this in turn sees many young people returning to the same cycle and patterns of behaviour and remaining in the system for longer than necessary.

'It is clear from some of the assessments, looking through a child's file, if this was done and early intervention there you know that you wouldn't be reading the file now'.

'... when leaving the placement, a child is going back to the same situation as no work done with the family so no change then they become young adults and the cycle continues'.

3.4.5 Views on Resource Barriers

The lack of personnel/resources available to make an initial investment in effective inter-agency co-operation in order to yield a return was highlighted. Like any investment, inter-agency co-operation requires an outlay of resources to yield a return. But services are viewed to be 'crisis-driven' and to be operating with high caseloads, and this was reported as a barrier to effectively investing in inter-agency co-operation.

'...is not something that happens overnight'

'For people under pressure, it's easier to say no. There's no culture to talk about cases or issues/services'.

It was noted that most funding mechanisms were not set up to enable inter-agency co-operation. Previously systems were designed from the perspective of there being an 'organisation's client' rather than the perspective of 'a client with multiple organisations serving him/her'. Organisations have operated with a



'single funding body' and 'single recipient body' approach. This limited the scope for 'fast tracking' or 'buying in' services on a periodic or needs basis, e.g. from the private or community and voluntary sector.

It was a widespread belief that some services are **insufficiently funded and that there are insufficient numbers of front line staff**.

'... in X county, there were four JLOs but only 1.5 education welfare officers, i.e. not enough' (a non-education sector worker).

'The Government needs to make a commitment to children. We need more services, more JLOs, more EWOs, more Barnardos and Youthreach. I'm often the only resource to my 40 cases'.

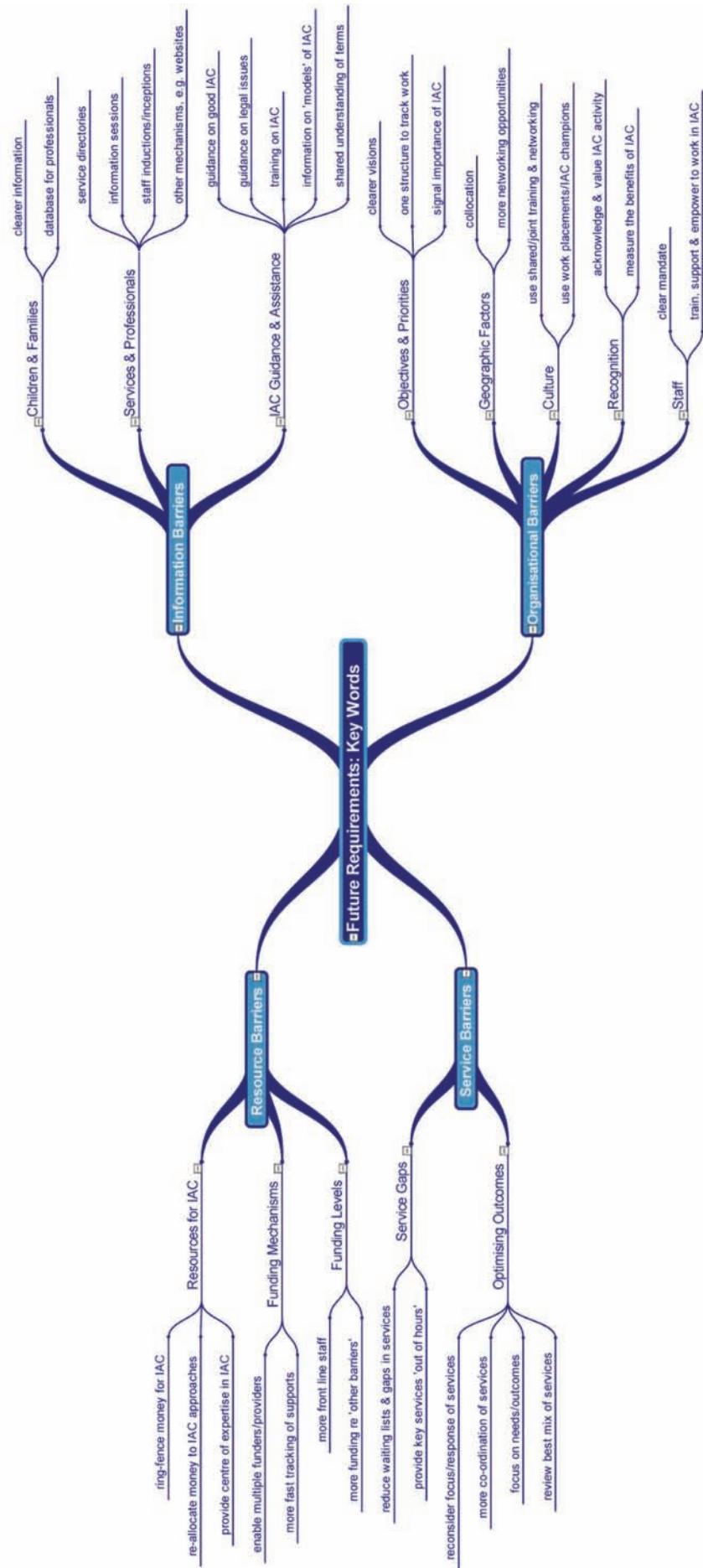
Insufficient resources was seen to be the biggest obstacle when it came to re-focusing on early, preventative and family supports/services, which were seen to be the best way to achieve positive outcomes for children and their families. In addition to insufficient resources the following were also identified as barriers: the lack of information sharing; the emphasis of services on risk instead of need; the lack of clear procedures.

3.5 Views on Future Requirements

Participants identified a coherent set of actions to overcome the above barriers, to improve inter-agency co-operation and to improve outcomes for children. These are detailed in the main report and keywords are summarised on page 5.



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4. Study Benefits?

This study provides two main benefits. Firstly, collecting and recording information on the experiences and views of managers and practitioners across Irish children's services should help inform future inter-agency co-operation. The CAAB will help realise this benefit by disseminating the report widely and by linking in with particularly relevant initiatives, e.g. children's services committees.

Secondly, it shows the existence of common and shared barriers to effective inter-agency co-operation across children's services, therefore pointing to a clear rationale for central expertise to support better and more effective inter-agency co-operation. Particular areas where central support would be beneficial are illustrated below.

Information Barriers	Service Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Produce an information booklet on services and their roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide Evidence to Practice Seminars on cross sector issues, e.g. responding to child protection and family support needs, on assessment etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Produce guidance on inter-agency co-operation, including information sharing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide a 'safe space' for agencies to discuss inter-agency co-operation issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Examine international approaches for recording children's use of services and sharing information with professionals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Analyse service co-ordination gaps.
Organisational Barriers	Resource Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide networking opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build an information source on inter-agency co-operation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Showcase 'models'/'champions'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide a centre of inter-agency co-operation expertise.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facilitate the development of training on inter-agency co-operation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Highlight experiences of inter-agency co-operation as a more effective way to work and to achieve better outcomes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Support attempts to measure the benefits of inter-agency co-operation for children. 	

The CAAB undertook work in relation to a number of these barriers during the period 2008 to 2009. This included producing or commissioning:

- an information booklet on the role of agencies under the Children Acts;
- a literature review of inter-agency co-operation with a particular focus on children's services;
- a report of six organisational case studies on the use of inter-agency co-operation in the delivery of children's services;
- an online database of research on inter-agency co-operation;

- guidance to support effective inter-agency co-operation.

While the CAAB has completed the above work, in advance of being 'subsumed into the Department of Health and Children and other agencies', it is clear from this and other research (mentioned above) that there is a need for other central supports (training, networking, sharing of learning and dissemination of good practice etc.) to help achieve more effective inter-agency co-operation and improve outcomes for children.

For more information:

- ✓ Phone 01-6724100 to speak to Robert Murphy or Ciarán Ó Searcaigh.
- ✓ Check out www.caab.ie to see this study's Full Report or Web-conference.

