

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



An Bord Comhairleach um Achtanna na Leanaí
Children Acts Advisory Board

November 2009

**INTER-AGENCY CO-OPERATION IN IRISH CHILDREN'S SERVICES:
THE VIEWS OF SOME STAKEHOLDERS**

Hibernian Consulting in Association with the Children Acts Advisory Board

CAAB RESEARCH: REPORT NO. 3

November 2009



Hibernian Consulting



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Foreword

Following establishment in 2007 the Children Acts Advisory Board (CAAB) was charged with ‘the promotion of inter-agency co-operation including the sharing of information’. From our earliest ventures into this complex domain it was evident that there was little or no direction or guidance available for agencies and individual practitioners who wished to work in this way.

With the ultimate objective of developing such guidance the CAAB engaged in a number of processes to inform our deliberations.

This report is the outcome of one process of consultation undertaken with a wide array of policy makers, managers and practitioners who are involved either directly or indirectly in inter-agency working. The report recounts the current experience of workers and their thoughts and views on how things might be improved.

I want to acknowledge the willingness of all those we approached to participate in the process, which mirrors in many ways the very real commitment in children’s services for people in the sector to work in a way that offers the greatest benefit to children and their families, and towards achieving the maximum return for the investment of scarce resources.

I want to thank Finbar McDonnell of Hibernian Consulting for undertaking this consultation on our behalf, for writing this report with Robert Murphy CAAB, and all of the CAAB staff who made it possible.

Aidan Browne

Chief Executive

Children Acts Advisory Board

Research Quality

Two important elements of the CAAB's research quality assurance are the use of a steering committee to 'guide' a project and using an independent peer review process - see below.

Membership of the Steering Committee

Robert Murphy, Head of Research and Information, CAAB.

Ciarán Ó Searcaigh, Advisory Officer, CAAB.

Peer Reviewer

Nick Frost is Professor of Social Work (children, childhood and families), at the Faculty of Health, Leeds Metropolitan University. Nick has published in the fields of child welfare and professional learning, including as co-author of 'Developing Multi Professional Teamwork for Integrated Children's Services' (OUP, 2006). Most recently he has written, 'Understanding Children's Social Care' (with Nigel Parton, Sage, 2009). His primary research interest is integrated professional working. Nick is a registered social worker, and practiced in local authority social work settings for 15 years before commencing his academic career.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2008 Hibernian Consulting in association with the CAAB consulted with staff across Irish children's services on inter-agency cooperation.

Most practitioners and managers had **experience** of inter-agency co-operation. This was either in terms of direct client involvement, such as accessing other services to respond to clients' needs, or non-direct client involvement, such as participating in inter-agency management or other committees.

There was strong **support** for effective inter-agency co-operation as it was believed to place the child at the centre of service delivery and so could improve the impact and/or efficiency of services. Also cited were potential benefits for staff from access to new tools, new learning and new opportunities.

The vast majority of participants experienced **barriers** when undertaking inter-agency co-operation. Barriers fell into four broad categories: information barriers, organisational barriers, resource barriers and barriers arising from 'other' services. A coherent set of **actions** to help overcome barriers, to improve co-operation and outcomes for children was identified.

The evidence of common barriers to effective inter-agency co-operation shared across the children's sector points to a rationale for central expertise to support better and more effective inter-agency co-operation. Central support would be particularly beneficial in the areas below.

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



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This is a report on the inter-agency experiences of workers in Irish children's services and their views on how more effective co-operation can be achieved. It is based on consultations undertaken as part of a series of network seminars organised by the Children Acts Advisory Board (CAAB) in May and June 2008.

The CAAB was established in July 2007 as an enhanced enabling organisation with the capacity to encourage inter-agency co-operation and information sharing and to support the development of services that are evidence based and outcomes focused. Further information on the CAAB is available at www.caab.ie.

Given the strong mandate of the CAAB in relation to inter-agency co-operation, the CAAB undertook a number of actions in relation to this objective in 2008 and 2009. The actions included commissioning a literature review on the topic, documenting a number of case studies in relation to good practice in inter-agency co-operation, providing an online database of research on inter-agency co-operation, and producing a guidance document to support effective inter-agency co-operation across children's services. The CAAB's 2008 National Conference also focused on this topic.

1.2 Method

It was in the above context that inter-agency co-operation became a focus of a number of network seminars held by the CAAB in 2008. Four such seminars were held, to coincide with the four HSE regions, as follows:

- Galway, HSE West, 7th and 8th May 2008;
- Clonmel, HSE South, 14th and 15th May 2008;
- Dublin Airport, HSE Dublin North-East 18th and 19th June 2008;
- Dublin West, HSE Dublin Mid-Leinster, 25th and 26th June 2008.

These network seminars served a number of purposes, including the provision of information to practitioners on different services for children, examination of the role of research in informing these services, and networking between people from different organisations. In relation to inter-agency work, the seminars provided two sets of input for this report:



- All delegates were invited to complete a detailed questionnaire on the topic. This questionnaire drew on a preliminary literature review on inter-agency co-operation. In total, 166 questionnaires were completed by delegates, with questionnaires completed by the vast majority of those who attended the seminars. The high completion rate was achieved by giving participants a specific period of time during the seminar programme to complete the questionnaires.
- Eleven focus groups on inter-agency co-operation were held with a total of 120 delegates participating in them, across the four venues. The list of topics used by the group facilitators is attached as Appendix A. The focus groups were independently facilitated.¹

Following the series of network seminars, data input for the questionnaires was undertaken by the CAAB and notes were prepared on the focus group discussions by members of CAAB staff and researchers. These inputs were compiled into a report by Hibernian Consulting, and the facilitators met to discuss a draft report and to ensure that all key points from the consultations were included. Following this Hibernian Consulting and staff from the CAAB finalised the report.

The network seminars were attended by people from a large number of agencies and professions as listed in Figure 1.1. The list shows the broad spectrum of organisations that work with children as well as the broad attendance at the seminars. Key points from the profile of participants are as follows:

- **Gender:** of the 166 delegates, who completed the questionnaire on inter-agency work, some 162 provided their gender, of which 69% were female and 31% were male.
- **Age:** the largest cohort was aged 35–44 (33%), followed by the 45–54 (31%) age group. This suggests that the people attending the seminars were experienced workers in the sector.
- **Sector:** there was a relatively even distribution of participants across the health, justice, education and community/voluntary sectors.
- **Level:** delegates were asked whether, within their organisation, they worked at policy level, at operational/senior management level, or as front-line managers or practitioners. The majority of delegates worked as front-line managers or practitioners (57%), and there was also a significant number of operational/senior managers present at the seminars (42%). A small minority of delegates (1%) were operating at a policy level, defined as influencing national policy in relation to children.

¹ The independent facilitators were: Finbar McDonnell, Hibernian Consulting; Dr Helen Buckley, School for Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin; Nicola Carr; Clíona Murphy.



Figure 1-1: Organisations and Occupations Participating in the Network Seminars

Organisations	Occupations
OMCYA	Social workers, psychologists, service managers
HSE	Guidance counsellor, childcare managers
Residential care centres	Managers – children and family services, alternative care managers
Irish Youth Justice Service	Community social care leader
Probation Service	Care managers from schools and residential services
Young Persons Probation	Adult education officers (VEC)
Garda Youth Diversion Programme	County childcare committee managers
National Juvenile Office	Area Partnership childcare coordinators
School Completion Programme, DES	Youthreach coordinators
National Educational Psychological Service	Youth advocates
National Educational Welfare Board	Juvenile liaison officers
VECs	Garda Youth Diversion project workers
Barnardos	Others



1.3 Report Structure

There are five further sections in the report:

- Section 2 summarises participants' involvement in and understanding of inter-agency co-operation;
- Section 3 discusses participants' views on the benefits of inter-agency co-operation;
- Section 4 considers the experiences and views of participants' on barriers to effective inter-agency co-operation;
- Section 5 describes participants' views on how to support more effective inter-agency co-operation;
- Section 6 presents some concluding comments.



2 INVOLVEMENT AND UNDERSTANDING

2.1 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.

2.2 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. This is demonstrated from the selected quotes below which arose when participants were asked to describe their understanding of inter-agency co-operation:

'Linking in with other agencies'.

'... inclusive and useful model to get all agencies involved'.

'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 to sharing of resources to deliver services at another level). The following quotes below illustrate this point:

'... different levels, going from irregular, informal contact between two agencies through to formalised joint work taking place'.

'... there are different levels of inter-agency co-operation, e.g. information sharing (and dealing with the issues that arise) is a lower level than pooling expertise to deliver services'.



The participants' acknowledged that the term 'inter-agency co-operation' had different meanings for different people. This was felt to be due to the broad nature of the term (as demonstrated earlier) and the fact that different professionals frequently have different past experiences of inter-agency co-operation. One participant summarised this when they noted:

'I'm not sure we all mean the same thing when we say inter-agency working'.



3 VIEWS ON BENEFITS

3.1 Views on Benefits for Children

Focus group participants' felt that inter-agency co-operation can place the child at the centre of service delivery.

In addition, it was felt that good inter-agency co-operation puts the focus on what the child and his/her family need and hence places the emphasis on sourcing what is required from the different agencies. Many participants noted that this differs from the traditional approach that tends to focus on what each individual agency does.

'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'.

3.2 Views on Benefits for Organisations and Staff

It was noted that inter-agency co-operation builds a better understanding of the needs of the child and the family. This is because although agencies approach the client with different individual perspectives, these can together help create a more holistic understanding of the needs of the child and family.

Participants acknowledged that staff can gain benefit from inter-agency co-operation. In particular, it was noted that staff can gain access to new tools, new perspectives, new learning and new opportunities.

It was indicated that good inter-agency co-operation can result in better use of resources in service delivery. Good inter-agency co-operation can reduce duplication and prevent overlap across services and agencies.

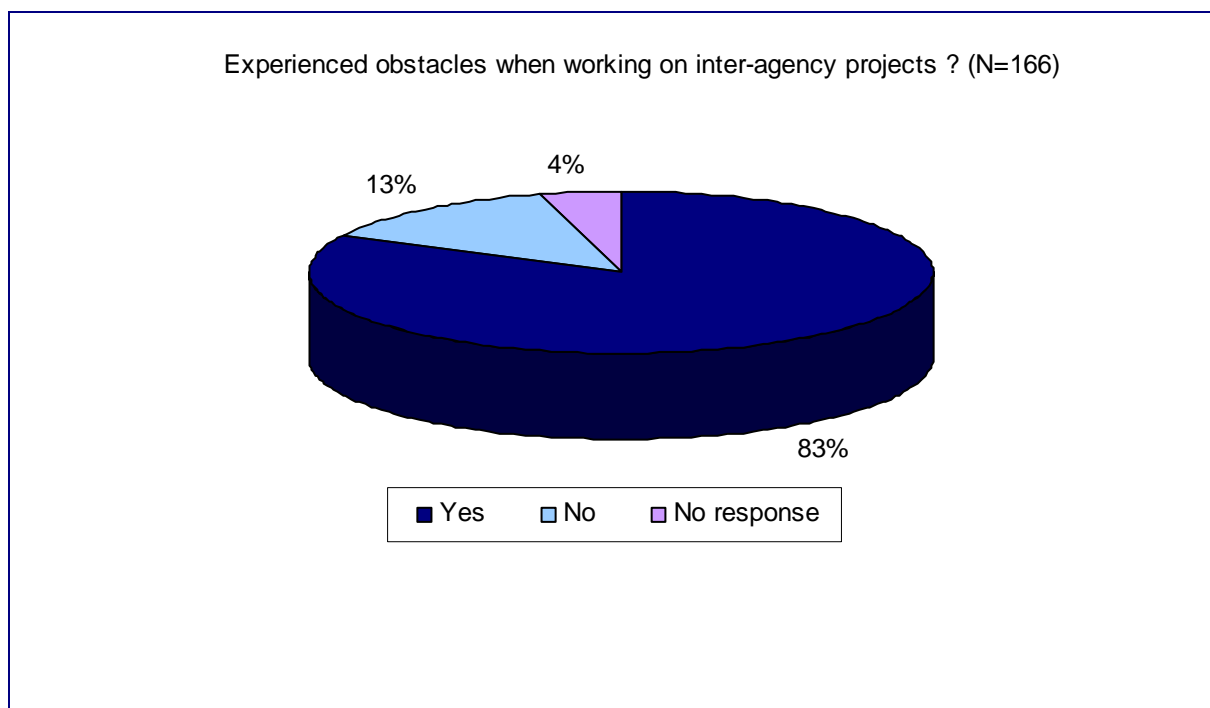


4 VIEWS ON BARRIERS

4.1 Proportion Experiencing Barriers

The majority of delegates at the CAAB network seminars had experienced barriers when engaging in inter-agency co-operation, as shown in Figure 4.1.²

Figure 4.1: Experience of Barriers to Inter-agency Co-operation (Unweighted Data)



Barriers are now discussed in four categories: information barriers (Section 4.2), organisational barriers (Section 4.3), resource barriers (Section 4.4) and barriers from 'other' services (Section 4.5).

² This figure reflects the views of those attending the seminars only and should not be interpreted as being statistically representative of Irish children's services in general. The sample of organisations and professionals at the seminars is reflective of children's services. However, the employment data, by sub-sector, that would be necessary to weight the sample and extrapolate the findings to the population as a whole to produce statistically representative figures for the population, are not available. The quantitative findings provide a general picture of the views of the 150 plus people who participated in the consultation process.

4.2 Views on Information Barriers

Participants noted that children and families receive services from multiple agencies in an unexplained and an uncoordinated manner. This can lead to confusion for families involved with multiple agencies and may impact on the benefit of work for the families and young people supported by these agencies. The following quotes reflect these points:

'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'.

'A young person was recently referred to us by his mother as he was misusing drugs and there was trouble in the family life. He was referred firstly to a JLO, then to an educational welfare officer, then to Youthreach, then to Probation Services, he then went to [an assessment] Centre and there he was referred to a psychologist for assessment, then he had to see social workers and the social work department and finally he had to be taken care of by care workers. When this many professionals see one troubled young person the young person begins to clam up . . . as he is telling the same story to so many different agency workers'.

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. A lack of clarity and awareness among professionals about the available services can make it difficult for inter-agency working. Some participants noted:

'I earned about new services at the CAAB network seminars so I [find] it hard to imagine how children or families would be able to find their way around the system to appropriate services'.

'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 can be used from different perspectives, which can lead to confusion among agencies when they meet as demonstrated below:

'...We tried to pilot a common assessment framework but it hasn't worked. People didn't know



what 'assessment' meant... We need to see if people are talking about the same thing, as people weren't bringing together a common background of experiences, e.g., social workers do risk assessments, the council assesses housing needs. All different. People had different interpretations of assessment and it made sense as to why the common assessment framework didn't work'.

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

'There are legislative barriers to information sharing'.

'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[rmation] giving and sharing'.

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

Respondents referred to overcoming their biases regarding particular agencies and 'putting themselves out there' to work with other agencies.

Other participants noted the lack of a tradition of sharing information across government departments and the fact that there is 'no mirror image in government or no role models of excellence' on how to undertake inter-agency working.

4.3 Views on Organisational Barriers

For organisations, there was a perceived 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 with what others are doing in different services when involved in inter-agency co-operation.

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



Agencies not fulfilling their inter-agency commitments are a barrier. This was said to present barriers for other organisations in inter-agency processes, either through agency representatives not attending relevant meetings or attending but not fulfilling their commitments. It was commented:

'Agencies need to be at the table'.

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

Some organisations have different geographic parameters and this can 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 cultures goals and objectives were reported as concerns. These can present themselves as barriers to effective inter-agency co-operation, as participants referred to:

'Different cultures', 'risk adverse cultures', 'passing the buck', 'professional snobbery'.

Participants noted that organisations' systems do not typically recognise inter-agency co-operation activity by staff nor capture its benefits. This is seen 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. In some cases where the mandate was there staff felt that there was not enough flexibility to deliver on inter-agency co-operation agreements. It was argued that practitioners should be up-skilled, trained and supported to:

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



4.4 Views on Barriers Relating to Nature of Services

The length of waiting lists and gaps in service provision were viewed as barriers to co-ordinated services. It was noted that young people need to be dealt with promptly and not placed on waiting lists as is sometimes the case.

A lack of services available outside '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 for other organisations accessing supports.

The crisis-driven nature of services was said to limit levels of involvement by some professionals/services. Some agencies and organisations were seen as withdrawing services once the immediate risk to the child or young person is reduced. This can make 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 seems 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 identified as a barrier. It was reported that a more productive inter-agency meeting tends to be one where the focus is on the needs of the client.

'I sometimes find with statutory agencies that the services they offer do not always offer the client exactly what they need'.

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. This is reflected in the following quotes:

'It is clear from some of the assessments, looking through a child's file, if this was done and there was 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. When a child is placed in care there should be continued work with families to effect change so that when they return there is a different model of care at home'.

4.5 Views on Resource Barriers

The lack of personnel/resources available to make an initial investment in effective inter-agency co-operation to yield a return was highlighted. Like many policies, inter-agency co-operation requires an outlay of resources to yield a return. But services that are 'crisis-driven' or operating with high caseloads were reported to be barriers to effectively investing in inter-agency co-operation. Participants observed:

'... is not something that happens overnight'.

'... cost money in the short-term as they are established'.

'As the people involved (inevitably) move on, further effort is required to maintain the relationships through these times'.

'Time required for inter-agency meetings and consultations'.

'There are only so many hours in the day'.

'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. Systems were often designed from the perspective of there being an 'organisation's client' rather than '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.

Many participants believed that some services are insufficiently funded and lack sufficient numbers of frontline staff. This is illustrated by the following quotes:



'... 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 were seen as the biggest obstacle in re-focusing on early, preventative and family supports/services which were seen as the best way to achieve positive outcomes for children and families.



5 VIEWS ON FUTURE REQUIREMENTS

5.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the views of participants on future requirements needed to improve inter-agency co-operation and outcomes for children. There was recognition that by addressing a number of requirements together a greater impact could be achieved. The views of participants are presented in tabular form in relation to the four sets of barriers identified in Chapter 4.

5.2 Participants' Suggested Actions: Information Barriers

<p>Children and Families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide clearer information to children and families on services available, on the roles of professionals dealing with them and on how these are interrelated. ■ Create a database on services provided to children and families to enable relevant professionals working with children to quickly identify other relevant professionals and to share appropriate information.
<p>Services and Professionals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Produce and disseminate service directories (national/local) to reduce information gaps. ■ Host more information sessions on services explaining roles and responsibilities. ■ Build information/training/time into inductions/inceptions. ■ Create other dissemination mechanisms, e.g. relevant website(s).
<p>Inter-agency Guidance and Assistance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Produce and disseminate guidance on effective inter-agency co-operation. ■ Provide guidance on legal issues regarding sharing of client data. ■ Provide guidance and training on inter-agency co-operation. ■ Disseminate information on 'models' of inter-agency co-operation. ■ Create a shared understanding of common terms relevant to inter-agency co-operation.



5.3 Participants' Suggested Actions: Organisational Barriers

Objective and Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop clearer visions to support inter-agency co-operation at service delivery level. ■ Use one structure/resource to lead and track inter-agency co-operation work. ■ Signal the importance of co-operation, e.g. include in job descriptions.
Geographic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Greater use of collocation of local service delivery. ■ Regularly provide networking, information sharing and training opportunities.
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Promote an appropriate culture by using shared/joint training and networking. ■ Promote an appropriate culture by using work place exchanges and champions for inter-agency co-operation.
Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Acknowledge and value staff activity in inter-agency co-operation. ■ Develop mechanisms to measure the benefits of inter-agency co-operation.
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide a clear mandate to undertake inter-agency co-operation ■ Train, support and empower front-line workers to undertake inter-agency co-operation.

5.4 Participants' Suggested Actions: Service Barriers

Service Gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reduce long waiting lists and gaps in key services (e.g. social worker services, psychological services). ■ Provide key services 'out of hours'.
Optimising Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reconsider whether focus and response of some services, e.g. 'a different/differential response model' is appropriate for responding to child protection and family support needs. ■ More and better co-ordination of services. ■ Systematic focus on needs/outcomes, e.g. 'common assessment'/'shared plan'. ■ Reconsider how to achieve the best mix of services.



5.5 Participants' Suggested Actions: Resource Barriers

Resources for Inter-agency Co-operation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Ring fence money to establish effective inter-agency co-operation.■ Leadership/management could reallocate money to new inter-agency co-operation service delivery approaches.■ Develop a central source of expertise in inter-agency co-operation (this role was to be fulfilled by the CAAB).
Funding Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Develop ways to enable multiple funders/service providers.■ Have more flexibility to allow more fast-tracking of supports.
Funding Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Provide more frontline staff where there are long waiting lists■ Re-consider funding levels related to points in Sections 5.2 to 5.4.



6 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Most practitioners and managers consulted had **experience** of inter-agency co-operation. This was either in terms of direct client involvement, such as accessing other services to respond to clients' needs, or non-direct client involvement, such as participating in inter-agency management or other committees.

There was strong **support** for effective inter-agency co-operation. Focus group participants felt that inter-agency co-operation places the child at the centre of service delivery and therefore can improve services 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.

The vast majority of participants experienced **barriers** when undertaking inter-agency co-operation. Barriers can be grouped into four broad categories: information barriers, organisational barriers, resource barriers and barriers arising from the nature of some services.

Participants identified a set of **actions** to overcome the above barriers to improve inter-agency co-operation and to improve outcomes for children. The broad areas of action are summarised below.

Figure 6-1: Barrier Categories and Broad Areas for Action

Information Barriers	Children and families, services and professionals, and inter-agency guidance and assistance.
Organisational Barriers	Objectives and priorities, geographic factors, cultural issues, recognition of the benefit of inter-agency co-operation, and staff support and empowerment.
Barriers from other Services	Service gaps and optimising outcomes through altering focus, approach, response and service mix.
Resource Barriers	Resources for inter-agency co-operation, funding mechanisms and funding levels.

The existence of common and shared barriers to effective inter-agency co-operation across the children's sector points to a **rationale for central expertise** to support better and more effective inter-agency co-operation. Particular areas where central support would be beneficial are illustrated in Figure 6.2.



Figure 6-2: Barriers to be Addressed by Central Resource for Inter-agency Co-operation

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

The CAAB undertook work in relation to a number of these barriers during 2008 to 2009. For instance, it produced an information booklet on the role of agencies under the Children Acts; commissioned a literature review of inter-agency co-operation with a focus on children's services; commissioned six organisational case studies on inter-agency co-operation in the delivery of children's services; produced an online database of research on inter-agency co-operation; and produced 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', this and other research (mentioned above) shows a need for other central supports (training, networking, sharing of learning and dissemination of good practice etc.) to achieve more effective inter-agency co-operation and improve outcomes for children.



A TOPIC GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP FACILITATORS

Network Seminars May/June 2008: Focus Group on Inter-agency Co-operation

You kindly filled out questionnaires for us yesterday, and we are now following up with a discussion on some of the issues. What we would like from this discussion is to hear your views.

One of the three strategic objectives of CAAB is to facilitate inter-agency cooperation, including the sharing of information between agencies. In order for CAAB to support and facilitate inter-agency cooperation, it is important to hear about the extent to which people in the children's sector work together. The information gathered in these seminars will be used to further refine CAAB's strategy, actions and work programme. Practical suggestions arising, for example in relation to transfer of good practice or training, will be reviewed by the CAAB. Outcomes will also inform the other elements of the CAAB's 2008 work programme in relation to inter-agency working, which include a literature review, case studies with both children and agencies, a conference on inter-agency work in the child care sector, and production of an end-of-year journal on inter-agency work.

What the discussion should reveal:

- Participants' understanding of inter-agency co-operation and working.
- The extent to which organisations engage in inter-agency work.
- The nature of inter-agency work.
- The factors supporting good inter-agency work.
- Practical examples of inter-agency work and the outcomes arising.
- The kind of problems and challenges in relation to inter-agency work.
- Suggestions to achieve better inter-agency work.
- Suggestions as to where and when more effective inter-agency work is required.

Session to begin with facilitator introducing him/herself and participants introducing themselves, their organisation and their role in the organisation. The facilitator should also present the proposed ground rules for the discussion to the group.

The topics overleaf are presented at a relatively high level. Where possible, the facilitator should also 'drill down' through the use of follow-on questions.

Topics for Discussion

Your Experiences

1. Do you work on an inter-agency basis? If so, with which organisations and on what topics? What do you understand inter-agency co-operation and working to be?
2. What factors influence your decision to work with another agency?
 - rationale
 - organisational guidelines
 - policies and procedures
 - knowing people in other agencies
 - time (have the time to do it or co-operation will save time...)
 - training
3. Does your inter-agency work tend to be ad hoc and informal or is it formalised and based on structures, plans, job descriptions etc?
 - To what extent does it depend on individuals or are outcomes consistent no matter which individuals are involved?
 - Does your organisation have features that open up, or close down, the opportunities for inter-agency co-operation? (e.g. geographic co-location, built into performance management systems etc.)
4. How well would you say this inter-agency co-operation works? What has it achieved in practice? What are the good aspects of it and what are the problems/ challenges in making it work? Give examples of inter-agency co-operation which has led to benefits for children and their families, or other kinds of benefits, and examples where this did not happen. (Clarify if you are speaking from personal experience or if this is your opinion but you haven't personally seen the benefits/problems etc.)

Incentives, Tools and Supports

5. What tools or supports have you seen in your work that can underpin good inter-agency co-operation? What lessons would you draw from the inter-agency work that you have been involved with?
6. What would you say are the three most important factors in supporting successful inter-agency work in relation to children?
 - explicit commitment to inter-agency working by organisations and management
 - involvement of children
 - defined roles and responsibilities for people involved
 - leadership and example
 - sufficient and flexible funding
 - protocols for sharing of information

- joint or inter-agency training
- systems for inter-agency communication

Future Requirements

7. Do you feel any incentives or supports can be put in place to encourage organisations and people in organisations to engage in more inter-agency work? What changes would you make? How would you prioritise these?

8. Can you think of areas where you feel inter-agency work should either be started, or should be strengthened, to improve the well-being of children and their families?

