

CAAB Research Briefing Note: No. 4

A Literature Review of Inter-agency Work with a Particular Focus on Children's Services

1. What is the study's purpose?

The purpose of the study was to produce a summary analysis of research literature on inter-agency co-operation in public services, with a particular focus on inter-agency co-operation in children's services. The CAAB commissioned WRC Social and Economic Consultants Ltd and the work was undertaken by Dr. Carmel Duggan and Ms. Carmel Corrigan. It was guided by a steering group and was independently peer reviewed. Specific areas of interest for the review are summarised below.

Definitions	Processes	Actors
Motivation/Rationale	Strategies/Models	Success/Enabling Factors
Objectives	Tools	Inhibiting Factors
Structures	Benefits/Outcomes	Alternatives

This briefing note discusses the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations. The full report is available at www.caab.ie

2. How was the study undertaken?

The literature review involved the researchers drawing on publications already identified by the CAAB and also undertaking a number of searches on key terms in order to identify additional materials. Keywords and terms utilised in these searches included inter-agency co-operation, inter-agency working, inter-agency methods, both on their own and in combination with the terms child protection, family welfare, child welfare, education and juvenile justice. The overall analytical framework was distilled from the specific objectives of the research as outlined earlier and the literature review focussed on:

- literature reviews (international and Irish) of inter agency co-operation;
- reviews of relevant Irish public policy initiatives with inter-agency co-operation;
- individual literature reports on inter-agency co-operation in Irish children's services.



3. What are the key findings?

The report provides a large number of findings across the 140 plus reports reviewed. It is not feasible to summarise these in this short briefing note,

nevertheless the table below shows the areas covered by the findings.

Overview of Literature:	The Emergence of Inter-Agency Approaches in Ireland:	Individual Chapters on Child Protection and Welfare, Education, and Youth Justice:
The Theory	Introduction	Introduction
Definitions	Policy Framework	Definitions
Motivation and Rationale	Definitions	Rationale
Objectives and Purpose	Rationale	Objectives/Key Actions
Structures and Mechanisms	Remit and objectives	Benefits and Outcomes
Processes	Structures	Structures and Strategies
Models and Typologies	Process and Models	Actors and Actions
Tools for Co-ordination	Tools	Inhibiting Factors
Actors	Assessing Benefits	Facilitating Factors
Benefits and Outcomes	Inhibiting Factors	Key Findings
Inhibiting Factors/Obstacles	Inhibiting Factors	
Alternatives	Lessons from Public Sector Initiatives	
Key Findings	Key Findings	

4. What are the conclusions?

4.1 Cross-cutting Conclusions

The report provides conclusions that cut across individual sectors on a number of key themes, and these are summarised in this briefing note.

4.2 The Importance of Context

Inter-agency approaches are **heavily influenced by the policy and service contexts** in which they operate as well as the specific issues they address. However, common elements of inter-agency approaches can be identified in the literature. Thus while the specifics of the inter-agency initiative must determine the process, mechanisms and so on, **it is also possible and necessary to be guided by available knowledge and experience.**

4.3 The Basis for Inter-agency Working Theories and Rationale

At present, the **theoretical underpinnings of inter-agency work** remain weak and require considerable development in Ireland. The lifecycle approach to policy and service development provides a context for the development of such theory. It focuses on the way

in which the various aspects of the lives of children are integrated and interact, and on how integrated policies and services can effectively support children and address many of the difficulties faced by vulnerable children in particular.

The **rationale underlying inter-agency working** needs to be challenged and evidence based. Strategies should clearly identify when, and in what ways, inter-agency approaches can contribute to meeting children's needs and achieving strategic objectives when other approaches might be more effective.

Good inter-agency initiatives require **good agencies and good services.** It is particularly important in the context of services for children to ensure that inter-agency approaches are not viewed as a way of compensating for poor quality services, for the lack of services, or for under-performing agencies.

4.4 Defining Inter-agency Approaches and Objectives

Definitions of inter-agency work are diverse, reflecting different approaches and different contexts. There is a need for context specific definitions and the use of continuum models.



There is a need to **distinguish between inter-agency working at different levels**, e.g. co-operation in planning and decision making on the one hand, and service delivery on the other as these require different objectives. This approach helps to develop clearer objectives, targets and mechanisms for inter-agency working.

Different **service delivery contexts** require different language, practices and tools. For example, integrated services in the context of *responding* to child protection issues is very different to integrated services in *preventing* early school leaving. Not only are there different sets of actors involved in these contexts, but the issues and structures with which they are concerned also differ considerably.

4.5 Structures, Mechanisms and Actors

Different types of inter-agency approaches require different structures and mechanisms of co-ordination. For example, where the objective is to engage in planning or decision making, a forum, or similar structure, with representatives from the key agencies is required. On the other hand integrated service delivery needs to be reinforced, and underpinned, by a formal structure such as a forum or network, but the services are delivered through different mechanisms such as shared protocols, key workers and case conferences.

Integrated service delivery needs to be reinforced, and underpinned, by a formal structure such as a forum or network but should be delivered through different mechanisms. Three such mechanisms predominate in the Irish context: shared protocols, key workers and case conferences. The first two are not yet in extensive use although interest in both is growing and the key worker approach has been advocated by National Economic and Social Forum (NESF).

When undertaking inter-agency co-operation, there is a need to ensure that **all key agencies or departments** are fully involved in the formal structure. One should also be mindful of the need to keep this structure relatively small and flexible.

The **community sector** has an important role to play in inter-agency processes in the children's sector in Ireland, especially in relation to ensuring community commitment and acceptance of initiatives. In order to support the community sector's involvement there is a need to address difficulties such as a lack of resources and a lack of parity of esteem.

While **formal structures** are necessary to underpin effective integrated service delivery, these can also impede it. The key issues here are the quality of participation, and the difficulties caused by non co-operative partners. These can include partners who are lukewarm to participation in inter-agency work as well as those who actively obstruct integration.



Mechanisms to deal with this type of situation are recommended in the literature, but there is little mention of exactly what these might be apart from some references to providing incentives to ensure compliance.

4.6 Tools and Resources

While the literature is inconclusive on the contribution of specific tools to inter-agency working, it is clear that **tools should be relevant and specific** to the particular level of inter-agency work being undertaken, as well as to the settings, agencies and professionals involved. Amongst the tools that are frequently referenced in the literature are those that support technical excellence and consistency across initiatives. These include central support units, the development of strategic frameworks at national level to guide planning and activity at local level and the development of planning guidelines and related material such as self-audit templates and so on.

More **generic tools** to support training for inter-agency working and the transfer of learning could be developed. There are two areas where a more generic approach to developing tools for inter-agency work in the children's sector may be possible: the provision of training for inter-agency work, and the development of mechanisms to transfer the learning from successful interventions.

4.7 Strategic Planning, Setting Targets, and Monitoring Impact

Two key issues can be gleaned from the literature in relation to **planning and target setting**: (a) there is **huge variability** across initiatives in this regard; (b) there is a growing awareness that they are **essential** in facilitating effective inter-agency working. The area of planning and target setting is one where inter-agency work in the children's sector can draw on previous experience. However, **three key issues** need to be addressed if effective planning and target setting are to become possible, namely:

- good baseline data that can facilitate planning and objective setting;
- the setting of specific, rather than vague or overly general targets and time frames within which these should be achieved;
- appropriate mechanisms to collect the relevant data to underpin ongoing monitoring.

Strategic planning, target setting and monitoring should contribute to the **sustainability of appropriate and effective inter-agency work**. A final issue here is that of sustainability. There is a need to be careful about the ongoing development of inter-agency mechanisms that simply add to the number of initiatives at local level and that risk consigning inter-agency work to pilot projects. Sustainability requires that organisations participating in inter-agency work become adept at being inter-agency organisations and that they learn from inter-agency experiences to reconfigure their existing services.

4.8 Research and Evaluation

The literature reveals a number of areas in which **further research and evaluation** are required if inter-agency work is to develop in an informed and effective manner.

A number of issues have emerged from this area. As already indicated, these include lack of **baseline data, lack of monitoring data and the lack of comparative data**. A further very significant issue is the failure to include the **voice of the child** in evaluations of services that are primarily aimed at improving their wellbeing.

The development of a more comprehensive and systematic approach to evaluating children's services and children's policy is required, as well as mechanisms to involve the participation of children within this. The central question to be asked is to what extent inter-agency working in children's services and policies improve the processes and outcomes experienced by the children concerned, over and above those secured by single agency approaches?

5. What are the recommendations?

In light of the analysis contained in the report, recommendations to assist more effective inter-agency working are provided.

Recommendation 1

It is recommended that when planning, undertaking or reviewing inter-agency co-operation approaches and initiatives agencies in the children's sector take into account the conclusions presented in this report to inform their work.

Recommendation 2

A more robust approach, definition and understanding of inter-agency working should be developed in order to facilitate effective approaches. The main objective of this recommendation is to develop a sectoral consensus and understanding of inter-agency approaches. The following steps are suggested:

- a. A conceptual/theoretical approach to inter-agency working to inform the rationale and the basis for adopting inter-agency interventions across a range of areas should be developed.
- b. A more critical approach to assessing the relevance of inter-agency working in concrete situations is necessary, to avoid the assumption that inter-agency approaches are always the most appropriate response.
- c. There is a need to clarify the language and terminology used to clearly differentiate between integrated planning and integrated service delivery. Lack of precision on this issue can frustrate the development of integrated services.
- d. Conduct and/or commission research to aid understanding of integrated service delivery in different contexts, including the distillation of lessons for specific settings and those that can be applied to inter-agency approaches more broadly. This should include research into the impact of developments in the past ten years or so, including the Children Act, 2001, the National Children's Strategy, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the provisions of Towards 2016, on putting in place national and local structures to facilitate inter-agency working.

Recommendation 3

Measures should be taken to support the development of effective structures of co-operation and to support the members of these structures.

The importance of appropriate structures at various levels – from national to local – is highlighted in the literature. Consideration should be given to the following:

- a. Develop protocols to help ensure the participation of key agencies in local structures. These should incorporate guidelines on active and constructive forms of participation, how agencies might support frontline staff in inter-agency working,

Recommendation 3 *contd*

development of information sharing protocols and other mechanisms of co-operation.

- b. Take actions to help ensure an appropriate level of meaningful involvement of the community and voluntary sector. This might include the development of guidelines for helping to ensure parity of esteem for community sector representatives as well as feedback mechanisms to the wider community. Regard for the fact that community organisations have fewer resources than statutory agencies is also necessary.
- c. Provide guidance and assistance on ways to work with inter-agency structures to identify and respond to problems with non co-operative or obstructing agencies. While this is an issue that needs to be addressed within the context of any specific inter-agency initiative, it is important to anticipate any such difficulties and agree mechanisms for overcoming them.

Recommendation 4

Appropriate Irish resources should be provided to support inter-agency co-operation.

Providing resources, tools and incentives for inter-agency working is recognised as important but remains somewhat under-developed within the literature. In developing Irish resources it would be important to draw and build on relevant international resources and tools, for example resources on the Every Child Matters website (www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters), tools developed by the Children's Work Force Development Council (www.cwdcouncil.org.uk) and other relevant international resources and tools. In addressing this within the Irish children's sector, the following are important:

- a. Develop training for inter-agency working in the children's sector. This training should address key issues such as clarifying roles and responsibilities, defining inter-agency working in the specific context and building agency-to-agency rather than, or as well as, individual-to-individual relationships. Training should also take a whole organisation approach, that is all relevant personnel within the organisation should be trained and not just those seen to have a primary role within the inter-agency process.
- b. Develop a toolbox for inter-agency working at all levels, to include technical expertise, training and

Recommendation 4 *contd*

sharing of good practice. Resources to facilitate target setting, data collection and identifying impact indicators are particularly important.

- c. Support the sharing of learning and dissemination of good practice. This could be facilitated by publications on inter-agency working in the children's sector but would need to be accompanied by pragmatic measures to bed down learning in various contexts.

Recommendation 5

Actions should be taken to support the effective planning, strategy development and review of inter-agency working and initiatives in the children's sector.

Currently, there is a lot of unevenness across inter-agency initiatives with regard to how strategically they are planned, implemented and reviewed. Work in this area should include the following:

- a. Help to ensure that inter-agency initiatives have good knowledge and data on the local context is essential. Ways to provide relevant data to inter-agency initiatives, to assist them in developing integrated impact indicators, and to develop data gathering mechanisms should be explored.
- b. Help to ensure that all levels of inter-agency work are involved in strategic planning targeting setting and monitoring and that this extends to absorbing the learning within organisations.
- c. Promote a more systematic approach to evaluation with systemic participation by children and young people. Evaluations of integrated service delivery mechanisms involving a client perspective are particularly warranted.

6. What is the benefit of this study?

This study provides three main benefits. First, this study complements the consultation process with stakeholders and organisational case studies on inter-agency co-operation in children's services, also commissioned by the CAAB. Together they provide a wealth of information in relation to inter-agency working, thereby creating the evidence base for the CAAB document, 'Guidance to Support Effective Inter-agency Working Across Irish Children's Services'.

Second, it brings together the findings from a large volume of research evidence on inter-agency co-operation. This should be of particular benefit to Irish policy makers, managers and practitioners as not only does it distil the lessons from international reviews but it also presents lessons from previous Irish public policy initiatives (e.g. City and County Development Boards/The Social Inclusion Measure, local partnership projects, RAPID and the Local Drug Task Forces) and from individual reports from three core sectors of Irish children's services, namely: child protection and welfare, education, and youth justice.

Third, it presents a set of recommendations that, if implemented, are likely to help improve the effectiveness of inter-agency co-operation in Irish children's services.

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 Summary Report, Full Report or Web-conference.