Policing & Reducing Crime

Briefing Note

REDUCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ...WHAT WORKS? MULTI-AGENCY FORA

Introduction

Research in the 1970s and 1980s revealed inadequate domestic violence services, and widespread dissatisfaction among women and children attempting to access these services. Resulting pressure from the refuge movement and changes in public attitudes led to the idea of setting up domestic violence initiatives specifically to co-ordinate provision and to promote good practice, and, in the late 1980s, the first experimental multi-agency projects were established. Encouraged by various reports and government publications, more and more domestic violence fora followed these initial pioneers. In the late 1990s, multi-agency initiatives on domestic violence formed a major plank of government domestic violence policy and were the subject of an important Home Office Circular in 1995, currently being updated.

Successful multi-agency work on domestic violence (also interchangeably called 'inter-agency') occurs informally in many areas, with no need for a formal initiative. Nevertheless, at least 200 specific domestic violence fora with a local co-ordinating brief now exist. The inter-agency approach includes both domestic violence fora (which attempt to bring together all relevant agencies to build joint responses), and specific multi-agency projects (e.g. to develop practice guidance or a particular policy) which vary from locality to locality. There is no single model of inter-agency working and local circumstances play an important part.

Who takes part and at what level?

- Participating agencies include local authority departments (including housing, social services and education) and specialist units, the police, probation, health services, refuges, women's support and outreach projects, community projects and the voluntary sector. The two agencies that participate most frequently are the police and refuges.

- Many fora have been initiated by police officers, resulting in much dedicated and careful multi-agency work. However, it is recommended that the police do not lead or dominate fora, due to the sensitivities involved and the possible difficulties of equalising relationships with other agencies, for example, small-scale women's refuges, black women's groups etc.

- Criminal justice agencies (apart from police and probation), education departments and health services are often notable by their absence, although there has been more participation, particularly by health services, in recent years. Further local and national guidance to these agencies to encourage them to take part would be of assistance.

- In general, members of initiatives need to be the agreed representatives of their agency and be able to influence its policy. Thus, the writing of inter-agency domestic violence work into relevant job specifications, so that it forms an agreed part of work programmes rather than being an 'add-on', is to be recommended. Some localities have experimented with a two-tier system of senior level strategy groups, plus local practitioner inter-agency fora. Senior management support is, therefore, of importance. Nevertheless, a strength of domestic violence inter-agency work — which needs to be preserved in future development — is often its grass roots dynamism and committed, activist stance.

Structures and terms of reference

Many fora operate initially as networking groups, which can have a vital co-ordinating function. However, these initiatives need to become more than 'talking shops' in the medium term, at least. If there are no positive

changes as a result of the work of a forum, alternative approaches are indicated. There is nothing magic or prescriptive about the multi-agency approach. The rationale for setting up inter-agency initiatives is to improve the safety of abused women and their children in concrete ways. If this does not happen, an alternative course of action is needed.

The 'talking shop' problem can be avoided by the development of agreed *Terms of reference*, likely to include *Guiding principles, Aims and objectives, Equal opportunity polices* and other agreed procedures. Specific *Objectives* need to be achievable, giving rise to agreed, practical *Action plans*, which are regularly reviewed and updated and usually time-limited so that participants can plan their workloads.

While domestic violence initiatives are often collaborative ventures, as they develop, they need an operating structure with clear lines of accountability. This most commonly consists of a steering committee and sub-groups with specific, achievable briefs, often time-limited.

What do inter-agency initiatives do?

Apart from networking and exchanging information, inter-agency fora usually specialise in:
● monitoring domestic violence, identifying gaps in provision and attempting to fill these gaps;
● co-ordinating the work of member agencies and promoting good practice (e.g. developing domestic violence training, policies and practice guidance). New practice just developing and deriving from the Duluth project in the US includes tracking domestic violence cases through the system and conducting institutional audits to assess the practice of different agencies; and
● educative and preventative initiatives (including public awareness programmes, preventative work in schools, perpetrators projects etc.)

The primary goal, however, tends to be the maintenance of adequate emergency refuge, support and outreach services for abused women and their children.

One wider response in the UK has been the formulation of policy-level domestic violence strategies across a whole locality, with chief officer support. This often involves creative liaison between statutory agencies in particular.

Legislation which requires partnerships can be helpful if used constructively, including the positive developments in the Crime and Disorder Act as regards crime and disorder audits, partnerships and strategies. There can be dangers in new legislation, however, potentially leading to the marginalisation of previous initiatives and of the voluntary sector.

The statutory sector has devoted much welcome time and energy to developing multi-agency initiatives and in many areas initiatives would not have survived without this input.

Resources, funding and employees

While many officers attending fora are inspired by the potential of inter-agency co-ordination, they often lack the time, energy or resources to take their inspiration forward. Although lack of resources should not routinely be used as an excuse for inaction, many examples exist of inter-agency fora losing their momentum as a result.

Some fora have obtained a measure of funding support for employees and projects, but the vast majority of initiatives do not have employees. However, where co-ordinators or development workers are employed, especially if they have administrative support and some resources with which to work, projects are almost invariably transformed. Co-ordinators are able to give initiatives focus and direction, to 'oil' the inter-agency process and to operationalise agreed work programmes.

Cost-effectiveness and evaluations

Many multi-agency domestic violence fora monitor and review their work informally, and well-developed projects have been able to conduct evaluations. However, few are able systematically to evaluate their work (partly due to the expense and time-consuming nature of evaluations), and there is almost no work on the cost-effectiveness of multi-agency domestic violence fora in this country. Are they, in fact, value for money? The time and salaries of participating officers can be an expensive and overlooked item.

There is some tentative evidence that services which women and children receive have been improved as a result of inter-agency work, but this is not always clear.

While innovative co-ordinating, preventative and educational work has been undertaken in various localities, in others multi-agency initiatives appear to use up resources and energy, and divert attention away from the provision of support, refuge and outreach services. Thus, inter-agency work can act as a 'smokescreen' and a 'face-saver', while very little actually changes.

To avoid this, evaluation criteria need to include elements such as improvements in safety, concrete changes in policy and practice, and service user satisfaction with changes resulting from the initiative's work.

Conclusions and recommendations

Benefits of multi-agency working

These include (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, 1998):

- clear and transparent communication mechanisms;
- better targeted resources;
- common approaches to service delivery based on women's needs and preferences;
- more effective pooling of resources;
- the translation of policies into action;
- enhanced understanding by service providers of the issues that affect women; and
- up-front identification of needs and services to meet those needs.

Difficulties of multi-agency working

Achieving co-ordinated working means that power differences between agencies need to be addressed in practical, achievable ways. Local initiatives may have to address several issues:

- The voluntary sector tends to be under-represented in multi-agency domestic violence initiatives, and there may be a tendency for statutory agencies to 'take over'. Concrete, agreed strategies need to be in place to combat this tendency.

- One of the most pressing issues faced by such initiatives can be how to maintain the central position of the refuge movement, as more objectively powerful agencies such as the police and the local authority, become involved in multi-agency co-ordination, and how to retain and develop an independent women's provision.

- Women's Aid is accepted as the lead national agency for women and children experiencing domestic violence. A variety of initiatives have built creative and profitable relations between other agencies and refuges, and, in some areas, Women's Aid takes a leading role in inter-agency initiatives (sometimes, however, at the expense of other parts of their workload). Recommended ways forward include Women's Aid and women's services always being consulted, taking the chair, or occupying a reserved position on the management of the initiative.

- Potential marginalisation can also affect small minority agencies (such as black women's groups, community self-help groups etc.), as domestic violence is mainstreamed. Many inter-agency initiatives have not begun to address these issues, and it is very rare indeed for steering or management groups to reflect diversity. However, current good practice is that equality issues should run through all the activities of a domestic violence inter-agency initiative.

- There is much current interest in service users' views in all fields, and the women's movement against domestic violence has always attempted to raise the voices of abused women and children. Nevertheless, women who have experienced domestic violence are rarely part of inter-agency developments except where they participate as professionals.

- Consultation and advisory systems need to be put in place involving domestic violence survivors, so that fora and services are responsive to abused women and children's needs and views. These could include focus groups, domestic violence survivors fora or advisory groups, and consultation through Women's Aid.

- Evaluation and monitoring in relation to effectiveness is vital and after a networking stage, evaluations need to include criteria relating to concrete improvements.

- It is important that innovation is not necessarily promoted at the expense of longer-established initiatives which have been working solidly to combat domestic violence in a locality, often without any support, and which may not therefore qualify as cutting edge initiatives.

The full report contains many practical suggestions, examples and recommendations for 'what works' in relation to inter-agency work. Key recommendations include:

- further national and local guidance from central and local government, and from national co-ordinating agencies, to make domestic violence a core part of their agencies' work and to encourage the inter-agency approach;
- adequate resourcing;
- full involvement of relevant statutory agencies with senior management support;
- the central involvement of Women's Aid and the refuge movement and of women's and community organisations, together with some form of accountability to, and involvement of, women experiencing domestic violence; and
- the situating of inter-agency work within a wider, overall policy framework of support, and including adequate general service provision.

To summarise, local policy and practice has been transformed in some areas by multi-agency domestic violence work. There is much creativity, but it can also become a blind alley, indicating that an uncritical adhering to the inter-agency approach would be unwise. At best, the approach can form a creative 'next step', so that the provision of services and the development of co-ordinating, campaigning, preventative and educative initiatives become complementary parts of a comprehensive approach.

Further reading

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) (1988) *Guidance on Preparing and Implementing a Multi-agency Strategy to Tackle Violence Against Women.* Edinburgh: COSLA.

Dominy, N. and Radford, L. (1996) *Domestic Violence in Surrey: Developing an Effective Inter-agency response.* Surrey: Surrey County Council and Roehampton Institute.

Harwin, N., Malos, E. and Hague, G. (2000) *New Opportunities, Old Challenges.* London: Whiting and Birch.

Hague, G., Malos, E. and Dear, W. (1996) *Multi-agency Work and Domestic Violence: a National Study of Inter-agency Initiatives.* Bristol: The Policy Press.