

Holistic approaches to early intervention: what works in delivering effective partnerships

Lesley Noaks, Cardiff School of Social Sciences

Abstract

This article reviews the strategic shift in the promotion of partnership working in the social care field. Drawing on empirical research undertaken as part of the evaluation of On Track, the article provides a review of the challenges of operationalising a partnership approach. The On Track project is a government funded, early intervention programme that required a collaborative approach. With an alertness to the potential for rhetorical claims in relation to partnership working, the article provides a review of the key factors that facilitated implementation of the On Track programme as a collaborative venture. It provides important insights for other partnership projects about what works in delivering integrated services.

Keywords: Strategy, multi-agency, partnership working, service users, facilitation, collaboration

A language of 'partnerships' has been borne. In contrast to a reliance upon rigid, autonomous bureaucracies, networks of diverse group interests have become the dominant ethic. They have been accompanied by a greater emphasis upon the desirability of a more holistic, rather than specialist, approach to social problems. (Crawford, 1997, p.25)

Introduction

Crawford's statement constitutes part of his mapping of key influences on U.K. criminal justice policy at the end of the twentieth century. He points to a rapid alignment, by both politicians and policy-makers, with the concept of partnership as the key route to tackling crime. Notions of collaboration became the dominant discourse in relation to preventing and addressing crime with a direct impact on both legislation and policy. The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) epitomised such trends, placing on a statutory footing the requirement in England and Wales for every area to establish a Community Safety Partnership. At the same time, the legislation required the establishment of Youth Offending Teams which incorporate a range of professionals

(social workers, probation officers, educationalists, police officers) brought together to provide a more co-ordinated approach to youth offending.

Commitment to the principle of partnership was not restricted to crime related strategies and was more broadly adopted in the social care field. The importance of co-ordinated approaches between professionals and open channels of communication with the community has been highlighted in a series of public enquiries in the social care field (DOH 1995; Hallett, 1995; Laming 2003; Bichard – Home Office 2005). The report of Lord Laming's enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Victoria Climbié called for a number of measures to be introduced to enhance working in partnership. These include:

Recommendation 8: The Management Board for Services to Children and Families must appoint a director responsible for ensuring that inter-agency arrangements are appropriate and effective. (Laming, 2003, p.372)

Recommendation 15: The newly created Local Management Board for Services to

Children and Families should be required to ensure training on an inter-agency basis is provided. The government inspectorates should evaluate the effectiveness of this. Staff working in the relevant agencies should be required to demonstrate that their practice with respect to inter-agency working is up to date by successfully completing appropriate training courses. (Laming, 2003, p.373)

The Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (HMSO, 2003), which preceded the 2004 Children Act, also has as one of its stated priorities “to break down organisational boundaries” (2003, p.10). The focus of this article is a review of the key factors that serve to promote effective partnership working. Drawing on the evaluation of the multi-agency On Track project the piece identifies the operational and strategic factors that facilitate and challenge partnership working.

The operational context to partnership working

The concept of partnership working is not new to either the social care or crime control fields. The Seebohm reforms of the 1970s, which produced large generic social services departments, were a response to the perceived overlap in the largely uncoordinated social care provision. Typically, in response to public enquiries and tragic failures in public provision there have been calls for enhanced inter-agency collaboration and ‘working together’ (Butler & Shaw, 1996). By the latter half of the 1990s there had been something of a shift in the requirement for partnership working with the launch of a series of initiatives that were contingent on evidence of joint working. This included urban regeneration schemes; youth offending teams; community safety strategies and early years partnerships. A distinct feature of these developments was the increasing requirement for evidence of community

engagement and consultation although, in practice, the challenge has been to avoid partnership arrangements that are professionally dominated and have limited engagement with service users (Noaks *et al.*, 2004; Bullock *et al.*, 2006). A further feature of recent requirements has been an expectation of co-ordinated approaches across the public and independent sector. Crawford (1997) went as far as describing the recent promotion of partnership approaches as a ‘quiet revolution’ in the delivery of services in the social care field. Kampenaar (2001, p.15) describes this period as reflecting “renewed emphasis and enthusiasm in partnership working”.

Operationalising the principles of partnership working

The key principle driving the contemporary collaboration movement is the perceived need for a more holistic approach to social problems. In the case of offending behaviours the significance of the inter-relationship between multiple risk factors, such as membership of a delinquent peer group, low levels of parental supervision and failure at school (Graham & Bowling, 1995; Wikstrom & Sampson, 2006) was crucial to the promotion of the collaborative movement. The commitment to the principle of collaboration went as far as making evidence of partnership a requirement of government funded crime prevention initiatives.

The On Track (OT) project, on which this piece is based, reflects the three core concepts of prevention, community and partnership that Crawford has defined as critical to the “major shift in paradigm” he describes (Crawford, 1997, p.25). Evidencing partnership in both planning and service delivery was a central requirement for OT projects. In that regard, On Track exemplifies change in the “nature and shape of the administrative structures of British governance” (*ibid*, p.55). The evaluation undertaken by the author (Noaks *et al.*,

2004) provides the opportunity to consider the implications of requiring and establishing such partnership approaches.

The On Track programme

On Track is a multiple interventions crime prevention programme targeted at children aged 4-12 and their families. It was initially established within the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme, which sought to deliver preventative programmes of crime reduction and evaluate the evidence for what works to reduce anti-social and offending behaviour.

The OT programme was premised on addressing links between offending behaviour and known risk or protective factors associated with the individual, family and/or community. The programme was established in 24 areas of England and Wales.

Delivery plans were required to show evidence of service development under the five core categories of:

- Home Visiting
- Family Therapy
- Parent Support and Training
- Home/School Partnership
- Pre-school Education.

At the same time, there was scope for local areas to develop a sixth category of specialist services. Such inputs were less prescribed and as such were more likely to reflect local needs and priorities.

Research methodology

There were four phases to the aspect of the research that studied partnership working:

Phase 1 - Participant-observation in steering group meetings and project based interviews in six OT areas. As well as the six coordinators the sample consisted of ten partners including four educationalists; two

voluntary organisation staff; one social services worker; one urban regeneration worker; one police officer and one parent. Everyone who was approached agreed to be interviewed. All but one of the interviews were face to face and were undertaken in the project areas. In the remaining case a telephone interview was undertaken.

Phase 2 – a survey of steering group and operational group members (eight project areas). The main aim of this stage of the research was to gain a perspective from a broader range of On Track partners regarding the effectiveness of joint working. To achieve this, data was collected by means of a self-complete postal questionnaire. A response rate of 53% (134 out of 253 questionnaires that were distributed) was achieved across the eight projects.

Phase 3 – follow-up project based interviews with providers and service users (seven project areas). Follow up interviews were undertaken with 15 providers and 19 service users across seven of the eight areas. Face to face interviews were undertaken to achieve an in-depth perspective on the effectiveness of partnership working on the part of service providers and, most importantly, service users.

Phase 4 – consultation with other evaluation teams to gather evidence from the remaining 16 On Track projects.

In the reporting of results all of the project areas are anonymised and referred to as areas A-H.

Evidence of collaboration

From the initial launch of OT, the area-based strategic planning required evidence of multi-agency collaboration and active engagement with local communities. Projects had markedly different starting points in terms of the established level and quality of multi-agency collaboration and

engagement with the local community. In practice, projects could be placed on a continuum ranging from those which were in a position to draw on an established tradition of partnership working (some of which included partnership with service users) to those with more limited experience of this type of professional approach and little or no experience of working collaboratively with community representatives. Subsequent operational management groups also showed some diversity in the extent to which activities were driven by the partnership approach.

OT was reported by service deliverers to be a “somewhat unique” project in requiring partners to go beyond strategic planning and to work together to provide services. For most, their experience to that point in time had involved joint planning of services rather than joint delivery. In that regard, OT is illustrative of the factors that serve to promote effective partnership working. The evaluation offered the opportunity for a detailed review of the factors that facilitate and challenge effective partnership working. This paper provides a focus on the factors that supported best practice in partnership working. These included: early appointment of a project manager/co-ordinator committed to partnership working; supportive infrastructures evidencing an equal commitment; robust service level agreements; clear and open lines of communication; trust between professionals; and resourcing of partnership approaches, including training opportunities.

The research found that very few community users were part of the formal strategic or operational groupings that supported OT. Limited plans were evident to introduce service users to such strategic groupings. One area did include service users and another reported that service users were being offered training to play such a role but, in the majority of cases, the

strategic partnership work focused on co-operation between professional providers.

In the latter stages of the research, there was evidence of increasing engagement by projects with users and the adoption of innovative methods to achieve this. Some of those projects with no history of engagement with service users increasingly sought to move away from a top-down approach and develop OT in line with user priorities. This was acknowledged and welcomed by service users. In some areas there was evidence of service users who had engaged with OT moving on to take an increasingly active role in their community.

The research pointed to various ways in which the innovative working methods adopted by OT teams had contributed positively to the culture of partnership working in their locality. In particular, it was felt that the requirements for planning and delivery of OT services to be premised on partnership promoted joint working. The innovative approach to collaborative working adopted by some OT teams provided a good role model and was felt by some professional providers to have contributed positively to the culture of partnership in local communities. Such experience provides important groundwork for future collaborative ventures.

Transforming strategy into delivery

I don't feel that the management board has really got to grips with the issue of partnership. You know people turn up to the meetings mostly and contribute but don't have sufficient time to give to meetings and the following up of the meetings and taking issues back to their own agencies and I don't feel that has worked. (OT co-ordinator)

The transformation of strategy into operational practice was a key issue for the research. On Track was typically represented by respondents as requiring new

levels of organisational collaboration described by one co-ordinator as a working rather than a planning partnership. Another felt that the challenges of multi-agency working only became apparent “once you start working in partnership”. They went on to say:

We've had pots of money in the past and everyone has said, 'thanks very much I'll have that money'. Once you've got the money you walk away from it and leave everybody to work it out. What we have tried to ensure here is that they don't walk away. That we keep bringing them back into the partnership arena and we keep saying, 'you have a responsibility to ensure that this is led by you' or that we make a collective decision about how the referral system is operated. And that's been a struggle. But it hasn't not worked.
(OT co-ordinator)

It was acknowledged by another co-ordinator that “there are different levels of partnership and the strategic does not always cascade down to the operational” and one co-ordinator felt that in the early stages of implementation the strategic partnership had limited impact on the operational day-to-day running of OT:

Partnership secured the posts and enabled those people to access professional supervision.

Prompt appointment of a co-ordinator was seen to be a key factor in establishing an OT identity. In all six areas in the original research such an appointment was key to formulating the OT identity with possible partner agencies and users. In one of those areas that made a delayed appointment, having the framework for the OT infrastructure in place before the co-ordinator was appointed was described as “putting the cart before the horse”. Despite the fact that a copy of the original bid was included with the co-ordinator’s job application form they found that “it took

some time to get your head around it”. In another area, which had experienced major shifts in responsibility for OT, the key stakeholders revealed gaps in their knowledge and understandings of the original OT vision and objectives.

A number of the interviewees saw the transformation of strategy into practice as a key function for the OT co-ordinator and their core team. One of the stakeholders described the co-ordinator’s role as:

Trying to ensure that players are genuinely engaged, inputting what they originally agreed, disseminating and avoiding residents feeling done to.

Another respondent described the need for a process of narrowing down general strategy to specific policies. They described the need for “the co-ordinator’s vision to mould ideas”. The challenge of this was acknowledged with a comment that “we are very different departments who work very differently”.

Some providers felt that secondment of staff from other agencies into the OT team helped with establishing an identity:

I think it was a facilitating factor that people have worked hard with their parent agencies to try and make known what On Track does. (OT Service provider)

Others were slightly more guarded about such an approach:

Well it's partnership with a small p. We are a partnership with our own specific roles but dip into each other. (OT co-ordinator)

In this case the provider did not feel that they had achieved an adequate level of rebranding into an OT team.

Good practice in multi-agency partnership working

The evaluation of OT provided the opportunity to identify good practice in relation to effective collaboration. Dissemination of such findings is important as multi-agency delivery models are increasingly deployed. In that regard the research pointed to the significance of effective communication and co-ordination as a key means of transforming strategy into delivery. Such co-ordination proved to be important both within OT teams and between OT and other mainstream services. As OT expanded, internal co-ordination became increasingly challenging. Investment of sole responsibility for such co-ordination with the co-ordinator/manager became insufficient. As teams expanded and increasingly moved toward delivering the multiple interventions model that a more holistic approach required, maintaining co-ordination proved to be beyond the remit of a single individual. In area D, the co-ordination responsibility was vested with an individual. However, when this person left their post, co-ordination collapsed, highlighting the potential fragility of such an approach. It proved important for projects to put in place infrastructures and systems to operationalise co-ordination. Evidence of best practice in this regard included:

- Establishing co-ordination teams to deal with allocation of referrals and case reviews;
- Accessible written information, for example service level agreements;
- Multi-agency staff development sessions (but important that these are supported by written information);
- A shared OT base/location (although even this is insufficient without formalising the opportunity for liaison);
- Appointment of intervention co-ordinators with designated

responsibility for co-ordination of service delivery.

Without such practices there was a sense of interventions working in isolation rather than as part of a co-ordinated holistic package. Fieldwork with project managers and others involved with service delivery pointed to some over-estimation of the level of co-ordination. For example, fieldwork for the impact research (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003) identified that some providers were unaware if those to whom they were providing a service were receiving other OT interventions. It is difficult to see, in such circumstances, how service users could experience OT as a co-ordinated programme.

As well as the measures identified above, projects have demonstrated some innovation in attempting to tackle the co-ordination issue. Project E has, for example, established an OT website that providers are actively encouraged to visit and leave messages on at regular intervals. Projects had also put in place co-ordination meetings and team development days, although several providers acknowledged the potential workload issues in achieving effective co-ordination and the danger of an overly bureaucratic approach:

It's been really difficult I would say with partnership. I can say that - the facilitation of it is messy, it's a bit muddled because - I mean we've got this system now where if I need an education element brought in if I'm working with a family I have to make an internal referral to the education team I can't just go to a partner, to a colleague and say "I've got this issue with a school can you visit the school" ... I can't do that it has to be an internal referral to education as I mentioned which should only be given in a Thursday afternoon caseload management meeting. (OT Service provider)

The view was expressed that individuals needed a training input to achieve effective partnership working. The required radical shift in working methods needed to be acknowledged and an appropriate training input provided:

We've had recruitment and retainment problems and initially I believe some people just could not make the change into a new role. You've got to leave everything behind and try and form some new way of working and work with others and it can be hard and I know some people found that very, very difficult and there's the element then of personalities, knowing somebody's previous role, where they've come from, and I've never worked in that before and I've found that very difficult. (OT Service provider)

Shifts in working practices

Partnership working in general is perceived to have brought about a radical shift in the profile of workloads and working methods, particularly for senior managers. Evidence of the positive benefits that derive from the work of OT will be vital in encouraging such staff to adjust workload to accommodate new approaches. One service provider described partnership as “a way of life and central to effective delivery of core services”. This reflects some of the shift in policy and prioritising of partnership approaches described earlier. The police officer in the first sample reported how their entire role involved some form of partnership working and how strategic collaboration received greater priority than their operational inputs. Another respondent highlighted that organisations were at a relatively early stage in what was a radically new working approach. For some areas, attendance at such meetings was particularly resource intensive but a key requirement to operationalise holistic solutions. The organisational issues highlighted as requiring further attention were:

- The lack of community engagement in partnership arrangements. The focus was mostly on multi-agency working with direct involvement by service users extremely limited. Something which might be described as a ‘rhetoric of communitarianism’.
- The lack of organisational infrastructures to support partnership working. One area graphically described the bureaucratic difficulties that proved impossible to surmount in advertising a joint post that cut across several local agencies.

Several respondents reported that significant amounts of their time were invested in multi-agency forums in marked contrast to their role five years ago when little or no such inputs were evident. Booker (2006) has commented on how the integration of Children’s Services has brought with it issues for the professional identity of staff, with managers needing to address overlap in function, rivalry and competition.

Achieving an emerging culture of partnership working

Interviews with service providers pointed to various ways in which the innovative working methods adopted by OT teams had provided a good role model and contributed positively to the culture of partnership working in their locality. Typically, blocks and challenges related to a need to work across professional boundaries. Reference was frequently made to initial suspicion and misgiving and the need to work through that to build trust:

I think it's encouraged people to look at other ways of working and other ways of doing things and to trust us enough really to let us do that and start working at an earlier stage with children and families. In relation to health visiting and Sure Start, there were a few problems in their relationships and we stuck our

heads above the parapet, it was a bit like 'oh no, what are this lot going to be doing.' Again, it has been very much the strength of the team members, that they have been able to work through that. (OT Service provider)

Multi-agency truly is a reality in On Track. It wasn't always the case. People were initially guarded and needed to build trust. (OT co-ordinator)

Often services talk about working in partnership but miss the fundamental principles of what that means. We aim to model those principles whether or not we are talking to families or professionals. Hopefully people will have a sense of how effectively that can work. That it's about negotiation, problem solving and creativity. (OT co-ordinator)

For some, the OT approach itself was seen to be innovative with related positive ramifications for evolving partnership arrangements in the locality:

We are a partnership not an organisation. On Track isn't just one of the agencies. It is seen as a partnership venture. (OT co-ordinator)

Most providers felt that OT had met its aspiration to deliver services grounded in a partnership approach. One co-ordinator commented that OT's efforts had made working in partnerships "more accessible and acceptable". Such co-ordination was essential to achieving a more holistic solution to social problems.

Lessons learned on creating effective partnerships

The evaluation of OT has provided the opportunity to consider the factors that have facilitated implementation of the programme as a collaborative venture. The 12 factors set out below will have generic relevance for a range of policy domains

including health, education and regeneration schemes:

(i) The significance of the role of the co-ordinator and the stage at which they were appointed. The challenge of operationalising partnership working required a relatively high level of appointment. The status of the co-ordinator/manager was significant and management experience vital. Strong leadership and a commitment from the top to partnership working were seen to be critical.

(ii) The time lost in developing action plans that mostly preceded the appointment of the co-ordinator and their core team. Such a strategy worked against seamless strategic planning - many had to play catch up, key personnel had moved on and some agencies claimed no recall of original commitments in relation to OT. This was a structural problem in that money for the appointment of co-ordinators was not made available until after action plans were approved. Those projects that took up money made available for the appointment of external consultants to write bids, report delay in local partners identifying with the OT programme. Our recommendation would be for money to be made available for the appointment of programme co-ordinators at an earlier stage. This would have facilitated ownership of the programme, made for continuity in planning and saved time and resources in the longer term.

(iii) More acknowledgement of the need for a project start-up phase. Expectations regarding when service delivery would begin were unrealistic. One co-ordinator described the OT model as "complex" and felt that time spent on laying the foundations was vital. The need for such planning, including developing service level agreements, was not acknowledged and the discourse quickly shifted into suggestions of delay in delivery. Several respondents also felt that insufficient time was allowed for community consultation in the initial

planning phase. The time scales were felt to be too short to allow for genuine community consultation with the consequence that projects delivered little more than tokenistic efforts. One respondent considered that:

there was little time for informed discussion and to consider where On Track fitted in the bigger picture. The process was rushed and there was not enough time to see where it fitted with other initiatives. Without this it felt like a knee jerk response. (OT Service provider)

Another felt that short time-scales meant that it was 'opportunistic' as to which agencies were part of the initial consultation process. This was felt to have an ongoing effect on an agency's understanding and connection with OT and negatively impacted on its engagement with providing data for the evaluation. Broadly, projects reported limited acknowledgement on the part of the Home Office of Huxham's (1996, p.6) finding that "collaboration is inherently more time-consuming - and hence resource consuming and costly".

(iv) Acknowledgement of the importance of support networks for co-ordinators. In some areas, co-ordinators were isolated, with the future direction of OT overly reliant on a single individual. Management infrastructures and some delegation to other senior staff were important. Some of the individual pressure of the position is reflected in the turnover in staff and the negative impact on service delivery once those individuals leave.

(v) The importance of time spent on devising inter-agency service level agreements. This can look like a lack of activity and output but those areas that gave early attention to this have experienced less in the way of delay in the longer term. Area B, which described not having a local culture of using such instruments, has experienced ongoing uncertainty and related

delay regarding working practices. This has negatively impacted on their ability to retain staff. Service level agreements can also be beneficial in the face of a lack of continuity in strategic planning. They can be a valuable tool in a climate of strategic shifts and deflection of policy and overall direction. Information sharing was seen to be a crucial issue in facilitating collaboration and the need for agreements to be formalised in service-level agreements.

(vi) The significance of task groups as a strategy for transforming the strategic into operational policy. Such groups provide an important tier in service delivery and are more amenable than large steering groups to input and participation by service users.

(vii) More resources and support for community based partnership groupings. The research uncovered a need to acknowledge the shift in role experienced by professional groups and, where appropriate, provide training on working effectively. Training might also incorporate guidance on working with service users. Such inputs evidence a commitment to genuine community engagement.

(viii) Avoiding rhetoric. Several respondents felt there was a measure of rhetoric regarding governmental commitments to partnership working with a lack of awareness of the practicalities of implementation. The challenges that were felt to be particularly overlooked centrally were time constraints – including, as indicated above, insufficient time to undertake effective consultation and for mutual understanding and trust to be established in partnership forums. One respondent suggested that the government had a:

Notional idea of partnership and not the faintest inkling of what it implies. In practice it is time consuming and that is not supported financially by central government. (Service provider)

(ix) Sharing of skills and expertise and a willingness to be honest regarding gaps in knowledge. Threats to effective collaboration were felt to be the predominance of an insular perspective with “people still fighting their corners, often linked to budgets” (Partner provider). Trust between professional groups and with service users was felt to be a vital component:

On Track has pulled together a group of different professionals with a different ethos in how they work. This has had implications for confidentiality and information sharing. This has been a challenge within a multi-agency team but in the same respect it has added different perspectives on how to work together.
(Service provider)

For multi-agency practice to work effectively, professionals had to be prepared to work beyond their own professional boundaries. Personal commitment to partnership working was felt to be particularly important but this needed to be backed up by organisational features, such as service level agreements.

(x) Efficiently-run meetings. Opportunities for decision-making will encourage participants to attend. Overly-large meetings are a constraint on decision-making with the danger that there is merely a reporting function rather than critical discussion and debate (see previous point regarding task groups). Effective chairing of such meetings needs to be supported by clear and accessible minutes. In sum, the focus, size, membership and administration of such meetings all proved to be critical factors.

(xi) Build into the infrastructure opportunities for communication across agencies and with service users. Face to face opportunities for sharing views and perspectives were seen to be crucial in operationalising partnership. It was acknowledged that time constraints can

mean this is not always feasible. Other innovative options include project websites and active encouragement and training for partners to use the web on a regular basis.

(xii) Location in an accessible and user-friendly base. The atmosphere should be conducive to both service users and professionals. Regular use by the community was seen as important in establishing an OT identity. One of the projects well-served in this regard received 40% of their referrals directly from members of the community visiting the centre.

Conclusion

Partnership is not a cheap option. To work effectively it needs time and resources invested. (Service provider)

While acknowledging that effective partnership working can be resource intensive a majority of the research participants identified considerable positive benefits deriving from joint working. Respondents suggested that OT provides a unique example of strategic partnership translating into collaborative service delivery. They also point to the increased prevalence of partnership working as a mode of delivery. In that regard, the lessons learned from this piece of research will have implications for other collaborative projects.

Experience shows that effective partnership working does not occur without opportunities being formally factored into organisational infrastructures. This is acknowledged by the Laming Report (2003) and endorsed by this research. Where effective partnership working does take place it can be extremely positive for the co-ordination of multi-disciplinary service delivery and seamless planning:

The profile of the school has been raised and parents are choosing the school for

its support services among other things.
(Service provider)

It's a privilege to work so closely with experts in other fields. (Service provider)

The multi-agency approach can only be a positive thing as repetition is less likely to occur and expertise will be used to the most effect. (Service provider)

From the outset, partnership working was at the core of planning and delivery of OT. Effective collaboration was critical in meeting the challenge of implementing multiple interventions in a holistic and co-ordinated manner. This paper shows evidence of how this is being successfully achieved in some areas but with others having some way to go in achieving required levels of collaboration. This evidences the challenge of operationalising a collaborative approach and the need to avoid assumptions that genuine partnership approaches will happen without a focus of energy and effort.

Recent government policies for children and families in the U.K., particularly promotion of Identification, Referral and Tracking and the 2004 Children Act, clearly demonstrate that multi-agency collaboration is seen as the way forward. In that regard, the experiences of OT are highly relevant.

Effective co-ordination of services required commitment from the top and an open and receptive stance in relation to diverse professional groups. Bringing together professionals in new collaborative ventures often entailed some initial wariness. Factors that served to overcome any initial resistance included joint training and regular multi-agency meetings. Such meetings served to establish team policy and build a team identity. It proved important to foster a culture of partnership working. Without such an ethos, professionals tended to work in parallel rather than collaboratively.

The groundwork required to establish effective professional partnerships is time consuming, a particular issue for public services under pressure. Explicit acknowledgement of the increased workload, particularly for middle and senior managers, is vital. In sum, achieving effective collaboration is costly in employee time and needs to be appropriately factored into job descriptions. The positive benefit of such endeavour is a more co-ordinated approach in regard to service delivery. Where the goal is also to achieve partnership with community representatives, the research demonstrates that this will only be achieved once effective collaboration is secured amongst key professionals.

While achieving effective collaboration is resource intensive, OT staff commented that working effectively in partnership, as well as enhancing service delivery, was also an important tool for achieving enhanced staff morale. Interestingly, those projects who had achieved most in their efforts at collaboration spoke about their approach going beyond multi-agency work to a more holistic approach: "I don't see them as representatives of other agencies but as colleagues" (OT service provider). There was a concern, however, to stress that this is not a static event but an ongoing process that needs to maintain momentum and continue to draw in professional and lay members of the community:

I think really everyone has got to know what is going on and sort of communicate. Otherwise, it just doesn't work does it? You end up dealing with separate people and nobody knows what the other person is doing. (Service user)

On Track has created opportunities for partnership working, ensured ease of access to other services and enabled quick and easy problem-solving between agencies. The crucial factor in the On Track method of working is that partnership leads to clear lines of

communication with common ground, even though service providers' differences in working practices may stay in place. (A professional partner representing a voluntary agency in Area H)

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Notes on Contributors

Lesley Noaks was a practising social worker in the child care and mental health fields in the period 1973-1989. She worked in both the statutory and independent sectors. Since 1989 she has been a researcher/lecturer in social work and criminology in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University.

Address for Correspondence

Dr Lesley Noaks
Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University
Glamorgan Building
King Edward VII Avenue
Cardiff
CF10 3WT
Wales

Email: Noaks@Cardiff.ac.uk