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Working together: building effective multi-agency partnerships

Report of a roundtable discussion hosted by the Police Foundation

13 October 2016

Background

Policing is increasingly concerned with protecting the vulnerable from harm. In response, multi-agency case management arrangements have proliferated and come to represent a 'new orthodoxy' for the police and their partners. However, evidence about the effectiveness of such schemes is in short supply. Recent research by the Police Foundation aimed to address this.

The Police Foundation attempted to reduce recurrent violent crime in Slough through a Violence Multi Agency Partnership project (VMAP), part of the Police Foundation's *Police Effectiveness in a Changing World* project[1].

An evaluation[2] showed that although it secured strong local support, improved multi-agency working, increased information sharing and stimulated 'sensible' activity; it did not achieve a measurable reduction in violence. This raised a number of important questions which were discussed at a private roundtable with participants from the police service, local councils, domestic violence charities and other agencies. A summary of the discussion follows.

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[1] See http://www.police-foundation.org.uk/projects/police-effectiveness-project.

[2] See http://www.police-foundation.org.uk/uploads/holding/projects/ changing_world_paper_3.pdf.

Presentation

Andy Higgins, Senior Research Officer at the Police Foundation, gave a short presentation summarising the findings of the Police Effectiveness in a Changing World Project in its Slough site [3] and some of the questions that were raised for multi-agency case management. Key points included:

1. The project used a problem-oriented approach to develop innovative crime reduction methods that were responsive to social and organisational change, in two English towns.

2. In Slough, the project focused on violence however, rather that revealing a cohesive 'problem', research indicated that violence in the town was diffuse and multifaceted,

   – however it did reveal a substantial level of recurrence with the same individuals coming to notice time and again as victims, offenders or both;

   – and with a notable commitment to addressing violence from a broad set of local agencies and organisations, this suggested that a multi-agency case management approach would be most appropriate.

3. An intervention model was designed that brought together a practitioner panel, systemised identification of recurrent individuals from police data and put in place processes for case research, information sharing, 'problem solving' and multi-agency tasking.

4. Following a one year pilot period, a process evaluation showed that the initiative had generated significant support and 'buy-in' and improved information sharing and coordinated working. It

had also benefited from strong leadership and generated positive appraisals from those involved in delivery; however an impact evaluation provided no indication of a related reduction in violence.

5. These findings fit within an emerging picture of evaluated practice in the field of multi-agency case management; although often viewed positively by practitioners it has proved difficult to produce robust evidence of its effectiveness as an approach.

6. In the light of this, the need to identify the ingredients of multi-agency management conducive to success and the circumstances in which it is most appropriate is particularly urgent. The findings of this project draw attention to:

   – The complexity of the caseload and the apparent scarcity of resource available for additional engagement work.

   – The potential for schemes to focus too heavily on internal process improvements that generate only modest outputs.

   – The inherent weakness of tasking in a multi-agency environment.

   – The difficulty of focusing a broad, shared (but nebulous) 'partnership project' on specific outcomes (such as crime reduction).

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[3] See also http://www.police-foundation.org.uk/news/228/23/
Multi-Agency-case-management-evidence-and-orthodoxy/d,Blog-main.

Opening reflections

Chief Constable Sara Thornton CBE, QPM, Chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council opened the roundtable by offering a set of reflections on the presentation and report.

Sara Thornton acknowledged that the Police Foundation's research had raised some very important questions in view of the current proliferation of multi-agency working. While the implementation of the project itself hadn't necessarily been faulty, the evidence suggested that there were less obvious failures that needed deeper consideration. Sara Thornton made some observations for the participants to consider:

1. She suggested that co-production – the involvement of individuals in finding a solution to their own problems might have been considered. It is commonly accepted that state can 'do things' to people, but this approach may overlook the level of complexity in such cases. She said it was notable that only 20 per cent of VMAP's actions involved a direct attempt by practitioners to engage with a victim or offender.

2. She invited participants to consider whether multi-agency meetings simply offered a place of refuge for hard-pressed professionals in very difficult and demanding jobs, and whether multi-agency case-based management is truly 'multi-agency working' or merely 'multi-agency meetings'.

3. She wondered whether the evidence base for multi-agency working should have been established before its implementation, not afterwards. A number of other policing initiatives (such as hotspots policing) were introduced only after substantial academic evidence on effectiveness was established. Finding evidence for something already in operation is a much more difficult endeavour.

4. She noted that VMAP agencies had worked towards one success criteria – crime reduction. Was this fair and were some positive outcomes overlooked due to narrowing the success criteria?

5. Simply bringing a group of people together in the same space doesn't automatically lead to partnership. How can real integration be achieved? Would a unified command structure have been beneficial or could it have led to a 'prevailing average' and lessened effectiveness?

Open discussion

Defining the problem and envisioning outcomes

Participants agreed that the focus of a partnership should start with some basic but fundamental questions, specifically 'what are we trying to resolve?' and 'who should be responsible?'.

The breadth of a multi-agency project was also felt to be an important consideration. Some participants suggested that the VMAP project was too wide in scope. Covering all police recorded violence, which encompasses non-domestic and domestic violence, seemed to have resulted in a complex workload that required a very wide team of professionals. But others argued that a specific crime type was merely 'a way in' or 'the symptom' of dysfunction driving a lot of crime and the picture may have been no different if another offence had been chosen.

Measurable outcomes are also an important consideration. Are we running a project to reduce crime or manage harm and risk, or to achieve a number of objectives? Participants questioned whether VMAP's single objective, to reduce violent crime, was the right approach for dealing with such complex, 'needs-based' problems. Also by definition, different organisations will be seeking to achieve separate outcomes and imposing a single objective on a multi-agency team may be entirely unrealistic.

There was a strong consensus that the 'needs' of the victim or perpetrator should form the starting point for multi-agency case-based problem solving. Participants generally agreed that co-production was a vital element of this. One participant mentioned that the complex and diverse problems highlighted in the VMAP project were likely to have at least one commonality – adverse childhood experiences and that working from the basis of need could more easily illuminate the course of action. Several participants mentioned that non-statutory bodies had a key role to play here as victims were often more willing to engage with voluntary organisations.

What works – evidence and experience

While most practitioners admitted that multi-agency working appealed to them intuitively, they could only draw on a limited evidence base, although several were able to relate their first hand experiences. One participant said research done by their organisation before the introduction of MARACs [4] showed that victims of domestic abuse had wanted a proactive, integrated and victim-focused response from agencies. Another participant spoke about the success of a mental health triage project they had instigated.

Partnership dynamics and tasking

Participants agreed that simply imposing a structure wasn't enough – bringing partners round the table to share information solved nothing in itself. They agreed that the dynamics within this infrastructure were important, though how this might be achieved was not so clear. A standard model was not appropriate; one participant mentioned the multiplicity of partnership models and the problem of defining these even before 'what works' could be determined.

In view of the complexity involved in tackling diverse violence (or other complex social problems), some practitioners thought it was important to give due consideration to the expertise needed to tackle it, including recognising what specialist non-statutory bodies might bring to the mix (some participants felt

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[4] MARAC – Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference.

that these organisations were often overlooked). Individual professional knowledge and skills should be recognised; practitioners certainly shouldn't try to do each other's jobs but should challenge each other to fulfil their unique roles. Underpinning this should be a shared understanding and common language about the issues under discussion so that practitioners are not working at cross purposes.

Some participants questioned the Police Foundation's recommendation that a more unified command structure might facilitate effective problem solving [5]. One participant felt that while this was appropriate in policing it was unlikely to offer an effective model for multi-agency working; in their opinion frontline staff worked more effectively when they were empowered. Another participant thought that the professionalism of the frontline staff should be respected; they were far more capable of finding solutions to uniquely local problems without the interference of senior management. Both participants agreed that a partnerships infrastructure should be dynamic and evolving – a flexibility that would be stifled by a top-down approach, and for this reason there should be a built in review process to avoid a structural fossilisation. This should include recognising when multi-agency partnership working is not relevant, or ceases to be useful.

Another participant suggested that simultaneous interventions from different agencies might be counter-productive because actions couldn't be targeted. Could collaboration be vertical, rather than horizontal so the right agency intervenes at a time?

Co-production and recognition of need

A logical extension of the 'needs focused' approach mentioned earlier was the concept of co-production, where the subject is an active participant in the partnership. There was overwhelming agreement among participants that co-production was an essential ingredient of multi-agency case based problem solving. This was felt to be particularly appropriate in the context of troubled lives, often marked by powerlessness, institutionalisation or long –term dependence on statutory agencies. The victim (or indeed perpetrator) might have greater insight into their problems (and their solutions) than a professional who may be more concerned with managing risk but fail to recognise the unmet needs that are keeping a person trapped in dysfunction. However it was acknowledged that this way of working was more appropriate for victims – an entirely non-enforcement led approach would be unrealistic in the case of perpetrators.

One person suggested that it might beneficial to draw on evidence from other approaches such as gang intervention. In some cases offenders have been able to turn their lives around by engaging with one trusted person. This is supported by the evidence base (Bellis et al, 2014) [6] which found that a relationship with a trusted advocate offered a significant protective effect against the damage of adverse childhood experiences.

Prevention and upstream work

There was also some discussion about early intervention and whether family dysfunction should be tackled further upstream when it might be more easily resolved. One participant suggested that a national database to which professionals (schools, healthcare professionals and the police) could contribute relevant information about particular individuals, which can be shared across statutory agencies, could be valuable. In this way potential problems can be identified and resolved much earlier.

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[5] See recommendation 4, page 13 http://www.police-foundation.org.uk/uploads/holding/projects/changing_world_paper_3.pdf.

[6] See https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/National-household-survey-of-adverse-childhood-Bellis-Hughes/dcbf812ecb33caffb71116988a0e2f24bb46cec2.

Conclusion

Practitioners called for transparency of purpose, clear and realistic outcomes, a needs-based approach (incorporating co-production) achieved through dynamic and evolving partnerships.

Overall, discussion highlighted the need for greater clarity about what partnership working is for (for example reducing crime or responding to complex needs), the role that different organisations should play within the partnership, who should lead and how success should be defined.

Discussion also highlighted that the evidence base urgently needs to be developed, to which we hope the Police Foundation's project has contributed.

**Authored by Catherine Saunders,
Communications Officer, Police Foundation**

About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is an independent think tank focused on developing knowledge and understanding of policing while challenging the police service and the government to improve policing for the benefit of the public. The Police Foundation acts as a bridge between the public, the police and the government, while being owned by none of them. **www.police-foundation.org.uk**