

Multi-agency working

A guide to multi-agency working for professionals working with families of prisoners and offenders

Introduction

This guidance is based on an event held by Action for Prisoners' and Offenders' Families on multi-agency working. It is intended to give an overview of multi-agency working, provide examples of good practice, a description of the range of ways that family work can be included in provision and tips on working effectively and sustainably in partnership.

Multi-agency working is about a systemised approach to allowing different agencies to work together with families in a co-ordinated way, which is best for the families and takes their needs into account.

Working in collaboration with other agencies is essential to offer families the range of support they need. Multi-agency working is about providing a seamless response to address multiple and often complex needs. This can be part of a fixed multi-agency team, panels, or an integrated service.

Multi-agency working is often bringing together partners who have the same aims, but different methods or remits. For example when working with families of offenders or prisoners, these agencies can include

housing, finance, health, police, substance misuse, and education.

By working together agencies can share information and skills and provide a more integrated service. Multi-agency working helps to prevent duplication and ensure families receive the best possible service.

Benefits of multi-agency working

- Earlier identification of any needs or issues
- Access to services not previously available or known about
- More robust decision making based on more accurate and timely information
- Quicker access to services
- Holistic approach to the working with the family
- Reduced duplication of process across different agencies
- Quality seamless services
- Shared knowledge and experience
- Better quality services
- Reduced need for long-term or more specialist services
- Services more localised to meet the needs of families
- Greater awareness of support available

Multi-agency working can be most effective when workers' different roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood, and when different structures and ways of working are understood. Working across these boundaries is essential to be able to provide appropriate support.

Ways that family work can be included in provision

- Running awareness training among professionals, e.g. in prisons, probation, CRCs etc.
- Effective signposting of resources and related agencies
- Offering access to different services from a central point
- Making links between criminal justice services, voluntary sector and local authority providers
- Effective networking to ensure different agencies are aware of the support available
- Work with providers to ensure that a holistic approach to working with families is adopted
- Family steering groups or consultation in local areas to give them a voice
- Share research and good practice between agencies and departments

Examples of good practice

Harrow Children's Centres

Staff at Harrow Children's Centres recognised the need for a multi-agency approach by realising the high levels of need in their area. Families in their area have higher than average number of dependants, high levels of deprivation and 69 per cent of residents in the area were from minority ethnic groups. Staff began to ask how many families in the area were affected by imprisonment, what their needs were and who was helping them.

They set up a multi-agency group comprising staff from the children's centre network, probation staff, a social welfare worker and staff from adult, community and family learning. In response to the recognised need in their area, Harrow now have trained five lead professionals and 64 other professionals to support raising awareness of this 'invisible group'.

The team in Harrow believe that strong well-established partnerships with other agencies support early intervention. Partnerships with parents are essential to the success of these interventions. They launched the HARO group (Harrow Acting for Relatives of Offenders) to work with the child and their family to respect their needs and wishes and support them through the prison journey. They ensure that the family lead on the decisions and are worked with rather than 'done to'.

The HARO team provide access for families to advice and information, health and well-being information, children and family activities, and training and employment opportunities.

The aims of HARO are:

- To have a community based group.
- To work in partnership with families
- To support families in their journey

- through the prison system
- To respond to the children and families need and combine practical assistance with work around relationships and children's understanding of imprisonment
- For all interventions to be led by the families needs and wishes
- To provide a place where children and families can meet others going through a similar journey.

Integrated Offender Management Worcestershire

The Integrated Offender Management (IOM) service in Worcestershire is an overarching framework that allows local and partner agencies to come together to ensure that the offenders whose crimes cause most damage and harm locally are managed in a co-ordinated way.

IOMW works with over ten different agencies to deliver the best support for families, including the police, community rehabilitation company, probation, housing and hostels, prisons, children's services, health service, and youth offending.

They run awareness days for criminal justice professionals and events at local prisons. They encourage staff to shadow other teams to understand each other's roles better and get an understanding of the bigger picture. This can help to ensure different agencies understand the impact of arrest and imprisonment on families. The team help each other by sharing their knowledge, this may mean the early help providers call police teams, or probation or offer to visit. The aim is for agencies to work in partnership to:

- Reduce crime and prevent re-offending (via focussing on the re-offending pathways)
- Tackle the social exclusion of offenders

- and their families
- Improve public confidence in the criminal justice system
- Improve partnership performance delivery by:
 - addressing overlaps in and gaps between approaches
 - aligning the work of agencies with other social agencies
 - providing greater clarity around roles and responsibilities

In Worcester they have co-located services sharing information on a daily basis so that information can be passed in real time. This helps to reduce the barriers that can often arise around using different systems and protocols and sharing information.

Re-Unite – meeting the needs of mothers leaving prison

Tips for effective and sustainable partnership working

- Roles and responsibilities must be clearly set out, as well as understanding the different structures and governance of colleagues from other organisations or sectors
- All professionals in the multi-agency team need to understand the holistic needs of the offender/family with whom they are working
- Multi-agency team workers need to communicate effectively with their partners
- All members of the team need to know what to do with information
- Confidentiality and information-sharing are 'barriers' that can be overcome to facilitate joint working.
- Some multi-agency teams find that co-location helps to cut down issues around information sharing, bureaucracy, allows better use of resources and greater sharing of expertise of the different agencies involved.

Re-Unite is a not-for-profit nation-wide housing and support project for mothers separated from their children by having served time in custody and who are committed and legally permitted to regain (or to work towards regaining) the care and custody of their children. Re-Unite is a partnership between Housing for Women and Common Weal and provides support to women through Support Workers and to the children through a specialist Children's Worker.

Re-Unite aims to deliver:

- Early in-reach contact with the women and pre-release liaison
- Through the gate service
- Appropriate accommodation upon release from prison
- Individual, tailored support for women
- Treating families as a whole
- User involvement and feedback
- Help to find and maintain permanent housing
- Support to move on with the aim achieving independence

In 2012 they introduced a specialist Children's Worker after recognising that many of the children they came into contact with are extremely traumatised as a result of separation during their mothers' imprisonment, and up to 50% of these children will have witnessed or experienced domestic violence as a result of this many children may suffer from depression, hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, sleep problems, truancy and poor school grades. The Children's Worker is now a core part of the work.

The work of the Support Worker is supplemented with a dedicated Children's Worker specifically dealing with issues relating to the trauma of being separated offering:

- 1:2:1 support – child led support planning, framed around the Every Child Matters outcomes
- Helping them access schools and nurseries
- Organising age appropriate activities This is not just a 'treat' as work is carried out in conjunction with this looking at the educational value of a trip, planning and preparing for a day trip, budgeting for it and general health and safety that parents need to be aware of when out with their children.
- Attendance at TAC, CAMHS & CIN/CP meetings – Often Lead Profession, sometimes initiating TAC, and advocating for parent and child
- helping the mother with parenting coaching to address behaviour and help to come to terms with the reality of responsibility for her child.
- Supporting mothers to manage their guilt whilst establishing boundaries.

Involving the children

Re-Unite also ensure that children are involved in the service through various methods including children's forums to allow children to have a voice in how the service is run; newsletters which children help to write; and recording their life story through pictures which helps support those children who have been separated from their mothers make sense of what has happened, and maintain a sense of identity and belonging which helps them understand who they are and where they fit in.