

Thame Children and Young Persons' Interagency Network Evaluation of projects funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

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1. Introduction

The Thame Network aims to maximize the coherence of the response of Health, Education, Social Services and Voluntary Agencies to the needs of vulnerable young people and their families in the Thame area. Set up in 1996, the Network's termly meetings have provided an open forum for informal discussion and the sharing of issues and concerns for interested field workers across agencies. Minutes are circulated to 60 people representing over 20 agency and community groups.

The Network provides opportunities for discussion of key issues, for example sharing concerns about different professions notions of confidentiality, and raising awareness of other agencies roles, responsibilities and potential resources. The open and loose structure of the Network meetings allows for fluidity in the membership that ensures:

- it is effective in informing and supporting new workers in the area
- it has a broad enough representation to identify gaps in provision, encompassing a wide range of statutory and voluntary responsibilities and drawing on the experience of professionals at different levels in individual agencies
- it has an open exploratory culture that promotes a positive problem solving stance

Network discussions have resulted in the identification of gaps in provision and these have been responded to by individual agencies. However the size and loose organization of the Network have some disadvantages.

- no one is responsible for following through where further detailed action is needed across agency boundaries
- although the membership of the group is comprehensive, membership at individual meetings can be patchy (typically 12-15 members) so that some discussions are limited by partial attendance

In response to these difficulties, rather than losing the advantages of the current Network structure, the group proposed that a steering group should be set up to facilitate collaborative interagency projects. Personnel for this group was drawn from interested members of the Network, ensuring representation for each of the key agencies. Because of the overlap between the concerns of the Network and those of the Thame Schools' Partnership, a formal link was made between the two groups by ensuring that a head teacher was on the steering group with specific responsibilities to liaise with the Partnership group.

One of the key concerns of the steering group was the question of funding for the Network's activities. Funding across agencies is notoriously difficult and time consuming to achieve, resulting in the still birth of many potentially useful collaborative endeavours. Agencies were prepared to contribute in allowing participants time to attend the steering group, and in the case of education, to second one member for half a day to provide administrative support for the group. However without a working budget the groups

potential was limited. In order to resolve this concern a bid was made to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. This bid was successful, and it is the use made of this funding which is the subject of this evaluation.

2. Evaluation aims

The steering group's overt aims were to set up an interagency framework which would promote particular areas of work prioritised through Network discussions. These were:

- to focus on early intervention to raise achievement
- to support good relationships between school and family life
- to address the particular needs of a rural community distant from many City based services
- to seek solutions to gaps in provision identified through the Network and Network workers
- to promote inter-agency co-operation, training and information sharing

These aims were used to focus the evaluation. Evidence was sought to review both process and outcome measures through mapping and sampling the system of support created by the Thame Network.

In order to look at the extent to which these aims had been achieved the evaluation focused on:

the mapping of the system that had been set up

- how far does it extend beyond those directly involved
- awareness / sanction from agencies involved
- communication links
- key roles
- resource allocation
- projects
- rural issues

issues of process

- meetings, regularity / efficiency
- professional support achieved / staff development issues
- motivation for personal / professional involvement
- leadership / sustainability
- coherence e.g. formal, informal
- links to individual agencies

outcome issues

- value added for the field workers involved
- value added for agencies
- value added / impact for client group
- what has been uncovered / raised
- what has been facilitated / further resourced
- what has been planned jointly
- what influence has been exercised beyond the group

3. Evaluation evidence

- Observation of two network meetings(NM) and three steering group(SGM) meetings and discussion of an interim evaluation report with the steering group.
- Interviews with a sample of people involved in: the Network (GP and ESW), the Network and the Steering Group (SW, Schools Counselor (SC) and SENCO), Thame Partnership members not directly involved in the Network (two head teachers (HT) and a SENCO) and the Family School Community Link Worker (FLW). Interviews were also conducted with senior service managers with no direct role in the project.
- Documentary evidence produced by the Network and steering group e.g. reports, minutes of meetings, directory of resources (DE).

No direct evidence was collected from the client group because of the difficulty of establishing any means of comparison for their experiences. Indirect impact was investigated through the case examples elicited from the field workers interviewed. In the following section, main sources of evidence are indicated at the end of each paragraph.

4. Findings

4.1 Early intervention to raise achievement:

4.1.1 Field workers interviewed illustrated how their criteria for involvement precluded being involved in early intervention. Shortage of resources in the services have led to their work being largely crisis driven. Thus whilst their personal view was that much of the work they did would have been more effective if they had intervened at an earlier stage, they were unable to justify intervention before critical indicators (for example levels of absence from school) had been reached. Early intervention was also problematic from the point of view of gaining access to sensitive work with young people and their families. Intervention from professionals in social work and education is often deemed to be threatening and therefore only justified in extremis (SW, ESW).

4.1.2 In the sessions observed it was a key theme of the network steering group to identify exactly what types of early intervention would be supportive and acceptable and how these might be implemented. Issues discussed included:

- young people failing to attend therapy sessions because of transport difficulties
- young people not having good access to information / support with health issues
- difficulties in providing support for young people at transition / stress points in their lives
- difficulties in supporting young people and their families in the early stages of relationship breakdown (with school and / or family)

4.1.3 A range of solutions were suggested and the following were implemented:

- funds to provide child care and transport for parents having difficulties in taking their children to therapy sessions
- support for the Bodyzone initiative providing young people with regular access to health information and care on the upper school site
- the employment of a family links worker to work with vulnerable children / young people and their families

4.1.4 Field workers interviewed described successful case examples of the use of all three initiatives.

4.1.5 Improved access to therapy was achieved by the two children previously missing appointments (DE, SGM).

4.1.6 Bodyzone referrals were usually made through others, for example by alerting the school counselor rather than by direct suggestion to the youngster at risk. Records on use made by the staff show that 210 young people visited Bodyzone during the nine weekly sessions in the Autumn term to attend information talks and to collect information. 45 young people asked for specific consultations with the Bodyzone staff, 11 of these were young women seeking advice from the Family planning nurses and the others were concerned with a range of issues including nut allergy, smoking, bulimia, Men C campaign, drugs, asthma, depression, self harm, relationships, alcohol and over eating. Information on the efficacy of this improved access to therapy and health services was not obtained. (SC, SW, ESW, SGM).

4.1.7 Referrals to the Family Schools Community Links Worker. This role had only recently been established but referrals were already being made and three were explored. In each case the field workers and teachers interviewed had identified a vulnerable period for the child that their experience led them to believe would result in a future crisis intervention. Triangulation of professional opinion demonstrated substantial improvement in relation to the areas of concern but a longer time scale would be needed to argue that they had been successful early interventions. The teachers and field workers praised the skills of the Family Links Worker and felt she provided a good model for extending para-professional practice in inter-agency work. The key skills identified were her ability to network and create a profile, her counseling abilities and her confidence in working with families on their territory and to their agenda. They felt that the neutrality of the role, free of agency statutory responsibilities, enabled her to be seen as a support and an advocate by young people and their families. The fact that some parents had referred themselves to the Family Links Worker suggests this view may be shared by families. (SENCO, SW, ESW, SC, FLW)

It is clear from reviewing documents produced by the steering committee that there are other examples of early intervention projects that have not been explored in this small evaluation.

4.2 Supporting good relationships between school and family life

There were a number of aspects of the project that provide families with improved access to support, firstly through specific offers of services and secondly through non-threatening referrals. Examples in the first category include the health visitor setting up a group for young mothers and their babies and the allocation of a budget to help with transport and child care to ensure parents could support youngsters in attending therapy sessions. In the second category, the family links worker received referrals to offer low key individual support, for example in advice for a mother having problems managing her child's behaviour. This latter intervention resulted in other families asking for help with behaviour management. (SGM, DE, FLW, SENCO)

The key feature of the Networks activity in this area is that support is being made available for vulnerable young people and their families before things have gone wrong,

when they still have the confidence in themselves and the involved agencies to make use of the help (Illich, 1977).

4.3 Address the particular needs of a rural community distant from many City based services

Field workers described the difficulties of the diffuse nature of work in rural areas. Whilst working in Oxford City the prevalence of case conferences resulted in good informal contact with professionals in other roles or agencies, the rarity and geographical spread of case conferences in rural settings meant very little of such contact. Mileage traveled was also considerable making formal meetings much more difficult to set up. The result was that field workers in a rural setting were much less likely to have a personal relationship with others involved with children, young people and their families in their care. This lack of knowledge affected relationships within agencies as well as across agency boundaries. The Network was felt to be an invaluable remedy for this situation, enabling individuals to meet other key workers but also to understand the channels of communication and the types and level of support available. (ESW, SW, SENCO)

The steering group was seen as a way in which the work of the Network was consolidated. One interviewee who attended Network meetings felt that the Network was “rendered less fragile” by the steering group. This fragility of the network was also reported by others. As attendance was voluntary and fueled by personal commitment, involvement was always liable to be subject to pressures on workload, and discussion at Network meetings was sometimes limited by the lack of a representative from a particular agency. Further some workers in key roles did not seem to be represented in any way, for example no Educational Psychologist appears on the 60 strong Network circulation list. However despite these problems, the teachers and field workers interviewed, regarded the Network as a good model of interagency communication that facilitated their work in the Thame area and would be helpful in other rural centres that they covered. The steering group was seen as an essential addition to the working of the Network that enabled it to function effectively. (NM, ESW, SW, GP, SENCO, DE, HT)

4.4 Seeking solutions to gaps in provision identified through the Network

There was clear evidence to show that the Network had generated interagency solutions to problems that without the Network could have been seen as single agency quagmires. The issues that led to a strengthening of the mental health services and the health information services for young people in the Thame area came out of initial concerns from education and social services. For example the identification of a small number of adolescents who were tying up education and social services resources resulted in a review of mental health services for young people in the Thame area and the subsequent appointment of a clinical psychologist by a local GP practice. This in turn released education and social services resources for work with other youngsters.(GP, SENCO, SC, DE).

The health information service, Bodyzone, involved a multi-professional and multi-agency approach utilizing resources and personnel from five different professional groups and all three agencies. (DE, SC).

People not directly attending Network meetings, for example both head teachers interviewed, were able to identify significant benefits that had come from the Network and clearly saw its function as problem solving in orientation, resulting in a better use of existing special educational needs resourcing. Examples given included the very

effective training that resulted from a request from the heads group to the steering group to improve the skills of LSAs in managing pupils with challenging behaviour; the SENCO support group; improved transition arrangements; the Resource Directory and the development of the Lord William's Resource Centre for teachers and LSAs. (HT)

One of the head teachers was more informed about the operation of the network than the other and was consciously using it as a clearing system. For example, he had been concerned about the lack of support for staff and pupils following recent bereavements and was taking this to the steering group through the heads partnership meeting. By contrast, both head teachers were very dissatisfied with what they regarded as the "professional gate keeping" associated with normal LEA protocols for referral for support for children with special educational needs. They felt that these invariably resulted in a long drawn out process that rarely provided appropriate or adequate solutions for the children concerned. They both saw the Network as a way of getting services to move away from the inefficiencies of field workers and agencies operating independently and to draw in some of the very useful voluntary services more effectively. (HT, SENCO)

4.5 Promoting inter-agency co-operation, training and information sharing

The Network had improved interagency communication very directly by organizing the creation of a Directory of Resources for the Thame area, including workers and resources from all three agencies and the voluntary sector. (HT, ESW, SW, SENCO)

Training opportunities for LSAs has already been mentioned, but the Network was providing opportunities for less formal staff development. As an observer to the Network meetings and steering group I was impressed by the purposeful and strongly problem solving orientation of the discussion that seemed to be untrammelled by professional and agency boundaries. Each person seemed to have a distinctive contribution to make but there was also trouble taken to share information, explain perspectives and to engage in joint work to develop expertise. At this stage in the Network's life the groups were performing an important staff development function, a classic representation of what Senge(1990) calls a *Learning Organization*. In particular some practitioners had more training and experience of interagency practice than others and they were able to support the group in identifying the issues and practices that would facilitate joint working.

The key features of the information exchange were: raising awareness about individual roles and responsibilities; informing each other about the practice and policy issues that defined the priorities of each service; identifying similarities or differences in service operation that could facilitate or impede joint working. It was interesting to note the differences in focus on interagency work that was evident from individuals understanding of their job description e.g. whilst the health visitor saw interagency work as an explicit part of her job for which she might be held accountable, individuals from education saw interagency work as something additional to their job description which they personally valued but would have to fight to justify to their managers. (SGM, NM, SW, DE)

4.6 Managing the system of support

The assorted personnel and agencies that can be drawn upon to support vulnerable young people and their families inevitably become linked in some systematic way. Channels for communication and resourcing develop as the users of the system see the best ways of meeting their needs.

It was clear from discussion with head teachers and SENCOs that prior to the development of the Network they had concerns about the functionality of the system in relation to meeting the needs of their pupils. They saw it as sluggish and unresponsive so that a crisis had to be generated in order for any action to occur. It was clear that head teachers and SENCOs had become adept at moving around what they regarded as blockages in the system in order to try and achieve the support they needed. They viewed the development of the Network as beginning the process of making the system more coherent and effective for users. By examining the whole system of support its operation was made visible and channels for communication could be explicitly mapped and their functionality explored.

The Network had provided a forum for developing the fluidity of the system and this function had been greatly enhanced by the energy and strategic action of the steering group. The steering group was effectively providing a brain for the system, allowing it to reflect upon itself and change itself to be more responsive to users needs.

The extent to which this reflection could bring about change is currently inhibited by the lack of involvement of senior managers. Identified problems have been met with partial and limited solutions on the part of some senior managers, which is perhaps in part a function of this lack of involvement. The Network has had to work very hard to gain outside funding for its initiatives even though the funding needed has been small. For senior managers to have time to join the Network and/or steering group meetings there would need to be a change in the quality of interaction in those groups, almost certainly reducing their creative problem solving and staff development functions. However some more robust link with senior management needs to be achieved.

The success of the Network would seem to depend on what Peters (1982) would call its simultaneous loose / tight properties. The Network has an explorative and inclusive culture but to sustain the expectations raised by their reflections the steering group has had to ensure that ideas are followed through into action. That the steering group has been able to do this is a function of the quality of its membership and processes, and the commitment of Oxfordshire LEA to provide high level administrative support (.2 of a SNAST). The quality of its membership is in my view key to its success and requires further examination.

The group interaction is warm and supportive which facilitates the sharing of perspectives and creative problem solving characteristics. The culture of the group results in an unfalteringly positive discourse about childhood and family relationships. In every case, in the meetings I attended, the solutions were concerned with coming alongside and meeting need before it becomes pathologised by a breakdown in relationships. The role of the links worker exemplifies this; the stress of transition is anticipated and support put in before a crisis develops. The discourse also included drawing on the whole community as a resource, for example enhancing self responsibility through "Bodyzone", training LSAs to take a more active role in behaviour management policies, facilitating self referral from parents. The philosophy seemed to be governed by an implicit assumption of individuals retaining as much responsibility in the situation as possible, both for staff and young people, but in a context of support and care.

The setting up of the network has been facilitated by the vision and energy of one particular key worker and this is an issue for the sustainability of the project. Both of the

head teachers drew attention to the need for someone to look after the network and that this was not a role a head teacher would have the time to fulfill. The steering group consists of a number of very committed professionals who have been prepared to take a leadership role for particular projects but currently there is no explicitly defined leadership role that would necessarily continue if key members left the current group. The diffuse model of leadership that has developed has many advantages, not least the feeling of joint ownership and joint responsibility with all members of the group being actively engaged as practitioners. However it may prove a problem to replicate and some clear ground rules need to be established for the handing on of the batten.

The system needs a *minder*, not perhaps the normal notion of a leader, but somebody who can stand back from the web of roles and relationships that make up the Network and identify what is needed to ensure optimum functioning. Examples of the role of the *minder* in this evaluation included the temporary filling of gaps in the system and the ability to identify and support others in taking on those roles thus releasing the *minder* for the next role that the system requires in order to remain in free flow.

5. Summary

The Network functions to bring together people and information and provides a forum to explicitly review the systemic nature of effective support for children / young people and their families. In enhancing the responsiveness of the system the existence of the Network is also an implicit critique of current models of working and funding of services for vulnerable youngsters. In particular it raises questions about the bureaucracy that frequently accompanies needs driven services in a limited resource environment.

The Calouste Gulbenkian grant has provided a means for Network personnel to be released from the inertia produced by current funding models which do not yet secure long term funding for interagency work.

It has enabled an interagency forum to develop that is characterized by:

- strong feelings of accountability of each group member to the group (de-role without deskill)
- purposeful and strongly problem solving orientation of discussion
- positive discourse about childhood and family
- solutions concerned with coming alongside and meeting need before it becomes pathologised by a breakdown in relationships
- solutions that draw on the whole community as a resource
- an implicit assumption of individuals retaining as much responsibility in the situation as possible in a context of support and care

And this has resulted in:

- quicker response times
- earlier intervention
- provision of support for vulnerable young people and their families before things have gone wrong, when they still have the confidence in themselves to make use of the help
- joint agency analysis, decision making and action planning
- solutions that would not have been available to agencies / professionals working in isolation

- increased involvement of field workers in strategic decision making and resource allocation
- integral staff development opportunities through the creation of a “learning organization”
- an enhancement of local decision making through the already effective school partnership organization in the Thame area

Recommendations for future action

- pilot joint funding mechanism devolved to area / partnership level
- clear positioning of a key worker to ensure the coordination / facilitation of the Network
- resources to support the Thame Network personnel in the development of training materials
- more explicit agency direction to field workers to support the Network meetings
- higher profile for Network meetings (e.g. more comfortable meeting space)
- clearer and more explicit facilitation between the Network and senior managers in some of the relevant departments and agencies
- clearer recognition of interagency commitment in the job descriptions of some of the field workers

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