

A Summary of the evaluation findings of the Oxfordshire Integrated Support Service pilot projects– November 2005

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The focus of activity for the Integrated Support Service (ISS) pilots

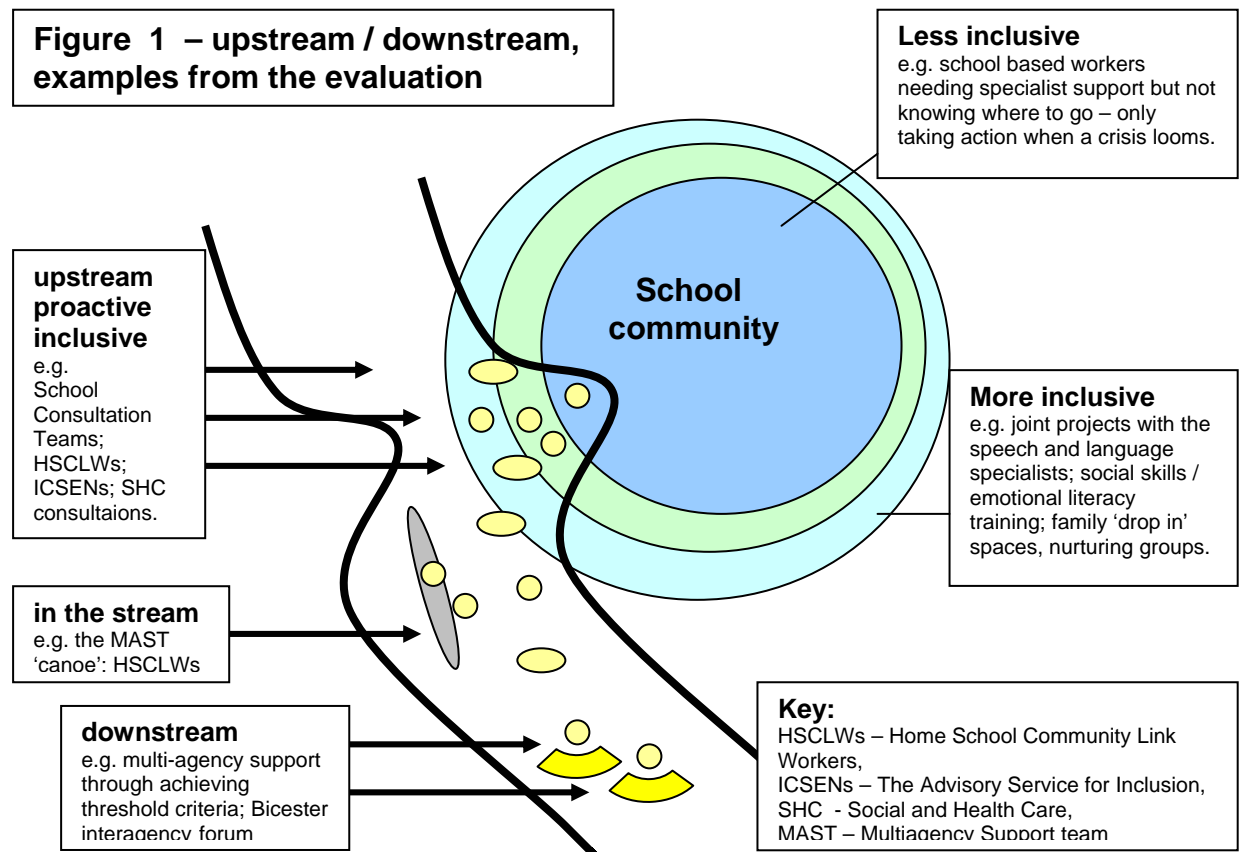
The ISS pilots were set up to improve services to children by establishing better working relationships between members of the different agencies involved. The pilots focussed on children who have been felt to be in a 'no man's land' between the support that schools can confidently offer and that which other agencies have the resources to provide. This territory has been marked out by threshold boundaries of various kinds, for example through statutory assessment procedures, and attendance and child protection thresholds. These procedures have developed to ensure resources go to the children in greatest need. However the focus on 'gate keeping' resources for individual children has led to inefficiencies and perverse incentives in the support system as a whole. For example, schools have been concerned about children they feel need intensive and specialist help and whom they watch deteriorating for long periods of time before threshold levels are met. Meanwhile other agencies, to protect themselves from being overwhelmed by the constant flood of need, tend to withdraw behind the shield of 'thresholds'.

Managing the balance between 'upstream' and 'downstream' work

Roaf (2002) has applied the terms 'upstream' and 'downstream' to help with the understanding of the relationship between early and later interventions. The analogy of taking a walk upstream to see why we are finding bodies in the river downstream is helpful in drawing attention to the continuity of experience and the role of context in the definition of need (see figure 1). This emphasis on continuity also helps avoid the often rather artificial polarization of the early intervention, versus crisis intervention, discussion and allows a wider consideration of what good 'upstream' and 'downstream' work might mean. The focus on the context, making 'upstream' safe, rather than the individual child, also resonates with the agenda for inclusion that the 'Every Child Matters' agenda is seeking to promote.

The ISS pilots have been engaging in a variety of experiments to better manage this territory and in particular to provide a service to children in 'no man's land'. An early

assumption of this work was that solutions would be found by more collaborative working between agencies. What has emerged from this evaluation is the importance of the communication system as a key element for collaboration. Although agencies may be involved in joint activity, they are usually working alone. Unless they communicate with others, the value of their individual work is reduced. However, unless there are good communication systems set up, this essential communication can be difficult to achieve and therefore is absent or attenuated.



A significant function of an effective communication system is that it provides a forum to address the upstream / downstream issues, and to look for possible improvements to meet the needs of a wider range of children. An important area for discussion is the extent to which the Integrated Support Service is seen as:

- a way of organising professional engagement around children in difficulties (downstream solutions), or
- a means of involving agencies in a wider agenda around creating environments in which fewer children have difficulties (upstream solutions).

The pilots had examples of responses to both agendas (see figure 1). 'Upstream' solutions were characterised by extensions in the capacity of schools to be inclusive, either through changes to school structures and processes or through developing the

skills of 'upstream' key workers, for example SENCOs and HSCLWs. Schools capacity for inclusion was also achieved by improving the accessibility and quality of consultation services from 'downstream' agencies, for example social workers and mental health colleagues.

Multi-agency panels / teams

Responding to the 'downstream' agenda of children and families with complex levels of need, the pilot areas had set up specific structures for :

- joint discussion of cases and commissioning of support e.g. the multi-agency panels in Bicester and Abingdon, or
- joint casework e.g. the Multi-agency support team (MAST) in the City.

As well as the better opportunities for 'downstream' consultation these groups provided, all respondents had valued the sharing of perspectives that had occurred through the discussion of particular cases. The common terminology provided by the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was also helping in the detailed exploration of how case work could be best managed for individual children.

Working with the CAF tools (ICAF) did however raise a number of concerns:

- Practitioners found the ICAF completion burdensome and education colleagues were anxious about this being a new version of the current expensive statutory assessment procedures.
- Establishing the balance between the value of quality assessment for individual children and the amount of resource the assessment process takes from other 'upstream' work.
- The lead professional role was largely falling to schools. For the 16 referrals made to panels, schools completed the ICAFs for 15 and were identified as the lead agency for 10 children following panel discussion. The MAST team became the lead agency for all referrals it received.
- The skills implicit in completing the ICAF and taking the lead professional role, require both training, and time to complete casework, neither of which are commonly available in schools.
- Although experience of sharing perspectives across agencies was gained at panel meetings, not all field workers had access to this experience.

In conclusion there would seem to be a need for both significant training and reconfiguration of school roles, to meet the needs of the CAF process.

The conditions for achieving 'collaborative advantage'

Huxham and Vangen (2005) stress the problems of collaborative work and the difficulty of balancing the time and effort it takes with the rewards that can be achieved. In this study there are clear indications that certain practices result in 'collaborative advantage' as opposed to the 'collaborative inertia' that can result if conditions are not quite right.

The conditions that seemed to need to be in place to achieve 'collaborative advantage' in the interdisciplinary / interagency context of this evaluation are listed below (ref. in brackets to sections in the main report that discuss these themes):

- Clearly bounded localities so that people understand their patch (2.1)
- Good links to the centre ensuring both a supportive framework for locality work and upward flow of information from localities that will be 'received' and impact on policy / provision (3.1)
- Local ownership of the project (3.1)
- Strong project management (3.8)
- 'Minding' of the communication system (3.8)
- Inclusive communication structures – access and clarity for all (3.2)
- Inclusive communication – upstream and downstream conversations
- Appreciative systems (3.8)
- User involvement (see 3.6, 3.7)
- Support for schools in being as inclusive as possible (3.3, 3.4, 3.5)

Structure or process - to achieve an effective communication system?

The pilots demonstrated that structures could vary widely, to achieve the underlying principles that generated a good communication system. Examples from the evaluation include:

- A Family Centre operating as an interagency hub and managing case work for local primary schools
- School partnerships addressing issues through steering group meetings and developing multi-agency dialogue and case work practice through panel meetings
- Networks – inclusive communication structures, achieving good levels of collaborative advantage with low resource output

- School Consultation Teams – both a forum for supporting schools in maximising inclusive practice and in providing good quality information from the ground about how the system is functioning.

There were also other examples of good multi-agency practice that have developed independently in other parts of the county. However formed, these already established local projects have emerged as a ‘good fit’ to local circumstances and provide an obvious starting point for Locality working.

Recommendations for locality based Integrated Support Services

Over the year the pilots were being developed, there were significant improvements in the functioning of the Integrated Support Services and the emergence of a range of good practices to facilitate communication between individuals and agencies (see figure 1 for examples). Drawing from the learning of the pilots, there would seem to be a number of principles that underpin the development of good communication systems and significant training implications that follow from these:

- i.) Localities need to be clearly bounded and be managing all ISS activity in the area (e.g. it is disruptive to have ‘hot spot’ projects managed separately within them)
- ii.) There is a need for a key communication group, in each locality, with strategic responsibilities and devolved resources. This group would be inclusive in membership and have a wide brief in terms of children, young people and their families in the locality (facilitating the opportunities for ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ conversations). This group needs to link directly and effectively with LA wide strategic decision making groups.
- iii.) The key locality communication group needs to make an audit of current structures and processes before developing new ISS structures to ensure a ‘best fit’ with local strengths in personnel and other resources. The structures themselves do not seem to be as important as the underlying principles and practices by which they operate (e.g. table 1).
- iv.) The *communication system* needs to be scrupulously minded, so that the services it oversees can be tweaked to meet changing conditions and aspirations, and to ensure the application of the principles and practices that underpin the achievement of *collaborative advantage*.

- v.) The development of a response to the Information Sharing and Assessment agenda has resulted in fruitful interagency dialogue and would provide a basis for a common language and developing shared practice across the county.

- vi.) There are substantial communication and training implications emerging from the evaluation findings. Some of the training initiatives imply a redefinition of roles. Two particular areas require attention prior to the setting up of Locality working.
 - a. Firstly, the role of the 'locality co-ordinator' needs to be explored with its double barrelled function of 'project leading' and 'system minding' (see 3.8).

 - b. Secondly, schools have accrued a number of new responsibilities over the past few years which have been variously attributed to head teachers, heads of year, school counsellors and SENCOs, and to these numerous roles the ISA agenda and the liaison with HSCLWs, is adding further responsibilities. There would seem to be a need to look again at how support is managed in schools, how the interface with pupil services and other agencies is organised, where the enhanced casework role should be placed, and what training needs to be organised to support its successful completion.

- vii.) Agencies normally working at tier 3, need to be providing consultation services to 'upstream' agencies, to ensure:
 - a. Children with serious issues are not being missed;

 - b. Children with significant but less serious issues are not left in 'no man's land' because schools feel 'out of their depths';

 - c. Schools are supported in developing their supervision arrangements and case work skills;

 - d. A reduction in the number of children requiring 'downstream' help.