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Inter- and Intra-Agency Co-Operation in Safeguarding Children: A Staff Survey

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Inter- and Intra-agency Cooperation in Safeguarding Children.
A Staff Survey

Stefan Machura

Abstract

In the United Kingdom the cooperation of professionals and their organizations in safeguarding children has been widely criticised. Over-bureaucratisation and lack of support for staff are main concerns. In two counties of North Wales 210 employees from statutory and voluntary agencies took part in a questionnaire survey on local administrative arrangements and working culture. Insufficient administrative support (40%), funding (33%) and time (28%) were cited by respondents. Staff feeling well supported in coping with work stress rated the quality of cooperation with other agencies significantly higher. Cooperation on agency level was correlated to the use of common terminology and the presence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms between agencies, but also to fair treatment of staff and appropriate administrative arrangements for child protection cases within the particular agency. Concerted efforts will be necessary within Local Safeguarding Children Boards and their member agencies. The results underline calls to strengthen professional judgment and responsibility.

Key words

Inter- and Intra-agency Cooperation
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The task of safeguarding children requires relentless effort in an area that is extremely difficult, both professionally and administratively. Cases of child abuse, neglect, and even homicide have alerted the public to the plight of children suffering at the hands of their carers, and profoundly politicised issues of child protection (Clapton et al., 2013). Safeguarding children, and the coordination of the agencies involved, is one of the most challenging administrative tasks facing local councils. A chain of responsibility stretches from front line staff to county managers and beyond. In the UK, governments have resorted to performance management, monitoring and regulation to facilitate the co-ordination of the network of organizations involved and to control those (Stafford et al., 2012, 24). It is the statutory duty of local councils, and a number of agencies involved in child welfare, health and education to coordinate their actions within the framework of a Local Safeguarding Children Board (Children Act 2004, sections 13–16; Stafford et al., 2012 on devolved administrations). Surprisingly little is known about the efficiency of multi-agency collaboration in LSCBs (Webber et al., 2011). Certainly, the quality of inter- as well as intra-agency cooperation will be pivotal for their success. Safeguarding children requires problem-solving through the collaboration of specialists belonging to different organizations and professions. However, problems from within these organizations further complicate the coordination of efforts (Anning et al., 2010, 10). The ability of professionals and organizations to interact

successfully will, among other factors, depend on leadership and the resources made available (France et al., 2010). Increasingly, severe cuts in public spending limit the provision of social services. In practice, there can even be a trade-off between resources earmarked for wider needs of children, and resources required specifically for their protection from harm and abuse (Stafford et al., 2012, 156, 226). These circumstances constitute a severe challenge for LSCBs and their member organizations, on top of the plethora of problems that have built up in previous years. The experiences of staff should be taken into account when considering changes to the provision of services and to the modes of agency co-operation.

The LSCB responsible for two counties in North Wales facilitated the present study so as to learn about the experience of staff working in the area of safeguarding children. The survey involved frontline staff and their managers in the statutory member agencies of the LSCB, and of voluntary agencies in the field. Although the LSCB studied covers two counties, coordination is facilitated by some organizations working in both counties, like the Police and the National Health Service (NHS). Other agencies, notably the local authorities are administratively separate.

Problematic Developments in Safeguarding Children

LSCBs coordinate the activities of disparate organizations, which have very different cultures. Some of them are organized as if to illustrate Max Weber's (1978, 220–221) "pure type" of modern bureaucracy. Some belong to the voluntary sector, but employ professional staff. Safeguarding children is to varying degrees the core, or a secondary purpose of the institutions involved. In addition to this there are differences as regards professional ethos. Individual commitment to the task of safeguarding also is a factor that comes into play (Dudau, 2009, 406). Staff members need to negotiate their approaches to cases and to policies. Together, the organizations involved resemble a truly complex system, one which does not run "like clockwork" and which is not "amenable to top-down control"

(Munro/Hubbard, 2010, 728–729). Respondents of the present survey were invited to rate their experience with partner organizations, as well as the effort made by their own organization to fulfil the demands of safeguarding work.

In the field of safeguarding children a specific bureaucratic culture has developed which has begun to have an negative impact on effectiveness (Munro, 2011a). It combines new public management tools with "risk assessment by tick box" (Fitzgibbon, 2012, 10). Staff members are pressured to work "by the book", rather than to use common sense and professional knowledge. Problems have been solved by drawing up an ever increasing number of detailed rules (Parton, 2011b, 4), that have become impractical (Stafford et al., 2012, 90-91). This coincides with an attempt to hold individual staff responsible through painstaking documentation (Parton, 2011a, 869). Its effect on the system of safeguarding children has been detrimental. Consequentially, the Munro Report (2011a) in England has called for a change of direction: professional judgment should be strengthened in Children's Social Services. In addition, earlier studies showed the importance of support by managers and colleagues in enabling social workers to cope with their demanding tasks (Collins, 2008). The respondents of the study in this article were asked to indicate how much they could influence the decisions of managers, how well supported they were and whether their work was unnecessarily bureaucratic.

Safeguarding in Britain is surrounded by a climate of fear. "The public is frightened of the system that has been set up to protect their children" (Cooper et al., 2003, 16). A certain proportion of members of the public are prejudiced against social workers and are afraid they will "snatch away children", as one respondent in our study noted. Staff in child protection, often already feeling "unsupported by the child protection system" (Stafford et al., 2012, 42), are fearful of being held responsible for child abuse. Managers are perhaps even more under pressure, as some of their colleagues have been the target of terrifying media criticism.

Concern with risk management: sticking to predefined procedures and producing the "perfect" paper trail of cases has often taken precedence over working with children and families (Taylor, 2009, 32-34; Morrison, 2010, 314; Munro, 2011a, 20–21; Stafford et al., 2012, 42–43; Lees et al. 2013, 551). After all, in a "blame culture" (Munro, 2011b, 86), being able to demonstrate that one has followed the "right" procedure can make the difference between keeping one's job and becoming a scapegoat. The present study covers these themes, addressing issues such as whether the staff of partner agencies avoid responsibility, how much unnecessary documentation is required, and how far staff feel supported by their managers.

The system for safeguarding children relies on effective partner organizations. Staff need to feel supported in their working conditions, and that, above all, they have the backing of their organization and their managers when difficult decisions have to be made. Working in safeguarding children involves uncertainty and an element of risk. Good team relations contribute to successful administration. Strained relations with managers may discourage staff from taking decisive action when necessary. The relational model of authority in groups formulated by Tyler and Lind (1992) predicts that perceived unfair treatment by superiors has adverse consequences for commitment to the organization. Individuals who feel unfairly treated may find it difficult to contribute effectively in a group setting. This theory has been supported, for example, by earlier studies on German and Russian mixed courts, where the fairness of the presiding judges towards members of the tribunal facilitated their meaningful cooperation (Machura 2001, 2003, 2007). The present study therefore asked staff in the organizations concerned with safeguarding children whether they perceived their managers' treatment of them as fair.

Social workers – and other professionals – are sometimes the target of aggressive and manipulative tactics designed to cover up child abuse (Coffee et al., 2009, 429; Laming, 2003, 3; Parton, 2011b, 15). In some case reviews child protection staff had lacked the necessary

confidence to challenge parents and carers (Reder/Duncan, 2004, 97). Respondents were therefore asked whether they felt confident they could deal with threats.

Lord Laming, in his Progress Report (2009, 4) on safeguarding practices, emphasized that "training, case-loads, supervision and conditions of service" need to reflect the task. Investigating conditions in social work, Coffey et al. (2009) found that employees in childrens' social services suffer most, not from factors intrinsic to the job, but from stress related to "organizational" aspects such as rigid management styles and insufficient resources. Support from team colleagues helped them to cope with work stress (Coffey et al., 2009, 435). In the survey reported here, staff were asked about their case-loads, the resources at their disposal, and the support they received from their managers.

Effective safeguarding of children also depends on effective mechanisms for communicating difficulties. Munro (2010, 1143 and 1148) stated that, in the current blame culture, staff would be reluctant to alert managers to problems. The present study looks into this, and also asks staff whether there is an effective conflict resolution system in place to deal with disagreements between agencies. Following criticism (Munro 2010, 1148; Wastell et al. 2010) that present conditions lead to "distorted priorities", the survey also addresses the question of agencies setting the wrong priorities.

Finally, the article seeks to identify the factors which may contribute to successful staff co-operation. Staff members are part of an ongoing effort, typically involving recurring contact with partner agencies. At the level of the immediate team to which respondents belong the quality of co-operation may be experienced differently, from what is the case at the level of their organization generally. For a larger organization's effectiveness in cooperating with other agencies, additional layers of management come into play. To all this experiences with partner agencies have to be added. Governments and academics have identified cooperation

between agencies as key to safeguarding children, and the present study reflects the experience of staff as regards inter- and intra-agency cooperation.

Method

In two counties of North Wales, a questionnaire survey was conducted of all employees of agencies associated with the Local Safeguarding Children Board; those surveyed were people directly involved with children and carers, and their supervisors. They offer information about problems of intra- and inter-agency cooperation. Representatives from the LSCB cooperated in the study design and the development of the questionnaire. The study conforms to professional ethics guidelines (see British Society of Criminology, 2006). The project was given clearance to proceed by the ethics committee of the College of Business, Law and Social Sciences, Bangor University.

The questionnaire consisted of open-ended and closed questions, allowing statistical analyses as well as text content analyses. Covering letters in English and Welsh stressed the decision of all LSCB organizations to support the staff survey and assured the anonymity of responses. The letters instructed respondents not to mention case details and emphasized that formal procedures should be used for complaints about individual cases. Participants gave informed consent to the use of anonymised data. A reminder letter was sent out after about three weeks. Data were gathered from late March to June 2011.

Significance tests were used for correlations and regression analyses, and to test differences in distributions. When results for individual agencies differed, z-tests for significance were employed. For correlations between ordinal variables, Spearman's rho, or Kendall's tau-c coefficients with nonparametric significance tests were used.

Answers to open-ended questions provided additional information. Open-ended questions were systematically categorized for dimensions and trends in staff experiences. Only aspects raised by several respondents are mentioned in this article.

A total of 543 staff had been reported by the agencies to the LSCB as involved in safeguarding children. Of these, 210 (39%) responded to the survey. The profession has not been asked for. It would have threatened anonymity for small partner agencies. However, most likely, in agencies like the police, local authority social services, or NHS mental health teams, the majority of respondents were from their respective main professions: police officers, social workers, or doctors and nurses. Participation varied considerably across organizations. It was very high for the Substance Misuse Services and the charity Barnardo's (12 participants each, which was 86% of the targeted staff from their agencies, respectively) as well as for the police officers specialised in safeguarding children (12: 75%), to be followed by Midwives (22: 65%), Education (11: 52%), Action for Children (11: 44%), Community Nurses (20: 42%), Youth Justice Service (10: 42%), Health Visitors and related staff (28: 36%), School Nurses (9: 33%), Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (5: 33%), Mental Health teams (22: 29%). The lowest rates were those of Children's Social Services (35: 24%), and Specialist Children's Services (one respondent: 17%). It is possible that some agencies had registered staff with the LSCB who only rarely dealt with safeguarding children, and therefore did not send in their questionnaires.

Results

Demographics

The median age of respondents was 45 years, 163 (78%) being female. Half of the respondents (105 individuals) had been in their "current role" for more than five years, which indicates some degree of experience with the system for safeguarding children. Various roles

in safeguarding could have been held previously. For example, managers might have served for a number of years as social workers.

The survey reached the targeted population. Only 6 respondents (3%) indicated "never" having direct contact with children and their carers, but 42 (20%) "occasionally" and 162 (77%) "routinely". Even most of the 59 (28%) self-identifying as "managing staff" had "routinely" (36, 61%) or "occasionally" (21, 36%) contact with children and carers. Still, when it comes to the extent of direct contact, the difference between managers and non-managers is significant (Kendall's tau-c = -.18, n = 209, p < .01).

Table 1: Support and quality of cooperation

	1 = % strongly agree	2 = % agree	3 = % neither agree nor disagree	4 = % disagree	5 = % strongly disagree	Mean
Help and support in the team/by direct line manager						
I feel I have a manageable case load.	15	46	17	15	4	2.46
I feel supported in coping with work-related stress.	18	38	23	17	4	2.51
The internal cooperation within our team is good.	34	49	12	3	1	1.88
I am well supported by my direct line manager.	32	48	14	4	-	1.90
The cooperation between me and my direct line manager is good.	37	49	11	2	-	1.78
It is easy to alert my managers to concerns about a case.	41	47	8	3	0.5	1.75
Structure, procedures and leadership						
Leadership of my agency in relation to child protection is effective	20	54	23	1	0.5	2.08
My agency's management structure for child protection cases is effective.	15	60	19	3	-	2.10
Management processes in my organization are unnecessarily bureaucratic.*	7	21	47	20	2	3.10
There is too much 'paperwork' involved in child protection.*	16	24	36	19	1	3.35
I feel fairly treated by my managers.	21	59	17	3	0.5	2.03
My managers encourage me to voice my own opinion.	21	54	17	5	1	2.09
My managers do not take my views into account when making a decision.*	4	5	17	57	16	2.24
I have confidence in my organization's policy on whistle blowing	9	40	34	9	6	2.63
My senior managers are in touch with front line demands.	7	47	27	13	3	2.58
Cooperation with other agencies						
My organization coordinates actions with other agencies in the field effectively.	13	59	24	2	0.5	2.18
The cooperation with other agencies is good.	9	50	31	7	1	2.39

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to missing answers.
* Coded inversely for means.

Mutual Support at Team Level in a Challenging Environment

In the staff survey, respondents rated various measures of support and cooperation (Table 1). Relations with immediate superiors and cooperation with their team are favourably portrayed. Of the respondents, 168 (80%) felt supported by their direct line manager and 181 (86%) indicated "the cooperation between me and my direct line manager is good". They felt it would be "easy to alert my managers to concerns about a case". Staff saw their treatment by superiors as fair and felt encouraged to state their views. A large majority saw the "internal cooperation" within their team as "good".

Forty respondents (19%) felt their caseload was not manageable and 43 (21%) did not feel supported in coping with work-related stress. Fifty-eight of all respondents (28%) indicated "Management processes in my organization are unnecessarily bureaucratic" and 84 (40%) agreed that "There is too much 'paperwork' involved in child protection". 102 (49%) showed "confidence in my organizations' policy on whistle blowing".

As if to illustrate the Munro Report's (2011a) critique of social work bureaucracy, 17 respondents (49%) from Children's Social Care (Local Authority), complained about "unnecessarily bureaucratic" management processes, which is a higher rate than for other agencies (z-tests, $p \leq .05$, significant). From all agencies, 34 (16%) "strongly agreed" that there was "too much 'paperwork' involved in child protection"; 16 (47%) of these fierce critics were working at Children's Social Care.

Most respondents stated they had received clear work priorities: 29 (14%) "always" and 103 (49%) "mostly", with a further 51 (24%) "somewhat", 16 (8%) "a little" and 5 (2%) "not at all".

Leadership and management structure for child protection are not seen negatively by the majority, to say the least (Table 1). However, there was some criticism. Cooperation with other agencies is rated "good" or better by 124 (59%).

	More than enough	Enough	Somewhat	Not enough	None at all	Missing
Time	2	42	25	27	1	1
Funding	1	30	30	27	6	5
Administrative support	3	35	21	30	10	2

Entries are percentages.

Resource Problems

Addressing problems from a frontline staff perspective, the survey focused on three resources: time, funding and administrative support. Eighty-three (40%) of the respondents reported a lack of administrative support (Table 2), especially midwives and staff from the Substance Misuse Service (15 and 10, 68% and 83%, respectively, z-tests, $p \leq .05$, significant). Surprisingly, Barnardo's employees (11: 75%) indicated they had sufficient funding for their work while 70 (33%) of all respondents reported having insufficient, or no funding at all for child protection (Table 2). Among health visitor respondents 14 (61%) stated there was no funding at all or "not enough". Time constraints, indicating issues with appropriate employment of staff, were also frequently experienced (Table 2). Of the midwives 11 (61%) complained they had "not enough" time (z-test, $p \leq .05$).

When the respondents were asked to provide examples of wrong priorities set by agencies, lack of resources featured prominently.

- *"Occasionally budgetary constraints affect decision-making re safeguarding children."* (Police officer)

- *"At the moment it seems that financial constraints are more important than safeguarding."* (School nurse)

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- *"Social Services at breaking point need resources and investigation."* (Substance Misuse Service)

- *"Managers say prioritise your caseload to those with greater risk. How can you identify those if you are not visiting a manageable caseload!!"* (Health visitor)

In discussions of the survey results with representatives of the LSCB and its member organizations, no one objected to the existence of crippling caseloads.

Table 3: Experiences with other agencies

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Missing
Do the agencies involved use common terminology?	6	51	35	1	0.5	5
Do you think that other agencies involved set the wrong priorities?	0.5	8	55	25	4	8
How often do you feel your organization cooperates effectively with other agencies?	17	60	17	1	0.5	4

Entries are percentages.

Experience with Other Agencies

Cooperation experiences can be negative. Staff working in safeguarding children often found that partner agencies had set different priorities. Only four respondents (2%) stated that other agencies had "never" had different priorities, while 12 (6%) said this happened "rarely". "Sometimes" different priorities were indicated by 102 (49%), 70 (33%) chose "often" and 19 (9%) "very often". According to 134 respondents (64%) partner agencies at least sometimes even have the wrong priorities (Table 3). Also, according to 78 (37%) of the respondents, agencies at least "sometimes" do not use common terminology (Table 3). Only 36 (17%) stated that their own organization "always" cooperates effectively with other agencies, while

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most (126, 60%), said they "often" cooperate effectively (Table 3). Two related items, the effectiveness of the coordination of actions with other agencies and the quality of cooperation with other agencies received similar ratings (Table 1, last two entries).

Table 4: Experiences with other agencies and the LSCB

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing
I understand the role of other organizations involved in child protection.	13	70	13	1	0.5	2
There is an effective mechanism in addressing conflicts among agencies.	1	26	45	16	3	8
I feel staff of partner agencies avoid responsibility.	6	24	41	23	0.5	6
I feel informed about the work of the LSCB.	3	33	34	25	1	3
I understand the purpose of the LSCB.	8	56	24	8	1	3

Entries are percentages.

As Table 4 shows, the overwhelming majority of the respondents believed they understood the role of other organizations involved in child protection, and the purpose of the LSCB. Nevertheless, most did not feel well informed about the LSCB. Adult Mental Health Teams indicated they had less understanding of other agencies' roles compared to the rest of the sample (z test, $p \leq .05$). On a five-point scale ranging from "1 = very positive" to "5 = very negative", cooperation with Adult Mental Health teams received the lowest rating (mean = 2.76, n = 116) by staff from partner agencies. For comparison, the police and nurses (health visitors, school nurses, midwives, and community nurses) attracted the best ratings (means between 1.95 and 2.24, $120 \leq n \leq 170$). Few disagreed that staff of partner agencies avoid responsibility (Table 4). Notably, 20 (59%) of Children's Social Services staff agreed or strongly agreed, a significantly larger percentage compared to other organizations (z-test, $p \leq .05$). An effective mechanism in addressing conflicts among agencies is crucial for the safeguarding system, but only a quarter of the respondents felt this existed (Table 4).

Evaluation of Senior Management

Of the respondents 113 (54%) agreed to the statement "My senior managers are in touch with front line demands" (Table 1). Seeing senior management as "out of touch" was correlated with a lack of resources such as time, funding and administrative support (Spearman's rho = .34, .26, and .37, $p \leq 0.01$, $194 \leq n \leq 204$). Evaluations of senior management as "out of touch" were also significantly correlated to perceived manageable caseloads (Spearman's rho = .33, $p \leq 0.01$, $n = 198$), to finding an effective management structure for child protection in place (Spearman's rho = .43, $p \leq 0.01$, $n = 203$) and to the perception of the agency's cooperation with partner agencies. A significant correlation of senior management being seen as "in touch with front line demands" was found with three different measures of effective cooperation: "The cooperation with other agencies is good" (Spearman's rho = .18, $p \leq 0.05$, $n = 200$); "My organization coordinates actions with other agencies in the field effectively" (rho = .35, $p \leq 0.01$, $n = 203$), and "How often do you feel your organization cooperates effectively with other agencies?" (rho = .27, $p \leq 0.01$, $n = 198$).

Ordinal regression for quality of cooperation with other agencies at team level

	The cooperation with other agencies is good	
	Estimate	*Significance*
Threshold		
Strongly agree	3.665	.001
Agree	7.867	.001
Factor		
Quality of internal cooperation in "our team"	.570	.010
Being given clear priorities	.550	.014
Highly supported with work stress[1]	3.014	.001
Confidence in dealing with hostile situations	.467	.047
Effective mechanisms for addressing conflicts among agencies	.499	.020
Partner agency staff do not avoid responsibility	.442	.025
Feeling fairly treated by managers	-.828	.004

Reference for dependant variable: "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neither disagree" and missing.

[1] Answer "strongly agree" to five-point question "I feel supported in coping with work-related stress".

N = 187, Nagelkerke's R² = .412, -2LL constant 310,986, Chi² = 79,232, df = 7, p < .001, function: logit.

Cooperation with Other Agencies: Multivariate Analysis

In the context of questions related to their relation with, and support by their direct line manager, their ability to alert managers to a case, individual caseload, and support with work-related stress, together with the quality of team cooperation, respondents rated the item "The cooperation with other agencies is good." A multivariate analysis for effectiveness of team level cooperation (see last entry in Table 1 for percentages) as dependant variable was conducted to identify factors related to answering this question positively or negatively. Six factors are significantly positively related and could even be read as indicators of "good practice" (Table 5).

1. Having strong support with work-related stress had the strongest impact

2. Having been given clear work priorities

3. Experiencing good cooperation in one's own team

4. Feeling confident in dealing with hostile situations. Only eight (4%) of the respondents had indicated being "extremely confident", 87 (41%) "confident", 96 (46%) "somewhat confident", and the remaining 16 (8%) "not confident" or "not at all confident".

5. Thinking that staff of partner agencies accept responsibility

6. Seeing in place "an effective mechanism for addressing conflicts among agencies"

Interestingly, those who felt unfairly treated by their managers also rated the cooperation efforts of their team higher. The team's cooperation with other agencies appears in a more favourable light when there is a challenging context of conflict with the organization's management. 'We manage to work well with other agencies, even if we sometimes have problems with our managers", this seems to suggest.

Table 6:
Linear regression for quality of cooperation with other agencies at organizational level

	How often do you feel your organization co-operates effectively with other agencies?	
	Beta	Significance
Managers take respondent's views into account when making a decision[1]	-.275	.001
Feeling fairly treated by managers	.226	.004
Management processes in respondent's organization not unnecessarily bureaucratic[1]	.158	.037
Respondent agency's management structure for child protection cases is effective	.260	.001
Agencies involved use common terminology	.150	.026
Effective mechanisms in place to address conflicts among agencies	.133	.061

[1] Question negatively worded, responses inverted for analysis.
N = 183, corrected R^2 = .271.

When it comes to agency-level effectiveness, matters of policy gain more prominence. A majority answered the question "how often do you feel your organization cooperates effectively with other agencies?" affirmatively (Table 3). A multivariate analysis indicates the

covariates of this assessment (Table 6), some of which are characterisations of the agency itself, others are traits of the cooperation between agencies. On the level of interaction between agencies, a common terminology and having an effective conflict mechanism in place are important. At the level of the agency, effective cooperation is positively related to respondents feeling that they are fairly treated by managers, that management processes are reasonably un-bureaucratic, and that the management structure is conducive to child protection cases. Notably, responses to the item "My managers do not take my views into account when making a decision" were probably affected by situations of conflict in which other agencies have been involved. Rating one's organization as effectively cooperating with other agencies was negatively related to feeling that managers take the respondent's views into account. This might be best understood as a consequence of situations in which the respondent had no say with decisions made as a matter of routine, or even as situations in which the respondent favoured one decision, but her agency decided differently, in agreement with partner agencies.

Discussion

"There is room for improvement of all agencies and individuals", these words by a survey participant reflect the overall results of the survey. Staff working in safeguarding children identified a range of issues. Despite the devolution of political powers away from the central UK government, the systems for safeguarding children are still largely similar in England, Northern Ireland, Wales, and even Scotland, in terms of procedures, institutions and other aspects (Stafford et al., 2012). The broad similarity suggests the results of this study can be taken into account beyond North Wales.

On the positive side, respondents reported being supported by their direct line managers. Perceived success at team level indeed correlated with staff feeling highly supported in stressful situations. Many, however, found management processes unnecessarily bureaucratic,

even more said there was too much paperwork involved, and many complained about a lack of administrative support. Some respondents criticised the "target and tick-box culture" so prevalent in public services. For example, one manager commented:

"In my experience a social worker is generally bogged down with pages and pages of assessments – time limited. The thrust is to meet these targets."

Such findings underline the problems identified in the Munro Report (2011a). Also on the negative side, only half of the staff in the two counties studied had confidence in their organization's policy on whistle blowing. Others felt the lack of clear work priorities, which is the more detrimental as such priorities promote effective cooperation with other agencies. Lack of resources were mentioned by many staff. Not having enough administrative support was an issue for most respondents, followed by insufficient funding and insufficient time for safeguarding children. A caseload of several hundred children in a rural area would be *"far too much"*, read an alarming statement from a health visitor.

While most portrayed leadership and management structures in child protection positively, and also rated the cooperation with other agencies as "good" or better, 26% of the respondents objected that senior managers are not "in touch with front line demands". There was a degree of disillusionment about their leaders' ability to provide front line staff with the necessary resources.

Cooperation is suffering from organizations setting different priorities. For most respondents, partner organizations have at least "sometimes" set the w r o n g priorities. A third complained that "staff of partner agencies avoid responsibility", which makes collaboration difficult. Tensions also arose from what is perceived as the lack of an effective mechanism to address conflicts among the agencies.

Respondents assessed their experiences with specific partner agencies. The police and nursing professions received the highest ratings, whereas Adult Mental Health services attracted

particular criticism. Social work, whether in the public or voluntary sector, occupied the middle ground (Machura, 2012, 28–29). Part of the explanation might be the nature of the services provided and the degree to which safeguarding children and inter-agency cooperation are core to the organization involved. Additionally, passing on information was a major factor in evaluating partner agencies.

Answers from open-ended questions provide additional insight into the evaluation of partner organizations. If respondents pointed out a "best" agency, they often mentioned the Police. Local authority Social Services were sometimes described as exemplary, but also sometimes as a "less effective" agency. This double-edged result probably reflects the central role of Social Services within the system of child protection. As a consequence, respondents are more likely to have varying experiences of the quality of the local authority's provision. Other agencies also occasionally received harsh criticism. Individual answers raise a number of issues about working with partner agencies. Reports of insufficient information sharing with other agencies echo earlier findings in the literature (e.g. France et al., 2010; Richardson and Asthana, 2006, 665–666; Laming, 2003, 9; Stafford et al., 2012, 130), and information can even be an issue among units of a single large organization. Failures to pass on information may start when referring cases to other agencies and go on to include withholding information about decisions and outcomes. Another main concern was the insufficient training offered by agencies and by the LSCB (Machura, 2012, 13–16).

Many respondents wanted the LSCB to provide more training for front line staff and their managers. Joint training with staff from partner agencies was called for. This makes sense since it would enable them to learn about the criteria, routines and capacities of those they need to work with. Mutual trust could develop as a consequence. After all, our results suggest that the trusted group of team colleagues is a major factor contributing to effectiveness in safeguarding children. Although 134 respondents (64%) indicated they understood the

purpose of the LSCB, which is at least a start, only 76 (36%) felt they knew about the activities of the LSCB. Many respondents also insisted that the LSCB should work with the public and with staff in partner agencies, to raise awareness about safeguarding children.

Occasionally staff had conflicting ideas. For example, some respondents favoured more guidelines (similar to findings by Dudau, 2009, 412), and others more professional autonomy (as suggested by the Munro Review, or by Martin et al. 2010, 1). Some demands may be hard to meet in the current economic climate. Some problems, like over-bureaucratisation, might only be remedied by strengthening "professional" judgment and responsibility. Issues of a practical nature definitely can be addressed by Safeguarding Children Boards and by their member agencies.

The present study thus holds implications for social work policy and practice. On a general level, resources must be made available to social work staff to sufficiently address their tasks. One example is the lack of administrative support reported by many in local authority social services, aggravated by documentation duties that for many have become a burden beyond all practical gains. The right balance between top-down administrative controls and professional responsibility of social workers has not been found yet and for too long the pendulum has swung in the direction of over-bureaucratization. From there, the initial and ongoing training of social workers, at least partially together with partner agency staff, comes into play. More professional responsibility and less rigid controls need to be accompanied by renewed training efforts. On another level of social work management, attention needs to be paid to the system of inter-agency cooperation. It might be likened to a chain in which the weakest link decides durability. Beyond responsibility for their own organization, social work management has to work with the partner agencies, if necessary alerting them to shortcomings. The main instrument for this would be the Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

It is natural, that a study of interagency cooperation arrives at recommendations for social work management as those above. But the present study also highlights an enabling factor at the very micro-level of social work. The climate of cooperation within teams of social workers helps coping with work-related problems. Beyond what can be achieved by allocating resources and organizational measures, fair and respectful treatment of staff colleagues is paramount for the well-functioning of the organization. The same would apply to colleagues from partner agencies within the network of organizations in safeguarding children.

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