

Research



How integrated working facilitated the transition of children from primary to secondary school



Sharing our experience

Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

PLR0809/031



This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

How integrated working facilitated the transition of children from primary to secondary school

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Abstract

Integrated working has succeeded in facilitating the smooth transition of children from primary to secondary school in Southwark. This has been the primary finding of this research.

This study was aimed at determining how integrated working affected the transition of children and young people from primary to secondary education. It was aimed at determining some good practices already happening in Southwark. The study was not an attempt to evaluate the practice of professionals and agencies in the borough but was about identifying emerging good practices that can be improved further or replicated

The study was conducted using the following:

1. Interview with six practitioners from the voluntary sector and from schools
2. Focus group discussion with six children and young people from Years 7 and 8
3. Phone interview with four parents
4. Review of related literature and past studies.

The four most important facilitators of integrated working are the relationship between professionals; understanding and the consistent use of common tools; the engagement of children and their parents; and the efficient management of the whole process of integrated working. This includes clarity of the roles of the different professionals involved, regular updates and review meetings, and efficient management of expectations between and among professionals.

It was also found that the use of the Common Assessment Framework and the sharing of information has contributed to the effective provision of support to children during their transition. Practitioners from the voluntary sector and schools are also keen to make integrated working successful and they welcome the opportunity to take part. Even at times of such a difficult period in children's lives, parents find the support provided by different professionals very useful in accessing necessary help.

There were, however, some things which need improving, such as practitioners having more opportunities to network and understand the services provided by different agencies. Interface between different practitioners from both sectors will improve co-ordination and avoid duplication of services. The use of common language and avoiding the use of jargon in working alongside different professionals will ensure better co-ordination of services.

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1. Introduction

The Change for Children agenda emphasized that integrated working focuses on encouraging professionals to work together in delivering front-line services to children in order to achieve the outcomes set for them. It places emphasis on a co-ordinated service provision and the use of common tools such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and information sharing (ECM website).

Freedom Centre International (FCI) is a voluntary sector organization which provides support to children and young people by equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills and building their confidence. The organization works closely with other voluntary sector groups and networks with the local authority to provide additional support to vulnerable children.

In the course of the organization's work with children, it has become apparent that some have difficulty during their transition from primary to secondary school, often due to different reasons such as challenging behaviours, difficulty in forming and sustaining relationship with peers and adults, and challenges faced by parents that make transition hard for the child.

This study was aimed at determining how integrated working affected the transition of children and young people from primary to secondary education. It was aimed at determining some good practices already happening in Southwark. The study was not an attempt to evaluate the practice of professionals and agencies in the borough but was about identifying emerging good practices that can be improved further or replicated.

2. Aims of the project

The objectives of the study were the following:

1. To determine the facilitating and hindering factors to the timely delivery of services to children and young people during their transition from primary to secondary education.
2. To identify the tools used by practitioners in integrated working and determine the strengths of these tools.
3. To determine the views of children and young people, as well as their parents, on how integrated working facilitated their transition from one school to another.
4. To understand the views of practitioners on integrated working and how integrated working can be improved.

The study hoped to inform Southwark Children's Services and its transition forum on how integrated working can be used more effectively to assist children and their families.

3. Context

Every Child Matters: Change for Children (ECM) sets out the framework for services to revolve around the child and to achieve the outcomes set for children. It also sets out the need for all services to be co-ordinated to make better use of resources and to provide the services the family and the child need. Integrated working is a key component of ECM both as an objective and as a means to achieve better outcomes for children. It was introduced more than three years ago and has since proven to be an effective means to support the child.

On the other hand, transition is an important stage in a child's life, whether it be in terms of age, disability, circumstances or relationships, among others. Every child undergoes transition one way or another. For some, especially the vulnerable children, transition is challenging.

This study focused on how integrated working facilitated or hindered the access to services by vulnerable children during their transition from primary to secondary school. Vulnerable children is defined in this study as those with additional needs such as behavioural or relationship issues which make their transition difficult.

A study which was undertaken in December 2006 (*Every Child Matters: Change for Children 2006*) looked at common operational features of an effective integrated working. The two main findings were:

- integrated working in the areas nominated as a good practice was fundamentally based on personal relationships that, although currently effective, may not be sustainable
- in the areas visited there is general anecdotal evidence of impact on individual cases, however it was thought to be too early to measure the overall impact on outcomes.

The study enumerated a number of the characteristics of effective integrated working, including a strong personal relationship between staff, the deep commitment of staff to integrated working, no major dependence on IT, the embedding of principles in strategic-level documents, the adoption of common models, language and service delivery, effective information sharing within the team and outside services, and putting the child and the family at the centre of the provision and management of services.

Two relevant studies were conducted, one that looked at transition and one that explored the resilience of children.

The first study determined what makes a successful transition from primary to secondary and was published by the DCSF in January 2008 (Evangelou 2008). Samples were taken from 1,190 children, of which 550 children responded. Some of the findings were:

- Developing new friendships and improving their self-esteem and confidence
- Having settled so well in school that they caused no concerns to their parents

- Showing an increasing interest in school and school work
- Getting used to their new routines and school organization with great ease Experience curriculum continuity.

Findings also included aspects that hinder transition:

- Understanding of parents of the process and procedures
- Bullying
- Worrying about their ability to do the work or having new teachers
- Worrying if they can make new friends.

The second study was conducted by Barnardo's (Newman 2002) and looked at strategies which promote the resilience of children. Some findings included factors associated with resilience such as personal, family and environmental features, of which some are relatively fixed such as gender, IQ or sense of humour. The findings also included strong social support networks, positive school experience and the presence of at least one parent substitute as key factors in building resilience. It has been almost three years since integrated working was first introduced. It would be very useful to see how it is being practiced at a local level to help the child during his or her transition. This study looked into some local practices to determine if integrated working has helped or hindered the timely access of children to necessary services during their transition. It also looked into the interface between professionals, as well as into their views and the views of children on the subject matter.

4. Methodology

This was a small piece of research which looked at the perspective of a very few respondents consisting of children, parents and practitioners from school and the voluntary sector. It was aimed at determining how integrated working facilitated or hindered the smooth transition of children from primary to secondary education and at identifying emerging themes that might be replicated in other schools or used to inform the whole process in Southwark.

The study was not aimed at evaluating anyone's practice, though it hoped to identify some good practices, as viewed by practitioners, parents and children. The study did not attempt to carry out an in-depth analysis of the whole integrated working processes but only identified some key features that can be improved further. Due to time constraints, only a manageable number of samples were interviewed. The researcher, however, attempted to involve different people involved in integrated working, including parents and children.

The study was conducted using the following:**[change following list to 1 to 4]**

5. An interview with six practitioners from the voluntary sector and from schools
6. Focus group discussion with six children and young people from Years 7 and 8
7. Phone interview with four parents

8. Review of related literature and past studies.

At the outset, the researcher sought the permission of the relevant bodies to carry out the study. It was a challenging experience in that research guidelines were not in existence. The researcher had to communicate with four people from different agencies and partnerships to ascertain Southwark's take on studies involving issues about children. In the absence of written guidelines, the lead commissioner in children's services decided to endorse the study. One important lesson learned from this experience was the need to develop clear guidelines on conducting researches involving children's issues and to designate the partnership or department to oversee its implementation.

The timing of the data gathering (mid-November towards Christmas and early in the New Year) and setting up interviews with practitioners also proved challenging. Consent from parents also had to be sought, which did not present a problem as the researcher clearly explained the study to parents. There were, however, some delays in the conduct of the focus group discussion with the children due to their other activities in December.

On ethical consideration, the researcher and interviewees were all aware that any information about the child and the family which might be discussed in interviews should be kept confidential. In order to maintain confidence, the interviews were only about the process of integrated working and the lessons learnt, not about specific issues of any particular child.

5. Findings

The main finding of the study was that integrated working facilitated the smooth transition of children from primary to secondary education and the timely delivery of services to them. The following themes emerged.

1. Working relationship between and among professionals contributes to effective integrated working

All respondents from the voluntary sector said that a good relationship with colleagues from schools makes the co-ordination of services better and more efficient. Where headteachers and other personnel are cooperative, voluntary sector practitioners feel confident in referring a child and in following up the action points. Practitioners from some schools initiate the update by communicating with the voluntary sector staff. It is felt that working relationship should be consistent and known to all school personnel. Where school personnel with whom they have a good relationship leave their post, the process of rebuilding the relationship has to restart. One respondent from the voluntary sector stated that:

'integrated working will work if the relationship we have established with certain school personnel will be maintained. The problem arises when they resign, then we have to establish [a] new relationship which often takes a long while.'

One respondent commented that there are some issues with some agencies that demonstrate a 'silo' mentality and some service managers are protecting their own patch. Some agencies also have a reluctance to share information and to genuinely collaborate. These issues get in the way of effectively assisting the child and the family. However, it was also noted that these are discussed and resolved during the first meeting and reviewed regularly in subsequent meetings.

2. Good knowledge and consistent use of tools facilitate easy access to services

All respondents mentioned that the use of the Common Assessment Framework is one of the best features of integrated working. They agreed that the series of training events conducted a few years ago and the consistent promotion of its use had helped in emphasizing its importance. Parent respondents also said they appreciate the fact that they only have to be interviewed once.

Everyone was forthcoming in sharing information and appreciated its importance in facilitating support for the child. There were occasions where school personnel refused to share information, especially when sharing it will affect parents' trust. Practitioners eventually shared information after open discussions. Parents and children were also made aware that any information which might relate to child protection issues would have to be disclosed to the authorities.

Respondents said that the use of the CAF had been helpful as they do not have to start from scratch. Information was recorded and shared across all professionals. However, it was felt that the local authority should make it a point to discuss the updating of the system and for everyone from across all sectors to understand it.

3. Engagement of children and parents contributes to the success of integrated working

Parents said that they were involved and were kept updated on the progress of the service provision. They said that they were also involved in review meetings and were encouraged to contact the different agencies should it be necessary. Practitioners said that they empower the child and the parents by giving them information of other services available and the key people to contact. One school head teacher stated:

'giving parents the information they need is enabling them to be independent in seeking help for their families without them having to come back to us, that is very empowering.'

The children said that an ideal practitioner is one who asks them about their opinions and considers how the services will affect them. A 13 year old boy said

'I have met my ideal practitioner when I was being bullied in school. She listened to me and I felt I could trust her.'

All respondents confirmed that participation was important in the process and that they make sure that they involve the child and the parents in discussions. They said

that they inform them of the services they can access and the actions each practitioner will take. They also give them information on key contacts and the telephone numbers of different agencies. The children said that a good practitioner should be able to empower their parents by sharing information which they can use in the future.

4. Management of expectations and clarity of roles of different professionals help to establish a clear process

The different professionals involved are protective of their own professions but were able to explain or demonstrate what they could contribute. They said that they discuss and properly manage their expectations at the outset. The lead professional was usually tasked to co-ordinate the whole process, and to follow up action points, depending on the complexity of the case. There were also regular update and review meetings where actions could be discussed. Sometimes, they had to initiate finding the services for the family even before the meeting takes place. However, frustration arose when actions were not being followed up and if some petty personal and professional hierarchy issues manifested themselves. These were however discussed and resolved, and everyone was reminded that the main focus of the service is the child.

All respondents said that professionals should have the opportunity to know all services within the borough so that they can tap into them. They said that regular networking events would be helpful in understanding the different services in Southwark. Events will also help them update their knowledge on the different professionals working particularly within the voluntary sector. Practitioners said that they refer families to services that were known to them and services that were usually based in schools.

The use of common language was also mentioned as an important aspect. Some respondents said that professionals used different terms to mean the same thing and this complicated their understanding of the process to be undertaken. However, it was mentioned that this has improved significantly over time. Practitioners had started to avoid the use of jargon and where jargon was used they explained the terms/words to each other.

The children said that professionals should use simple and understandable language so that they can also take part. For them, a good trait of an ideal practitioner is the ability to interpret complex issues into plain, everyday language which they can understand and relate to. They said that they could participate more if practitioners use common terms that they hear in everyday conversation. One child remarked:

‘we don’t need to hear big words, plain English will do.’

6. Implications for practice (including integrated working)

Integrated working focuses on the child and the family so as to achieve the best possible outcomes for them. The emerging themes from this study have indicated what good practice probably looks like and what could be the basis of evaluation of integrated working processes in the next few years.

The following are some key features of integrated working which could lead to it becoming good practice in the borough.

1. Integrated working as a new way of working

The concept of integrated working has led to new ways of working in children's services. Prior to its introduction a few years ago, professionals worked in isolation and there was less co-ordination of services for parents and children. Integrated working has improved not only the way services are delivered but more importantly how professionals contribute their expertise to provide good quality services to children and their families. Although professionals are protective of their own professions, and sometimes there are bureaucratic issues with service managers, they are all committed to serving the child and the family. This commitment binds them together and facilitates the professional relationship. There has been a complete paradigm shift from working in isolation to working in conjunction with other professionals. The professional boundaries still exist but there are now close links and the sharing of expertise between different professionals.

2. Clear strategic direction on integrated working

Achieving efficient and effective integrated working entails good leadership and the adoption of the process at a strategic level. In Southwark, the children and young people's partnership board as well as the Children's Trust have been instrumental in promoting integrated working through policies and plans. There is also a co-ordinated training programme. Practitioners in the voluntary sector and in schools have been trained and encouraged to embed the process in their practice.

A clear strategic direction ensures that the whole local authority and all agencies understand and implement the process, and understand their accountability. Each departmental plan includes co-ordination and multi-agency working. Strategic processes on integrated working have been made part of the Children and Young People's Plan which cements the commitment of the local authority on integrated working.

3. Integrated working embedded in local processes

Locality development is being promoted in Southwark as the way of working where services are based in different localities to be accessed by local residents. Integrated working fits within this in that local services and a cluster of schools are

actively involved. There is a natural blending of the integrated working process and the locality development, which makes the former an integral part of locality working. Local processes also include children's centre partnerships, a cluster of schools, extended services and locality teams where the CAF has been piloted and now being rolled over in other locality-based working. Each team has been trained in use of the CAF, information sharing and working alongside other practitioners from the statutory and voluntary sectors.

4. Continuous learning and development for all practitioners

It is important that practitioners get the chance to refresh their understanding about integrated working and the tools used to implement it. Continuous learning and development include training events, seminars and the opportunity to get together and network. This will ensure the workforce is well-versed in the process and that they get to know the different services available, even within the voluntary sector. It is important for practitioners from all sectors to network with other agencies so that they can maximize the use of limited resources. Practitioners find it very helpful to know which agency provides the same services so that they can work together to assist the child and the family and avoid duplication of services.

Southwark has a communication strategy which includes the dissemination of good practices, including integrated working, to the whole children's workforce. The message of collaborative working is consistently given to all agencies through the different partnerships at a borough-wide level. This also translates to a well co-ordinated training programme which is jointly managed by adult and children's services.

5. Participation of children and parents

The involvement of children and parents is essential for making integrated working a success. Both children and parents have confirmed that having a voice in the process empowers them. Participation also enables them to be self-reliant in that they would know the key people and agencies to contact even after the services have been provided to them. Participation enables children to take part in deciding the services they need to access. There is also transparency involved in that expectations of both the practitioners and the family are discussed and managed. This is important in building a good working relationship and helps clarify what can and cannot be achieved.

7. Conclusion

Integrated working helps to achieve the objectives set for children. It has facilitated different professionals to work together, share their expertise, learn together and review their work together, all towards achieving what is best for the child and the family. There are a number of reasons why the process should be continued and supported in children's services.

Firstly, integrated working assists vulnerable children in attaining specific goals set for themselves such as adapting to their new school, receiving the extra support the family and the child need, receiving support for their behavioural issues, among others. This would not have been possible in single-agency working. Integrated working has improved the co-ordination of services and has contributed to resources being used more efficiently. It has also helped to build relationships between professionals

Secondly, integrated working has led to a paradigm shift among practitioners and agencies involved in helping the child. They now understand that helping a child to adapt to a new school for example, should be the task of all agencies surrounding the child. The paradigm shift also includes 'going the extra mile' by acting as lead professionals or contributing to the whole process and being part of the multi-agency team. Unlike before, there is now a very thin line separating the different professions, more respect between professionals and a continuous sharing of expertise. Although professional expertise and boundaries are still maintained, professionals work more closely, use the same language, set common goals for the child, and complement resources.

Lastly, integrated working values the child and the family and makes them the centre of all the efforts. Valuing them is demonstrated by involving them and giving them a voice in what is being done to support them. The participation of children and parents has made them feel that they are not merely recipients of services but contributors to discussions about which services they should access.

Integrated working as it is currently practised in Southwark is not perfect but there are indications of it becoming a good practice. Aspects that need further attention so as to bring additional improvement include better understanding of the language being used so that every professional, the child and the family can relate to the process; better understanding and consistent use of the tools through training and networking events; and processes being less bureaucratic among the more senior level in the hierarchy.

Integrated working is indeed potentially one of best practices in the Change for Children agenda. In Southwark, this is now becoming a reality which will continue to improve so that the outcomes for children are achieved in due time.

References

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