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Multi-Agency Working

Graham Connelly

As this chapter was being written, in May 2007, the outcome of elections for the third Scottish Parliament since the establishment of devolved government in 1999 saw a minority Scottish National Party (SNP) administration installed at Holyrood. The SNP's pre-election manifesto promised a focus on integrated services for children and families, saying that: 'Creating more joined-up services will ensure that children's needs are at the centre of policy and provision' (see www.snp.org.uk). The manifesto also proposed that schools should be able to set local policies on a range of issues, including uniforms and exclusion. Making decisions locally is consistent with the broader principles of devolution and is popular. However, while variations in approaches to school uniform might be likened to tolerance of differences in attitudes to dress, it is more difficult to see how a major issue like school exclusion, which adversely impacts on disadvantaged families, can be successfully tackled in the absence of a coherent strategy.

This chapter, therefore, examines the case for a strategic approach to joined-up services by reviewing the development and operation of multi-agency working in Scottish education, and considers the professional imperatives for collaboration between agencies, and the barriers which present significant challenges to action. The chapter begins by outlining the policy context in relation to making Scotland a fairer society through improving educational experience generally, and then discusses more particularly the emerging practice issues for multi-agency working by considering the case study of one significantly disadvantaged group: children and young people who are 'looked after' by local authorities.

THE POLICY CONTEXT

The first post-devolution Labour Liberal-Democrat coalition government introduced a prospectus for social justice, outlined in the report *Social Justice: a Scotland where everyone matters* (Scottish Executive, 1999 www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/158142/0042789.pdf).

The report, paralleling similar intentions articulated elsewhere in the UK, elaborated the Scottish government's declared aim of defeating child poverty within a generation (i.e. by 2020) and its ambitious targets for achieving social justice set the tone for subsequent legislative and executive activity. The law makers were extremely active, and between 1999 and 2006 a total of 27 acts were passed by the Parliament in the areas of health, social services and education. An underlying theme permeating the legislation was the desire to make Scottish society more inclusive through greater equity, tolerance and diversity. One of the first statutes to be passed was the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000*. In what was mainly a ragbag collection of procedures, it is possible to discern the influence of the New Labour social justice agenda in two of the Act's provisions: the presumption that education will take place in mainstream schools and only in exceptional circumstances in special schools; and the intention to define 'national priorities in education'. When the five national priorities were subsequently introduced (*Scottish Statutory Instrument No. 443 The Education (National Priorities) (Scotland) Order 2000*) one of these stipulated the requirement 'to promote equality and help every pupil benefit from education.'

The 10 targets identified in the 1999 social justice prospectus included the general aspiration that: 'Every young person leaves school with the maximum level of skills and qualifications possible.' The government also identified milestones by which movement towards the targets could be measured, and from 2000 to 2003 the Executive reported on progress in the *Annual*

Social Justice Report. Two of the original 29 milestones related in particular to the needs of looked after children: (Milestone 8) ‘All our young people leaving local authority care will have achieved at least English and maths Standard Grades’; and (Milestone 10) ‘Reducing by a third the days lost every year through exclusion and truancy.’ No improvement was noted in relation to Milestone 8 over the life of the first parliament, though, as we shall discuss later, efforts designed to influence the educational experience of looked after children had not had time to make much impact. The milestone relating to exclusion has a more complex history however.

Pupils registered for free school meals, pupils with additional support needs, and looked after pupils, are excluded more than other pupils. Where a pupil falls into all three categories the exclusion rate is considerably higher than for pupils with none of these characteristics – 15 times greater in 2005-06. In that year, the rate of exclusion for children not looked after was 55 per thousand, while 337 per thousand looked after children were excluded from school. Most exclusions, according to the Executive’s statistics, are for short periods (typically less than one week) and in over 70% of cases the precipitating reasons reported include persistent disobedience, verbal abuse of staff and offensive behaviour. However, case studies of individual looked after children tell a rather different story: of multiple exclusions; delays in making arrangements for alternative education; and inadequate arrangements for continuing education during periods of exclusion. The authors of the *Learning with Care* report (HMI and SWSI, 2001 www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/lacr.pdf) studied 50 children in foster or residential care and found that 21 had been excluded at least once, and some had been excluded many times. At the time of the inspection two of the young people had been without a school placement for three months and one for seven months. Two had been excluded ‘informally’, an arrangement without statutory backing. The report’s authors said

that: 'Except in exceptional circumstances, all looked after children should have permanent full-time education, however that may be organised' (p.21). Despite this strongly worded recommendation by the inspectors, the problem of exclusion has got steadily worse. Table 1 shows the pattern of exclusion of looked after children over a period of seven years.

[Table 1 about here]

The most visible feature is that schools' tolerance of challenging behaviour appears to have been declining, or at least the capacity of teachers to manage difficulties within school has declined. The explanation for the lower rates of exclusion of looked after children in 2000-01 and 2001-02 lies in the provision of official guidance to schools to reduce its use as a sanction, in line with social justice Milestone 10. However, there were protests from teachers' and head teachers' organisations, and the government appeared to backtrack in the face of the pressure, and the requirement to reduce exclusion at all costs was eased. In the language of political newspeak, the most recent increase in exclusions was even welcomed by the then Minister for Education and Young People as evidence that schools were 'using powers at their disposal to crack down on troublemakers by removing them from their classes' (reported in *The Herald*, February 1st 2006). Many teachers clearly favour exclusion as an answer to disruptive pupils, according to the report of a survey conducted by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (Adams, 2005 www.gtvvs.org.uk/nmruntime/saveasdialog.asp?IID=1057&sID=1511), but it is clear that local authorities in general have not been particularly successful in making effective provision for alternatives to mainstream education.

A Labour Liberal-Democrat government was again formed after the election in 2003 and just under one year into the second Parliament the administration's social justice aims were re-branded as *Closing the Opportunity Gap* (CtOG), six key objectives for combating poverty (see www.scottishexecutive.gov.uk/Topics/People/Social-Inclusion/17415/opportunity). The Executive refers to CtOG in separate entries on its web site as 'replacing' the social justice milestones and also as 'building' on them. Confusingly, the term 'target' is no longer used to refer to long-term aims but seems to have the same meaning as 'milestone'. The 10 targets of CtOG do not appear to derive precisely from the 29 earlier milestones, although there is some correspondence, and therefore it is not entirely clear how they are built upon. Four of the targets are quoted in Figure 1. An obvious feature is that they have short timescales, typically three or four years. Another defining feature highlights the extent of the challenge: these particular social trends have been resistant to improvement. For example, data collected by the Executive's statisticians show that in relation to Target F, while there has been no appreciable change in the attainment in national qualifications by the lowest performing 20% of pupils since 2000, the gap between this group and the remaining 80% has widened. Similarly, in relation to Target B, the proportion of 16-18 year olds not in education, training or employment (the 'NEET' group) was estimated to be 14% in 2005, a figure that has remained virtually the same since 1996. Another feature, illustrated by Target G, is the difficulty experienced in collecting accurate data. The target is to have over 50% of care leavers in education, employment or training by 2007; in 2006 it was estimated that only 37% were engaged. The economic activity of 16% of care leavers was unknown and this missing information is mirrored by a general lack of accurate data about Scotland's looked after children, a point to which we will return.

[Figure 1 about here]

Also characterising these targets is the extent to which policy makers emphasised the importance of collaboration between agencies and professional groups, and words like ‘co-operate’, ‘integrated’, ‘joint’, ‘consult’, and ‘share’ feature in the guidance literature. In relation to Target E, The Executive identified seven key elements among which the theme of multi-agency working is clearly evident.

- Integrated Children’s Services Plans
- Quality Improvement Framework for Integrated Services For Children and Young People
- Integrated Assessment and Information Sharing
- Joint Inspection of Children’s Services
- Workforce development
- Consolidated funding streams for children’s services
- Implementation of *Getting It Right For Every Child* (Scottish Executive, 2005 www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/54357/0013270.pdf)

In a pamphlet for local authorities and schools, *Improving outcomes for children and young people: The role of schools in delivering integrated children’s services* (Scottish Executive, 2006 www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/92327/0022073.pdf), it is possible to sense the frustration of ministers in the expression of a vision for children to become ‘confident individuals, successful learners and responsible citizens’ which ‘can only be realised if all professionals working with children and young people pull together to plan and deliver top-quality services which overcome traditional boundaries’ (p.2). The characteristics of ‘pulling together’, more formally understood as the concept of multi-agency working, are explored in more detail in the following section.

MULTIPLE AGENCIES AND THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

There is a long history in Scotland of recognition of the importance of joint working between education, social work and other agencies. The Kilbrandon Report of 1964, famous for proposing what subsequently became the system of Children's Hearings (www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/10/18259/26893), envisaged a specialist 'social education department' within local authorities, bringing together children's welfare services under the control of the director of education. Although this recommendation was not implemented, the principle of collaboration was established in youth strategies during the 1970s and 1980s, and more recently was the basis of the introduction of New Community Schools (NCS).

French (2007) suggests that multi-agency working involves two key concepts, partnership and integration, and that both have different definitions. Partnerships, she says, are: 'working relationships in which different groups of people work together to support the child and family' (pp. 47-48). This vision of joint working firmly underpins the Executive's plan to have all publicly funded schools designated as Integrated Community Schools (ICS). The move to ICS arose from the experience of the NCS initiative piloted between 1999 and 2003. Among the 'essential characteristics' of NCS, according to the *Prospectus*, was: 'integrated provision of school education...social work and health education and promotion services' (The Scottish Office, 1998 www.scotland.gov.uk/library/documents-w3/ncsp-00.htm). The official evaluation of the pilot programme was not very encouraging in relation to the initial success of NCS in encouraging multi-agency working. Unsurprisingly, the researchers found that commitment by staff, managers and partners was an important success factor but they also uncovered considerable barriers, including differences in working hours and holiday

arrangements between professional groups, differences in understandings about professional matters such as confidentiality, and difficulties in finding time to meet to discuss different perceptions of practice and to plan joint strategies. Effective multi-agency staff development was regarded as contributing to improved collaborative working, but the evaluation pessimistically concluded that: ‘...the overall extent to which NCS projects had contributed to multi-agency training for the specific needs of vulnerable children was reported as fairly limited’ (Sammons, Power, Elliot et al., 2003

www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47133/0023877.pdf). The authors of the inspectorate report, *The sum of its parts; The development of integrated community schools in Scotland* (HMIE, 2004 www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/dicss.pdf), say that the concept of ICS is:

...best defined in terms of how associated clusters of schools, including special schools, work together with each other and with other local agencies and establishments to support the education and development of all children and young people, and their families and communities. It is less appropriate to define it as applying to individual schools in isolation (p.29).

The subject of this chapter is how agencies work together in the educational context, but it is important to highlight the references to young people, families and communities in the above quotation. In a highly critical account of the introduction of NCS, Baron (2001) predicted deficiencies in the outcomes of the programme in relation to its aims, as a result of a failure to engage in prior ‘systematic exploration of research evidence and option appraisal’ (p.98) and also because of a tendency towards ‘increasing professionalisation of the issues of deprivation’ (p.100). In contrast to an approach which Baron characterises as State centralisation of power, a more democratic, account of the potential of multi-agency working

in a community school context is outlined by Illsley and Redford (2005). The project they describe, based in a NCS in Perth in central Scotland, explicitly aimed to empower families, through building and sustaining relationships in very practical ways, such as phone calls and the use of humour. The authors report a resultant ‘belief in the “ordinariness” of education’ and of evidence of equality of power in the ‘growing number of occasions when parents have approached staff and included them in their social occasions’ (p.165).

MULTI-AGENCY WORKING AND LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

The evaluation of the NCS pilot noted that the joint agency approach had none or little impact for looked after and accommodated children in primary schools, although the authors add a caution that this is likely to be due to small numbers of children in this category in individual schools. Looked after children, among the most socially disadvantaged members of the community, represent a particular challenge to the effectiveness of the joined-up working practices of a local authority and therefore, as a group, they make a valuable case study of both the barriers and aids to inter-agency collaboration. To assist readers understand the circumstances of looked after children and their experiences of education, some brief background to the issues is provided below.

The *Children (Scotland) Act 1995* adopted the term ‘looked after’ from the earlier *Children Act 1989* in England and Wales. The term ‘in care’ had become a rather pejorative description, while the preferred term ‘looked after’ emphasised the corporate responsibilities of local authority departments to collaborate to provide support for families. In Scotland, a child under compulsory measures of supervision (i.e. about whom a children’s hearing or

court has stipulated care requirements) can be looked after while continuing to live in the family home (for more details about the legal background see McRae (2006), *Children looked after by local authorities: The legal framework*, www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/06/07104155/0). The 'at home' category accounted for 43% of the 12,966 children who were looked after by local authorities in Scotland on 31 March 2006, and this group includes both children living with parents or with extended family or friends (known as 'kinship care'). Pupils in the 'at home' category can dip below the radar in schools and yet these young people have the poorest attainment. One measure of attainment is provided in the information about the qualifications of 16 and 17 year-olds leaving care in the previous year which has been included in the annual looked after children statistics since year ending March 2002. These statistics tell a similarly bleak story to that emerging from elsewhere in the UK, though there have been small percentage gains in the years since 2003-04 (see Table 2). It is not appropriate to provide a discussion of the underachievement by looked after children and young people in this chapter but interested readers can find more detailed accounts elsewhere (e.g. Connelly, 2008; Jackson, 2007).

[Table 2 about here]

Acknowledgement of the disappointing lack of improvement in outcomes for looked after children and a determination to '[drive] forward positive solutions' are both sentiments expressed in the report *Looked after children: We can and must do better* (Scottish Executive, 2007 www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/01/15084446/0). Multi-agency working in the context of looked after children, according to the report, means local authorities acting as 'good corporate parents'. A number of factors appear to be critical in determining the effectiveness of corporate parenting, and, in consequence, successful multi-agency working.

These are: good communication and efficient transfer of information; clarity of roles; and shared protocols in relation to professional and ethical standards.

Communication and information transfer

There is compelling anecdotal and research evidence about ambiguities and discrepancies in relation to being clear which children in a school are looked after (see, for example, Jacklin, Robinson and Torrance, 2006). There are several possible reasons for problems in identifying children with accuracy. One has to do with confusion in schools about the different categories of looked after children, a factor compounded by the fact that the *Learning with Care* report (HMIE and SWSI, 2001) was based on the inspection of a sample of accommodated children only, and many local authority services which developed in response to the report have targeted precisely this group of children and young people in foster and residential care, which leaves out almost half of children for whom the authorities have corporate parent responsibilities. The difficulty in identifying children for whom a school shares responsibilities is highlighted in the following field note from research in the University of Strathclyde.

When we initially asked the high school to provide us with details of their LAC [looked after children] we received only six data sheets – all accommodated children. Further discussion led to a concern that the group we were interested in might involve 'hundreds' of children. After further clarification we found 28 young people were looked after at home.

The official report upon which Table 2 is based notes that two local authorities in Scotland (which are named) were unable to provide any information in time to be included, and many

of the tables have cautionary notes about missing information. When I wrote a letter to the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* to ask whether the two authorities actually knew who their looked after children were, a response from the chief executive of one insisted that his authority did know but that the timely transfer of information had been hampered by a change from a manual to an electronic system. Working on behalf of the Executive, University of Strathclyde researchers asked 18 local authorities that had received funding for pilot projects aimed at improving the educational experience of looked after children to provide details of the attainment of young people targeted for special intervention. More than half of the authorities experienced difficulties in supplying basic information which parents of all children would expect to be readily available, and one authority had still not supplied the information three months after the deadline. Difficulty in information transfer between local authorities and the Executive and between departments within authorities is a deeply rooted institutional problem, and difficulties persist even in authorities which have combined children's welfare and education functions within a single department. Clearly one explanation has to do with systems for information transfer but a more worrying explanation is an attitudinal one.

School managers often mistakenly assume that responsibility for initiating contacts in relation to looked after children rests with the social work agencies, and social workers do not always give sufficient emphasis to attainment and broader educational issues. One feature of Integrated Community Schools which has potential for solving these problems is the regular meeting of professionals (e.g. school senior manager, home-school link teacher, educational psychologist, social worker, specialist nurse) known in some areas as the Joint Assessment Team (JAT) which discusses both procedures and individual children. An important by-product of regular meetings is that professionals get to know and respect each other, and good

working relations often flow from such personal contacts. Sometimes simple practical measures can produce significant benefits. For example, school managers regularly complain about difficulties in making contact with social workers; some authorities have provided social workers with mobile phones and since virtually all teachers now have an individual work email address the communication channels are at least potentially much improved. The lack of a common language for planning and monitoring services causes difficulties between agencies and in an attempt to make improvements the Executive issued *A guide to evaluating services for children and young people using quality indicators* (HMIE, 2006 www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/Evaluating%20Services.pdf), and also appointed HMIE as the lead inspection agency to ensure joint working extends to the inspectors of public services.

Clarity of roles

The most basic rule in effective multi-agency working is to be clear about who does what. An important co-ordinating role, recommended by the *Learning with Care* report, is that of the designated senior manager with responsibility for looked after children (DSM). All schools must make such an appointment. Unfortunately, not all have given high priority to the role, even where there are significant numbers of looked after children attending the school. Twenty-five students on the PGDE (Secondary) programme in the University of Strathclyde, taking an elective on the education of looked after children, agreed to track down and interview the DSMs in their placement schools. Around half of the students experienced difficulties in finding out which manager had this responsibility. Other teachers in the school were often unclear who would have the role.

One member of the group found out more information through consultation of her local authority's website, rather than what the school could tell her. Another member commented that it felt like he was being passed from pillar to post, rather than anyone being willing enough within the school to admit responsibility for the LAC.

Once tracked down, some DSMs (often a depute head in a secondary school) confessed to being unclear what was required of the role and claimed not to have been given clear guidance from the local authority. In some schools, however, the DSM role has developed significantly.

I think it's about knowing who the children are and not being in their face but just knowing them and formally tracking them, but also informally tracking them. I think that's how I see my role. There is a formality to it in that the first filing cabinet as you come in the door is my locked filing cabinet with the confidential list, the statistics in there of the children and their progress. Names of looked after, looked after and accommodated children, guidance teacher, attendance, exclusion rates, length of exclusion and status. But on a week-to-week basis I speak to pastoral care and I would maybe check in with the pupils as well if I felt that they needed a bit of extra support. (Research interview transcript, University of Strathclyde.)

Shared protocols

A DSM told me that she did not know which children in her school were looked after because a social worker had insisted this information was confidential. Information about pupils' attainment was requested retrospectively by the social work department in order to complete the annual statistical report but this was clearly too late to be of any value in planning for

looked after children's educational development. In this case the social worker misunderstood the meaning of confidentiality and the school manager did not feel empowered to challenge an incorrect view. At the other end of the spectrum of privacy is the story told to me by a student about interviewing a DSM who explained that information was shared only on a 'need to know' basis, but the student later found details of looked after children in a handbook for teachers which was given to students and visiting tutors. A training course for DSMs included a session on the local authority joint protocol for looked after children. It was found that most course members had not seen it before, however, a social worker acting as a course tutor noticed that details about lines of communication were no longer accurate since the social work department had been restructured; none of the teachers present was aware of the restructuring and its implications for them.

Confusion about what data can be shared between agencies and among professionals within the same agency is a common problem (Harker et al., 2004). There are real worries about ethical and legal considerations. Local authorities need to provide clear guidance to professionals who are expected to work together and professionals should also avoid hiding behind bureaucratic procedures instead of seeking clarity about safe mechanisms for sharing information. A fourteen year-old boy came late to a first period class. The teacher shouted at him and said he would be reported for a breach of school rules. The boy swore at the teacher and the incident escalated, resulting in exclusion from school. The teacher later learned that the boy was looked after 'at home' but instead of getting support he was in reality the main carer for a younger brother and their mother was addicted to heroin. The teacher felt guilty and questioned the school's 'need to know' policy. A DSM of a secondary school told me that he had changed his views about sharing confidential information and that a child's looked after status was now made available to all teachers who would have contact with the pupil on

a secure intranet site accessible only to teachers. The depute head maintained that the change in practice had averted exclusions and teachers had become more understanding and appreciated being treated as equal professionals.

CONCLUSION

The case study which has been central to this chapter has given the impression that looked after children have generally poor outcomes, but that is to underplay the significant achievements of some young people. The SWIA report, *Celebrating Success*, (Happer, Mccreadie & Aldgate, 2006 www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/129024/0030718.pdf) makes encouraging reading. The authors concluded from their interviews with 30 adults or young people who had been looked after that five factors are important for satisfying lives: having people in their lives who cared about them; experiencing stability; being given high expectations; receiving encouragement and support; and being able to participate and achieve. These conditions are at least in part dependent on the multiple agencies involved in the care of looked after children and young people working well together.

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Table 1: Exclusions from school of looked after children in Scotland 1999-00 to 2005-06

	Total, all exclusions	Total exclusions of looked after children/young people	Rate per 1,000 looked after children aged 5-15
1999-00	38769	3141	390
2000-01	38656	1339	172
2001-02	37442	1235	154
2002-03	36496	1819	227
2003-04	38912	1396	253
2004-05	41974	2579	339
2005-06	42990	3046	337

Notes

1. Source: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/01/30100624/0.
2. The figures refer to 'cases' of exclusion and not to numbers of children, as one child may be excluded on more than one occasion during a year.
3. The overall rate of exclusion from local authority primary, secondary and special schools in Scotland in 2005-06 was 60 per 1,000 pupils. There was considerable variation in the rates of exclusion between local authorities, ranging from 6 per 1,000 to 122 per 1,000. The overall rate for 'non-looked after' pupils in 2005-06 was 55 per 1,000.

Figure 1: Exemplar Closing the Opportunity Gap Targets

Target B: Reduce the proportion of 16-19 year olds who are not in education training or employment by 2008.

Target E: By 2008, ensure that children and young people who need it have an integrated package of appropriate health, care and education support.

Target F: Increase the average tariff score of the lowest attaining 20 per cent of S4 pupils by 5% by 2008

Target G: By 2007 ensure that at least 50% of all "looked after" young people leaving care have entered education, employment or training.

Table 2: Percentage of 16 and 17 year-old care leavers in Scotland with one or more ‘Level 3’ qualifications

	Number of care leavers	Looked after ‘at home’	Looked after ‘away from home’	Total, all looked after	Gained both English and mathematics at this level or above (looked after)	Gained both English and mathematics at this level or above (all pupils)
2003-04	1146	35%	52%	42%	27%	91% (a)
2004-05	980	37%	55%	45%	30%	90% (b)
2005-06	1267	45%	57%	50%	34%	91% (c)

Notes

1. Source: Scottish Executive: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/12/08105227/0>
2. ‘Level 3’ refers to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (see <http://www.scqf.org.uk>) a system of attainment from Access 1 (level 1) to Doctorate (level 12). Level 3 qualifications include the foundation level of Standard Grade (equivalent to GCSE) and similar qualifications accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (see <http://www.sqa.org.uk>)
3. Sources for final column: Scottish Executive:
 - (a) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/09/19971/43529>
 - (b) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/09/2393330/33314>
 - (c) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/09/14140034/0>