



research briefing

Integrated children's services: enablers, challenges and impact

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NFER is committed to building research in the area of integrated working in children's services, and to passing on key findings to those who need them – Directors of Children's Services, Children's Trust Managers and others in local authorities. Recent projects have assessed the early evidence of integrated working (Kinder *et al.*, 2008; Lord *et al.*, 2008), and this summary provides background information about the enablers, challenges and impact of integration, based on a thorough literature review (Robinson *et al.*, 2008).

Thirty-five sources were included in the review. The review findings are presented under thematic headings that reflect the:

- **extent** of integration: the 'stage' or depth of the collaborative activity in integrated services
- integration of **structures**: the supporting organisation and frameworks required at different organisational levels
- integration of **processes**: the actions or operations required at different organisational levels
- **reach** of integration: the extent to which partnerships in integrated services reach out to include diverse agencies.

There was very little research that demonstrates the impact of integrated working on outcomes for children and families. At this early stage of integration, local authority staff may find it helpful to use the four themes detailed in this document to assess how integrated their services are, and to use this information alongside any they have about the efficacy of those services to judge the impact they are having.



Overarching issues

This part of the summary takes a holistic view, providing an overview of the key enablers, challenges and impacts concerned with models of integration. It highlights some of the key factors that affect extent, structures, processes and reach. Following this, each of the four themes are considered in more detail, with examples of the enablers, challenges and impact of each.

Enablers

Key factors contributing to the facilitation of integrated working included the following.

- **Clarity of purpose/clear recognition of need for partnership working:** a coherent and long-term vision, common aims and collective ownership.
- **Commitment at all levels:** a focus on the vision and strategic commitment of resources, e.g. collaborative capacity at strategic level.
- **Strong leadership/management:** effective multi-level leadership and effective operational management of complex interdisciplinary relationships, accountability and supervision, plus identified champions and dedicated posts for developing capacity.
- **Strong personal relationships/trust between partners:** a realistic time frame for developing trust, previous history of working together and a positive experience of collaboration.
- **Understanding/clarity of roles and responsibilities:** professional understanding of how their existing role fits with new structures/processes, as well as understanding new roles, e.g. the lead professional role.
- **Good communication and joint training:** a variety of communication channels, both formal and informal, at different levels, and opportunities for joint training.
- **Assessment of children's needs:** restructuring and development of the types of service required to meet their needs and the experience and skills required of staff, along with appropriate physical location.

Challenges

Overall, the challenges associated with integrated working can be grouped under four main themes.

- **Contextual barriers/political climate,** including changes in political steer, financial uncertainty, agency reorganisation, organisational change climate, local needs at odds with meeting national priorities, coterminosity and rurality generating challenges and costs for networks. There can be tensions between the integrative model of Every Child Matters (ECM) and pressure for change in individual services, e.g. the National Service Framework and white paper encouraging school autonomy.
- **Organisational challenges:** different agency policies, procedures and systems. Information sharing can be a challenge as agencies have different

remits and do not collect the same data, and there are professional, technical and ethical obstacles to the integration of information sharing.

- **Cultural/professional obstacles**, including negative assessment and professional stereotyping, as well as different professional beliefs. Differing levels of qualification and experience can lead to conflicting views. Agencies need to view interagency working as a learning process with tensions and difficulties as well as insights and innovation.
- **Commitment obstacles**: where managers do not experience integrated working as part of core work and real ownership is not embedded, integrated working is vulnerable to changes in work priorities. Explicit commitment to integration is required and different levels of buy-in are likely. As a result, certain agencies or individuals may need additional nurturing to engage them.

Impact

Overall impacts were identified for service users, professionals and services.

- **Outcomes for service users** have focused mainly on improved access to services and a speedier response, better information and communication from professionals, increasing involvement of service users and wider communities, a holistic approach and improved outcomes, such as maintenance in the home setting and improved attainment.
- **Outcomes for professionals** involved in integrated working centre on a better understanding of the issues and children's needs, a better understanding and increased trust among agencies, and an increased workload.

The **benefits for services** centre primarily on quality and efficiency.

- *Quality*: improving service user experience (e.g. reduced multiple assessments, more responsive mainstream services, reduced waiting times) and the delivery of more seamless services.
- *Efficiency*: through the elimination of contradictions or tensions between policies, programmes or interventions, more efficient deployment of resources through the elimination of duplication, sharing of overheads, securing better value for money and achieving economies of scale.
- *Other service benefits*: the devolution of solution development, through the promotion of local problem solving and capacity building to resolve policy problems, a greater focus on prevention and early intervention and greater reliance on evidence-based practice.

The research showed an emerging view that full integration of services is not necessarily the way forward. Rather, a looser arrangement allowing the right people to work together at the right time to deal with the right issues, was felt to be more powerful.

The four themes of extent, structures, processes and reach will now be examined in more detail.

what are the challenges to achieving closer working, what factors are likely to enable it, and what impacts are so far associated with closer integration?



Extent of integration

How close are integrated services becoming? What are the challenges to achieving closer working, what factors are likely to enable it, and what impacts are so far associated with closer integration?

The **key features of some models of integration** prompt questions to help local authorities assess the extent of integration.

- **Shared ownership:** Is there a shared vision? Are agencies committed to a shared purpose? Is there a degree of shared identity?
- **Mutual dependency:** Are agencies dependent on each other for the fulfilment of their aims? To what extent are activities influenced by the contributions of other members?
- **Sustainability:** Are there strong professional identities and respect between agencies? Are the necessary structures and processes needed to support integration embedded?
- **Joint planning:** Is there evidence of joint planning? Does the planning of service development take place through joint processes?
- **Communication/information exchange:** Can services access information held by one another? Is there openness about decision-making processes?
- **Integration of structures and processes:** Are services synthesised and coordinated? Are there joint communication and information sharing systems? Are there joint assessment procedures?

Enablers

The following factors were said to facilitate greater integration:

- building on local willingness to collaborate and on developments with regard to localised integrated working
- strong involvement of children, families and communities in service design (without which integrated services were likely to be ineffective)
- development of less hierarchical relations and client-led professional roles, dependent on the various needs of the organisation, client and family
- providing opportunities for those involved to reflect on their working relationships
- basing integrated working on respect for professional roles rather than personal relationships.

Challenges

The following challenges were associated with a greater extent of integration:

- loss of autonomy and a greater reliance or dependence on partners, with consequent risks to individual agencies' resources and reputation
- reliance on key individuals, where services are not fully integrated, and lack of sustainability (counteracted by commitment at strategic level)
- greater burdens on those involved in terms of partnership development and the time and resources required (balanced against the benefits).

Impact

Professionals involved in more fully integrated partnerships express feelings of unification and equality (commensurate with particular findings from the early impact of integrated children's services project, which identified the 'language' of integration as an indicator of extent), and recognise the potential of their partnership for children, families and the community.

A fully integrated model may be most valued by, or of most value to, service users but the impact on service users is not well evidenced. A greater extent of integration may be required to achieve outcomes for service users.

More recently, it is thought that the outcomes of integrated working are situation specific and that diverse approaches to the degree/extent of integration may be equally valid, rather than there being one ideal model.

at frontline service delivery level, there is a range of challenges to do with joint working and co-location

Integration of structures

At what organisational levels is integration taking place? What are the challenges to building enabling structures, what factors are likely to support this, and what impacts are so far associated with redesigned frameworks?

Enablers

Enablers in relation to the integration of structures were identified at both strategic and operational levels:

- at strategic level, enablers include relating structure to purposeful planning, high-quality leadership, sustaining a focus on outcomes and maintaining appropriate reach, e.g. to the voluntary sector
- at operational level, enablers include flexibility/responsiveness in relation to policy and local development, and ensuring time for capacity building.

Challenges

Challenges in relation to the integration of structures were also identified at both strategic and operational level:

- at strategic level, there are commissioning challenges, e.g. barriers to pooling budgets under current legislation and guidance
- at frontline service delivery level, there is a range of challenges to do with joint working and co-location, e.g. agency commitment levels, sustainability, staff terms/conditions, unrealistic timescales and unsuitable buildings
- divergent missions or remits can persist and different assumptions about the vision underlying whole-system integration can lead to tensions.

Impact

Service users see greater attention to prevention, more accessible and acceptable services, and are empowered and engaged in decision making.

Professionals delivering the services feel a greater sense of unification and equality, and have improved access to newly developed cross-sector training and co-learning with new colleagues.



The system as a whole experiences improved efficiency, identified in Children's Trust Pathfinders, including savings from the decommissioning of expensive interventions that could then be reinvested in preventative services, and a reduction in the duplication of training across different departments.

Integration of processes

What sorts of processes are being integrated, or are needful of integration to promote effective services? What challenges are faced when integrating processes, what circumstances best support the process, and what impacts are identified from such integration?

Three aspects of the integration of processes were identified:

- management of organisational change and capacity building
- routine/procedural processes within integrated services, e.g. joint commissioning processes, and joint delivery processes such as integrated care pathways
- interprofessional joint activities, working practices and interactions between members of integrated services.

Enablers

The enablers of **change management** encompassed a number of elements:

- capacity for change, e.g. establishing realistic time scales
- planning, e.g. involving the voluntary sector and families/children
- preparation, e.g. gathering evidence of potential benefits
- managing integrated working, e.g. developing a participatory culture.

Factors that facilitate the **integration of routines and procedures** include:

- assessment processes and information sharing, e.g. developing an inter-agency steering group
- key worker/lead professional roles, e.g. promoting the status of workers across agencies.

Factors that facilitate the **integration of interprofessional joint activities** include leadership and capacity at strategic level, and continuity of personnel.

Challenges

The following types of challenge were identified in the research:

- **capacity-building processes**, e.g. overcoming lack of capacity at Children's Trust manager level
- **routine procedural processes**, e.g. achieving service-user involvement and overcoming different understandings of procedures and terminology
- **interprofessional processes**, e.g. establishing and extending roles to cover a wider range of users and frontline cultural differences among managers and professionals.

Impacts

The results of integrating routine procedures include increased speed and efficiency in decision making, speed of response from referral to assessment, and improved information sharing with parents and between professionals.

An important impact of the process of integration may be learning, identified as occurring among professionals in frontline delivery teams through reflective processes or confronting difference. There are potentially positive effects around realignment of understandings, but risks of increased workloads, which have to be managed.

at governance level, boards need to develop an open approach to partnership through the engagement of stakeholders

The reach of integration

Who is to be integrated in the provision of services for children, and in what ways do they contribute to decisions and delivery? The literature explores different approaches to broadening the reach of integration to include not only the key departments of local authorities, but also third-sector agencies, community groups and service users.

Enablers and challenges

The following factors were deemed important in relation to extending the reach of integration.

- At governance level, boards need to develop an open approach to partnership through the engagement of stakeholders (including providers and service users) and to pay more attention to strengthening networks in order to identify needs.
- Where partnerships are widened, care needs to be taken that power imbalance inherent in such widening does not negate wider inclusion. Status-inequality issues must be overcome.
- Perspectives/goals of less powerful partners may be overridden by the internal priorities of fundholding agencies, leading to failure to use their potential contribution. Power imbalance between partners may mean the lead partner obtains preferential treatment for referrals.
- At the level of user involvement, procedures may be such as to alienate parents rather than involve them (or they may be alienated if too much is expected of them).
- Good partnership depends on limiting the number of partners to make things manageable.
- Alternative means of involving some groups (young people and parents) in decision making may be needed.

Impact

The greater breadth of partnerships can result in an increased take-up of services because it avoids the stigmatisation of parents who would otherwise have to relate only to social services and other 'official' departments.



Broadening the reach of partnerships (especially to community groups) can positively affect decision making, intelligence gathering, public information and delivery.

The trust that may be generated between agencies, which itself can lead to willingness to take risks, enhances the potential for innovation and improved outcomes. Knowing and trusting each other, partners pass valuable information on to parents, raising their awareness of choices available in the services on offer.

While an increased reach in partnerships may generate greater involvement, democracy and the potential to respond to user needs, it may also undermine accountability.

Conclusion

There is a wide variety of models of integrated working, and they are each dependent on their context. Integrating services is complex work and cannot be achieved quickly. As a result, evidence of integration takes time to build up.

The four major dimensions of integration presented here – extent, structures, processes and reach – can be used to structure a toolkit for local authorities to gather real evidence of their own progress in specific areas of integration. It is true that there are many challenges for local authorities in integrating children's services, but the key enablers covered in this short document will help professionals achieve the impact they need to improve services for children, young people and their families.

References

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