Youth Offending Teams and Inter-Agency Work

Brian Williams reflects upon the pitfalls and possibilities of YOTs working in partnership.

The introduction of Youth Offending Teams in England and Wales earlier this year was a landmark in the development of inter-agency working in the youth justice field. The experience of setting up the new teams was a difficult one in many areas, and the legal requirement to work together may *have been an added source of pressure*, but the new teams are now in existence across the two countries. Before the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act came fully into force, Youth Offending Teams were piloted in a number of areas and the experience was independently evaluated. Some of the findings of that research have helped inform decisions about setting up the new teams in other areas, although there was very little time between the publication of the research and the establishment of the teams in which to take proper account of it.

Not surprisingly, the differences between the various agencies have led to a variety of conflicts and misunderstandings. While some teething problems could have been expected, several more intractable issues have been identified by the research. No single, standard model of a Youth Offending Team has emerged, and the range of agencies represented varies to a considerable extent from place to place, although the main statutory agencies are all contributing staff and resources in almost all areas.

Partnership working

The youth justice teams which previously did much of the same work as the new Youth Offending Teams, routinely liaised and worked with a range of other agencies. The new arrangements were intended to make this partnership work more systematic and easier. In some respects, bringing people from health, education, police, and the social and probation services together has clearly helped. For example, the staff from these agencies can share their knowledge more easily when they work in the same office as one another. Joint work is also facilitated, bringing a range of professional perspectives to individual and group work with young offenders. Information about individuals has proved more problematic, however. Although the Crime and Disorder Act encourages the sharing of confidential information held by the various agencies, ethical constraints and concern about data protection legislation have prevented the routine exchange of such information in practice. Indeed, information which is already available to the new teams, but hard to locate in paper files, is being withheld in some areas by police services which already have it in computerised form, on the grounds of data protection. All the same, there are real ethical issues about routine sharing of confidential information which will be difficult to resolve (Bailey and Williams, 2000).

Interagency conflicts

Because, in many areas, the new teams were put together close to the time when the new legislation came into force, the process has had to be hurried. Even in the pilot areas, differences in philosophy and approach led to inter-agency conflicts (see Universities of Sheffield and Hull, 1999; Dignan, 2000). The short time-scale has meant that genuine differences have at times been brushed under the carpet, when it might have been beneficial to discuss them and learn from them. The history of inter-agency work in the criminal justice field is full of examples of repressed conflicts of this kind. In the current case, they have been aggravated by insensitive statements from national politicians eager to force the pace of change. Repeated assertions that non-intervention is no longer acceptable, and that staff must abandon their previous 'mind-sets' (Warner, 1999) have done little for staff morale particularly among the majority of team members who previously worked in Social Services youth offending teams (Bailey and Williams, 2000; NACRO, 1999).

Rapid change

The government's desire to encourage rapid change has also, at times, encouraged the new teams and the courts to take short-cuts. There is potential for conflict, for example, between speeding up youth justice and involving victims of crime more centrally in its processes. The pilot areas in which Reparation Orders were first implemented found this a real problem, and this is highlighted in the report of the evaluation (Dignan, 2000). Failure to consult victims before making court orders requiring young offenders to make reparation is illegal, and the new National Standards make this very clear, as does the Act. It would appear to have happened at times *during the pilot projects, however,* and this is an area of concern (Williams, 2000).

Despite difficulties of this kind, the new teams have in many ways proved a great success. Enormous changes have been implemented in a short period of time, and this has

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Ilderton Motor Project, Kath Wilkinson photo
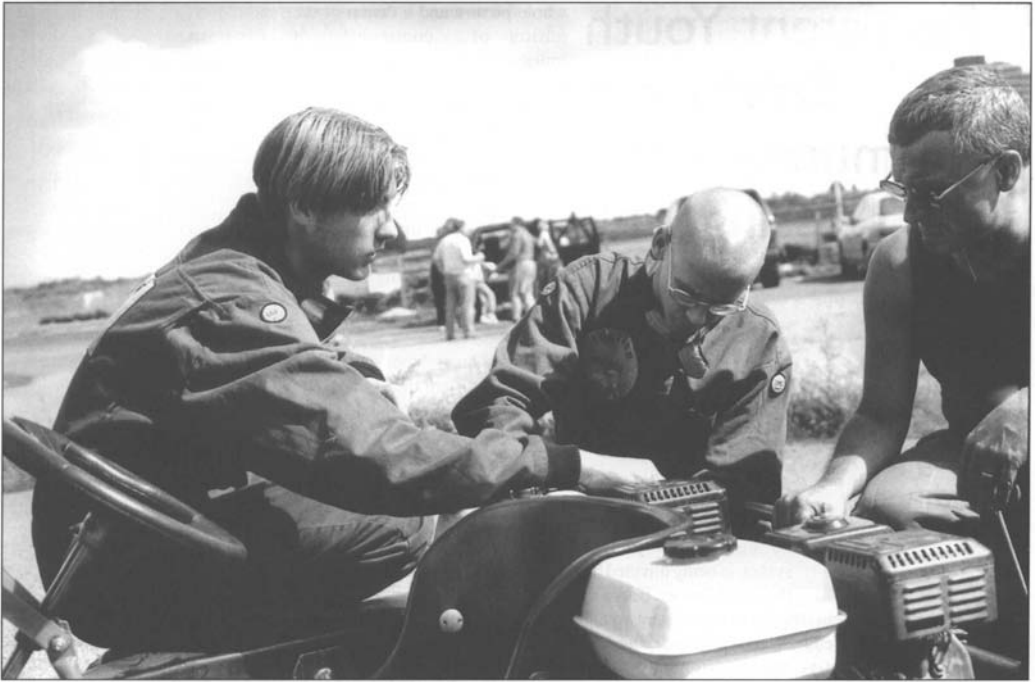
required extensive inter-agency collaboration. While this may at times have been a difficult experience for participants (both at management and practitioner levels), it is beginning to show positive results. Expertise is being shared between practitioners from different agencies who might never, previously, have met one another. In many parts of the country, the whole range of new Orders is already available to the courts. Victims' organisations are being consulted, and individual victims involved, in a way that is completely new to youth justice in most areas. Practitioners are developing new projects and procedures, and there is an atmosphere of experiment and excitement in many of the new teams (where the staff are not simply exhausted with the pace of change!). All the new initiatives are being independently evaluated, in line with the government's commitment to evidence-led practice, and it will be interesting to see how the new system looks once it has settled down. ∎

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