

Partnership working for victims of crime

Hannah Goodman, Jennie Fleming, Alison Skinner and Brian Williams review the evidence on best practice in multi-agency victim support work.

A team from De Montfort University was contracted in 2005 to undertake an evaluation of the Victims and Witnesses Action Group (VWAG). This is a multi-agency group in Leicester that was created to look at the level of service provision for victims of crime in the city. The research team has also been involved in undertaking evaluations of a number of other multi-agency groups in the past and has found that many groups faced very similar difficulties in working in partnership.

Partnership working has become increasingly popular in recent years, driven forward by the Government. Partnerships may be made up of local authorities, the police and voluntary agencies. The legal basis for this was the 1998 *Crime and Disorder Act* which continued the tradition of partnership working and introduced the requirement for local areas to produce multi-agency crime audits and crime reduction strategies every three years (Hall and Whyte, 2003).

A literature review undertaken for the evaluation of VWAG identified concerns about the difficulties that can be involved in multi-agency working. These included miscommunication, disagreements over funding, domination of the group by 'the usual suspects', and unrealistic expectations (Fleming *et al*, forthcoming). Webb and Vulliamy state that the factors often blamed for breakdowns in inter-agency working may include: clashes in professional culture, competition over funding, and low morale (2001).

Initially, VWAG was successful at hosting events and carrying out mapping exercises. VWAG's strengths included its ability to organise events for workers from a variety of victim organisations enabling them to come together and network and share good practice. However, many of the problems mentioned in the literature review were faced in reality. What was less evident from the evaluation that we undertook was how these difficulties had then been tackled.

A different model of multi-agency groups set up for victims of crime is embodied in Domestic Violence Forums (DVF's). These may include representatives from the police, courts, and voluntary support agencies. In their discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of partnership working in terms of DVFs, Hall and Whyte (2003) argued that work is negatively affected by the fact that women's organisations were often required to compete with

each other in order to gain funding. Forums could also face difficulties when statutory agencies failed to come on board or were represented by staff from such a level that issues around resourcing could not be decided.

A third model of multi-agency support for victims includes centres which have been created in several areas which allow victims of domestic violence to access services from a number of agencies within one building. An example of this is the Sunflower Centre in Northampton. Victims are often required to tell of their experiences to many members of staff of different agencies and there has been a desire to reduce this. Chan and Lam found that these projects were "successful, rapidly accessible, safe, convenient, and cost-effective" and that these would "reduce the system-induced trauma of the victims" (2005, p. 425).

Bliss (2005) argues that "Partnerships can't and won't just happen – you have to work at them". Groups should take into account the difficulties that can be inherent in multi-agency working and have strategies in place to deal with these should they arise. Moves could be made to include groups which are often excluded. For example, voluntary agencies find it difficult to pay people to cover for those attending meetings. Resources might need to be freed up to allow this to happen. Bliss says that partnerships need time for member organisations to build up trust for each other.

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Partnerships also need support from external sources in order to allow them to flourish. Chan and Lam argue that UK research has shown that "the multi-agency approach in domestic violence found that inter-agency coordination needs to be positioned within a supportive policy and practice framework in order for it to be effective" (2005: 425).

Webb and Vulliamy (2001) argue that partnership working needs to take place at three levels, that of the individual client, the project level, and the policy or strategic level. VWAG experienced difficulties in

terms of working well initially within itself and other agencies in the area, but failed to sufficiently engage at a policy and strategic level (in this case with the Crime and Disorder Partnership) and therefore missed the opportunity to highlight victim issues at this level. Interestingly, the culture clashes between professionals warned about by Webb and Vulliamy were not a major issue for VWAG. Instead, some of those interviewed for the evaluation stated that working with voluntary organisations had opened their eyes to the amount of time that was spent fundraising and the difficulties that arose from this.

Those who took part in the evaluation of VWAG reported that they had been left feeling that VWAG had been set up with unrealistic aims, especially in terms of its aim of sustaining services. It had been successful in gaining further funding for groups which made up VWAG, but another victim agency in the city had undergone a major financial crisis which VWAG had been able to address only by writing supporting letters on its behalf. The group also faced difficulties when dedicated staff responsible for publicising and coordinating the work left, leaving both VWAG members and agencies that had previously had close links with VWAG unaware of any further developments.

Our recommendations to VWAG included the suggestion that there should be clear lines of accountability to a supervisory group. Communication between members of the group, and agencies outside of it needed to be improved. Agencies need to maintain their commitment to a group in order to ensure that it is sustainable, and that aims put forward by the project were achievable and realistic. If this did not take place then false expectations are created and this can lead to people feeling let down when the project fails to deliver.

Partnership working in support of victims looks set to continue as witness care units have been piloted successfully and are likely to become an established part of the criminal justice system. The police and Rape Crisis have also worked together to create forensic examination suites such as the one provided in Derbyshire. Multi-agency work for victims can bring about huge benefits for victims, however agencies should be aware of the pitfalls and should work to avoid conflicts wherever possible.

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A full copy of the VWAG evaluation is available at http://www.dmu.ac.uk/Images/VWAG%20Report_tcm2-35458.pdf

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