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Multi-agency safeguarding: From everyone's responsibility to a collective responsibility

Emma Jayne Ball*, Jessica Devon McElwee*, Michelle Ann McManus*

ABSTRACT

Multi-agency collaboration (also termed inter-professional, inter-agency, and multi-sector) between agencies and practitioners has been established as a valuable way of working in safeguarding, to protect people from harm. Whilst multi-agency working is mandated in legislation, policy, and guidance, there are challenges in its implementation. Research has not only highlighted many benefits of multi-agency working, for example, sharing resources and expertise, but also key barriers, including uncertainty of agency roles, remits, and responsibilities. Ongoing challenges, such as information sharing in an appropriate and timely manner, are often cited within various serious practice reviews and inspections. However, what is less explored and understood is how we know and evidence if our multi-agency safeguarding arrangements are effective. This article summarizes the multi-agency safeguarding landscape and highlights an urgent need for the development of a framework that identifies key components to evidence effectiveness. This framework should seek to define, identify, monitor, and review factors that enable effective multi-agency partnership working. In doing so, we argue that the evidence of practice needs to build on safeguarding being “everyone’s responsibility” towards establishing a “collective responsibility.” This is the first of the two papers mapping developmental journey of “The Collective Safeguarding Responsibility Model: 12Cs”.

Key Words Multi-agency; safeguarding; collaboration; multi-sector; inter-professional; inter-agency; effectiveness; collective.

INTRODUCTION

Safeguarding has been defined as “protecting people’s health, well-being and human rights, and enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect” (Care Quality Commission, 2022). Whilst this definition can vary across organizations, sectors, and countries, the premise of protecting people from harm is fairly consistent. There is also a general consensus that this cannot be achieved by any one person or organization. Safeguarding requires a multi-agency and collaborative approach within adults (Stevens, 2013) and children (Gray, 2015; Stanley, 2018), with multi-agency working argued as being the “cornerstone of effective child safeguarding” (Dixon et al., 2022, p. 438). There is an abundance of literature over the past three decades detailing the benefits and challenges of multi-agency safeguarding, yet far less evidence to understand how this is successfully translated into practice and how we are assured that the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements are effective.

Multi-agency Legislation, Policy, and Guidance

The strategic commitment to multi-agency safeguarding is evident at the legislative policy level. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states in Article 19 that “The state must do all it can to protect children from violence, abuse, neglect, bad treatment or exploitation by their parents or anyone else who looks after them” (Save the Children, n.d.). The European Commission Directorate-General Justice and Consumers (2015) advocates for an integrated child protection system whereby services can work together coherently through a multi-disciplinary, cross-sectorial, and inter-agency approach. Within the United Kingdom, the establishment of The Children Act 1989 initiated the statutory requirement for joint working between professionals and inter-agency collaboration (Cheminais, 2009). The Children Act 2004 strengthens the commitment to partnership working by creating a duty for local authorities to coordinate key agencies to improve the well-being of children. Guidance specifically related to multi-agency working in safeguarding was issued in the publication

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of Working Together to Safeguard Children (Department of Health, 1999) and was most recently revised in 2023 (HM Government, 2023). This guidance asserts the importance of all agencies playing a key role in fulfilling their safeguarding responsibilities and how this is a shared endeavour. Regarding adults, the Department of Health (2000) notes that safeguarding adults requires “partnership working between statutory agencies to create a framework of inter-agency arrangements” (p. 14). This was mandated in The Care Act 2014, stipulating that local authorities must take the lead for a multi-agency local adult safeguarding system, aiming to prevent and swiftly stop abuse and neglect (Social Care Institute for Excellence, n.d.).

Multi-agency Safeguarding Models

Whilst there is policy, guidance, and legislation to promote and, indeed, mandate multi-agency safeguarding, the governance, structures and models in facilitating this are often varied and complex (Lane et al., 2016; Madembo, 2015; McManus & Boulton, 2020). Operationally, there are numerous models and approaches designed to facilitate partnership working between sectors, with the collective aim of safeguarding those at risk of harm. Within England, one of the most established models of multi-agency safeguarding is referred to as the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The MASH can be in place for adults, children, or both, and aims to improve the safeguarding response for children and adults at risk, through better information sharing and a timely safeguarding response (Home Office, 2014). The core functions of the MASH include the following:

1. Acting as a single point of entry by gathering all notifications related to safeguarding in one place.
2. Enabling thorough research of each case to identify and address risk.
3. Sharing information between agencies supported by a joint information sharing protocol.
4. Triaging referrals, exemplified in the use of agreed risk ratings.
5. Facilitating early safeguarding intervention and prevention.
6. Managing cases through co-ordinated interventions (Home Office, 2014, p. 9).

An example of a multi-agency model in Canada is the Child and Youth Advocacy Centres, which facilitate collaboration between law enforcement, child protection, medical and mental health professionals, and victim advocates, as part of a multi-disciplinary team (Government of Canada, 2023). This collaboration takes place within a child-friendly facility where children, youth, and their families can receive a personalized, co-ordinated, and comprehensive response to child abuse. In Australia, there have been innovative examples of multi-agency working for adult safeguarding through a health-justice model, whereby a lawyer is placed within a health setting who can respond to abuse referrals (Chesterman, 2020). The key objective is to work together to address a variety of issues to reduce the risk of harm.

Benefits of Multi-agency Safeguarding

The benefits of multi-agency working have shown that when organizations work together, they can deliver on values and

outcomes, which would be more challenging to deliver individually, by combining resources, expertise, and ideas across agencies (Local Government Agency, 2008). Although there is no agreed set framework for implementing effective multi-agency working internationally, a systematic narrative review of studies from the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, Canada, and Norway has established consistent factors which enhance multi-agency collaborative working. These included standardized procedures and decision-making tools, leadership, multi-agency meetings, and training (Alfandari & Taylor, 2022). Atkinson et al. (2007) noted several positive impacts on multi-agency safeguarding professionals such as taking on new job responsibilities, increasing professional development, and overall job satisfaction. In addition, it is suggested that working in a multi-agency partnership allows for a greater understanding of partner agencies’ roles, and cross-disciplinary issues. Furthermore, increased communication and approachability between agencies has been noted to improve information and data sharing, with resources being shared more efficiently (Atkinson et al., 2007). When reflecting on working within a MASH, Shorrock et al. (2019a) detailed practitioner’s perspectives which noted that trust between agencies had increased, in addition to facilitating a better understanding of different agency roles and responsibilities. A study in Norway by Jakobsen and Filstad (2020) explored multi-agency collaboration between child welfare services and the police. They found that when working toward the best interests of the child, in relation to domestic abuse, there was improved communication. This allowed for an increased understanding and respect of each other’s tasks, procedures, and timelines, enabling collaborative problem-solving.

It is also crucial to understand the perspectives of the people who experience multi-agency safeguarding support and responses. Harris and Allen (2011) explored the perspectives of young people receiving multi-agency support and found that multi-agency work can help to reach children and young people within contexts of risk and vulnerability. The young people perceived multi-agency working to improve behaviour, well-being and confidence, and engagement with learning. Additionally, a survey exploring adults’ experiences of safeguarding showed that 53% of respondents felt that agencies worked together to make things (safeguarding experiences) better, such as police and social workers. In addition, 56% felt listened to by services, although a further 20% felt that while they were listened to, their views did not affect safeguarding decisions (Montgomery et al., 2017).

Barriers to Multi-agency Safeguarding

An effective and efficient partnership requires professionals to work across their traditional boundaries, modifying their roles and responsibilities to meet the demands of integrated working (Abbott et al., 2005). However, this requires time, commitment, and investment and, whilst professionals can have known, defined roles, it is harder to motivate individuals to function as an effective team (Feng et al., 2010). Agency workers, for example, have been reported to work less collaboratively, with a preference to work in their professional silos, and as a result, effective multi-agency partnership working can be compromised (Lalani & Marshall, 2020). As many agencies are often involved with the safeguarding process, there is a possibility for disconnect across different

structures, processes, and systems. Moreover, the fragmentation of services can result in silo working *within* as well as between agencies (Brandon et al., 2020). From a practitioner's perspective, professionals can lack the understanding and confidence in fulfilling the duty to share information with other agencies (Rees et al., 2021a). This is also impacted by the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation and the associated Data Protection Act (2018), which has arguably increased confusion and anxiety among safeguarding practitioners, who may feel anxious to share information due to the fear of inappropriate information sharing (Rees et al., 2021b). Whilst co-location of practitioners across agencies is seen to increase positive relationships, it does not automatically result in an effective multi-agency approach to safeguarding. Rather, for a multi-agency partnership to be successful, consistent practices and processes need to be embedded into daily practices and regularly reviewed (Shorrock et al., 2019b).

Ongoing Challenges in Moving toward a Collective Safeguarding Responsibility

There is undoubtedly a dedicated, hardworking, and skilled workforce of safeguarding practitioners who work tirelessly to support children, adults, and families. There is also a plethora of legislation, guidance, and research advocating for the use of multi-agency working in relation to safeguarding, in addition to many examples of good practice and promising progress (Ball & McManus, 2023; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2023; Government of Canada, 2023; McManus et al., 2022, 2023). However, recent reports suggest continued challenges in multi-agency safeguarding and reoccurring thematic areas of concern regarding effective collaboration. A fundamental challenge is notably how all agencies can implement and take action on a *collective responsibility* for safeguarding.

A key forum whereby multi-agency practice is explored, reviewed, and analyzed to enhance greater learning is after a child or an adult has been seriously injured or died, such as within England's local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews or Adult Practice Reviews. A recent review of Child Practice Reviews in Wales conducted by McManus et al. (2023) highlighted that poor information sharing between agencies remains a long-standing issue, and that the infrastructure in place for agencies to routinely share information is often unclear, as is accountability for coordinating this information. Similarly, a publication from Child Family Community Australia states that many practitioners "simply do not work in ideal collaborative environments, and are left to navigate the 'street-level' complexities of imperfect systems with little explicit training or advice" (Price-Robertson et al., 2020, p. 5). Within Canada, it was observed that while there are avenues which exist for professionals to share information, there continues to be barriers to information sharing, in addition to limited consultation or collaboration (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2021).

Working in partnership with those requiring safeguarding support is also an area of ongoing challenge. Legislation prescribes that agencies should work in partnership with children, adults, and families who are receiving safeguarding support and ensure their voices are heard; however, the voices of children and young people are not always effectively captured, recorded, or utilized (McManus et al., 2023).

Assessing risk and ensuring partnership working with adults who access safeguarding support are also challenges, and Stevens (2013) advised that multi-agency partnerships must continue to balance elements of risks with empowering those who access services, as these individuals retain the right to make their decisions, which do not necessarily indicate a lack of capacity. Whilst there will be many examples of good practice in this area, it remains inconsistent.

Ofsted (2023) reviewed the practices and effectiveness of multi-agency working arrangements for children and families who require help. It was found that whilst there were practitioners who were well-trained, knowledgeable, and undertaking effective work, this was again inconsistent. They also highlighted weaknesses such as ineffective oversight of early help and a lack of multi-agency working. Similarly, Child Family Community Australia argues that there is often poor communication between child protection, and child and family welfare services (Price-Robertson et al., 2020). They also make the distinction between practitioner-level barriers, such as shared understanding, and system-level barriers, such as the lack of resources. In the United Kingdom, the publication of *Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation* (Department for Education, 2023) identified the need for much improved multi-agency working, and increased accountability for how practitioners and agencies are working together and the impact this makes, thus echoing previously identified challenges.

Multi-agency Safeguarding Effectiveness: What Next?

McGuire et al. (2021) reviewed empirical studies to ascertain the effectiveness of community-based multi-agency safeguarding of vulnerable adults. They concluded that no studies were found which could provide a clear indication of the most effective way to safeguard adults at risk. Writing on behalf of Ofsted, Stanley (2018) noted the importance of multi-agency audits but argued that the quality was highly variable and the impact was not always clear. Additionally, not all safeguarding partnerships involved service users to feedback into audits, limiting the overall understanding of their effectiveness.

Whilst progress has been made in multi-agency safeguarding practice, The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2024) highlights, "Silo working in individual agencies at times led to missed opportunities for partnership relationship building and more effective co-ordinated multi-agency responses" (p. 11). There are continual challenges experienced by practitioners and across the structures and systems within agencies. Resources, funding, and investment within safeguarding services are undoubtedly the biggest barriers when it comes to implementing lessons learned. The issue of recruitment and retention of experienced safeguarding practitioners across sectors is widely reported (Hall, 2023; New Brunswick Association of Social Workers, 2022; Ratwatte, 2023), often alongside reports of increasing demand and complexity in safeguarding concerns, resulting in an insufficient capacity to respond (Koutsounia, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

Agencies are reliant upon a collaborative approach to fulfill their collective safeguarding obligations, but there is substantial variability of enactment across practice. Whilst variation

is both inevitable and necessary to respond to different environments, there is an urgent need to identify and understand effectiveness coherently and consistently through an agreed multi-agency framework. This framework should seek to define, identify, monitor, and review multi-agency policies and interventions that are put in place by partnerships and organizations. From this, good practice should be extracted to maximize learning, in addition to the identification of challenges and how these are best addressed. As Dixon et al. (2022) observe, it is imperative to review and understand which structural factors and processes can create potential barriers, and where there are areas of divergence and cohesion. Safeguarding is complex, onerous, and dynamic; therefore, understanding the impact of safeguarding activity requires a framework that can demonstrate the enactment of multi-agency safeguarding. The creation of a multi-agency collective safeguarding framework should identify key collaborators, ensure accountability within the system, and ultimately create a collective responsibility for safeguarding.

Furthermore, our research has identified that we must progress and build on the notion that safeguarding is “everyone’s responsibility,” which inadvertently may encourage individual decision-making. A move towards a “collective responsibility,” ensures that responsibility holistically addresses the needs and risks across individuals, their families, and their environments and crucially that allows for an accurate understanding of the daily lived experience for those at risk of harm. This paper highlights the abundance of evidence calling for a framework to be developed to help multi-agency safeguarding arrangements understand if and how we are effective, with our follow-up paper introducing The Collective Safeguarding Responsibility Model: 12Cs.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DETAILS OF POSSIBLE PREVIOUS OR DUPLICATE PUBLICATION

Some of this work summarizes reports completed by the authors and available from the National Independent Safeguarding Board Wales.

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