

Jones, Ray (2020) Four key ingredients of shared services. Children & Young People Now, January 2020 p. 32.

Helping, economising and learning. These are three good reasons to share and partner across children's social services, especially at a time of workload pressures amid financial cuts. And there are now a catalogue of examples of how to make it work and also where it may not be sustainable.

There is a long history across the public sector of working in partnership across agency boundaries. Unlike the private sector based on commercial competition, collaboration and cooperation have been embedded within the public service tradition. As a social services director I had experience of other councils agreeing to undertake independent audits of our services, leading reviews for us after there had been a terrible tragedy, and having colleagues from our services spend time with them so that we could learn and reflect on their developments and achievements. And we reciprocated in kind. For some services (such as the out-of-hours emergency service and hospital social work) we shared the funding of joint teams.

Recent examples include senior leaders and managers from local authorities rated by Ofsted as performing well advising councils which have been struggling. Essex, Hampshire, Leeds and Cornwall have, along with others, made this contribution. It has also sometimes included workers from the stronger and more stable council being embedded in the more fragile service which needs to improve. This is a win-win as along with helping the council in difficulty it also gives development opportunities for the seconded workers.

And there are now even more substantial partnerships across agencies, with the total shared senior management of children's services across local authorities. Examples include the tri-borough partnership in London, the community interest company established by Richmond, Kingston and then Windsor and Maidenhead, and Hampshire's senior managers leading children's services for the Isle of Wight council.

What makes it work and what leaves it vulnerable? The lessons from recent experience about success include, first, having wise and confident stable service leadership within the shared arrangements. Anxious, too eager, overly energetic, churning and changing leadership does not build confident, stable, well-performing services. One of the reasons for the success of the Hampshire-Isle of Wight and the Westminster-Kensington and Chelsea - Hammersmith and Fulham jointly managed services has been the quality and stability of the leadership.

Secondly, capacity and scale. If one council is to take a lead in assisting another council to improve it needs to have the capacity to take on this additional responsibility and activity. Hampshire as a large shire county with long-serving wise leaders of a successful service has been able to take on the leadership of the services for the smaller island authority without destabilising itself. This has not been the position for Plymouth seeking to assist Torbay. Both are relatively small authorities and Plymouth needs to be able to concentrate on its own service improvement.

Thirdly, there needs to be political sign-up and maturity within the local authorities. One of the experiences of local government reform in the 1990s and more recently is that newly created councils have wanted to show that they could go it alone and be self-sustaining even when small and where partnering with neighbouring councils would have made sense in containing costs and sharing the scarce resource of experienced practitioners and managers.

Fourthly, funding. Successful partnership arrangements get challenged in the context of cuts. Local authorities have experienced a 50% reduction in government funding since 2010. Even within the

strongest partnerships tensions arise between councils when services start to overspend as demand increases but council budgets are seeing significant reductions. The tensions are likely to be greater when government cuts are not falling equally across councils with councils with higher rates of deprivation having the biggest government funding cuts. It is the instability being created by politically-chosen austerity targeting public services and poor people which is now contributing to the unwinding of partnerships. The tri-borough arrangement has lost one of its partner councils and the Richmond-Kingston partnership is under review.

The lesson here is that collaboration and cooperation, and partnering and joining-up, makes sense but it can be so easily undermined by the chaos and churn created when the funding for services is cut beyond salami slicing to the core. Having shared leadership and management of services may generate economies and efficiencies but even sensible solutions are being undermined by the decline and decimation of local authority funding.

730 words

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