

Promoting effective multi-agency working/partnerships

Who are EMPOWER?

EMPOWER is a network of stakeholders delivering services in relation to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, and Northamptonshire. This includes statutory bodies such as the police, crown prosecution service (CPS), local government, and third-sector organisations supporting VAWG survivors and perpetrators. EMPOWER is also a 9-month research project (concluding July 2023) identifying issues and co-producing targeted projects to uncover and explore problems and potential solutions to VAWG. The next steps from these mini-projects will seek to ensure the network's sustainability and undertake co-designed and co-produced research to develop effective solutions to VAWG-related issues in the future.

What key issues have been identified by EMPOWER so far?

Stakeholders prioritised five key issues at the beginning of the project. These are:

1. Accessing and engaging in the criminal justice system
2. Multi-agency/Multi-systems working
3. Education (intervention and training)
4. What works (using best-practice/evidence-based working)
5. Culture in the criminal justice system

Each of these issues was explored via a workshop including researchers and stakeholders, which led to the identification of mini-projects designed to explore the issue further.

This briefing summarises the *Promoting effective multiagency working/partnerships project*, developed from workshop 2: Multi-agency/Multi-systems.

What were the key aims of this project?

1. Examine existing barriers and best practices in promoting effective multi-agency working/partnerships.
2. Gather evidence of barriers to and ways of promoting effective multi-agency working/partnerships.

What did we do for this project?

- We performed a brief literature review examining academic sources, reports produced by individual organisations, and government policy documents.
- We completed 5 semi-structured interviews with EMPOWER members to gather views about multi-agency working/partnerships. Three of these were with members of the Consent Coalition (an organisation identified as having effective existing multi-agency partnerships) and two participants represented third-sector organisations collaborating with the Consent Coalition.

What did we find?

Our literature review identified that multi-agency partnerships promote better outcomes for survivors of VAWG and increase prosecution rates (1; 2). Our interviewees echoed this, as shown in the following excerpt from our interview with Caitlin³, a representative from a third-sector organisation:

“Without a shadow of a doubt, if we didn’t have that it [multi-agency working], you know, I’m not saying it wouldn’t exist, but life would certainly be a lot harder.”

In highlighting the positive role played by the multi-agency framework in producing better outcomes, we identified positive practices and also areas that need to be addressed to optimise the partnership work’s collective results from both the interviews and our literature review. Key areas were:

Establish processes for effective information and data sharing. This spans a range of different forms of information, related to both individual clients and data that can benefit multiple organisations (e.g., incidence rate statistics). This reduces redundancy and can improve outcomes for service users by reducing secondary victimisation (4; 1). Achieving this is challenging for third-sector organisations, who often must navigate the strict constraints on data sharing within statutory organisations. However, we identified examples where this could be achieved (e.g., the Consent Coalition shares only general, aggregated data among their organisations) abiding by each service’s data privacy rules. The process for this was explained by Lisa below:

“We look at lots of figures and lots of data, hotspots, and themes across the city. But they are marked confidential. They are only shared with those who need-who need to see it. People are very respectful of what and the trust between what is allowed in and out.”

Lisa’s observations also highlight the strategic role played by data sharing linking this with effective communication, which we focus on in the next section.

Establish effective communication and interpersonal relationships. This involves formal communication strategies (e.g., regular meetings) and facilitating interpersonal relationships between those working with different organisations. When asked if communication was vital, one participant from the Consent Coalition firmly agreed: *“It is. Do you know what? It absolutely is.”* – Lisa.

We identified methods of communication used within the Consent Coalition e.g., a newsletter that informs the partnership of any changes (e.g., people taking on new roles) and regular meetings. The

¹ Robinson, A., Hudson, K., & Brookman, F. (2008). Multi-agency work on sexual violence: Challenges and prospects identified from the implementation of a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC). *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47, 411–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2008.00531>

² Zweig, J. M., & Burt, M. R. (2003). Effects of Interactions among Community Agencies on Legal System Responses to Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault in Stop-Funded Communities. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 14(2), 249–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887403403014002006>

³ All names of research participants were changed, and their role descriptors were adapted to protect their identities and ensure anonymity.

⁴ Campbell, R. (2005). What Really Happened? A Validation Study of Rape Survivors’ Help-Seeking Experiences With the Legal and Medical Systems. *Violence and Victims*, 20(1), 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1891/vivi.2005.20.1.55>

benefits of this was that it fostered a sense of belonging and shared ownership, which has been shown to improve engagement (5). Lisa emphasised this point:

“Keeping those colleagues, keeping those organisations updated is really key because you need to feel like you’re part, you’re part of it. If you’ve dedicated some time or put some you know a colleague’s time and resources into it, you need to feel like you’re valued, and that only comes back with good communication.”

All interviewees promoted the importance of strong and constructive interpersonal relationships. These interpersonal relationships are, in part, influenced by developing a shared identity and goals, which we will discuss in the next section.

Establish shared goals and identity. Goals may be focused on promoting positive outcomes for survivors or on working together on a joint project. For instance, this was displayed by the Consent Coalitions recently successful projects (e.g., the A-Z Campaign). Participants in the Consent Coalition also reported that having a shared identity was a key factor in their success. Each organisation took pride in being a part of the partnership, which increased effectiveness and prevented one organisation from being seen as the sole face of the partnership, shown in the quotes below from Keira and Lisa:

“The beauty of it is that it’s not branded, which makes it not, you know, it doesn’t have Nott’s branding on it. We don’t want people to be put off by the police. It doesn’t have Council. Not that people are put off by the Council. But you know what it is? It’s its own standalone branding, which makes it really nice” – Keira.

“And one of the biggest things that I always refer to is that because it is one singular brand, it is one singular model. It means that all partners are recognised for their contribution. Because sometimes it is not always about who is the biggest funder, who has done this and this. And we found that our voluntary sector tended to put in a lot of work, a lot of addition, but they were not always recognised equally as some of the statutory services. So, we don’t have that problem.” – Lisa.

These messages emphasise the essential role of ensuring that the different organisations have an equal role within the partnership. This concept links heavily with some of the barriers to effective multiagency working (e.g., power imbalances), which we will discuss below.

Pay attention to and (where possible) mitigate power imbalances. Our discussions with third-sector representatives identified a shared perception that they often feel they have less power than statutory organisations in multi-agency collaborations. This feeling of being undervalued is a common occurrence across different organisations. Ceala highlighted how these power imbalances between statutory and third-sector organisations can manifest and have negative impacts.

“So, I think it would be different if we were mainstream because I feel like they’d take us a bit more seriously. But then, on the other hand, we’re often seen as a free exit strategy for a lot of these services. So, you know, these services will be getting paid from, you know, the NHS and they’ll have their nice commissioning, and then ours will be an exit strategy”.

⁵ Frontline. (2022, March 7). *How to implement multi-agency working*. Frontline. <https://thefrontline.org.uk/how-to-implement-multi-agency-working/>

“They have the power to actually do stuff, whereas we don’t. It would often take me nagging a few professionals on their end to get stuff done. Do you know what I mean? Where, I’m sure if I worked with the Council, I could get stuff done quite quickly. Or worked in mental health. I could, you know, refer someone into a service. But I kind of have to go all around the houses to get somebody else to be able to do that” - Ceala.

These excerpts highlight how power imbalances may hinder third-sector organisations to take an active role in multi-agency partnerships. However, research (5) emphasises the importance of including statutory and voluntary elements in partnerships, due to their greater flexibility.

Be alert to the fragility of partnerships that rely on individual staff members. Another barrier to effective multi-agency working, which was not highlighted in our literature review but was emphasised within the EMPOWER workshops and in our interviews, was the precariousness of existing partnerships between member organisations for staffing reasons.

“...because I do often wonder how sustainable something is if it’s the person or the role” - Keira.

In the Consent Coalition, the partnership initially relied on one individual, making it vulnerable if unavailable. As such, a barrier they had to overcome was ensuring the partnership did not rely on a single individual. This was also the case for one of the third-sector organisations, with one person responsible for maintaining these connections. Ensuring that multiple individuals are involved in overseeing the partnership is essential, as this helps to reduce the negative influences of staff turnover (1).

“I think upskilling other colleagues, so you aren’t solely relying on one person to do it one element because if you got sick or if you go on annual leave, how does that model break? How does it fall?... [continued]... because it’s part of my, massively part of my role to, to manage the partnership. How did-how would that function? And that actually, that example came when I came back and we looked at it thinking okay, we can’t continue to function the way that we do. Let’s put a plan in place that this wonderful partnership and can rely on itself” – Lisa.

Consider the impact of contrasting policies. In order to collaborate effectively, it is important to identify areas of agreement between organisations. Ideally, inter-agency guidelines should be implemented that prioritise shared policies that go beyond the individual goals of each service, as the following excerpt from the interview with Kayleigh, working as an outreach officer for an agency belonging to the Consent Coalition, highlights:

“...people might go: okay, I can work on this, but I can’t work with them on that and-and that’s depending on what their-their own central policies and ways of working are.” – Kayleigh

Identifying contrasting policies may be one step toward promoting effective multi-agency working. This is associated with promoting shared goals and identities.

What does this mean?

- This project showcases the potential advantages of effective interagency partnerships. When partners collaborate, they can leverage each other’s strengths and improve client outcomes.



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- To achieve successful interagency partnerships, organisations must establish robust information and data-sharing policies that support effective communication strategies.
- The Consent Coalition succeeded by creating a shared identity among different organisations rather than relying on one organisation to represent the partnership.
- However, there are notable barriers to multi-agency partnerships that must be addressed to ensure that partnerships are effective including: potential power imbalances, the reliance on individual organisation staff members, and conflicts in policies.

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You can find out more about the EMPOWER project here: <https://le.ac.uk/criminology/research/empower>.

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