

Component 4:

Third Sector Collaborative Relationships



Connections are Key

Throughout the research, it became clear that the importance of relationship-based practice extended beyond relationships within families, or between supported people and their workers. Relationships between workers, and between agencies, were of critical importance to offering optimum support for people. We heard how collaborative relationships between workers in statutory and third sector agencies meant staff were more able to share important information or to have frank discussions.

What makes a good working relationship?

Third sector workers that we spoke to said that ‘the little things’ are what makes a big impact when building relationships with other workers. Small, more personal approaches, like popping in for cups of tea or picking up the phone rather than sending an e-mail are important as it gives those working together time to get to know each other and build a relationship. While practitioners involved in this research recognised that this often required a little extra effort (in the context of busy work schedules), it was clear that the effort was worth it in terms of creating relationships that improved practice for supported people.



And I don't think anybody can work in isolation, like those days are gone. And I think we can all learn huge points from each other, for the benefit of the families.

PRACTITIONER



I don't think there's a particular strategy about relationships. But communication between professionals is probably key to that. So, developing a strong relationship with the professional so it's not a faceless organisation.

PRACTITIONER

Third sector workers described the approaches they took to build relationships with colleagues working in other sectors; being clear and up front, encouraging reflection between colleagues, listening and remembering to praise, generally ‘supporting your fellow workers’.



So yeah, when you have that relationship with the other partners, round a bout, I think, you provide a fairer and better whole family support.

PRACTITIONER

Consistency

In every focus group that we spoke to, when asked about what enables good working across sectors, consistency was a key element. When asked what this means, workers said that consistency means communication and regular updates, a parity in staff training and the requisite skills to provide quality of support provision, and sufficient staff numbers to allow staff to do their jobs well.



When they [workers] do good communication it's easier than you trying to remember what you have said to everyone... they can just tell each other.

YOUNG PERSON

Third sector workers had a clear empathy and concern for the extreme workload and high caseloads that statutory workers are often assigned, noting that building consistent relationships can be difficult when workers are constantly challenged by their workload. This overload of cases was considered as a reason for there being a lack in consistency of long-term staff working in social work – an issue noted by both third sector workers and those being supported. One staff member noted a family who were assigned three social workers in three months, a result of staffing shortages, short term contracts and/or a reliance on agency workers.



Being flexible is key, and actually, for that to work really well, people need lower caseloads.'

PRACTITIONER

So, what works in improving relationships between third sector and with statutory services?

Know your roles

Throughout the research, it became clear that there is a lack of understanding, or in some cases, conflict, about what third and statutory sector workers are expected to do within their roles and to what degree their roles are complementary.



I think as a non-statutory service, you get... I wouldn't say pushed aside, but maybe don't carry the same sort of respect in terms of the support we provide for the young person, as opposed to social work or something.

PRACTITIONER

Not fully understanding the roles and responsibilities of colleagues who are involved in a family's life can lead to feelings of confusion, or duplication of roles and resource where it may not be necessary. A lack of clarity in roles leads to frustration, and sometimes feelings of hostility amongst professionals. It can lead to workers feeling underappreciated by colleagues.

Practically, this confusion often leads to multiple professionals working with the one child or family at once, something those interviewed said left them completely overwhelmed by the (often conflicting or confusing) advice, expectations or messages that is given by multiple professionals in their lives.



Create formal partnerships. Co-production with social work would be amazing.

PRACTITIONER

When asked what more useful collaboration would look like, third sector workers reported

that practitioners would see each other as allies, that they would take each other's opinions and recommendations more seriously, and respect professionalism. Because relationships are hard to build in the current way of working, third sector workers in this research reported feeling sidelined in formal proceedings. They felt that they were not always invited to panels or meetings, meaning that opportunities are missed for them to share the wealth of information they have about a child or family, which could contribute to making better, more informed decisions for the family.



'For third sector, we sometimes don't have a loud enough voice'.

PRACTITIONER

It was suggested that there should be more physical integration of social work in third sector working environments; from small changes to practice such as popping by for meetings to formal reconfiguring of spaces to allow coworking or colocation of teams so that they physically in the same spaces more frequently.



Relationships with social work and education need to be built with consistency, openness and trust.

PRACTITIONER

Third sector participants expressed that in order to make consistent and meaningful connections with other statutory workers, they want to feel like they could take advice from social work and the vice-versa, believing that a closer relationship would foster an environment of respecting each other's professionalism or opinions, or even just having a better understanding of the position of person's point of view.

The importance of practitioners understanding each other's roles was consistently reported as important to developing relationships.

Workplace Culture

Culture eats strategy for breakfast

Throughout the project, third sector workers routinely spoke about how workforce culture directly effects relationships between colleagues and agencies.

Some of this culture relates to commissioning and employment practices. Social work and statutory workers are generally perceived to have permanent contracts, and higher wages and pensions than third sector workers, but to the third sector workers in this research, appeared more frequently to suffer from burnout, or periods of sickness than third sector staff did.

In the third sector workplace, third sector workers reported their contracts were frequently reliant on time-limited grant funding or commissioning, and that third sector workers generally received lower pay than statutory services. **However, it's in the third sector that we saw evidence of longer retention rates of staff, and significant levels of job satisfaction. Most third sector workers appeared to enjoy their jobs, and so were happy to stay despite less secure contracts.**



It's not just a job.

PRACTITIONER

During our conversations we asked third sector workers what they thought makes people stay in third sector roles, and why job satisfaction and retention appeared to be better than for people working in statutory agencies. Most felt that the emotional burnout and high turnover of staff in these sectors seemed to stem from the high caseloads social workers are tasked with, and a culture that is not compassionate and based in fear of consequences – alongside a number of other stressful factors.

This led us to ask reflective questions on workplace culture in the third sector, to find out why people choose to stay. The common theme from these conversations found that third sector workers, in the main, felt that their workplace was compassionate and nurturing, that they were supported well and appreciated. These feelings appeared to be the main reason for many workers staying in their roles for longer periods of time.

So, what makes their workplace environment and those within it nurturing and compassionate?



'It's about empowering and helping them achieve the best they can achieve. Yeah, not what we think is the best they can achieve but what they think is the best they can achieve. And, as an organisation, we are facilitating that. It's all about ethos. Culture eats strategy for breakfast.

SERVICE MANAGER

Change happens at the speed of trust

Practitioners in the study expressed a belief that there are inherent values that a person needs (empathy, trust, compassion, honesty and care were some of the main values discussed). Practitioners believed that these are values that most people who choose to work in support services possess, but they can be honed and developed by a workplace with confidence, patience and tolerance. All these intrinsic values can help staff flourish and build an environment that allows workers to do what they are there to do – build strong relationships with others and to support them wholeheartedly, maintaining positivity and compassion, without burning out.



I think you're either good at engaging with people or you're not. Yeah, you know, and it's hard to teach that. So obviously, I can look for somebody that's going to be a good on an engagement level. And drugs knowledge can be taught, you know, I mean, you can you that, you can read a book about that, I can't teach you how to engage with young people though, that's something that you need to know.

PRACTITIONER

Participants in this study also recognised that there will always be something new to learn, and the often expressed a belief that the way to learn is from those who work besides each other through support, advice and discussing practice, rather than any formal training or qualifications.

Key to a nurturing workplace culture that we heard from practitioners were:

- Being valued by your organisation, being trusted to do your job and fully enabled to do so.
- Constant reflection on practice and/or leadership styles.
- Compassionate management style.
- Knowing there is no quick fix and knowing support for families is open ended; this changes and reframes ideologies and expectations

Another key reason for nurturing and leading a compassionate workplace is that it clearly filtered down into the support for the young people and families. Where organisations are led with compassion, we heard how practitioners felt more

equipped to do their best job, and to replicate that compassion in the service they provide. Further, when we saw evidence of compassion in the workforce, we heard how supported people experienced a more compassionate, relational service.

The end result – good quality service – happened in part by inspiring positive relationships and exhibiting good relational skills in every part of the service, starting with those in leadership positions.



**It takes a belief in change.
Optimism and hope and belief in families.**

PRACTITIONER

This finding is of particular interest and importance when we consider recruitment and workforce development. Qualities like compassion and optimism are not easily measured in competency-based interviews or CV. The ability to recruit the ‘right’ candidates based on their inherent qualities is difficult to quantify but is of critical importance to building a workforce that can lead and work in a relational way.

Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)

Throughout this research, GIRFEC was well understood and accepted in practice. Following on from the archive review, the research sought to understand if there were strategies used in practice that specifically help children and families living with drugs and alcohol.

Practitioners said that GIRFEC was a valuable tool when communicating with other third and statutory sector workers, and that there was no strategy per se that works best for children and families living with drugs and alcohol, as there are often complex traumas and life experiences which require active listening to tailor unique support. GIRFEC addresses this idea well by offering principles rather than set methods, and the evidence found through conversations reinforces much of the evidence found in the scoping review which suggests a strive for addressing and respecting the uniqueness of every family.



Outcomes are a difficult one. Because speaking to young people, you don't want to get pieces of paper out and say "how are you feeling about safety on a 1-10 scale?" It's through the conversation you have with them, you can kind of get a handle on where they're at.

PRACTITIONER

Following on from this finding, another aim from the scoping review was to assess ways that the GIRFEC model is used to promote building strong relationships both in and out of the immediate family circle. While many practitioners said that the policy framework hadn't necessarily created new values or ways of working by, it was praised for improving communication and contact across sectors by developing a ‘common language’ with which different agencies and organisations could use and understand.



I definitely think it guides professionals; we can have our own spin on it. It kind of gives professionals a starting place. And you know, “this is what we think of social work. This is who we would like to get done.” So yeah, I think it’s good. It feels professional as well. And it allows us as a third sector to say, “yeah, we know what you’re doing, statutory sector, that’s what we’re putting on the table.” We can meet halfway and you’re able to get in that collaborative sense. And it’s the same language we’re speaking.

PRACTITIONER

GIRFEC allowed agencies to name and identify the variety of support being given to a young person and their family, and for colleagues across sectors to understand why that support was needed. Clarity of communication and finding a common language to understand each other are essential to forming and strengthening relationships.



it’s just like second nature. I don’t really know how else to answer. You just kind of do what you do. And keep them safe. You want to be following these principles.

PRACTITIONER

What the GIRFEC framework has done is help to evidence needs of the child in different sectors in a way that allows information to be listened to and heard regardless of working background or experience in support. It has eased collaboration and centred the child and their positive development as the most important factor when providing support. While practitioners understood the term GIRFEC and its use, the families and children we spoke to did not, in the main, recognise it.



I think it’s just it’s part and parcel of what we do. GIRFEC is integrated into our work plans, communication with others, both in house and in [the locality].

PRACTITIONER

Reflections

From discussions in this research, relationships between the workers, regardless of the agency they work for, are as important as relationships between family members. Building relationships and trust between all the agencies and professionals involved in a young person or family’s lives has clear benefits to understanding the roles, remits of each worker, and builds an appreciation of their specialisms and practice.

Relationships within an organisation which are based on compassion and leadership which is trusting, nurturing and supportive appear to result in committed workers, who stick with organisations, weather short term contracts, without burn out or compassion fatigue.

The importance of understanding roles that each practitioner has is of critical importance and building relationships can help workers maintain respect and value towards colleagues from other agencies.

Positive relationships between agencies and practitioners mean that, because third sector workers often have a stronger relationship and connection with supported people, the quality of support offered to people and their families becomes more robust, especially when good relationships mean third sector staff are valued, and become integral to meetings and panels that involve the family or individuals.