



AVEC

Work package 2: "Multi-disciplinary cooperation and referral pathways"

Summary of findings from mapping of experiences of multi-agency cooperation (Milestone 2) 2021-07-05

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Introduction

The work-package aims to:

- Design, pilot and evaluate a generic working model for women shelters and relevant stakeholders based on a child (rights) perspective, current research, and existing legislation.
- Design, pilot and evaluate a model for multi-agency and multi-disciplinary coordination involving women shelter, social services and specialized services.

The first step to fulfil these aims was to map the experiences staff at women shelters of multi-agency and multi-disciplinary coordination around children staying at their shelter, as well as experiences that staff at social services' districts in Stockholm have of multi-agency and multi-disciplinary coordination around children placed at shelters. The mapping was carried out through interviews as well as a questionnaire on cooperation. The questionnaire also works as a baseline measure of staff views on multi-agency and multi-disciplinary cooperation regarding children at women's shelters.

This report contains a summary of findings from the mapping of experiences of multi-agency cooperation regarding children in shelters. It draws on interviews with, in total, 15 staff members from five agencies relevant to the specific local context. Apart from a women's shelter these agencies include statutory social services working with violence in close relationships (RVT), which is an agency formally responsible for assessment and placement of adult victims of violence in a shelter, and statutory child welfare services, which carries out child protection investigations when children are exposed to intimate partner violence, including when children are accompanying a parent (mother) placed in a shelter. In this local context, support and treatment in the context of violence are offered to children and families by two different agencies: one specialized social services agency aimed at support and treatment in relation to violence in close relationships (RVC), and one agency offering general social services/support and treatment to children and families (Öppenvård). While the women's shelter included in the work-package is not linked to any specific part of the City of Stockholm area, the specialized treatment (RVC) is regional and covers about a quarter of the City of Stockholm, and the general support to children and families (Öppenvård) is linked to the specific local authority where the adult and child statutory social services are also based (the local authority is one out of 13 in the City of Stockholm).

Of the 15 staff members interviewed, 12 also answered the questionnaire about cooperation. Findings are summarized below.

Critical issues in cooperation

The interviews indicate that there are critical issues in cooperation at all stages of the placement process, that is, at the point of placing a parent with children at a shelter, during the children's stay at the shelter, at the point of leaving the shelter and in the period after leaving. Furthermore, a central issue brought to the fore through the interviews is the fact that no agency is considered to hold the overall responsibility for the process regarding children, neither formally nor in practice. Instead, responsibility is disseminated among different agencies and children's situation, rights and needs may be "lost" in the (lack of) cooperation between the agencies involved.

At placement in a shelter

Due to the current legislation as well as the organization of the social services in this municipality/local authority, formally it is primarily the adult victim of violence that is placed at a shelter, and the children are “only” accompanying their parent. The statutory social services tend to only make a formal decision regarding the adult, while the decision regarding the children rests with the parent/custodian. Furthermore, as the statutory social services are divided into sections dealing with “adults” and “children and youths” respectively, the case workers making the decision regarding the adult are not mandated to also make decisions regarding the children. It is of course possible for the child and youth section to make decisions regarding placement of children. However, they tend not to do so if the parent is placed in a shelter by another part of the social services. As there is no formal decision made about the children, there is no plan made for the placement, and no follow up regarding the placement itself from the child and youth section. This way of interpreting the law and established practice has been criticized in a public inquiry regarding children in shelters, and amendments to the law were suggested several years ago to make it mandatory for the social services to make formal decisions regarding children in shelters (SOU 2017:112). However, so far, no legal change has been initiated by the government.

Due to this situation, cooperation between the different parts of the statutory social services (adult and child and youth sections respectively) is a key issue in improving the situation when children are accompanying their mother placed at a shelter. According to the interviewees from the shelter, there are generally problems in communication and collaboration between these sections, and much room for improvement. The interviewees from the statutory services in the local authority included in the work-package similarly describe some problems. However, they also describe some more positive experiences, especially in “emergency cases” where placement is not planned and needs to be decided upon immediately, for example when a mother turns up at the social services reception desk with her children and asks for help, or a case is referred to the social services from the police. In emergency situations, case workers from both statutory sections tend to get involved, communicate with each other and get a similar picture of the case. In cases where they have both been involved from the start, cooperation in the continued process tends to be easier, interviewees from both sections agree. There are also some local written routines for cooperation in cases where children are accompanying their parent to a shelter, that could be part of a base to a more comprehensive model developed through the work-package.

During placement in a shelter

The overall picture that emerges through the interviews with staff from all agencies is that although they have some positive experiences of cooperation at the placement stage, cooperation tends to “fade out”/decrease or stop further along in the placement process.

From the shelter point of view, there are several issues that need to be addressed to improve the situation. A key issue is that although the statutory child and youth services are mandated to open an investigation regarding children subjected to violence (including in the form of witnessing violence to a parent) and generally tend to do so, the way the investigation is carried out can be problematic. One recurring problem is that the statutory sections do not talk to each other and, for example, the “child people” asks the shelter staff about what the “adult people” plan to do, how long the placement will be and so forth, instead of staff from the statutory sections talking with each other. The interviewees from the statutory services tend, to

some extent, to paint a similar picture, adding that even though they would like to cooperate more and, for example, make investigation visit to the shelter jointly and interview the mother and the children at the same time, it is often not possible to synchronize time schedules due to their case load and working conditions.

A related issue is the fact that sometimes it takes time before the case is referred to the child and youth section and a case worker is assigned the case. There seems to be an issue here with the practices of the referral section that is the first to be involved in the case. While the case is referred to the adult section quickly (the one that decides regarding placement in a shelter), the case does not seem to be referred to the child and youth section with the same speed, and thus it becomes harder to achieve a joint handling of the case in the early stages of the investigation.

According to interviewees from both the shelter and the adult section, another problem is that the child welfare investigation may be shut down fairly quickly when the mother and children end up in a shelter, with the motivation that the mother has protected her children by seeking help at a shelter, her capacity for care is good-enough and no further action is needed from the social services. As described by the interviewees from the other agencies, the consequence of this practice by the child and youth section might be that the child's situation and needs of support outside of the shelter context, including needs when moving out, are not investigated nor assessed properly. The same can be said about the mother's capacity for care, as there can be a big difference between caring for children in safety and with staff around all hours, compared to caring for children by yourself in some insecure housing situation that abused mothers with children often end up in after leaving the shelter. Furthermore, although the children's needs may change at the point of moving out, if case is closed from the child and youth section point of view they are not involved in planning for "aftercare" and support after leaving the shelter.

A third issue raised by the shelter staff is support during the stay at the shelter. Even though this shelter offers support to both mothers and children during their stay, there are limits to how much work they can do in relation to parenting issues, and in some cases more support is needed. According to the shelter staff, social services are reluctant to make decisions regarding further interventions while one is ongoing (the placement in a shelter). The staff from both the child and youth section and the support services (öppenvård) claim that it would be possible to get further support to a parent while staying in a shelter. As far as we can understand these different views on the possibilities to get additional services during the shelter stay, they may be a result of the lack of clarity about who has the overall responsibility for the child's situation discussed above: if an abused mother needs extra support during the shelter stay, is it an issue for the adult section (focusing on her as an adult individual/abused partner) or the child and youth section (focusing on her as a parent)?

A fourth issue is children's access to school. Even though the shelter offers school at the shelter for a few hours a day, this service can be regarded as at a "minimal level". Also, the issue of school comes across as a somewhat conflicted issue in the relationship between the statutory sections, at least as described by the adult section. As the adult section is not allowed to make any formal decisions or write any supporting documents regarding children, all issues related to school must be handled by the child and youth section. However, there seems to be different views on how much the child and youth section does get involved in securing access to school (including preschool), for example, by writing supporting documents to enable

school placement in a different part of the city in cases where the mother and children need to move for safety reasons.

The issue of school also comes across as at least partly linked to different approaches to the perpetrator of violence, when he (as it is in most cases) is the children's father. Especially the adult section and shelter interviewees talk about the child and youth section sometimes being too deferential in relation to the perpetrator, while the child and youth section interviewees talk about other sections only involved with the victim/mother not always recognizing the role of the child and youth section as responsible for the whole of the child's situation, including the relationship with the other parent.

When placement ends

As already indicated by the description above about a general tendency of decreasing cooperation as the placement goes on, cooperation is often lacking in relation to the ending of the stay in a shelter.

A significant problem brought to the fore by the shelter staff is the practice by the adult statutory services to make decisions only for one week at a time, and often making decisions at the last minute, leaving mothers and children in insecurity of where they should stay until late Friday afternoon, when their placement ends on a Friday, for example. This creates a lot of anxiety and makes it difficult to plan and prepare children for leaving.

In addition, only making decisions for one week at a time makes it harder to offer services during the shelter stay, as it is hard to start a process if it is unclear how long the child will stay.

Decisions about short periods of stay, last minute decisions and lack of cooperation between the statutory services also mean that it becomes harder for the child and youth section to plan and prepare for services for children when leaving the shelter.

Post-placement services

The lack of cooperation and often hasty or non-planned exit processes from the shelter also mean that there tends to be insufficient planning for post-placement services, especially for the children. Staff from all agencies seem to agree that there is a need for some kind of planning conference or similar in relation to post-placement services.

One idea brought to the fore in the interviews is to use the measure of a "coordinated individual plan" (samordnad individuell plan, SIP) to enhance cooperation. However, some interviewees also talked about negative experiences of such a measure as everything written into the plan is to be considered a positive decision and agencies may therefore be reluctant to put anything in writing into the plan. Moreover, SIP-meetings can turn into "everyone wanting to do as little as possible" and are not always experienced as positive by the service users. In addition, a SIP normally concerns the adult, so the situation of the children would not necessarily be at the centre of attention. Therefore, the collaborative model of "Barnahus" would perhaps be a better option to look at for inspiration, some argued.

There was general agreement among the interviewees that there is a big gap in services when mothers and children leave the shelter. Some had other experiences when the family was already known to the social services and already had support from the social services, prior to the shelter placement. In such cases, the

support could continue during the placement and/or be continued immediately after the end of a placement. In other cases, it could take a long time before the mother and children would get any support.

One reason for the gap in terms of time could be waiting lists at the social services specialized in violence (RVC). Another reason could be that the child welfare investigation had been closed before the mother and children would leave the shelter, and another case would have to be opened before services could be decided upon by the statutory child and youth section. A third reason could be difficulties in finding appropriate services. Especially staff from the statutory child and youth section talked about problems in transferring cases if they, for safety reasons, need to be offered by another part of the City of Stockholm or other municipality. If the staff can make a referral to their "own" support services, the situation is a bit easier. If the family cannot stay in the area but need to move to another part of the city or elsewhere, it can take a long time to get another social services office to accept them as service users, the interviewees claim.

One of the interviewees described more positive experiences of the processes of exiting a shelter during a previous period when the decision on placement was made by the statutory child and youth section, rather than the adult section (at that time the RVT belonged to the child and youth section). During the previous way of organizing the violence work, the RVT had special pedagogues employed who would try to make daily home visits during a family's first week out of the shelter, to help both with practical matters and the process of transition from the shelter to a life outside. The pedagogues' work would include helping children making sense of the move out of the shelter and helping the mother and children developing a shared narrative about the move to a new home.

Other key parts of the municipality social services

In addition to the agencies represented in the mapping, the interviews made it clear that there are other parts of the social services that also should be included in any model for cooperation around children staying in shelters.

One such part is the referral sections of the statutory adult and/or child and youth units, as they are the ones who first are in contact with the family and may be involved at the point of placement at a shelter. In one of the interviews, the interview persons described a case that "remained" at the referral section for the whole of the children's stay at the shelter and was never transferred to the statutory child and youth section. Thus, a child welfare investigation was never performed, and the child's case was "stuck" at the referral stage.

Another part is the section concerned with financial aid, as it plays a key role in relation to post-placement housing and all matters that concern economic resources after leaving the shelter.

Thirdly, the "family law" section should be included. This part of the social services is performing investigations commissioned by the district court in legal disputed regarding child custody, contact or residence, or offer "cooperation talks" (a form of mediation) and aid formal agreements between parents who want to settle conflicts regarding children. A family law dispute is often ongoing parallel to any post-placement services, according to the interviewees.

Specialized services “BUP”

The work-package includes looking at referral pathways to specialized services. In addition to the services specialized in violence within the social services, relevant specialized services can be found within the health system. In the Swedish system, specialized services with competence in child and youth psychiatry, performing assessment e.g. of possible trauma symptoms and offering treatment, belongs to the health system. Thus, the child and youth psychiatry services are organized even more separately from the other agencies, as the health system is regional (21 regions in the whole of Sweden) while social services are municipal (290 municipalities in the whole of Sweden), and the regions and municipalities are run separately from each other politically, taxation and budgets are separate, etc.

A recurring theme in the interviews is that child and youth psychiatry services are hard to access in the case of children in shelters. There are several reasons for this, as described by the interviewees. Firstly, the child and youth psychiatry does not offer treatment if the situation around the child is deemed to be too unstable, which tends to be the case when children are staying at a shelter. Secondly, the interviewees describe the child and youth psychiatry as reluctant to carry out treatment without consent from both custodians. This is the case even when the social services board has formally decided that the child should be offered treatment also without consent from one of the custodians. Thirdly, there tend to be long waiting lists, and the child and youth psychiatry is generally hard to get in touch with.

As regards getting consultation from the child and youth psychiatry about children the shelter staff feel concerned about, they have stopped trying to use the public health system and turned to the NGO sector instead, to get access to relevant consultation if needed.

In summary, to include health services in referral pathways will be a challenge in this project.

Baseline views regarding cooperation

The questionnaire on experiences of cooperation regarding children in women’s shelters consists of nine questions where respondents are asked to assess key aspects of cooperation (Danermark et al. 2013). The assessments are made through a scale ranging from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good). The questions cover aspects that have been shown, through previous research, to be central to successful inter-agency cooperation. The aspects are: access to resources for cooperation (e.g. time, funding etc.), management support and engagement, the engagement of other parties, agreement on work procedures and methods, knowledge about cooperation parties, compatible rules and regulations among the cooperating parties, the flow of information between the parties, and service user participation in the sense that services users are able to influence the support they are provided. The respondents are also asked to make an overall statement about how well cooperation around children in women’s shelters presently works.

In table 1 the answers from shelter staff (n=4) are presented separately from responses from the other agencies (n=8). The table shows the average response within each group. It can be noted that there is variation within each group.

The overall assessment of cooperation by both groups of respondents is that it at present is somewhere between “bad” or “neither good nor bad”. Considering that the scale ranged from 1 to 5, it can be noted that on no measure the average response was above 4, that is, between “good” or “very good”.

Looking more closely at each aspect of importance for successful cooperation shelter staff tended to rate them lower than the others, except when it comes to engagement from management and knowledge about other parties. Other aspects in relation to which views clearly differ between groups are sharing of information and the engagement from other parties where shelter staff clearly consider these aspects working much worse than the others tend to do. The assessment of these aspects from shelter staff was between “bad” and “neither good nor bad” for sharing of information and between “bad” and “very bad” for engagement from other parties.

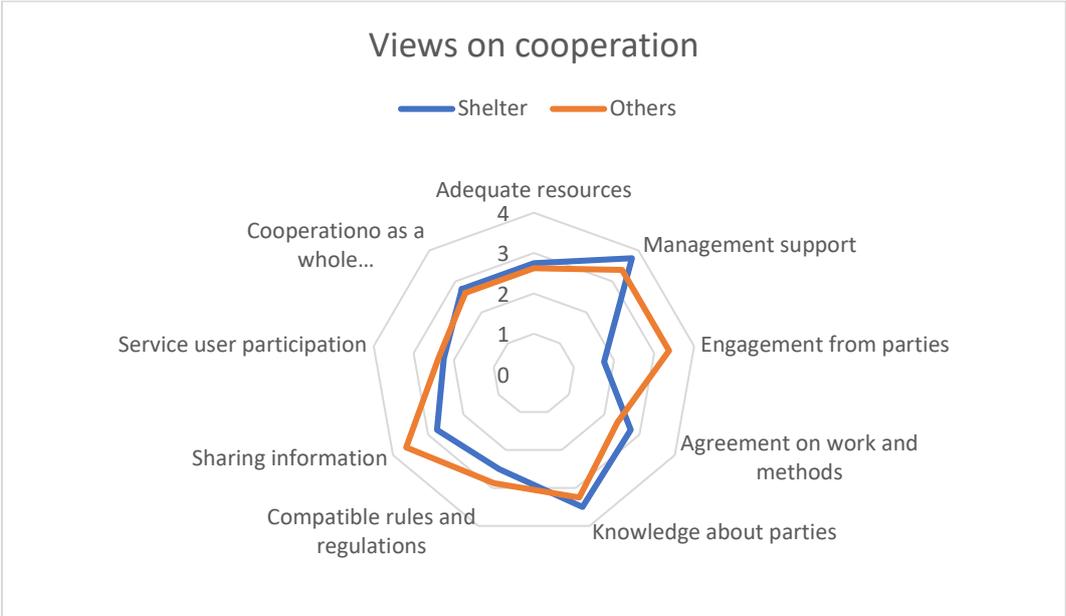


Table 1: Views on cooperation

In summary, the baseline measurement of views on how cooperation around children in shelters works at present clearly indicates that there is room for improvement, especially seen from the women’s shelter staff point of view.

References

Danermark, B., Germundsson, P. & Englund, E. (2013). *Toward an Instrument for Measuring the Performance of Collaboration across Organisational and Professional Boundaries*. Occasional Papers in Disability & Rehabilitation 2013:1. Malmö University Electronic Publishing [<http://hdl.handle.net/2043/15799>].

SOU [Swedish public inquiries] 2017:112. *Ett fönster av möjligheter – stärkt barnrättsperspektiv för barn i skyddat boende* [A window of opportunities – strengthening a children’s rights perspective for children in shelters]



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