Inter-Agency Cooperation in Services for Children and Families:
On why a good inter-agency process alone may not guarantee better outcomes

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Introduction

There can be few areas of public policy in Ireland about which there is more consensus than the need for state-funded agencies to work collaboratively in order to deliver more efficient and customer-friendly services. This consensus extends to complete unanimity in the case of services for children and families and has been consistently underlined in documents such as the National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children, the National Children’s Strategy, the National Social Partnership Agreement, the National Development Plan, the Agenda for Children's Services, and the Implementation Plan for the ‘Ryan Report’. Ironically, and despite more than a decade of repeated statements on the matter, there is just as much consensus that inter-agency collaboration in the delivery of services to children and families is still poor. A recent review of compliance with Children First concluded that inter-agency collaboration ‘is not working effectively’ and ‘sharing of information is not happening in the way it was envisaged’. In response to this, Children’s Services Committees are being planned for each of the thirty-four City and/or County Development Boards throughout the country, and four have already been set up on a pilot basis in Dublin City Council,

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1 The National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children – Children First, 1999:23; see also page 45.
South Dublin County Council, Limerick City Council, and Donegal County Council9.

Against this background, there is merit in considering the lessons which have been learned from a five-year initiative to develop an inter-agency approach to working with vulnerable young people (10-18 years) in the Ballymun area of Dublin. An evaluation of that initiative10 – called Ballymun Network – has just been completed and this paper draws out the core findings, conclusions and lessons. Understandably, the paper has a strong local orientation but, in many ways, the inter-agency issues in Ballymun mirror the broader context of policy and practice about services for children and families in Ireland.

Context

Ballymun Network began in 2005 at the instigation of Ballymun Local Drugs Task Force. It was prompted by the observation that many young people in the area were being neglected, some were effectively out of control, and yet none of the agencies with a remit for children or young people seemed capable of responding in a coordinated way to their wide range of needs. Following a process of consultation, a number of statutory and community/voluntary agencies agreed to participate in an exercise aimed at developing more collaborative ways of working. Managers from eleven agencies agreed to join the network and an independent chair, the author of this paper, was appointed to facilitate the process over this period (2005-2010)11. The style of facilitation

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11 At the start of January 2010, the Network comprised the following seventeen agencies: HSE Social Work Department, HSE Geraldstown House, An Garda Síochána, Dublin City Council, Trinity Comprehensive School, Ballymun Educational Support Team, Youthreach, Ballymun Regional Youth Resource, and Ballymun Youth Action Project, and Ballymun Job Centre. Since then, other agencies have joined notably Probation Service, Ballymun Primary Principals Network, National Educational Welfare Board, Aisling Project, Mater Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, HSE Psychology Services, and youngballymun.
was characterised by maintaining a balance between focusing on processes and focusing on outcomes\textsuperscript{12}, based on the understanding that too much focus on processes and the Network would become a ‘talking shop’; while too much focus on outcomes and the Network could lose the good-will of those who took longer to adapt or change their ways of thinking and working. An additional ingredient was the creation of an atmosphere which fostered positive and enjoyable interactions, keeping the focus on solutions rather than problems, and ensuring that all decisions had some benefits for everyone\textsuperscript{13}.

This approach has worked. In the five years since the Network started in April 2005, new agencies have joined, many more agencies would like to join, and only one agency has left\textsuperscript{14}. A protocol for inter-agency case management has been developed and implemented and this protocol, in turn, has been adopted by a number of inter-agency projects throughout the country. At the same time, and partly influenced by the Network, two other inter-agency case management systems have been developed in Ballymun, one with a focus on youth mental health and well being (called Jigsaw Wraparound Facilitation), the other with a focus on education, training, and employment for early school leavers (called EQUAL Youth). In this sense, it could be argued that Ballymun has all the inter-agency case management structures that are needed to address the needs of vulnerable young people.

In addition to the structures for case management, Ballymun Network has also facilitated the joint delivery of programmes by agencies (notably the Strengthening Families Programme), and has organised inter-agency training for front-line staff on therapeutic techniques (notably Marte Meo\textsuperscript{15} and Time to

\textsuperscript{12} Benson, 1987.

\textsuperscript{13} Based on the insights of cognitive and positive psychology (Fredrickson, 2002; see also Carr, 2004; additional information is available at www.positivpsychology.org).

\textsuperscript{14} At the end of January 2010, the HSE-Social Work Department withdrew from the Network due to the difficulty of meeting all existing demands on the department.

\textsuperscript{15} Aarts, 2000.
Grow\textsuperscript{16} as well as training on some of the legal aspects of care (notably the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act). Over and above these specific activities, the Network has created more informal sub-networks notably in the areas of education (resulting in the Community School Attendance Initiative) and youth justice/youth employment (resulting in Ballyrunners, an EQUAL Youth Initiative). It is probably no exaggeration to say that most agencies and professionals involved in the Network – both managers and their frontline staff – have found it a positive and enriching experience, and most professionals remark that it is easier to do inter-agency work in Ballymun because of the good interpersonal relationships that have been built up through the Network.

In its assessment of the inter-agency process in Ballymun Network over five years, the evaluation report judged this to be a considerable achievement: ‘Ballymun Network has succeeded in building trust across a wide range of agencies and in developing a mechanism to implement integrated service delivery. In the context of what is known about the difficulties of inter-agency working in both the Irish and international arenas, this on its own is a considerable achievement\textsuperscript{17}. Moreover, this achievement has also been acknowledged in another but separate study of the Network\textsuperscript{18}.

**Outcomes of Ballymun Network**

Against this background therefore, it may appear surprising that the outcomes of the Network for vulnerable young people and their families are generally disappointing. This is illustrated by two key findings in the report: (i) agencies have not substantially reconfigured their services in light of the Network; and (ii) the

\textsuperscript{16} A Time to Grow is a model of practice for working with young people involved in offending and anti-social behaviour (see http://www.ctcassociates.co.uk/timeto\_grow.html).

\textsuperscript{17} WRC Summary Report, 2010:20.

\textsuperscript{18} Rafferty and Colgan, 2009.
number of young people who have been helped by the Network has been relatively few.

In a four year period (2006-9), eighty-seven young people were referred to the Network (only thirteen in 2009), and the evaluation estimates that about a third of all referrals may have benefited from services delivered through the Network. Leaving aside the question of why so few children were referred to the Network, given the acknowledged scale of need that prompted the Network to come into existence, most of the young people referred did not benefit to the extent that might have been expected. These findings seem to challenge a core assumption on which the Network is founded: that a good inter-agency process will lead to a more user-friendly configuration of services and better outcomes for those who use them.

It needs to be acknowledged that any conclusions about the Network's outcomes – particularly for service users – are necessarily tentative since the evaluation was not in a position to compare outcomes before and after the Network was set up, or compare outcomes in a setting like Ballymun which has an inter-agency process with outcomes in a similar setting which does not. Equally, it must also be acknowledged that most agencies and their funders – in Ballymun as elsewhere in the country19 – do not assess the outcomes of their services, so any data on

19 A relevant example in this context is the regeneration of Ballymun, whose final cost is estimated to be €942 million. In a report by the Controller and Auditor General, the lack of systems and data to allow a proper assessment of outcomes was noted: 'Programme evaluation has been hampered by the absence of a systematic approach, the lack of baseline statistics and inadequate and variable information feedback on programmes. While progress has been made in developing performance indicators to measure social and economic regeneration there is a need to establish an agreed cluster of key indicators and to improve the provision of information from agencies so that progress can be regularly monitored and outcomes evaluated. In a wider context, an evaluation should be carried out over the short term which focuses on the lessons that have been learned in order to guide future regeneration work in Ireland. In future regeneration programmes, the Department should ensure that the baseline position is established and that there is regular monitoring of key outcomes' (Controller and Auditor General, 2007:11).
outcomes is relatively rare and merits careful attention. Notwithstanding these limitations, one is still faced with the question, in light of five years inter-agency working, whether the outcomes of Ballymun Network are as good as they could be or should be. The fact that a majority of service users seem to have experienced little, or no, benefit from the Network’s intervention is clearly part of the answer. In view of this, it is important to inquire into the reasons for the poor outcomes as revealed by the evaluation.

Why are Network’s outcomes relatively poor?

It is possible to identify four sets of reasons why the Network’s outcomes are relatively poor, based on evidence in the evaluation. There may be additional reasons but these are probably the main ones.

First, the target group of the Network – which is 10-18 year olds who have experienced neglect and abuse over many years – is acknowledged to be a particularly difficult group to work with. Frequently they do not want, engage with any service and some are already in the criminal justice system. So the target group provides a difficult test-case to show the positive outcomes that could be achieved through inter-agency working. At the same time, given that there are two sides to every therapeutic relationship, this finding invites the Network – and each agency


21 The difficulty of finding effective programmes is also evident in the area of educational disadvantage. Consider for example how, in its review of the Educational Disadvantage Initiatives in the Primary Sector between 1984 and 2004, which involved an expenditure of €62 million in the school year 2003/4, the Controller and Auditor General found that reading standards in designated disadvantaged schools – the only indicator for which there is consistent data over the period – did not improve between 1984 and 2004: ‘In both 1998 and 2004, pupils in designated disadvantaged schools had significantly lower average scores than pupils in non-designated schools with a slightly bigger gap in 2004 than in 1998. The data suggest a slight drop in reading standards of pupils in designated disadvantaged schools between 1998 and 2004.’ (Controller and Auditor General, 2006:51).
separately – to examine its role in contributing to this difficult relationship, and the reasons why it appears so difficult to build a relationship of acceptance, empathy and creative problem-solving with the young person\textsuperscript{22}. However, the broader significance of this should not be lost sight of either, since it is a stark illustration of the high and unavoidable costs to the state of not investing in prevention – leaving aside the personal, family and community costs involved – which is why the so-called policy choice between early and late intervention is really a choice between investing early and effectively or investing more later and ineffectively\textsuperscript{23}. Ironically, the commitment to ‘a more even balance’ between early and late intervention is stated explicitly in the government’s health strategy\textsuperscript{24}.

Second, the standard of work by some staff in some agencies is poor\textsuperscript{25}. Naturally, poor standards may not be confined to inter-agency work. The evaluation does not examine the reasons for these poor standards but the finding inevitably raises questions about management in some agencies and its capacity to support and supervise staff to perform work to an acceptable standard. Members of the Network’s Steering Group are middle and senior managers and, although quality issues about the handling of specific cases of young people were raised at almost every Network meeting, the evaluation confirms that these were not addressed by managers in some agencies. The reasons for this – which could include a lack of leadership and management skills, resistance to critical self-appraisal (or appraisal by others) of practices, lack of focus on outcomes for service users – go beyond the scope of the evaluation although they have a direct bearing on the outcomes of the Network, and on the outcomes of individual agencies generally. It is true that most services for children and families are not regulated by externally validated quality assurance procedures, State funding is not contingent on

\textsuperscript{22} Hubble, Duncan and Miller, 1997; Rogers, 1957.
\textsuperscript{23} Kilburn, and. Karoly, 2008; Heckman, undated.
\textsuperscript{24} Department of Health and Children, 2001:71 and 139.
\textsuperscript{25} WRC Main Report, 2010:55; 79; 83.
delivering to a minimally acceptable standard\textsuperscript{26}, and the concepts of licensing and commissioning agencies to deliver services to children and families are still alien. Nevertheless, many of the lapses identified in the evaluation – absenteeism and non-participation at case meetings, withholding information on cases, reluctance to get involved in actions, failure to adequately follow up on actions, failure to keep proper records of meetings – are simply unprofessional practices in any organisation.

Third, agencies do not seem to include inter-agency work in assessing their overall performance, or the performance of individual staff\textsuperscript{27}. To some extent, this is an extension of the previous point. In setting up the Network, it was decided that its core needed to be built around middle and senior managers since, in line with previous studies\textsuperscript{28}, this would ensure participation by the entire agency and not just its frontline staff. This presumption is challenged by the evaluation since some managers do not properly oversee the inter-agency work of their frontline staff – even in agencies where working in partnership with other agencies is part of the corporate vision and plan – nor do they respond to the moral authority of other agency managers in the Network. Again, this draws attention to how outcomes of the Network are more influenced by processes within individual agencies rather than by the inter-agency process itself. To some extent, this is a local issue that needs to be solved locally. However it also has a broader dimension because it draws attention to the gap between government policy statements on inter-agency working and the absence of policy instruments to implement them locally. For years, agencies have been exhorted and encouraged by national policy statements to work together – particularly those agencies which are funded to provide services for children and families – but without incentives or sanctions to ensure that this happens. For example, agency funding is not

\textsuperscript{27} WRC Main Report, 2010:58; 61; 63.
\textsuperscript{28} Thistlewaite, 2004; Children’s Acts Advisory Board, 2009.
contingent on the extent or quality of inter-agency working and, in such an environment, as the evaluation reveals, inter-agency working is an optional extra. In light of that, the Network's achievements could be construed as quite remarkable and against the grain of this broader policy environment.

Fourth, most agencies in the Network do not seem to have adopted an outcome-oriented, evidence-based approach to their work. Such an approach is stated government policy for all children's services, and there is wide consensus across the OECD and the EU that this is the direction in which services need to develop. Naturally, a focus on outcomes does not automatically produce better outcomes but it may at least encourage agencies to discontinue services when there is no evidence of positive outcomes. Conversely, it is a reasonable assumption that an agency is more likely to produce positive outcomes if it actively seeks them, and uses the best available knowledge to improve the chances of success. The experience of the Network is that most agencies still tend to see their work in terms of delivering services rather than delivering outcomes. Similarly, in a therapeutic context, a focus on outcomes continuously draws attention to the question of whether the person in receipt of a service is improving or disimproving, and invites that service to adapt accordingly.

**Network outcomes are influenced more by intra-agency than inter-agency processes**

These evaluation findings point to a simple but important conclusion namely, that the Network's relatively poor outcomes are due mainly to intra-agency problems, not inter-agency problems. More specifically, evidence in the evaluation suggests that the limits to inter-agency effectiveness may be set by the

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29 WRC Main Report, 2010:93-64.
31 OECD, 2008.
poorest performing agencies, particularly where those agencies have a significant role to play in services for young people. This conclusion means that the findings of the evaluation may have more significant implications for each individual agency than for the Network.

Naturally, this conclusion does not imply that the performance of every agency in the Network is poor or the same. Nor does it imply that agencies in Ballymun are less effective than agencies elsewhere, or that management and staff are not highly committed to giving the best possible service under the circumstances. However it does imply that the case for continuing to deliver the same services in the same way, irrespective of outcomes, cannot be justified on any reasonable grounds. In addition, the fact that children and families in Ballymun, as elsewhere, have no choice about the services they receive – since each agency is an effective monopoly for its category of service – adds to the moral obligation on agencies to demonstrate that their service is the most effective possible in the circumstances.

This conclusion draws attention to a diagnostic error that is commonly made in discussions about inter-agency services. The error is that problems with services are often misdiagnosed as flaws in the inter-agency process when in fact they may be problems of individual agency performance and management, and the broader policy environment which lacks instruments to promote quality standards for intra-agency and inter-agency working.\(^{33}\)

\(^{33}\) The observations of the former Director General in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs are particularly apposite in this context: ‘The Irish Public Service has been relatively strong historically in the area of policy formulation. I have come to the conclusion, however, that we are relatively weak when it comes to implementation and many good policies fail due to a lack of appropriate structures and processes to ensure their successful implementation from policy objectives to tangible outcomes’ (Langford, 2007:250). However the results of this evaluation do not support the assumption in that paper – and which underpins the setting up of Children’s Services Committees – that inter-agency cooperation necessarily [cont.]
This conclusion can be expressed more formally, in terms of the necessary and sufficient conditions for inter-agency working. The necessary condition is an effective and inclusive inter-agency process. The sufficient condition is that each agency also has an effective intra-agency process to deliver high quality services and there is a policy environment which supports and requires it. The findings of the evaluation suggest that the Network has met the necessary conditions for effective inter-agency working but the sufficient conditions have not been met. This is because the best inter-agency process in the world cannot compensate for the shortcomings of individual agencies or the weaknesses in how funders manage the performance of those agencies.

This conclusion is reinforced by the findings of a recent report from the Children’s Acts Advisory Board. The report, based on an extensive review of national and international research on inter-agency working – including a case study of Ballymun Network – concluded that there are ‘15 features associated with good practice in inter-agency cooperation’. The Network, as evidenced by this evaluation, performs well on almost all of these fifteen good practice standards, even though its outcomes are relatively poor and disappointing. This implies that these fifteen elements of good practice are just the necessary conditions for inter-agency effectiveness; they do not include the sufficient conditions which also require intra-agency effectiveness, and a broader policy environment which supports it. In that sense, it is misleading, and potentially dangerous, to highlight only the necessary conditions for inter-agency effectiveness because this can distract attention from the equally important sufficient conditions for inter-agency effectiveness.

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33 (contd.) leads to better outcomes (Ibid:251; 253). As if to compound this, the findings of a review of the initial phase of the Children’s Services Committees in Ireland observed that: ‘There is general consensus that the concept of outcomes and outcomes-focused practice is not well understood amongst individual agencies, and there remains a lack of clarity about their origins’ (Burke, Owens and Ghate, 2010:25).

conditions which rest with the performance of each individual agency and with the overall system by which funders manage those agencies.

A further implication of this analysis is that the promotion of inter-agency coordination of services for children and families may actually serve to mask, however unintended or unwittingly, more fundamental problems in the performance and management of individual agencies, including gaps in the broader national policy environment such as the absence of a standards-based system for licensing and commissioning agencies to deliver services. Indeed, if there is a weakness in this otherwise excellent evaluation, it is in the failure to challenge the tendency of agencies to frame and project their issues as ‘inter-agency difficulties’ (to be solved by information-sharing, procedures, protocols, training, building capacity etc) when they are in fact ‘intra-agency difficulties’ of performance and management, or indeed wider difficulties in the way funders manage the performance of agencies. Given that the Network cannot change these underlying realities – except perhaps by highlighting them and advocating for appropriate changes – this needs to be taken into account in assessing the true potential of inter-agency processes to produce better outcomes. In summary, a good inter-agency process can help to correct relationship difficulties between agencies – and may even magnify the performance of well-functioning agencies – but it cannot correct the performance of poorly-functioning agencies, or the weaknesses in national policy management.

Concluding Comments

This paper offers some lessons about inter-agency working with children and families, using the local example of Ballymun Network. Given the national consensus on the importance of inter-agency working, and a similar consensus that practice often falls short of the ideal, these lessons may have more general relevance, particularly in the context of the new inter-agency structures – Children’s Services Committees – which are being
planned for each of the thirty-four City and/or County Development Boards throughout the country.

The lessons of Ballymun Network, based on five years experience, have been crystallised in a recent evaluation whose key finding is that the Network is a good inter-agency process but has produced relatively modest outcomes. As a process Ballymun has developed robust systems for inter-agency case management, jointly delivered programmes to families, organised a range of training initiatives for front-line staff, and facilitated the emergence of informal sub-networks of agencies in the areas of education, employment and youth justice. Overall, Ballymun is seen by many who work there as a place where inter-agency work has become easier due to these structures and to the good inter-personal relationships that have been built up through the Network.

Despite the quality of these processes, the evaluation found that the outcomes of Ballymun Network are generally disappointing. For example, it found that the number of young people who have been helped by the Network has been relatively few, and only a minority of these showed significant improvements. In addition, it found that agencies have not substantially reconfigured their services in light of the Network. Further inquiry suggests that four sets of reasons contributed to these relatively poor outcomes. First, the target group of the Network – which is 10-18 year olds who have experienced neglect and abuse over many years – is acknowledged to be a particularly difficult group to work with because they may refuse to engage with services even when faced with the risk of entering the criminal justice system. Second, the standard of work by some staff in some agencies is poor – such as absenteeism and non-participation at case meetings, withholding information on cases, reluctance to get involved in actions, failure to adequately follow up on actions, failure to keep proper records of meetings. Third, the management of agencies do not seem to include inter-agency work in assessing staff or agency performance, even where this is stated to be part of their ethos and corporate plan.
Fourth, most agencies in the Network tend see their work in terms of delivering services rather than delivering outcomes and the extent to which interventions are evidence-based is unclear.

These findings point to a simple but important conclusion namely, that the relatively poor outcomes of Ballymun Network are due mainly to intra-agency rather than inter-agency problems. Naturally, this conclusion does not imply that the performance of every agency in the Network is poor or the same. Nor does it imply that agencies in Ballymun are less effective than agencies elsewhere, or that management and staff are not highly committed to giving the best possible service under the circumstances. However it does imply that the case for continuing to deliver the same services in the same way, irrespective of outcomes, cannot be justified on any reasonable grounds. In addition, the fact that children and families in Ballymun, as elsewhere, have no choice about the services they receive – since each agency is an effective monopoly for its category of service – adds to the obligation on agencies to demonstrate that their service is the most effective possible in the circumstances. An important implication of this analysis is that the Network – and inter-agency approaches generally, including the proposed Children's Services Committees – may actually serve to mask, however unintended or unwittingly, more fundamental problems in the performance and management of individual agencies.

Equally, and taking a more strategic perspective on state funding for vulnerable children and families, the findings also draw attention to the limits of ‘late intervention’, where ‘late’ is understood as late in the life of the problem not the life of the young person – and the correspondingly high and unavoidable costs of not investing in prevention and early intervention. The overall return from the investment by agencies – including the inter-agency process – in the specific cases examined in this evaluation is not high, and there is considerable international evidence that investing earlier could produce a much higher rate
of return. It is true that, irrespective of the rate of return, this investment is necessary to keep young people safe – or at least safer – but the question which continues to pose itself is whether services for children and families in Ireland have struck the right balance between prevention, early intervention, and late intervention.

It may be challenging for agencies who participated in Ballymun Network to accept this analysis, though not as challenging as ignoring or denying it. The challenge of accepting it arises from the risk that it may overshadow the fact that the Network has been a successful inter-agency process, is likely to remain so, and is rightly seen by many as an exemplar of how to do inter-agency work. Also, there is a danger that this analysis may be interpreted in solely personal terms to the exclusion of broader system-level issues associated with the way services are organised and delivered. It is true that all services have an inherently personal dimension – especially the services provided by agencies in the Network – and the issue of personal responsibility by staff in agencies is unavoidable. But the problems associated with services in Ballymun – as elsewhere – are also a reflection of system failings in the way services are managed and delivered, including weaknesses in how national policy is implemented. As such, this is simultaneously a national issue, a local issue, and a personal issue and, at each of these levels, the report is an invitation to reflect on its findings, and to respond in a way that will eventually produce better outcomes for children and families in Ballymun.

Finally, on a more reflective note, it is easy when deliberating on the merits of inter-agency structures and processes to lose sight of what might be termed ‘the common ground’, and even the common sense, of what is involved in the simple act of helping someone. All the inter-agency policies, procedures and protocols mean nothing if the professional helper cannot form a relationship with the young person that is accepting, empathic, and capable of generating creative solutions to their difficulties. There is nothing more personal than helping someone, and it is
something that comes naturally to everyone because people help, and are helped, all the time through family, friends, and communities. Everyone is a natural helper and professional help is only needed when all other sources have been exhausted. No one – young or old, vulnerable or otherwise – particularly wants a relationship with a professional helper, especially if their life experience is marked by broken or insecure attachments. Yet there is a danger that professionals – possibly due to the imperatives of working in a large organisation, possibly because they are trained to under-identify with themselves as persons so that they do not over-identify with the person they are helping – may not form the type of therapeutic relationships with young people that have the necessary ingredients for helping.

Naturally, the extent to which this happens in practice will vary. But it is striking that many of our deliberations in Ballymun Network, despite the often-repeated aspiration to keep focused on the young person, have often been absorbed by discussions about the fears and anxieties of professionals and agencies over procedural issues such as confidentiality, protocols, roles, competencies, boundaries, and training which, at best, are tangential to the helping relationship. This is not to deny the genuineness of these fears and anxieties but it also needs to be acknowledged that they may be symptomatic of a reduced capacity to provide help – and form effective therapeutic relationships with young people – that professionals and agencies are paid to do. The experience of the Network suggests that tackling these symptoms will require a more radically reflective intra-agency process, and even an intra-personal process – and not just deliberations about inter-agency policies, procedures and practices. It also needs to be combined with a stronger policy framework designed to ensure better outcomes for young people through standards-based systems for licensing and commissioning agencies to deliver services. In essence, this draws attention to the need for a process of simplification, and a rediscovery of the simple art of helping someone, and of being present and personal to the other in the only way that anyone – professional or otherwise – can be.
Bibliography


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