4 Partnership and Conflict

Qualitative dimensions of the partnership experience were crucial to projects’ success. These included perceptions of the significance of the enterprise and the quality of relationships between probation staff and substance misuse workers.

Successful and problematic partnerships

Projects were assessed for their degree of success or difficulty at the time of contact. While this might appear a harsh judgement, given the youth of some of the projects, the data yielded no basis for making confident predictions about future improvement or deterioration. Moreover, projects which were successful at the time of interview had been so since their inception, for reasons which will be examined. An initial categorisation was made on the basis of the relative weight of favourable or unfavourable comments concerning inter-agency communication, relationships between agency personnel, the level of referrals to the project and the quality of the intervention. Projects were then further examined for features which might account for their relative success or degree of difficulty.

Of the 25 projects visited, 13 were categorised as successful, and 11 were particularly problematic. In respect of one, identified during interviews regarding another arrangement, there was insufficient data to make a justifiable assessment. Examples of problem-free partnerships were rare. Equally, some projects which experienced acute problems displayed positive qualities. All six partnerships at which there were difficulties in defining the partnership service were problematic. Departure from agency tradition in the partnership service, however, was not uniformly linked to lack of success. Nor, notably, was the fact of funding: of the three non-financial partnerships, two were problematic.
Scrutiny of the 24 assessable partnerships revealed two features which reliably distinguished successful from problematic projects: championship; and enhancement.

**Championship**

At 10 of the 13 successful partnerships, an individual within the probation service clearly took a pro-active role in developing the project, promoting it among colleagues, liaising with the substance misuse agency and assisting its workers to establish their presence and acquire knowledge to raise their effectiveness.

The way it has been publicised up to now is by me attending seniors’ meetings, and seniors going back to their teams to talk about it…[The substance misuse workers] have had an induction programme which has involved them coming to teams, getting themselves known within teams. They’ve had a formal session from me about pre-sentence reports and the Criminal Justice Act, to get them into the new thinking in probation… I’ve spent time with [them] going through the plan they prepared, to look at how that should be framed and structured. (senior probation officer)

These project champions, spurred by personal interest or professional duty, invested considerable time and energy in the role. Two senior probation officers remarked:

I would estimate that this project takes up half my time. Now, I haven’t got half a job normally. I manage a very busy team… This role has taken up a lot more time, effort and energy than I would have anticipated when I took on this responsibility. I keep saying that it will get less as it goes on… But of course, it won’t. Because the strategy has got to continue.

The amount of work involved in maintaining good partnerships is often enormous. That goes for not only hours involved in committee meetings and liaison, negotiation, monitoring, research and preparation. The number of issues to be dealt with are never ending. Voluntary agencies go through difficult times. Problems can be hard to work with.

All project champions realised that their role was not temporary: “You constantly have to work at things. You can’t just set something up and leave it and let things evolve.”