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Inter-agency cooperation between services for children and families in Ireland: does it improve outcomes?

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to analyse the processes and outcomes of a five-year initiative to develop inter-agency working between services for vulnerable 10- to 18-year-olds in a disadvantaged area of Dublin, Ireland.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A case study methodology included: review of documentation on 32 formal meetings of the network; 43 interviews with agency personnel involved in the network; in-depth review of nine randomly selected cases which had been treated according to the network's agreed protocol of inter-agency case management.*

Findings – *The initiative created a vibrant inter-agency process in terms of developing and implementing an agreed protocol for inter-agency care planning. However, assessment of the outcomes for young people and their families showed that only a few made any improvement. Four reasons are suggested for this relatively modest result: the target group of 10- to 18-year-olds had experienced neglect and abuse over many years and this made it difficult to achieve positive outcomes for them; the quality and standard of work by some staff in some agencies was questionable; agencies did not seem to include inter-agency work in assessing their overall performance, or the performance of individual staff; and most agencies did not seem to have adopted an outcome-oriented, evidence-based approach to their work.*

Originality/value – *The paper points out that an effective and inclusive inter-agency process is necessary but not enough for improving child outcomes; the sufficient condition for improved child outcomes is effective intra-agency processes to deliver high-quality services and a policy environment that supports and requires it.*

Keywords *Inter-agency working, Young people, Process, Outcome, Ireland, Youth, Government agencies*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

There is a general consensus in public policy that inter-agency working between services for children and families creates more efficient and user-friendly services, and results in better outcomes. This policy manifests in a variety of forms due to the diverse understandings of inter-agency working (as cooperation, collaboration, coordination or integration) and the different contexts in which it is applied (to different target groups, different categories of agency or staff). Despite the consensus, it is not easy to evaluate this policy due in part to the difficulty of separating inter-agency working from other influences on outcomes but also due to the wide range of factors that may mediate this influence, and the often considerable time-lag between increased inter-agency working and improved outcomes. As a result, it is relatively difficult to find well-designed studies that show how and to what extent inter-agency working improves outcomes for children and families, although there are some exceptions (Crow *et al.*, 2004; National Quality Improvement Center, 2009). At the same time, it is less difficult to find evidence showing how the absence of inter-agency working contributes to system failures in protecting children from neglect, abuse or even death (Inquiry Team to the Roscommon Child Care Case, 2010; Lord Laming, 2003).

The public policy consensus on inter-agency working in Ireland is underlined in a number of documents such as *Children First: The National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Health and Children, 1999), *National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000), National Social Partnership Agreement (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006), National Development Plan (National Development Plan 2007-2013, 2007), *Agenda for Children's Services* (Department of Health and Children, 2007), and Implementation Plan for the "Ryan Report" (Department of Health and Children, 2009). Ironically, and despite more than a decade of repeated affirmations of this policy, there is just as much consensus that inter-agency collaboration in delivering services to children and families is still poorly developed. A recent review of compliance with Children First concluded that inter-agency collaboration "is not working effectively" (Department of Health and Children, 2008, p. 18) and "sharing of information is not happening in the way it was envisaged" (Department of Health and Children, 2008, p. 6). In response to this, government policy is creating new inter-agency structures through Children's Services Committees in each of the 34 City and/or County Development Boards throughout the country, and four of these have already been set-up on a pilot basis in Dublin City Council, South Dublin County Council, Limerick City Council, and Donegal County Council (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006, p. 48).

This paper is based on a case study of a five-year initiative to develop inter-agency working between services for vulnerable 10- to 18-year-olds in the Ballymun area of Dublin. The initiative is called Ballymun Network for Assisting Children and Young People – shortened to Ballymun Network – and the author was instrumental in setting up and facilitating the initiative for five years. The paper draws on this experience and the results of an independent qualitative evaluation (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010) in order to clarify some lessons about inter-agency working and the factors that facilitate or hinder its effectiveness. Despite its local orientation, the paper has wider implications since the issues raised mirror the broader context of policy and practice about services for children and families in Ireland, and possibly elsewhere.

Context

Ballymun is a community of around 15,000 people on the northern outskirts of Dublin and, by all available indicators of deprivation, is one of the most disadvantaged areas of the country. Until recently it was strongly identified with high-rise flat complexes but most of these have been replaced by nearly 10,000 new low-rise housing units through a regeneration programme costing nearly €1 billion (Controller and Auditor General, 2007). Ballymun is also the target of substantial social investment to implement an integrated programme of services for children and families through joint funding of a new agency, youngballymun (www.youngballymun.org), by the Office of the Minister for Children and Atlantic Philanthropies.

Ballymun Network began in 2005 at the instigation of Ballymun Local Drugs Task Force and 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 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 with 10- to 18-year-olds who had been experiencing neglect and/or abuse over many years. Managers from 11 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). At the start of January 2010, the Network comprised the following 17 agencies:

- Dublin City Council.
- HSE Social Work Department.
- HSE Geraldstown House.
- Mater Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.
- HSE Psychology Services.
- An Garda Síochána.

- Probation Service.
- Trinity Comprehensive School.
- Ballymun Primary Principals Network.
- National Educational Welfare Board.
- Aisling Project.
- Ballymun Educational Support Team.
- Youthreach.
- Ballymun Regional Youth Resource.
- Ballymun Youth Action Project.
- Ballymun Job Centre.
- youngballymun.

Methodology

Following a process of competitive tendering, WRC Social and Economic Consultants (2010) were commissioned to evaluate the Network. A case study methodology was adopted with a focus on assessing the effectiveness of inter-agency working and the benefits for young people and their families. The methodology included a review of documentation on 32 formal meetings of the Network between April 2005 and May 2009; 43 interviews comprising an interview with each of the agency managers represented on the Network and 1-2 of their frontline staff; and an in-depth review of nine randomly selected cases – from a total of 89 – who had been treated according to the Network’s agreed protocol of inter-agency case management. The review of these nine cases entailed examination of files on all inter-agency meetings; interviews with the young person and family as well as with the lead agency and other agencies involved.

Outcomes of Ballymun Network

In the five years since its establishment in April 2005, agencies involved in the Network – both managers and their frontline staff – have found it a positive and enriching experience, and most remark that it is now easier to do inter-agency work in the area because of the good inter-personal relationships that have been built up through the Network. Over the five years, new agencies have joined the Network, more would like to join, and only one agency left. A protocol for inter-agency case management was developed and implemented and this protocol, in turn, has been adopted by a number of other inter-agency projects throughout the country. The essence of the protocol is that agencies commit to work collaboratively with the young person and with each other in order to draw up, implement and monitor a care plan to improve outcomes for the young person.

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 – www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org), and has organised inter-agency training for frontline staff on therapeutic techniques (notably Marte Meo – www.martemeo.com; Time to Grow – www.ctcassociates.co.uk) as well as training on some of the legal aspects of care (notably the Freedom of Information Acts and the Data Protection Acts). Over and above these specific activities, the Network has created more informal sub-networks of agencies in the areas of education (resulting in the Community School Attendance Initiative) and youth justice/youth employment (resulting in Ballyrunners, an EQUAL Youth Initiative).

In its assessment of this inter-agency process, the evaluation report judged it to be a considerable achievement (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 20):

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.

This achievement has also been acknowledged in a separate case study of the Network (Rafferty and Colgan, 2009).

Despite the positive inter-agency process that has been created by the Network – which might be regarded as the “intermediate outcome” – evidence from the evaluation suggests that final outcomes for young people and their families are generally less positive. This is illustrated by two key findings:

1. agencies have not substantially reconfigured their services in light of the Network; and
2. the number of young people who have been helped by the Network has been relatively few.

As regards the reconfiguration of services, the evaluation found some evidence (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 83):

[...]of agencies seeking to adapt their provisions in order to reinforce each other's work, for example by one agency linking its personal supports for a young person to their participation on another agency's training programme [...] However, it also appears that there is a lot of room to expand this type of approach as the practice of doing no more than offering the young person the existing services of the agency is still quite common, even when those services are declined by the young person.

A total of 87 young people were helped by the Network in a four-year period (2006-2009). This is a small number relative to the throughput of young people in the participating agencies and relative to the acknowledged scale of need that prompted the Network to come into existence. In light of this, the evaluation suggests that “a number of participating agencies either do not consider the Network to be relevant to their client group or that they experience other significant barriers to referral” (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 9). Of the young people who participated in the Network, an in-depth review of nine of these indicated that only three showed any improvement.

At face-value, these findings seem to challenge a core assumption on which Ballymun Network, and similar inter-agency initiatives, are founded: that a good inter-agency process will lead to a more user-friendly configuration of services and better outcomes for young people and their families. This finding is 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 that does not have inter-agency processes. Equally, it must be acknowledged that most agencies and their funders – in Ballymun as elsewhere in the country – do not assess the outcomes of their services. 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 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 these relatively poor outcomes.

Explaining the findings

It is possible to identify four sets of reasons why the outcomes of Ballymun Network are relatively poor, based on evidence of this evaluation. First, the target group of the Network – which is 10- to 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 to engage with any services and some are already in the criminal justice system. According to the evaluation:

Working with these young people proved challenging for frontline workers and positive outcomes were difficult to identify [...] The term intractable was frequently used to describe these cases. This led to a concern among Network members with expending resources on cases where at best minimum outcomes could be achieved (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 71).

So this 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 helping relationship, this finding invites the Network – and each of its participating agencies – to examine why it appears so difficult to form relationships with vulnerable young people and why so little improvement seems possible, a question to which we return in the concluding comments. The broader significance of this question lies in the high and unavoidable costs to the state of not investing in early 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 effective early investment or later and less effective investment.

Second, the evaluation found that the quality and standard of work by some staff in some agencies was questionable. The evaluation reviewed the files of nine randomly selected Network cases and found that (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 79):

[...]the files from the case studies show that absenteeism from meetings is commonplace and that few meetings achieve full participation from all invited agencies. The practice of sending a briefed alternate also appears to be somewhat sporadic at best.

Other evidence from the in-depth review of cases suggests that “Certain agencies or individuals do not participate fully in NCMs [Network Case Meetings] as evidenced by withholding information, a reluctance to get involved in actions, failure to adequately follow up on actions, and so on” (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 83). Elsewhere, the evaluation observed that (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 55):

The failure to provide proper records of the meeting and to circulate these to the appropriate agencies in a timely manner was frequently noted. This is also evident from the case files where minutes are frequently missing, or poorly recorded. Additionally, minutes are not always provided to the Network Coordinator.

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. The reasons for this – which could include lack of leadership and management skills, reluctance to engage in critical self-appraisal of practices, resistance to feedback, 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 of individual agencies.

It is true that most services for children and families in Ireland are not regulated by externally validated quality assurance procedures, that state funding is not contingent on delivering to a minimally acceptable standard, and that the concepts of licensing and commissioning agencies to deliver services to children and families are not part of public policy. 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 – could be regarded as unprofessional practices in any organisation.

Third, agencies in Ballymun Network do not seem to include inter-agency work in assessing their overall performance, or the performance of individual staff. A frequent refrain in the evaluation is the absence of managerial oversight by individual agencies over the quality or quantity of their inter-agency work (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, p. 83):

Currently, there is no effective mechanism which allows frontline personnel, or the Steering Group, to resolve issues relating to the quality of participation and care planning on the part of agencies in the CMS [Case Management System] process. In relation to one of the case studies, a number of agencies had tried to register concerns about the participation of others, but these efforts were unsuccessful. At Steering Group level, this can lead to frustration [...] at the [Network Case Meeting] level, it can lead to sub-optimal care and sub-optimal outcomes for young people.

The evaluators ask the question “does accountability lie with the lead agency, with the Network, or is there a possibility that accountability could be dissipated within the inter-agency approach?” (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, pp. 63, 58 and 61). This is clearly a rhetorical question since the performance of agency staff is the responsibility of each agency, and these observations raise more general questions about the quality of management in those agencies, including the absence of a quality assurance framework.

To some extent, this is an extension of the previous point. In setting up the Network, it was decided that its core group needed to be built around middle and senior managers since, in line with previous studies (Thistlethwaite, 2004; Children’s Acts Advisory Board, 2009), 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 its corporate vision and plan – nor do they respond to the moral authority of other agency managers in the Network. This seems to suggest that outcomes of the Network are more influenced by processes within individual agencies rather than by the inter-agency process itself. This, in turn, reflects a wider issue, 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 agencies funded to provide services for children and families – but without incentives or sanctions to ensure that this happens. For example, agency funding is not contingent on the extent or quality of inter-agency working and in such an environment, as the evaluation revealed, 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 (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2010, pp. 93-64). Such an approach is stated in government policy for all children’s services (Department of Health and Children, 2000, 2007), and there is wide consensus across the OECD (2008) and the EU (Callanan, 2009, p. 161) 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. In comparison, 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, staying the same or deteriorating, and that invites the agency and the professional to adapt accordingly.

Implications of the findings

These 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, the evaluation suggests that the limits to inter-agency effectiveness may be set by the poorest performing agencies, particularly where those agencies have a significant role to play in services for young people. This conclusion means that the findings 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, in effect, a monopoly for its category of service – adds to the moral obligation on agencies to demonstrate that their service is as effective as possible in the circumstances.

This draws attention to a diagnostic error that is commonly made in discussions about inter-agency working. 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 as well as inter-agency working. The observations of the former Director General in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs seem apposite in this context (Langford, 2007, p. 250):

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.

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 that 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 short-comings of individual agencies or the weaknesses in how funders manage the performance of those agencies.

This conclusion is reinforced by the findings of a report (Children's Acts Advisory Board, 2009, p. iv) based on an extensive review of national and international research on inter-agency working – including a case study of Ballymun Network (Rafferty and Colgan, 2009) –, which identified “15 features associated with good practice in inter-agency cooperation”. These features are:

1. Have a justifiable rationale.
2. Ensure effective leadership.
3. Develop a shared purpose.
4. Clarify roles and responsibilities for inter-agency working.
5. Discuss and allay workers' fears and concerns.
6. Secure commitment from staff at all levels; strategic, operational and service delivery.
7. Build trust and mutual respect in inter-agency groups/workers.
8. Foster understanding between agencies.
9. Create an inter-agency culture and remove cultural barriers.
10. Ensure effective communication and information exchange.
11. Plan and organise effectively.
12. Achieve effective representation and participation in inter-agency working groups/teams.
13. Invest adequate time, staff and money.
14. Have appropriate corporate governance systems.
15. Monitor, evaluate and renew.

The Network, as evidenced by this evaluation, performs well on almost all of these 15 good practice standards, even though its outcomes are still relatively poor. This implies that these 15 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 that 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.

A further implication of this analysis merits attention: 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 environment of policy, management and regulation. It is not uncommon for government departments and their agencies to frame issues as “inter-agency difficulties” – to be solved by information-sharing, procedures, protocols, training, building capacity, and so on – when they are in fact “intra-agency difficulties” of performance and management, or wider difficulties in the way funders manage the performance of agencies. Given that Ballymun Network as an inter-agency process 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 working 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 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 in Ireland for each of the 34 City and/or County Development Boards throughout the country.

The key lesson of Ballymun Network, based on five years’ experience of facilitated inter-agency working, is that a good inter-agency process does not necessarily produce significantly improved child outcomes. As a process, Ballymun Network developed robust systems for inter-agency case management and jointly delivered programmes to families. Yet, despite the quality of these processes, the evaluation found that few young people experienced any improvement in their lives.

These findings are a challenge to the public policy consensus on inter-agency working. They highlight how inter-agency working is unlikely to produce improved outcomes unless accompanied by effective intra-agency processes and an equally effective national environment of policy, management and regulation. An important implication of this analysis is that the “paradigm” of inter-agency working – as reflected in Ballymun Network – may have the unintended consequence of masking more fundamental problems in the performance and management of individual agencies and in national policy implementation.

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 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. 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 the deliberations in Ballymun Network over five years, despite the often-repeated aspiration

to remaining focused on the young person, were absorbed by discussions about the fears and anxieties of professionals and their 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 needs to be acknowledged that they may be symptomatic of a reduced capacity to provide help and form the effective therapeutic relationships with young people that professionals and agencies are paid to do. The experience of Ballymun Network suggests that tackling these symptoms will require a more radically reflective intra-agency process, and even an intra-personal process – not just deliberations about inter-agency policies, procedures and practices. This 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.

Summary of policy and practice implications

- A good inter-agency process alone does not necessarily produce improved outcomes for young people and their families, since outcomes also depend on the characteristics of the target group, the quality of intra-agency processes and the system by which funders manage agencies.
- A focus on inter-agency working that does not take account of other influences on outcomes may have the unintended consequence of masking more fundamental problems in the performance and management of individual agencies and in national policy implementation.
- Improving outcomes for young people depends on the capacity of professionals to be effective helpers, which requires a radically reflective intra-agency process and even intra-personal process, and not just deliberations about inter-agency policies, procedures and practices.

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