

## Office of Chief Researcher

# Joined up working in the Scottish Executive

Vikki Milne, Office of the Chief Researcher

Joined up working in the Scottish Executive has become an increasingly important aspect of policy making. However previous work has highlighted difficulties in achieving a joined up approach. This study focused on six Scottish Executive policy teams whose work required them to join up with others in order to achieve their objectives. The teams were selected for their success in joining up, and the study aimed to identify the factors that had contributed to their success in this challenging area. The study was commissioned by the Delivering Professional Policy Steering Group, and was carried out between August 2004 and March 2005.

## Main Findings

- Policy teams faced common challenges when attempting to become more joined up. These challenges fell into three areas:
  1. The need to overcome *structural challenges*.
  2. The need to build *effective working relationships* with other teams.
  3. The need to develop *shared policy objectives*.
- These challenges were not seen in isolation; rather factors in one area were seen as having the potential to affect the other two.
- The focus of a policy initiative, and the extent to which it is joined up, can be influenced by where it is placed within the organisation, and the formation, size & make up of the team.
- Key factors in overcoming structural challenges were the use of secondees and the management of staff change, size of budget and sharing of resources, and available time.
- Teams noted the importance of making *and* maintaining relationships across the Scottish Executive in joining up effectively.
- A positive, proactive approach assisted teams to make connections & overcome obstacles.
- Importance was placed on building relationships through effective use of communication links and building trust and confidence with others.
- Senior management and Ministerial support were crucial to securing shared ownership of policy objectives.
- Potential conflict over competing agendas was addressed through developing shared vision and emphasising the mutual benefit of joined up working.
- Developing a shared understanding of policy objectives was achieved through taking time to understand different perspectives, use of common language and clarity of aims.
- Joining up was a central part of policy making for each of the initiatives, with teams emphasising the need to join up in order to achieve their policy objectives.

## Background

Joined up working is a key characteristic of good policy making. It is essential in order to achieve joined up policy outcomes for service users. The Scottish Executive, along with other public bodies, has not always been successful in joining up, and this is a key weakness identified by Scottish Executive stakeholders<sup>1</sup>. Previous research has documented the difficulties which Scottish Executive staff face in joining up and the barriers they encounter<sup>2</sup>.

## Study aim

This study sought to build on previous work by concentrating on good practice with a view to identifying factors which had enabled successful joining up. Specifically the study aimed to:

- Identify the extent to which selected projects had been successful in implementing a joined up approach.
- Identify factors which enabled joining up to occur; in particular how projects were initiated, setup and implemented.
- Identify how projects dealt with those barriers to joining up which they encountered.
- Disseminate the findings from the study across different networks within the Scottish Executive.

## Defining joining up

There is some debate about the meaning of joining up and the relationship between joining up and cross-cutting. Although many people use the terms interchangeably (including participants in this study), the following definitions have been adopted for this report (except when quoting or citing directly from participants):

*Joined up:* A way of working in which policy makers make links for the purposes of contributing to a particular policy outcome which involves more than one policy issue.

*Cross cutting:* An issue which cuts across departmental boundaries and which is fundamental to all policy issues, such as equal opportunity or sustainable development.

This report is about joined up working which should be a feature of all policy making, rather than just of policy making in respect of cross-cutting issues. While dealing with cross-cutting issues will involve a significant amount of joining up, not all joining up will relate to cross cutting issues.

## Methodology

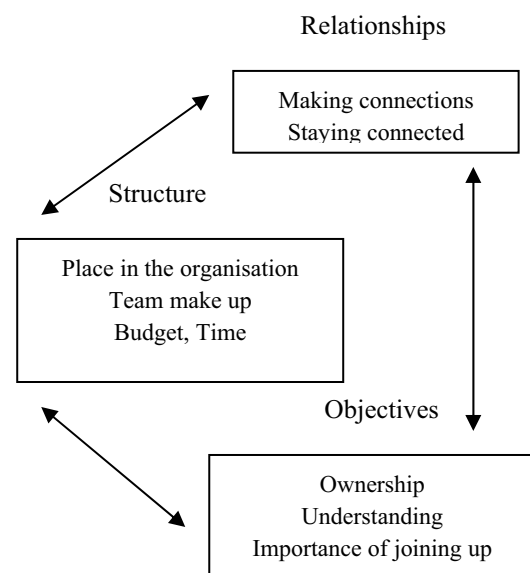
This project used a case study approach, focusing on six policy initiatives in the Scottish Executive which were identified (by members of the research reference group) as having been successful in joining up. The policy initiatives were based in five different departments across the Scottish Executive. Two or three members of each policy team and a small number of policy “contributors” (Scottish Executive colleagues outwith the core team who played a significant part in the policy process) were interviewed for the study as shown below. In all, 24 semi-structured interviews were carried out and the resulting data analysed using a computer package.

## The Challenges

Each policy team had different objectives, and varied in the nature and range of activities undertaken, but they faced common challenges when attempting to join up effectively. These challenges fell into three areas:

1. The need to overcome structural challenges, such as where the team was placed in the organisation, how the team was constructed and the resources at their disposal.
2. The need to work effectively with other teams through making and maintaining relationships.
3. The need to develop shared policy objectives through developing shared ownership and a shared understanding.

Challenges were not seen in isolation; rather factors in one area were seen as having the potential to affect the other two.



## Structural Challenges

Where policy initiatives were placed in the organisation influenced the focus of the work and the skills and

1 Scottish Executive, 2004. Stakeholder Survey.

2 Kenneth Hogg, 2000. Making a difference: Effective implementation of cross-cutting policy.

experience brought by team members. Structural factors which influenced the ability to join up were the size and make up of the team, and the resources available (in particular the staff, budget and time available to achieve the policy objectives). In order to achieve their objectives, for example, some teams were able to share resources such as staff or budgets. The use of secondments and the management of staff movement generally were highlighted by participants as important factors in enabling joined up working. Secondees in particular were noted as being very focused on the task because of their time limited involvement, and as benefiting from not being familiar with, and constrained by, the departmental structure of the Scottish Executive.

## Building relationships

The study indicated that a key factor in successful joined up working was the ability to make *and* maintain relationships.

### Making connections

Teams tended to be proactive in looking for opportunities to engage with others who may, in turn, be able to identify further links with other teams within the organisation. Interviewees commented on the difficulty in making such connections, however, because of the lack of easily accessible information on business across the Scottish Executive, and reported using a range of resources and techniques to make the required connections.

Early involvement of others was seen as important to assist buy-in and ensure the project benefited. The involvement of people at all levels of the organisation, particularly senior civil servants, was also highlighted as important.

Individual team members had a crucial role in making connections, and behaviours such as openness and accessibility as well as effective communication skills were noted as helpful to joining up. However, cultural issues, or team ethos, were also noted as important and in one case a “can do” approach was noted as being very much fostered by the Head of Division.

Face to face communication was seen as very effective in making connections, and a number of the teams held meetings with relevant colleagues across the Executive early in the policy process, although this was often replaced subsequently by other methods of communication.

### Staying connected

Participants also indicated the importance of staying connected, beyond initial contact. Many interviewees highlighted the need to keep people up-to-date with developments, via meetings or networks. Effective communication using different forms (email, written, document development, as well as face to face contact) was seen as essential when building an effective working relationship. Maintaining a profile within the Scottish Executive was also seen as helpful in maintaining contacts,

as was acknowledging the contribution and support of others.

Interviewees also noted that the trust and confidence which comes from good working relationship meant that they were able to be more effective and resolve any difficulties which arose.

## Shared policy objectives

All of the case studies identified the need to work with other teams in order to achieve their policy objectives. Teams worked to encourage shared ownership of the policy initiative and in most cases were supported by high level interest from senior management and Ministers. However, teams also needed to develop an agreed understanding of objectives with others, and were assisted in this by using common language and by being clear about what the initiative was trying to achieve. Teams still had to work within the structural constraints and needed to build relationships with others in order to achieve shared policy ownership.

## The importance of joined up working to good policy making

The findings which have emerged from this study could be viewed as elements of all good policy making rather than being particular to joined up working. However, effective joined up working becomes more crucial when the issues involved are more complex and require contributions from a wide range of interests. With an increasing focus on making a difference in the real world (i.e. being more outcome or delivery focused), many policy teams must now join up with colleagues across the Scottish Executive to ensure their objectives are met. An increasing number of policy makers, in addition to those involved in significant cross cutting policy issues, need to be effective at joined up working.

Particular issues raised by this work are:

**Joining up working as part of everyday policy development.** Rather than focusing on day to day concerns, there is a need for policy makers to focus on the objectives of a policy (i.e. it might be necessary to be “outcome focused”) and direct efforts accordingly. It may be necessary to work with others to achieve those objectives. To enable joined up working to occur, policy makers need to value working with others and have a belief that all those that take part can benefit.

**All levels of the organisation must recognise the value of joining up and actively support policies to achieve this.** In order to be joined up, all levels of the Scottish Executive must work to make the required connections, with Senior Management having a key role to play in recognising potential links and supporting and facilitating others to make these connections.

**The need to overcome structural challenges.** The current departmental structure of the Executive, based around particular topics (e.g. health, justice), and the focus on the day to day processes of policy making rather than on policy outcomes can encourage policy makers to lose sight of the importance of achieving objectives and the need to foster a joined up approach across departmental boundaries.

**Joining up takes time.** Policy makers and senior management need to be realistic about the extent to which joining up can be achieved in the time allocated to a policy initiative. Teams may need to take a longer view of policy outcomes, setting objectives that will contribute over time to greater joined up outcomes.

## Next Steps

The research reference group met at the end of the study to discuss the main findings and to suggest how the joined up agenda maybe taken forward by the Scottish Executive in the light of these findings. Suggestions fell under two broad areas:

### 1. What can policy makers do?

There is a need to encourage policy makers to view joining up as an integral part of all policy making activity (e.g. viewing work in terms of policy outcomes, valuing joining up as a way to achieve their own policy objectives).

### 2. How can the organisation help?

Senior management have a role to play in supporting joined up working by providing clear messages on joining up and supporting individual policy areas to make connections to broader Scottish Executive policy outcomes (with Group Head perhaps having a key role to play). Other organisational elements which could assist joining up are the development of systems which would enable information sharing and the recognition of success in joining up through mechanisms such as the performance appraisal system. The organisation may also be able to learn from the experiences and views of other organisations; through investigating what stakeholders understand by the term “joining up” and whether there is a need to better communicate what the Executive does and how it works.

If you wish further copies of this Research Findings or have any enquiries about social research, please contact us at:

Scottish Executive Social Research  
4th Floor West Rear  
St Andrew's House  
Regent Road  
EDINBURGH  
EH1 3DG  
Tel: 0131 244 7560  
Fax: 0131 244 5393  
Email: [socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)  
Website: [www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch)

ISBN 0-7559-2694-3

