

**Forging stronger partnerships to
address homelessness**

“Let’s make it happen !”

WA SAAP Protocols

**GUIDE TO DEVELOPING
INTERAGENCY PROTOCOLS**

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments.

GUIDE FOR DEVELOPING INTERAGENCY PROTOCOLS

INTRODUCTION

Two of the essential ingredients for any relationship to function well are the commitment of the parties to open and honest communication, and a strong desire to make the relationship work, this requires following through on commitments and addressing any difficulties that arise as early as possible. As professionals in human service systems we know this all too well. It is the same for agencies as it is for people.

At the end of the day, the success of interagency protocols will be largely dependent on a healthy climate of commitment and cooperation existing between agencies. This will require agencies to be willing to make the effort to build and maintain good working relationships. This is the crucial success factor from which the rest of the agreement stems. The development of interagency protocols will assist in clarifying interagency roles and expectations as well as provide a guide for maintaining the relationship.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to be used as a tool to assist your agency to formalise the working relationships which would most benefit your client group. These could include the services your agency uses most frequently or the services with whom the agency staff and/or clients spend a considerable amount of time negotiating. **It is not intended that every conceivable inter-agency interaction requires a documented protocol.**

It is recognised that many SAAP services already have well established protocols in place with other agencies, whilst other SAAP services may have developed good informal relationships and understandings with other agencies but may not have documented them.

These guidelines are not meant to be prescriptive. They have been developed as a guide to assist agencies to develop protocols, and to promote good practice in this area.

Sections of this manual provide space for you to file copies of the protocols that you develop.

Section 3 provides space for filing Multi Agency protocols that have been developed by or on behalf of a number of SAAP services.

WHAT IS A PROTOCOL?

A protocol is a documented relationship between two or more separate agencies detailing agreements that have been reached about how the agencies will work together. Your agency probably has such relationships already in place, these may simply need to be documented.

WHY DO WE WANT PROTOCOLS?

The purpose of a protocol is to clarify the working relationship between the agencies involved and to formalise these understandings in a document which can be used as a guide in maintaining consistency.

Protocols can help ensure that clients are successfully referred to the services they need, and that clients don't fall through the gap.

SAAP services link clients with a variety of other services such as Ministry of Housing, community housing associations, alcohol and other drug services, hospitals, general practitioners, schools, other SAAP services, etc. The success of a SAAP service is heavily dependent on agency staff being able to access those services which best assist the client to meet their needs. This involves:

- knowing what services exist and their objectives, target group, referral processes;
- forming good working relationships with those services.

Having written protocols in place can serve a number of purposes, such as:

- gaining a greater understanding and appreciation of the other agency;
- clarifying roles and boundaries in working with mutual clients;
- maintaining consistency of interagency relationships when there is staff turnover;
- knowing what both agencies have agreed to;
- having a basis to negotiate from when *exceptional* situations arise;
- having an agreed process for resolving differences.

Whilst the process of establishing a written protocol requires a fair amount of commitment and time to organise, the overall outcome will save countless hours of staff negotiations in the future. Therefore, it is an investment that will pay off handsomely.

Having written protocols will also greatly assist new staff familiarise themselves with agency agreements and subsequent procedures and in respect of relating with external parties.

GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The principles and philosophy that define the way your agency works, may not be fully shared by other agencies. It is important in developing protocols to discuss the principles that underpin your service, and reach agreement on common principles that you share.

Good practice principles¹ for the development of protocols include:

1. **ACCESS:** Access and entry procedures should be flexible enough to address the presenting needs of the clients who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This may include clients with multiple support needs.
2. **CHOICE:** Clients have the right to make their own choices in relation to their needs.²
3. **ASSESSMENT AND REVIEW:** Duplication of common components of the assessment process is minimised through the adoption of multi-disciplinary approaches which:
 - acknowledges the impact on clients/carers required to repeat information and/or distressing experiences;
 - respects the professionalism of other workers, both government and non-government, providing support and/or clinical care.
4. **COORDINATION OF SUPPORT AND CARE:** With the informed consent of the client, support and specialised/clinical services are provided in a coordinated manner by a range of service providers in and between different settings.
5. **EXIT PLANNING:** Planning for exit from one or more services occurs in a coordinated and collaborative manner with maximum client input.

Exclusion practices of one agency should be considerate of the potential to place excessive unplanned demands on another agency.

6. **EVALUATION AND REVIEW:** Agencies monitor their performance relating to agreements set out in the protocols. This would include internal monitoring of procedures and practices, client feedback and consultation with the other relevant parties to the protocols. The information gathered should be used to further improve any practices or processes that will enhance the quality of services to clients.

¹ Adapted from the South Australian Department of Human Services - Linkages and Protocols for Homeless People Project 1999 *Multi Agency Good Practice Principles and Guidelines*. A complete copy is included in the Attachments as well as on the resource disc.

² For young people under the age of 18 their parents or guardians will need to be involved.

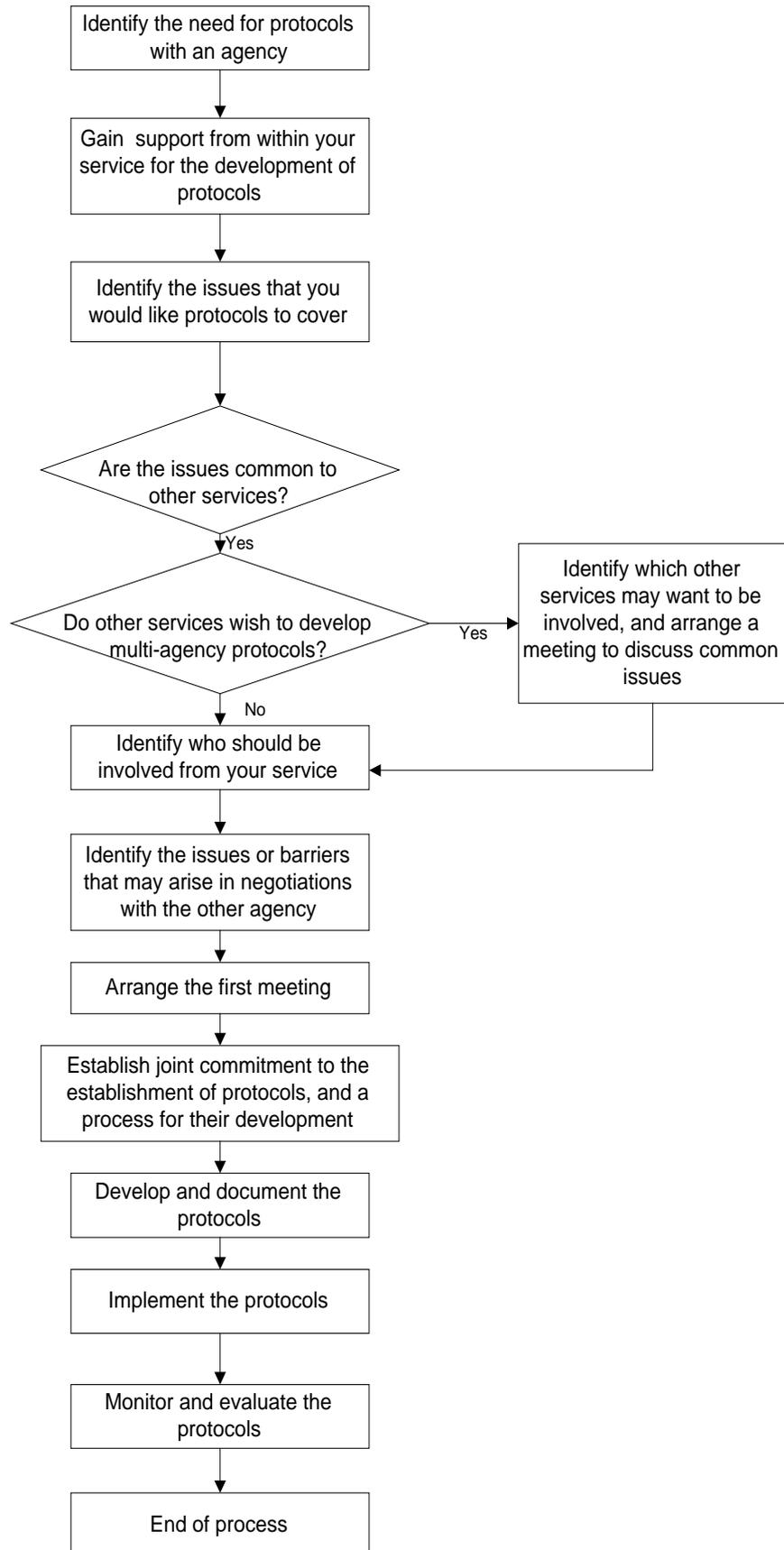
DEVELOPING THE PROTOCOLS

These guidelines describe a step-by-step process for developing interagency protocols. This process includes:

1. Identify the need for establishing protocols.
2. Gaining support from within your agency.
3. Identifying the issues to be covered.
4. Identify who should be involved.
5. Consider the issues or barriers that may arise.
6. Arrange an initial meeting.
7. Establish a joint commitment to developing protocols.
8. Develop and document the agreements.
9. Implement the Protocols.
10. Monitor and evaluate the Protocols.

The flow chart below gives a summary of the process of developing protocols.

Developing Interagency Protocols



1. Identify the need for establishing protocols.

There is no need to establish protocols with every agency you deal with. The need for the establishment of protocols with a particular agency may be indicated if the following issues occur:

- we make or receive a lot of referrals from an agency, and the referral process is over burdensome or time consuming;
- there are recurring issues or tensions that arise in our interactions with an agency;
- we continue to receive inappropriate referrals from an agency, even though we have tried to clarify our target group;
- we are often unsuccessful in our attempts to refer clients to a service even though we believe that they meet the eligibility criteria;
- there is a lot of overlap or duplication with another agency and some potential for collaboration or rationalisation.

Think of your agency's day-to-day practice and list the agencies you most often work with. Then ask yourself "can the working relationship with these agencies be improved upon in any way which will bring about better client outcomes and make my job easier when dealing with them?" Another good starting point is to revisit the minutes of your team or staff meetings over the past six months and identify the issues which have been discussed that involved working with other agencies.

2. Gaining support from within your agency.

Having established the need for protocols with a particular agency, the next step is to gather broad support for this from staff within your service.

As mentioned in the introduction, the process of building improved relationships with other agencies requires the commitment and cooperation of all those who will participate. This includes people within your agency. As with any relationship, where the commitment wanes the relationship will suffer.

Ways to engage the key players within your agency could include:

- explain how the process will assist the agency do its work;
- explain how the process will directly benefit the clients;
- provide maximum opportunities for the key players to contribute;
- reassure the key players that it is an open and collaborative process;
- maintain a positive attitude towards achieving worthwhile protocols, even if previous attempts at similar initiatives have failed;
- keep your goal realistic and achievable, this will assist other people to feel they can commit because it has a high likelihood of coming to fruition;
- have some examples of how the use of interagency protocols have been effective in improving client outcomes or agency efficiencies.

3. Identifying the issues to be covered.

Protocols are not intended to cover every interaction that you have with an agency, only those where there are some issues, or where you feel that there may be mutual benefit in this form of collaboration.

Identifying the issues can be done as a group exercise or by using a pro forma for the key players within your agency to complete.

Some of the issues which are likely to be raised could include:

- client eligibility
- management of waiting lists and potential for prioritising clients with higher needs
- information sharing
- confidentiality
- allocation of resources
- maintaining specific agency responsibilities e.g. justice, medical, guardianship
- determining case management responsibilities for clients with multiple and complex needs

When determining the areas which require attention it would also be useful to list what you would consider to be 'good practice' in responding to each of the points. Remember, it is always helpful when discussing difficulties, gaps or blockages, to focus on strategies to resolve them rather than sticking on the degree of difficulty.

It is important that the information gathered in this exercise is discussed amongst all the key players in your agency to clarify the points raised and identify the priority with which the agency wishes to address the matters.

Now you have a list of identified issues to develop specific protocols around.

The other agency may wish to add some issues of their own that they wish to discuss with you.

4. Identify who should be involved.

The previous sections have helped to:

- establish the environment in your own agency for establishing protocols,
- identify the issues which need to be addressed and who the key stakeholders are in respect of those issues,
- prioritise which issues should be dealt with first in order to maximise client outcomes and improved operation of the agency.

It is important to check whether there are any relevant interdepartmental protocols in existence as these can provide a foundation for building local agreements upon. For example, the interdepartmental protocols included in this WA SAAP Protocols File are intended to create a climate of open communication and cooperation at a cross department level between the Department for Community Development (who administers SAAP in WA) and other significant departments. The interdepartmental protocols are intended to improve communication and cooperation in areas affecting the provision of services to mutual clients accessing or wishing to access SAAP services. The interdepartmental protocols, along with this guide, are intended to make the process of establishing protocols between SAAP services and significant stakeholders considerably easier.

Now we need to consider who are the key players which may need to be involved in establishing a protocol to address the identified issues.

Are these issues likely to be shared by other agencies similar to your agency? If so, would it be useful to consider working together to develop a protocol which could serve the needs of a number of agencies? This may be an excellent opportunity for your peak representative organisation to facilitate the development of multi-agency protocols covering common identified issues. The representative peaks and contact details are listed in the Attachments.

You may also consider if there is the opportunity to include client representation or other forms of client input such as non identifying comments extracted from customer surveys.

This is also the time to identify who is best placed within your service to initiate contact with the other agency about establishing a protocol. You may wish to use a staff person who already has a well established relationship with the other agency or you may wish to nominate a senior member of the agency, or both.

HINT!

Some questions to consider:

- are there interdepartmental protocols in existence that can be built upon to cover relevant service deliver issues?
- should the protocol being considered cover one service or a group of services?
- are there other services which should be involved? (These could be specialist services which work closely with the client group);
- are there benefits to be gained by negotiating agreements between groups of services?
- are there people that would be useful to involve because of their leadership ability or influence? It may be useful to make a list of people to approach so that this doesn't become a blockage to the process;
- how will you secure the interest and involvement of the key players?

5. Consider the issues or barriers that may arise.

When considering the agency you wish to establish protocols with, it is important that you consider the best way to raise the topic with them. You want to hold your discussions in a cooperative and positive manner without causing the other agency staff to feel attacked or vulnerable. Remember it is the issues we wish to focus on, not the individuals.

It is also essential to recognise there may be power imbalances which can cause tensions and dilemmas during negotiations. These power imbalances exist between:

- SAAP services and government departments
- government departments themselves
- individuals and government departments
- service users and service providers
- SAAP services themselves
- individuals and SAAP services

The sorts of tensions and dilemmas which may arise could relate to the philosophy, principles, policies and/or practices of the agencies involved.³ Being aware of the differences helps to understand and overcome tensions. Careful preparation and planning is, therefore, needed before gathering the key stakeholders together. The process is as important as the final outcome. A positive and respectful process will increase the commitment of the players to ensuring that the agreements reached in the protocols are carried through into practice in their agency.

Last, but by no means least, if there are unresolved differences or long standing disagreements between any stakeholders it is important to recognise that these will need to be settled or at least agreed to be set aside, before those parties are able to honestly talk about working collaboratively.

³ The Infoxchange “Protocols Pal” web site. <http://www.infoxchange.net.au/pp/map/>

6. Arrange an initial meeting.

It is important that you identify the person within your agency who will take responsibility for the development of the protocol. A primary function of this person's role is to ensure the process doesn't fall short of its original aim, that is to gain documented agreements addressing the issues identified back in Step 3.

NOTE!

“ Collaboration between services does not necessarily occur easily , but is rather the result of good planning and commitment. Initially, this will require somebody or agency taking the lead responsibility for bringing the services together. We will call this person the broker. The broker is responsible for bringing the services together until a permanent interagency governance or linkage is in place” Kingsley,B. 1998⁴

It is now the job of your “*broker*” to meet with one of the identified key players within the agency that you wish to discuss the development of an inter-agency protocol with. If there is more than one identified key player you may wish to consider which person will be more positive towards the idea, or request that they all be available.

The first meeting needs to be structured in a way which allows all those present to participate openly and honestly and to come to a common understanding of the benefits of participating. The environment and tone of the meeting needs to be carefully constructed to ensure that the process does not target any individual key players in a negative manner.

⁴ Kingsley,B. 1993, *A Guide to Case Management for At Risk Youth*, Centre for Human Resources, Brandeis University, Waltham Spring, USA.

7. Establish a joint commitment to developing protocols.

It is important to foster a sense of ‘working together’ for the benefit of all concerned and to establish a joint commitment to the project. To encourage this process it is essential that all participants are able to express what they wish to gain from the process and be able to see gains being made along the way.

The initial meeting provides the opportunity to establish the structure for further discussions and explore ways in which the partnership can be further developed. At this, and subsequent meetings it is important to:

- consider if there are any other parties who should be involved
- determine what different parties want to achieve from the process
- develop strategies for achieving the desired outcomes
- consider how the protocols will be documented
- determine the process for authorising the agreements
- consider how the protocols will be monitored and evaluated

8. Develop and document the agreements.

A protocol is a documented relationship between two or more separate agencies detailing agreements which have been reached through consultative and constructive discussion.

Having written interagency protocols ensures that the agreements are not short-lived. The types of agreements documented in each protocol will vary according to the issues identified in Step 3 above. In general, inter-agency protocols may include items listed below:

- Introduction
 - purpose of protocol
 - shared clients / shared responsibilities
 - common practices

- Aims of the Protocol
 - enhanced client outcomes
 - improved service delivery
 - enhanced interagency relationships

- Good Practice Principles for the establishment of protocols
 - client focused
 - build on client's strengths
 - openness and honesty
 - willingness to work together
 - preparedness to try new ways

- Brief overview of each service
 - agency mandate
 - target groups
 - geographical coverage
 - organisational structure

- Referral processes for accepting and making referrals
 - eligibility
 - assessed on priority, 'wait turn' or assessed on priority with no wait list
 - work towards a seamless service provision

- Case management processes and responsibilities
 - coordinated case planning based on client goals
 - work towards a seamless service provision
 - best use of resources

- Processes for the exchange of service information
 - informing of changes to agency policy and/or procedure
 - staff interagency visitations and meetings

- Dispute resolution
 - in respect of case practice differences
 - in respect of interpretation of the protocol document
 - other

- Maintaining protocols
 - nominated person in each organisation responsible for implementing necessary changes

- Monitoring and evaluation
 - regular interagency contact to determine effectiveness of protocol
 - agreed period to first evaluation
 - what measures will indicate improvement
 - who will attend the evaluation eg. team leader, coordinator

9. Implement the Protocols.

Once having developed protocols, it is important to ensure that they are implemented and maintained. The processes for ensuring this include:

- make sure the protocols are signed off by an appropriate senior person in each organisation;
- develop a plan for the implementation of the protocols within your service. This may require changes to your existing policies and procedures, or the introduction of new tools such as referral forms.

REMEMBER!

As stated in the introduction, the success of the protocols in practice is dependent on the commitment and cooperation of the agencies involved. This is the critical success factor from which the rest of the agreement stems.

It is essential to maintain the relationship as well as the processes.

10. Monitor and Evaluate the Protocols.

The protocols should include a process for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Allocate the task of making sure that this happens to a person within your agency. Make sure that regular feedback is provided at staff meetings.

Initially you may want to meet with the key contact in the other agency every month or so to check that everything is running smoothly and to discuss any implementation issues.

Indicators of inter-agency protocols functioning well could include:

- enhanced interagency professional relationships
- improved inter-agency communications
- increased positive outcomes for clients
- increased client satisfaction
- increased staff satisfaction
- the continual review and development of the inter-agency relationship.

An example agency protocol format, common referral form format, and a multi agency case planning tool are included as samples. These examples are also provided on a disc included in the WA SAAP Protocol Project File.