

Dealing with offending by young people

A follow-up report

Summary / Prepared for the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission

November 2003



Summary

In December 2002 Audit Scotland published the report *Dealing with offending by young people*. It examined how young offenders, up to the age of 21, are dealt with in Scotland through the Children's Hearings System (CHS) and the adult Criminal Justice System (CJS). This is a follow-up report on some critical aspects of those systems. It is based upon review of case files and documents and interviews with staff in every council and police force.

Most children (an estimated 75% of the total) on statutory supervision for reasons which include offending appear to be receiving the required level of service from councils. But hundreds are not.

- Case records suggest that most children experienced no significant gaps in the services received. But in 15% of cases there appear to be gaps in service. In a further 10% of cases, the evidence was unclear.

- From these figures, we estimate that between 300 and 500 children on supervision for reasons which include offending are not getting the service the Children's Hearings prescribed to address their needs and their offending behaviour.
- This contrasts with adults on probation – our earlier study found that nearly all receive the level of service prescribed by the courts.

Most councils are providing the required levels of supervision but the evidence suggests problems in seven councils (Exhibit 1).

- Children in small council areas generally receive the level of service required; some larger councils also achieve this – Dundee, Falkirk, Fife and Renfrewshire.
- But the evidence suggests problems in Dumfries & Galloway, East Ayrshire, Glasgow, Midlothian, North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire.

Social workers see some children very frequently, but around half of the children on supervision do not see their social workers often.

- Children placed on supervision by Hearings should be seen regularly by a social worker. Our review of files suggested that 20% are seen more than twice a month. But around half of the cases we reviewed showed an average of less than one contact a month.
- There isn't a national standard for how often a social worker should see a child on supervision. But there is for adults on probation – the standard is weekly for the first month, fortnightly for the next two months, and at least monthly after that.

Poor records are a problem – which makes it difficult for council managers to make sure children are getting the services they need.

- 37% of children's files did not have a recognisable care plan. A quarter of young adult probation case files did not have an action plan. Care plans are required by statute, and action plans are a national standard.
- 10% of children's files did not have reliable records of contact.
- The information in existing records often appeared unreliable.

The number of vacancies for qualified social workers in children's services is high and continues to rise.

- The percentage of vacant posts for qualified social workers in children's services continues to rise sharply – up from 6.6% in 2000 to 14.5% in October 2002, equivalent to 247 posts.
- But vacancies in criminal justice posts, which deal with over 16s, are steady at around 8%.
- Most, but not all, of the seven councils with problems in provision have high vacancy levels. Some councils with high vacancies eg Angus, Highland, North Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire, are managing to maintain reasonable service levels.

There is a need for better information about:

- the **quantity** of services – the Scottish Executive does not know how many children are failing to receive the services required.

- the **quality** of services – the audit did not assess the quality of services. The evidence from case records and of contact levels raises questions about the quality of services.

Children's Reporters aren't getting police referrals or social background reports quickly enough.

- Social work and police services are not meeting nationally agreed time standards for referrals and reports.
- Only one police force and five councils reported that they met the national targets for producing reports.

The strategic youth justice teams often don't have the right information or the right members to do their jobs well.

- The Scottish Executive looks to strategic youth justice teams to coordinate services.
- Teams need data. From a list of 26 data items that a team may be expected to have, the teams, on average, had around one third (see [Exhibit 2](#)).
- Social work, Reporters, police and education are heavily involved in teams; but Procurator Fiscal, health, housing and leisure services involvement is patchy.
- Chief executive and corporate services are involved in less than half the teams.

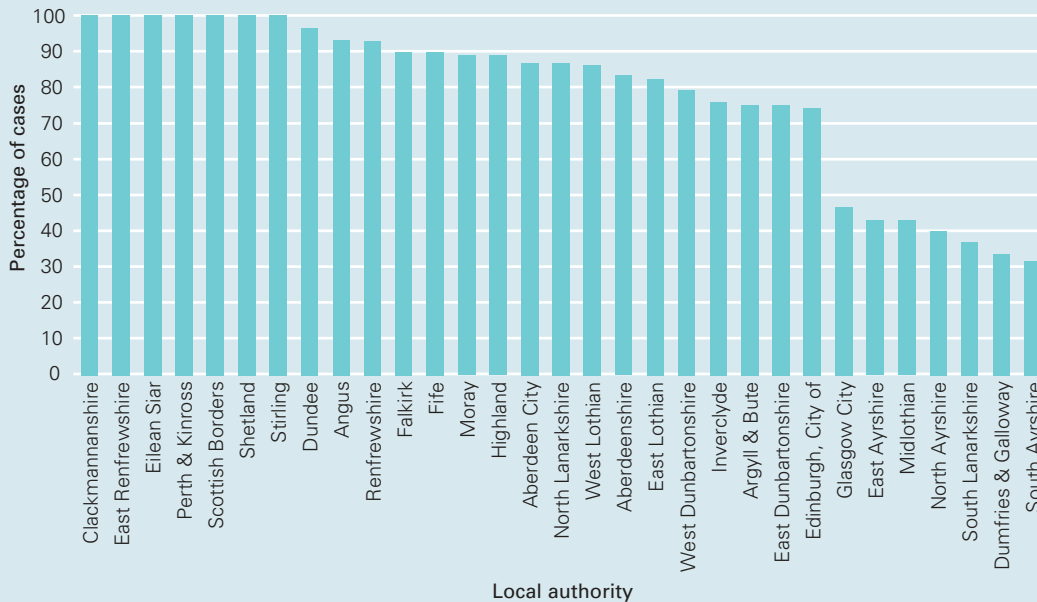
Most of the recommendations in our report *Dealing with offending by young people* (published December 2002) are being acted on.

- The Executive, councils and other services are working to speed up and improve decision making and provide more effective services.
- Other improvements are being pursued but it is too soon to judge the results.
- But further action by the Scottish Executive and councils is required to address shortfalls in services for children on supervision, to speed up police and social work reports and to engage senior staff in youth justice teams.
- And other issues need attention – evaluating the cost effectiveness of residential schools and secure units, more joint training and staff development across residential and institutional care, and collective approaches to residential and secure care provision.

Audit Scotland will monitor progress in implementing the recommendations of *Dealing with offending by young people*. We will carry out a follow-up study in two to three years. This will also cover the further recommendations made in this initial follow-up study. Issues in individual councils will be examined in Best Value audits.

Exhibit 1

Children on supervision: case files containing evidence of delivery of the required level of service – council by council
In only seven councils was there evidence that every child on supervision was receiving the prescribed service. In seven others more than half the files showed gaps in service.



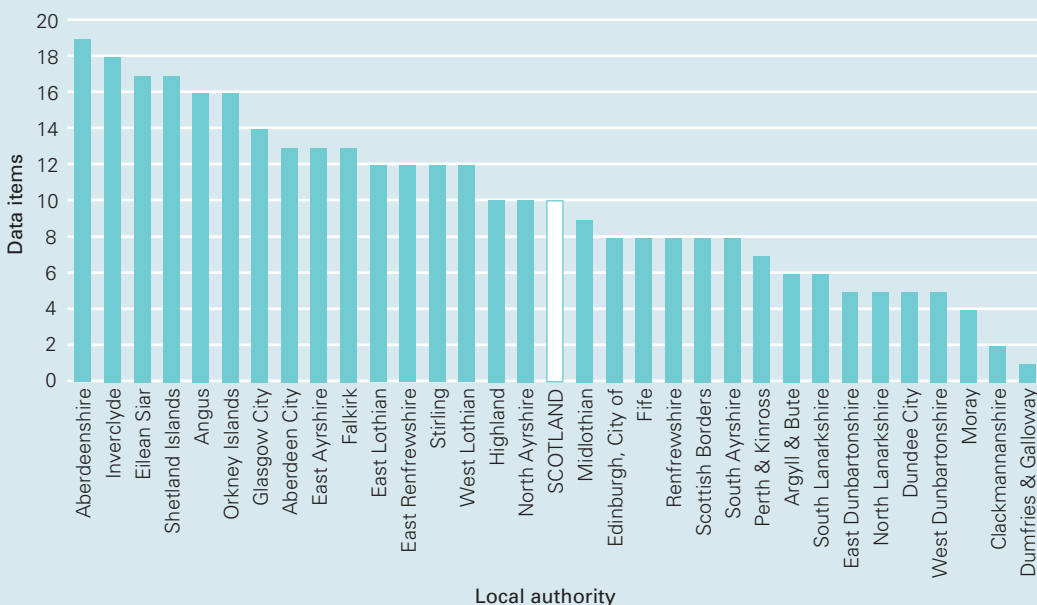
No files were reviewed in Orkney Islands Council

Source: Audit Scotland, 2003

Exhibit 2

Data items readily available to youth justice teams

The average number of items held by teams is around one third of the total that might be expected.



Source: Audit Scotland, 2003

Recommendations

Supervising children and young people

- Councils should implement the statutory requirement to provide care plans for all children on supervision, review these at specified intervals, and maintain easily accessible records of care plans.
- The Scottish Executive should consider setting standards for the frequency of contact with children on supervision (as exist for adults on probation).
- Councils should ensure that all young adults on probation have action plans as required by the National Objectives and Standards for Social Work Services in the Criminal Justice System.
- The Scottish Executive should clarify what is meant by an action plan in the National Standards.

Recording

- The Scottish Executive and councils should set out the purpose of recording (effective case management, performance management, accountability, the rights of clients to access information) and provide guidance on a standard format.
- Councils should review the quality of current records for children on supervision.
- Councils should ensure that contacts with children on supervision and their families are recorded in case files.

Youth justice teams

- The Scottish Executive Education and Justice Departments, the COPFS and strategic youth justice teams should agree a core set of performance information which should be collected by each team.
- The Scottish Executive and councils should review the membership and seniority of representatives in strategic youth justice teams.

Monitoring performance

- Councils should review arrangements to monitor the performance of services for children and young people on supervision and probation. This should include coverage of frequency of contact with children and their families, gaps in services, record keeping, and time to submit reports to the Reporter.
- The Scottish Executive should review whether current monitoring arrangements provide sufficient information about the quantity and quality of services for children on supervision; in particular the extent to which councils are meeting statutory requirements and providing the services prescribed by Children's Hearings.
- The Scottish Executive should publish annual reports on the performance of youth justice teams against national standards.

Implementing the recommendations of *Dealing with offending by young people*

- The Scottish Executive, councils, the SCRA and police forces should review progress to date in implementing the recommendations discussed in paragraph 5.5 of the follow-up report; and consider whether further action is necessary to achieve the improvements required.

Dealing with offending by young people

A follow-up report



Audit Scotland
110 George Street
Edinburgh EH2 4LH

Telephone
0131 477 1234
Fax
0131 477 4567