

SCOTTISH

CHILDREN'S REPORTER

ADMINISTRATION

✦ Evaluation of Posts of Education Liaison Officer and Social Work Liaison Officer to the Children's Reporter in Falkirk

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Executive Summary

Falkirk is unique within the Children's Hearings System in having two Liaison Officer posts that are funded by the local authority and located within the Children's Reporters' office. These two posts are an Education Liaison Officer (ELO) and a Social Work Liaison Officer (SWLO).

The general aims of the two Liaison Officer posts are to:

- Minimise delay in dealing with cases of children referred to the Reporter, by gathering information and making recommendations to assist the Reporter in decision making.
- Develop effective inter-agency working, to identify and provide appropriate support to children and families.

The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) carried out an evaluation of the posts to assess the effectiveness of the ELO and SWLO posts, any added value they provide to the SCRA team in Falkirk and to inform any consideration of the introduction of similar posts in other areas. The evaluation was carried out in 2005, and found that:

- Both the ELO and SWLO have a significant effect in minimising the delay between receipt of referral to Reporter's final decision.
- Both the ELO and SWLO are involved with investigating the referrals of children and young people at an early stage in the process and provide interventions where appropriate. The SWLO particularly appears to provide interventions that result in the avoidance of compulsory measures, although this finding was based on a small number of cases.
- Both the Liaison Officer posts are perceived by the Falkirk Reporters as offering considerable "added value" in relation to inter-agency working, improved quality of information collected, and are considered to offer benefits for children and families due to the speed of investigations and early interventions. Interviews with respondents from Education Services reported that they did not perceive many benefits from the ELO post, largely due to schools now being imbedded in Integrated Learning Communities. The perceptions of the SWLO post from respondents in Social Work Services were very positive and regarded the post as having considerable value.

Introduction

Falkirk is unique within the Children's Hearings System in having two Liaison Officer posts that are funded by the local authority and located within the Children's Reporters' office. The broad purpose of both these posts is to support Reporters in making decisions on children referred. This evaluation will focus on the value of these posts primarily from the perspective of the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA), but also from the perspective of other agencies in the Children's Hearings System.

The general aims of the Liaison Officer posts are to:

- Minimise delay in dealing with cases of children referred to the Reporter, by gathering information and making recommendations to assist the Reporter in decision making.
- Develop effective inter-agency working, to identify and provide appropriate support to children and families.

The Education Liaison Officer (ELO) and Social Work Liaison Officer (SWLO) posts in Falkirk have different historical backgrounds, funding arrangements, and operate in different ways, all of which are discussed in the following sections.

Education Liaison Officer

The ELO post was established in 1995 and is funded by Falkirk Council Education Services and based in the Children's Reporter's office in Falkirk. Generally, the purpose of the post is to assist in diverting children and young people from the statutory system, where appropriate, and so reduce the number of children and young people involved in the Hearings System. Investigations conducted by the ELO also aim to assist in speeding the process of appropriate disposal of cases by the Children's Reporter. The ELO also provides training on the Hearings System and its interaction with Education Services to teachers and panel members.

At the operational level the ELO's role involves consultation with education staff and other agencies and services in order to investigate the needs of children referred to the Reporter. The focus of the ELO's work is on early intervention, and targets two main groups of children:

- Children on first referral, or who have few referrals, to the Reporter where there are concerns about education (e.g. non-attendance).
- Children about whom the school has concerns, not necessarily related to education and may be considering referring to the Reporter.

The Reporter identifies the children on whom he/she wishes the ELO to obtain information for the Reporter's formal investigation. The ELO liaises with the school, child and other agencies to gather information and makes recommendations to the Reporter. The ELO also acts as a link between schools, families and agencies to promote inter-agency working and identify effective early interventions to support children and young people. The ELO also has operational responsibility for

maintaining an overview of local and national strategies relating to school non-attendance, truancy and school exclusions.

The outcomes of actions taken by the ELO are intended to assist in the early identification of issues for children and young people and the identification of early interventions to address these needs. Like the SWLO, involvement of the ELO often precludes the need for written reports from schools and Social Work Services to the Reporter.

Social Work Liaison Officer

This post was established in 2001 and the post holder is funded by Social Work Services in Falkirk and is based between the Children's Reporter and Social Work offices. The SWLO works with children that are new to the Hearings System (i.e. on their first or second referral). Children are identified by the Reporter who asks the SWLO to investigate by obtaining information from meeting and working with children and their families, and appropriate agencies. The SWLO then makes one of three recommendations to the Reporter:

- No further action necessary, as child and/or parents accept responsibility or the incident has been dealt with.
- Short-term involvement with the child and parents by the SWLO (e.g. to provide support and advice, sometimes by referring the child to another agency).
- Further investigation required and reports from Social Work Services should be requested.

The Reporter makes his or her decision based on the SWLO's recommendations. In many cases the involvement of the SWLO is intended to avoid the need for reports from Social Work Services and other agencies, and provides and/or identifies appropriate support at an early stage to children and families which may preclude the need for Social Work involvement or compulsory measures.

There is interest in Falkirk's Liaison Officer posts by other local authorities, and there are examples of attempts elsewhere to introduce similar posts. However, these have met with varying degrees of success. This evaluation will be of interest in informing SCRA and other local authorities which are considering developing similar liaison posts.

Aims of the evaluation

The posts of ELO and SWLO have not previously been evaluated, although both officers provide annual reports of their caseloads. Anecdotal accounts indicate that both of these posts are highly valued by the SCRA and the Council but there was no robust evidence supporting the perception that the Liaison Officers' involvement allows Reporters to make decisions more quickly. In addition, there has been no robust data regarding the effectiveness of the Liaison Officers in identifying early interventions for children and diverting them, when appropriate, from the Hearings System.

The main aims of this evaluation are therefore to assess the effectiveness of the ELO and SWLO posts by:

- Evaluating whether cases are dealt with more quickly from receipt of referral to Reporter's decision.
- Evaluating the extent to which children receive appropriate interventions/support at an early stage, and avoidance of compulsory measures.
- Gathering perceptions of the "added value" derived from the Liaison Officer posts in relation to inter-agency working, quality of information collected, benefits for the child and family, and the perceived benefits for the local authority.

Methodology

The basis of the evaluation was information derived from three sources:

- A review of 20% of case files held within the Reporters' Office in Falkirk of children that have had involvement of the ELO and SWLO. This was necessary to allow a detailed evaluation of the Liaison Officers' activities as SCRA's Referrals Administration Database (RAD) does not record Liaison Officers' involvement in cases;
- Data from the RAD relating to characteristics of children that have had referrals to the Reporter investigated by the Liaison Officers, or investigated without the Liaison Officers. This allowed comparison between two groups that are very similar to each other, differing only with respect to the involvement of the Liaison Officers;
- Interviews with relevant professionals to obtain qualitative information on perceptions of the ELO and SWLO roles by individuals who are in regular contact with them. These interviews are intended to supplement the quantitative information obtained from reviewing case files and RAD data. It will not be possible to include all the comments from those interviewed. Quotations used throughout the report will be selected on the basis that they clarify the Liaison Officers' roles.

Findings

Review of Sample of Liaison Officers' files

For the purposes of this evaluation, the ELO and SWLO produced lists of names of all the children with whom they were involved in the 2004 calendar year. From each of these lists 20% of cases were randomly selected and reviewed. The purpose of reviewing a sample of case files was to obtain more detailed information, than is held on the RAD, about referrals and the Liaison Officers' investigation process. Data were collected on: all referrals made to the Reporter; early interventions; timescales for Reporters' decisions; and disposals made by Reporters. Due to the small number of cases that comprised the review sample, the following findings should not be considered to be representative of the Liaison Officers' workloads generally.

Sample of Education Liaison Officer's files

During the evaluation time period, the ELO was involved in 324 cases (20% = 64.8) and for the purposes of this assessment 65 case files (28 females, 37 males) were reviewed. The average age of children in the sample that the ELO was involved with was 12.07 years.

I tend to work with [the ELO] more on earlier intervention stuff. If something has come in and screaming concerns then, in my view it has gone beyond that early intervention and I'll not tend to use her that much. But, a first or second referral, if the kid's got a couple of offence referrals and the school's got concerns.

I have discussions with [the ELO] about referrals that I get, that are... not just education based, but primarily education based. [The ELO] would make phone calls to school; find out how a child was doing; see if there were any significant concerns – that's probably one of the main ways that we work together.

- Reporter

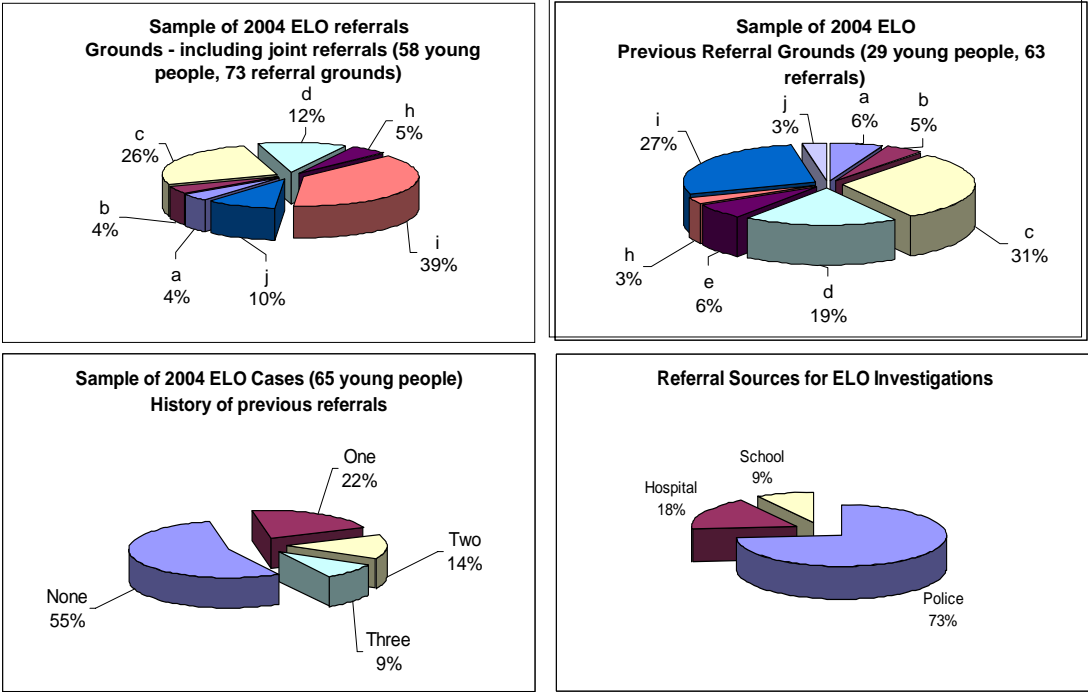
Within the sample of 20% of ELO cases it was noted that there was an average period of 8 working days, from the receipt of the referrals to when the Reporters recorded their initial decisions and requested that the ELO became involved in investigations of the referrals. The ELO was then involved with cases for an average of 21 working days. In some instances, the ELO had been involved with children prior to a referral being formally received by the Reporters. In these instances, schools had contacted the ELO to discuss children's circumstances and possible referral grounds before making referrals to the Reporter.

Generally speaking, I would be discussing at least one, probably more, cases per day with the Education Liaison Officer because all children who are referred to us on education issues – it would be a general practice for me to run the file past the Education Liaison Officer – because she would often have information to hand that is not in the referral. She is also very instrumental in making that bridge between us and education services; she will phone schools for information where maybe there is a gap with the information that we have. So before I really take anything to do with education forward and ask reports, I would be speaking to that officer first.

...she will often get information more quickly than we would otherwise get it. So it's not really restricted to cases of, for instance children that are not attending school, you can ask her to provide information about any child who is referred to us that is school age and she is able to get that to us very quickly.

- Reporter

Almost half (44.6%) of the children within the sample had been previously referred to the Reporter. Within the sample, six children had a history of Hearings and three were subject to Supervision Requirements at the time of the ELO's contact. In most cases the ELO appeared to be gathering information for the Reporter about children's conduct within school even though the referrals were not generally related to school issues such as truancy (a list of all the referral grounds are provided in the Appendix at the end of this report). Nineteen children were referred under s52(2)(i) of The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (the Act) usually for relatively minor offences such as vandalism. Sixteen children were referred under s52(2)(c) of the Act (the child would suffer unnecessarily or be impaired seriously in health or development due to lack of parental care) usually following a domestic disturbance where the child's mother has been assaulted when the child was in the house. Six children were referred under s52(2)(j) of the Act following arrest by the police after having misused alcohol or drugs. Only 5% of the total referrals were made under s52(2)(h) (failure to attend school regularly without reasonable excuse). There were seven children's files reviewed that did not have any formal referrals at the point at which the ELO was involved. These children had generally come to the attention of the ELO through schools seeking advice on how to manage non-attendance or alleged bullying, without formal referrals being made to the Reporter.



In all of the 65 reviewed cases the files contained notes on a number of phone calls, mainly with the school to gather information. In 7 of the 65 cases (10.7%) the ELO had conducted a home visit and also produced a written report detailing findings. In four cases, the ELO's records show the parents of the children had been referred to Attendance Committees.

In the sample of children that had referrals investigated by the ELO, cases took on average 47 working days from receipt to final decision by Reporters. Of those cases, where a decision was made following the receipt of grounds (58 children from the sample), the Reporter made the disposal of no further action for 45 of those children referred (including those referred on two or more grounds). Voluntary assistance

from the Social Work Services was noted in four children's referrals. Three children were regarded by Reporters as meeting the criteria for referral to Children's Hearings. Finally, four children in the sample were referred to Restorative Justice provided in Falkirk through SACRO.

Sample of the Social Work Liaison Officer's files

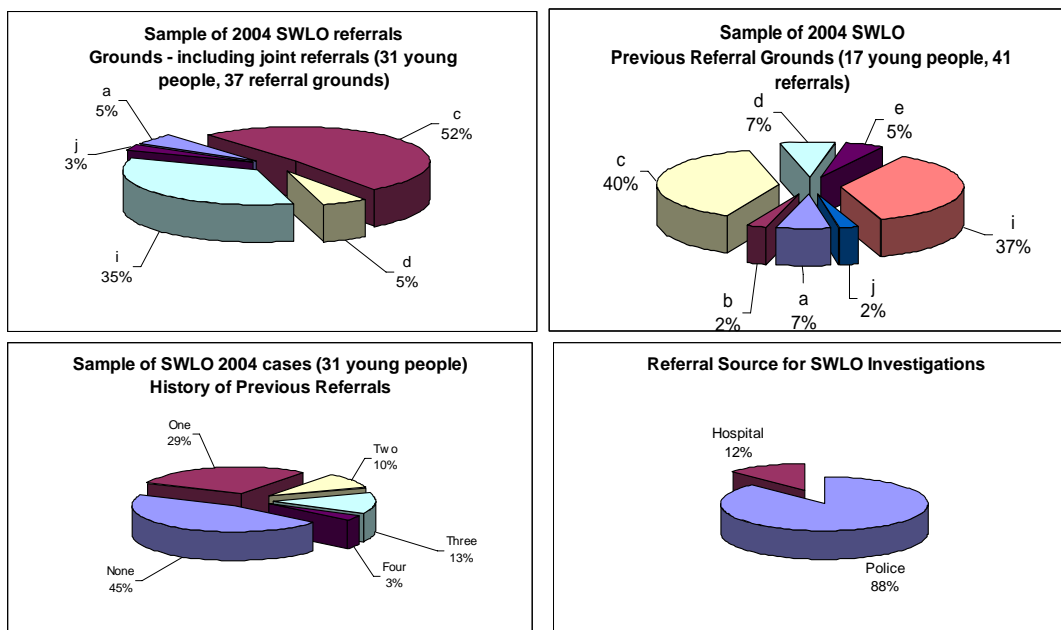
Within the 2004 calendar year, the SWLO was involved in investigating 153 children's cases (20% = 30.6), and for the purposes of the evaluation 31 case files (21 males, 10 females) were sampled. The average age of children with whom the SWLO was involved was 9.76 years. Seventeen of the children (54.8%) had previous referrals to the Reporter and two had histories of Hearings, but none within the sample were subject to Supervision Requirements at the time of the SWLO's contact.

Within the sample, the average period from receipt of referral to the involvement of the SWLO was 32.6 working days. This figure is skewed by two cases where there was a very long delay prior to SWLO's involvement. If these two are removed the average delay drops to 23 working days. Once the SWLO had been requested to be involved with a referral, the average duration of the SWLO's contact with the child was 33.8 working days, although contact was maintained for considerably longer in two cases (the first case was held open for 235 working days following the child's referral under s52(2)(c) of the Act as the child's mother had alcohol problems and was the victim of domestic violence). The family accepted voluntary involvement from the Social Work team; the second case was 124 working days and related to a child who after initial SWLO involvement was then subsequently re-referred on two occasions over the next 2 months prolonging the assessment and intervention period).

*...sometimes when we get a referral in it is useful to know if Social Work services have ever heard of this child, because even though perhaps we don't have a file it may well be that they have been involved on a voluntary basis with Social Work services. But in addition to that, the other strength to that post is that as part of her remit she is able to carry out short pieces of work with children and families...
...because of the minimal intervention principle, it means that they are keeping children out of the system - and the best possible scenario would be that we would like to be able to do that with them all... it's very much a case of early intervention and keeping them out of the Hearings System..*

- Reporter

In the sample of cases reviewed, referrals to the SWLO were most frequently (17 children) under s52(2)(c) of the Act and tended to involve incidents where the child was in the home during some form of domestic disturbance (in some cases the child was thought to have witnessed domestic violence, or the incident that was referred was a disturbance where the child was in the home but did not witness the events). Referrals to the Reporter on offence grounds (s52(2)(i)) were the second largest group of referrals (10 children). These alleged offences were of a relatively minor nature including vandalism of cars and throwing stones.



Within the sample of cases reviewed, the SWLO had made a home visit to 29 of the 31 children (93.5%), produced reports on 29 cases (completed after an average of 16.2 working days from the dates when they were requested by the Reporter) and brief written feedback for the remaining two cases. The SWLO provided interventions directly with the child and family and in ten cases extended the period of contact in order to meet the needs of the children and their families. In two cases the SWLO referred the children to the Social Work team and in two cases the children were referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

Reporters would, on average, reach their final decision on SWLO cases after 40.6 working days from receipt of referral. Reporters, in 30 of the 31 cases reviewed, made No Further Action disposals; in the case where this was not the disposal the child was referred to the Social Work team.

Comparison of samples of ELO and SWLO files

The sample of children investigated by the ELO was on average slightly older (12.07 years) than the sample of children that the SWLO was involved with (9.76 years). There was a considerable difference in the number of working days that had elapsed prior to the involvement of the Liaison Officers. Based on the small sample of cases reviewed, Reporters requested that the ELO investigate referrals after 8 days on average, in comparison to an average of 32.6 working days for SWLO cases. Once the ELO was involved there was an average period of contact of 21 working days, compared with an average of 33 working days for the SWLO.

Within the sample, there appeared to be some differences in the referrals that the Liaison Officers had been asked to investigate. The SWLO had twice as many referrals under s52(2)(c) of the Act than the ELO (52% compared with 26%). However, referrals relating to the child having committed an offence (s52(2)(i)) were similar with the ELO having 39% and the SWLO having 35%. The original source of the referrals for both Liaison Officers was primarily the police (73% for the ELO and 88% for SWLO referrals). Both Liaison Officers had similar proportions of referrals from Health Services (11 children or 18% of the ELO referrals, compared with one

child or 12% referred to the SWLO). A small proportion of the ELO's referrals was from schools (5 children or 9%) but the SWLO had no referrals from schools.

The authority has got individuals who are specialising at a very early stage in the proceedings with the Reporter... if they were not there, the activity by the Reporter would necessitate a huge range of activities across a whole number of people: teachers, social workers, other managers perhaps, residential establishments - possibly - maybe engaging some police as well. All that activity would have to be done, perhaps by these individuals going off in different directions. The personification of the activity in the individual ELO or SWLO and it being focussed there, it can be proportionate to what the actual issues are that the Reporter has indicated to the Liaison Officer. It seems to be a really good use of time and resources...

- Reporter Manager

Evaluation of Liaison Officers' cases using RAD Data

In this section the RAD was used make comparisons of decision-making timescales between cases the involving the Liaison Officers and other similar cases in Falkirk that did not involve the ELO or SWLO. The focus of the evaluation is the Liaison Officers' work in 2004 and consequently the RAD data included in this evaluation includes only cases where both the initial referral receipt date and the final decision date were both within 2004. To make the comparisons of timescales as fair as possible, further parameters were used to select referrals for both the comparison group and the Liaison Officer group. This was primarily an issue about ensuring that the comparison cases were of a similar "low-tariff" level to the cases investigated by the Liaison Officers. Children and referrals that were included in both the above groups met the following criteria¹:

- All had been referred on one or two occasions in the time period.
- All of the children in both groups had been referred and had final decisions within 2004 which were recorded on the RAD.
- All of the children's referrals in both groups were recorded on the RAD as requiring further investigation following Reporters' initial decisions.
- None of the children was subject to Supervision Requirements during 2004.
- None of the referrals when jointly referred was retained by the Procurator Fiscal.

¹ Children under school age (5 years) were not excluded from the comparison group, but are not included in the ELO cases.

