

<i>To:</i>	Iwan Davies, Chair of Conwy and Denbighshire Youth Justice Service Management Board
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<i>From:</i>	Julie Fox, HM Assistant Chief Inspector
<i>Publication date:</i>	3rd September 2014

Report of Short Quality Screening (SQS) of youth offending work in Conwy and Denbighshire

This report outlines the findings of the recent SQS inspection, conducted from 21st – 23rd July 2014. We carried this out as part of our programme of inspection of youth offending work. This report will be published on the HMI Probation website. A copy will be provided to partner inspectorates to inform their inspections, and to the Youth Justice Board (YJB).

Context

As an independent inspectorate, HMI Probation provides assurance to Ministers and the public on the effectiveness of work with those who have offended or are likely to offend, promotes continuous improvement by the organisations that we inspect and contributes to the effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

Good quality assessment and planning at the start of a sentence is critical to increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes. The purpose of this inspection was to assess the quality and effectiveness of recent casework with children and young people who had offended. In order to do this, we examined 14 cases supervised by Conwy and Denbighshire Youth Justice Service (YJS). Wherever possible, this was undertaken in conjunction with the allocated case manager, thereby increasing the effectiveness as a learning opportunity for staff.

We gather evidence against the SQS criteria, which are available on the HMI Probation website - <http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/>

Summary

The published reoffending rate¹ at the time of the inspection was 33.8%. This was an increase from the previous quarter of 29.7% and lower than the average for England & Wales (35.4%). Overall, we found a dedicated staff group working hard to deliver services to children and young people and the wider community. The team benefited from a range of specialist staff whose contribution was evident in the assessments and plans that we saw. We were also impressed by the often creative approaches used to help children and young people to participate in work to reduce their likelihood of reoffending. There was, however, scope for improving the quality of some assessments and plans, particularly to safeguard children and young people. Given the commitment of staff and managers, we anticipate that the good work observed in the majority of cases can be achieved in all instances.

¹ Published April 2014 based on binary reoffending rates after 12 months for the July 2011 to June 2012 cohort. Source: Youth Justice Board

Commentary on the inspection in Conwy and Denbighshire:

1. Reducing the likelihood of reoffending

- 1.1. The initial assessment of the child or young person's likelihood of reoffending was sufficient in all but two cases. The vast majority were thorough and provided a full picture of the child or young person's circumstances, including how factors such as their education and substance misuse impacted upon their likelihood of reoffending.
- 1.2. Pre-sentence reports (PSRs) were prepared in 11 cases. We considered that eight of these were of good quality. In three PSRs, the assessment of the child or young person's risk of harm to others was not thorough enough. There needed to be a better analysis of the circumstances of the case and the individual's motivation to offend. We were, however, pleased to find that all PSRs gave attention to the child or young person's diverse needs and how these could be addressed as part of a court order.
- 1.3. Following on from the assessment, we look to see if there is a plan of work to help reduce the likelihood of reoffending. This was in place, and of sufficient quality, in all custodial cases and in all but two community cases. Staff used a variety of approaches in their work with children and young people including formal offending behaviour meetings as well as activities such as 'Cook and Eat'. In one such session, a young person with literacy difficulties and limited independent living skills, was assisted to develop his reading and writing through drafting menus, and his independent living skills through cooking and eating the food that he had prepared. Sessions were clearly recorded, as one inspector commented: *"Again the contacts relating to offence focused work are very good. They describe the session and provide information about the young person's insight and reflection on the topic"*.
- 1.4. There had been a sufficient review of the assessment and plan to reduce the likelihood of reoffending in all but two relevant cases. Where there were deficits, this often related to an insufficient update of the child or young person's circumstances.

2. Protecting the public

- 2.1. We expect to see a detailed assessment of the risk of harm a child or young person poses to others. This should cover all relevant information, including past offending and behaviour, as well as the impact on victims. We found that this had been done well in 8 out of the 14 cases in the sample. Where the assessment was insufficient, this was often because relevant previous offences or behaviour had been overlooked. In the sample, we found two cases that had been inappropriately assessed as posing a low risk of harm to others.
- 2.2. Having assessed the risks, the YJS should put plans in place to manage them. These were good enough in seven of the ten relevant cases in the inspection sample. In one case, the risk management plan had not been completed as required and in another two cases insufficient plans were in place to address the risk of harm to the victim.
- 2.3. We were, however, pleased to note that assessments and plans to manage the child or young person's risk of harm to others had been reviewed appropriately in all but one relevant case.
- 2.4. We found that management oversight of work to protect the public had been effective in three of the four relevant cases in the sample.

3. Protecting the child or young person

- 3.1. The initial assessment of safeguarding and vulnerability had been completed sufficiently well in 10 out of the 14 cases in the sample. The child or young person's level of vulnerability had been underestimated in three cases. Sometimes, greater attention should have been paid to living arrangements. For example, we disagreed with the YJS assessment that a young person assessed by social services as a Child in Need with frequent changes of address between family members was only of low vulnerability. We were pleased, however, to note that good use was being made of the YJS Speech and Language Therapist. In one case in the sample, our inspector noted: *"Her assessment of the young person had resulted in a communication plan being produced to help the case manager to engage the young man by using very clear and simple language. This then helped him to attend his appointments and comply with his court order"*.
- 3.2. Suitable plans to manage safeguarding and vulnerability issues were in place at the start of sentence in 8 out of 12 relevant cases. Better attention should have been paid to putting plans in place to address unsatisfactory living arrangements, and the often complex emotional and mental health needs of children and young people who have offended.
- 3.3. Children and young people's safeguarding and vulnerability needs change over time and must, therefore, be kept under review. We found that assessments had been reviewed to an acceptable standard in 7 out of 11 relevant cases, and plans reviewed sufficiently well in only 6 out of 11 cases. The reasons for insufficiency were varied, including a missing review, an insufficient plan for release from custody and plans that had not been reviewed as required. These shortfalls had not always been addressed by managers. In our sample, we found that there had been effective management oversight of safeguarding and vulnerability work in only four out of eight relevant cases.

4. Ensuring that the sentence is served

- 4.1. We were pleased to see that diversity issues and other potential barriers to engagement, including the child or young person's health and well-being needs, had been assessed well in all cases. The YJS covered a large rural area and workers were able to provide the right balance between home visiting and office appointments. This helped them to work with the child or young person as well as their parents/carers and to better understand what had led them to offend.
- 4.2. When inspecting in Wales, we expect to see evidence of active and timely screening of the Welsh/English language preference of the child or young person. It was good to see that all children and young people were asked about their language preference at the first point of contact with YJS staff. Furthermore, Conwy and Denbighshire YJS have Welsh speaking case managers to enable them to respond to the child or young person's language preference when the need arises.
- 4.3. The majority of the children and young people within our sample had complied with their court order. For those who had not, we found that the YJS had responded appropriately in all but one case. Where there were difficulties, the YJS held twice-weekly 'compliance panels' to discuss with the child or young person, and their parents/carers, the reasons for missing appointments. This would often help to get them back on track.

Operational management

The YJS had focused on strengthening management oversight since the last inspection in 2010. Fortnightly 'high risk panels' were in place to oversee work with children and young people who posed a risk to the public or who were themselves vulnerable. A visiting Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services psychiatrist was available to provide advice in complex cases. We saw evidence of the oversight provided by the high risk panel and this was appreciated by case managers. Overall, we found that management oversight of cases where there were concerns about protecting the public was better than the oversight of work to safeguard children and young people.

We interviewed three case managers and they were mostly positive about the operational management arrangements at Conwy and Denbighshire YJS. All considered that their managers had the necessary skills to support them and to help them to improve the quality of their practice. Two case managers felt that they had been provided with effective and appropriate line management supervision. We found that all three case managers understood the principles of effective practice and were familiar with local policies and procedures for protecting the public, safeguarding children and young people, engagement and compliance. Whilst all felt that their training and skills needs were fully met in relation to their current post, one case manager would have welcomed further input on recognising the speech, language and communication needs of children and young people.

For the past six months a part-time reviewing officer had been in post. Their role included checking the quality of case records and meeting with children and young people to gain their view of the service that they had received. In one case, an inspector commented: *"The reviewing officer was able to feedback to the case manager on behalf of the young person that he found the number of appointments and objectives difficult to keep on top of. As a result, a simple pictorial timetable was issued and this felt more manageable to the young person and helped him to comply with his court order"*.

Key strengths

- Children and young people, along with their parents/carers, were actively involved in the assessment of why they had offended and in developing the plan that was put in place to help them to avoid offending in the future.
- The contribution of the YJS Speech and Language Therapist in helping case managers to communicate effectively with all children and young people.
- The YJS 'compliance panel' was effective in helping children and young people to cooperate with their court order and complete the work required of them.

Areas requiring improvement

- Staff and managers should ensure that all initial assessments and plans to protect the public and to safeguard children and young people are of sufficient quality.
- Assessments and plans to address safeguarding and vulnerability should be regularly reviewed, taking account of all changes in circumstances.

We are grateful for the support that we received from staff in the YJS to facilitate and engage with this inspection. Please pass on our thanks, and ensure that they are made fully aware of these inspection findings.

If you have any further questions about the inspection please contact the lead inspector, who was Helen Davies. She can be contacted at helen.davies@hmiprobation.gsi.gov.uk or on 07919 490420.

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