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| <i>To:</i> | Jonathan Roy, Chair of Knowsley YOS Management Board |
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| <i>From:</i> | Helen Mercer, Assistant Chief Inspector (Youth Justice) |
| <i>Publication date:</i> | 04 November 2015 |

Report of Short Quality Screening (SQS) of youth offending work in Knowsley

The inspection was conducted from 05-07 October 2015 as part of our programme of inspection of youth offending work. This report is 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

The aim of the youth justice system is to prevent offending by children and young people. Good quality assessment and planning at the start of a sentence is critical to increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes. We examined 14 cases of children and young people who had recently offended and were supervised by Knowsley Youth Offending Service (YOS). Wherever possible, this was undertaken in conjunction with the allocated case manager, thereby offering a learning opportunity for staff.

Summary

The published reoffending rate¹ for Knowsley was 37.0% this was better than the previous year, 38.8% and better than the England and Wales average of 37.4%.

Overall we found a dedicated staff team where the YOS workers had built constructive relationships both with the children and young people who had offended, and their families. Case managers were committed to identifying what aspects of a child or young person's life contributed to their offending behaviour. Good links were in place with other agencies and workers had access to a wide range of resources to help them assess and plan their work, including a parenting worker and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Some intervention plans designed to reduce reoffending, risk of harm and vulnerability lacked focus, and were not always reviewed on time. Compliance with court orders was supported by the flexible way YOS staff worked with children and young people, breach was instigated where necessary. Staff spoke positively about the support offered by their managers.

¹ Published July 2015 based on binary reoffending rates after 12 months for the October 2012 – September 2013 cohort. Source: Ministry of Justice

Commentary on the inspection in Knowsley:

1. Reducing reoffending

- 1.1. The initial assessment of the child or young person was found to be sufficient in all of the cases sampled. Case managers had obtained a wide range of information to build a picture of the individual's life and circumstances. This included efforts to seek the views of parents/carers and the child or young person. The case managers we interviewed had a very good understanding of the child or young person's behaviour.
- 1.2. Pre-sentence reports or panel reports were provided to the court in seven of the cases sampled; all of them were well-written, providing a clear outline of offending behaviour, the risk of harm the child or young person posed to others and any vulnerability issues. There was evidence that the reports had been quality assured before they were submitted to the courts. There was a good offence analysis in all but one of the cases sampled and clear and appropriate recommendations for alternatives to custody were made. Where a child or young person was at risk of custody, a member of staff from the YOS attended court which was entirely appropriate.
- 1.3. Following on from the assessment we expect to see a plan of work to help reduce reoffending. We saw examples where case managers had been creative in engaging the child or young person to produce personalised work. A 'good lives' model based on positive factors in the child or young person's life was used to generate joint ideas for future interventions, but in some cases the work lacked focus. The plans in too many cases were not effective; actions were not sequenced and did not always have a clear priority attached to them. One inspector noted "*planning...lacked detail and clarity*". However, we were pleased to note that they had recently introduced training and a new bespoke planning document. We found evidence the child or young person did not always respond well to multiple agencies being involved in their case. There was a good example of a case manager producing an outcome focused plan, with a child who had very complex emotional needs. The case manager focused their interaction with the child on reducing reoffending, and this allowed other agencies to concentrate on their safeguarding and well-being. The case manager was sensitive to the diversity needs of the child, while being clear about their relative roles and boundaries.
- 1.4. Reviews were sufficient in less than half of the sample inspected. There was a quality assurance process in place but management oversight was not always effective in ensuring that plans were reviewed on time. Records did not always reflect the quality of work that had been completed.
- 1.5. Three of the children or young people in the sample were sentenced to custody. Assessment and planning for the custodial part of the sentence was sufficient.

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 behaviour as well as the impact on victims. We were pleased to find that this happened in all of the cases.
- 2.2. Having assessed the risks that the child or young person poses, the YOS should put plans in place to manage these risks. This was done to a satisfactory standard in two-thirds of the relevant cases sampled. Specialist interventions aimed at providing support in relation to education, mental health, and parenting were generally well coordinated.

- 2.3. Risk management plans should be reviewed regularly to ensure they are up to date. It is of concern that satisfactory reviews were completed in only one-third of the applicable sample; many were not completed in a timely fashion. Nonetheless, the risk of harm to identifiable victims was managed effectively in all but one of the cases.
- 2.4. Management oversight was effective in ensuring the quality of risk of harm work in two-thirds of the relevant cases sampled. As with plans to reduce reoffending, risk management plans were not always completed in a timely fashion. In some cases, delays were attributed to pressure of work and/or staff absence, for which there did not appear to be adequate capacity to provide cover. The YOS had established routine multi-agency risk review panels within which high risk cases were reviewed on a minimum three month basis. This process allowed all the agencies involved with the child or young person to share information through a detailed examination of the case. This forum enabled effective joint assessment and planning to manage both risk of harm and vulnerability.

3. Protecting the child or young person

- 3.1. Often, children and young people who offend are themselves vulnerable and we expect to see that their safeguarding needs have been thoroughly assessed, with plans in place to manage these needs. We were pleased to see that case managers had taken time to identify and understand the vulnerabilities that were presented in all cases.
- 3.2. In Knowsley there was an increasing number of children and young people exploited by serious organised crime groups to commit offences. There was evidence of a strong organisational response to child criminal exploitation, with staff working well with colleagues from children's services, the police and local prisons to address concerns of this nature. The following case demonstrated effective work supported by management *"significant concerns were raised about a child's criminal exploitation as evidenced by [the] nature of their offending, peer association, regular missing periods and lifestyle issues. This young person was subject to a care order largely to try and monitor his whereabouts and support the mother in trying to keep him safe. Focus has been around trying to understand more about his lifestyle and involvement with more sophisticated adult offenders. The case manager maintained boundaries during the order, engaged the young person and supported him in completing the Youth Rehabilitation and Care order."*
- 3.3. Similarly, YOS workers were alert to the possibility of child sexual exploitation. They accurately assessed the risk of child sexual exploitation, and put interventions in place to manage the safety of the child or young person in all of the relevant cases sampled.
- 3.4. Children and young people's safeguarding needs change over time and must, therefore, be kept under review. We found that assessments and plans had only been reviewed to an acceptable standard in just over half of the cases; again, timeliness was a major factor here.

4. Ensuring that the sentence is served

- 4.1. Case managers took time to get to know the children and young people that they worked with and to develop trusting relationships. Discussions with case managers showed that the 'think family approach' enabled workers to see children and young people in their homes more frequently and to better understand the impact of the family dynamics on offending and the risk of harm to others. It was evident that case managers viewed parents/carers as essential to the successful completion of the order. The child or young person and their parents/carers were sufficiently involved in the planning in all but one case.

- 4.2. Diversity issues and other potential barriers to engagement had been assessed well in all of the cases sampled. In some instances there was an appropriate focus on overcoming barriers to engagement, such as reluctance to engage with professionals or difficulty in understanding the seriousness of the offences. However, in just over half of the cases the plans did not give sufficient attention to the engagement and diversity factors once they were identified.
- 4.3. Case managers made a consistent and substantial effort to support children and young people to comply with their sentence. If the child or young person failed to attend, compliance meetings were held to support their engagement, rather than immediately resorting to formal breach action. In all cases we considered the response by the YOS to non-compliance to be appropriate.

Operational management

We look for evidence that the management oversight has been effective in ensuring the quality of work. This can take the form of one-to-one sessions between workers and managers, wider meetings with internal colleagues and the implementation of sound quality assurance processes.

Overall, staff felt that their managers had the skills to support them and help them to improve the quality of their work; they felt that their managers were approachable and supportive.

We also found that staff were familiar with local policies and procedures for managing risk of harm, safeguarding, engagement and compliance. Staff felt that the culture in the YOS was positive and encouraging with regards to learning and development.

Key strengths

- Services provided to the court, particularly pre-sentence and panel reports were of a high standard.
- It was apparent that there was excellent staff commitment to children and young people, and their parents/carers, resulting in children and young people complying with the requirements of their order.

Areas requiring improvement

- Plans should be clear, concise and sequenced in order of priority.
- Plans should be kept under review and updated in response to any significant change of circumstances.

We are grateful for the support that we received from staff in the YOS 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 Yvette Howson. She can be contacted at Yvette.howson@hmiprobation.gsi.gov.uk or on 07825 453092.

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Note 1: 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.

Note 2: We gather evidence against the SQS criteria, which are available on the HMI Probation website - <http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation>.

Note 3: To request a paper copy of this report, please contact HMI Probation Communications at communications@hmiprobation.gsi.gov.uk or on 0161 240 5336.