

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

GOVERNANCE AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 21 MAY 2010

SOCIAL BACKGROUND REPORTS TO THE CHILDREN'S HEARING

Report by the Executive Director of Educational and Social Services

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To advise Governance and Scrutiny Committee of the Council's performance in respect of the percentage of social background reports submitted to the Children's Hearing within the target time determined by the Scottish Children's Hearing Administration (SCRA).

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 A social background report is a report requested by the Reporter to the Children's Hearing following a referral which suggests the child is experiencing problems. The report is requested from the local authority via the social work service, and provides information based on an assessment of the child and their circumstances. The report assists the Reporter to make a decision about whether compulsory measures of supervision may be required.
- 2.2 The Time Intervals Working Group was set up by the former Scottish Executive in 1997, to report on the processing of referrals through the Children's Hearing System.
- 2.3 The first blueprint containing a code of practice and associated standards and targets was published in March 1999. The overall objective of the blueprint and standards was to identify and minimise areas of inconsistency, duplication and unnecessary delay at key points within the system, so that children at risk have their needs addressed effectively at an early stage.
- 2.4 The Interagency Code of Practice and National Standards came into effect in April 2001, and contains a number of integrated standards and targets designed to promote improvements. It aims to:
- establish an agreed basis for what individual agencies can expect of each other
 - define standards which service users have a right to expect
 - provide a basis for accountability through inclusion of measurable targets
 - propose a workable system for monitoring, reporting and review.

3. NATIONAL STANDARDS AND TARGETS

- 3.1 The hearing system operates within a framework of statutory time limits for the processing of referrals in respect of children. National Standards covering the process of the hearing system define the level of service expected at key points in the process.
- 3.2 The standard with most relevance to the council is Time Interval Standard 3 (TI3)

3.3 The format for Standard 3 (TI3) consists of:

- Objective – Social Work will submit reports on time
- Standard – All reports will be submitted within 20 working days of the date of the request
- Target – 75% of reports will be submitted within 20 working days of the date of the request

4. EAST AYRSHIRE PERFORMANCE

4.1 The Scottish average performance in 2008 – 2009 was 41%, indicating that improvement is required across Scotland in reaching the national target.

4.2 Historically, East Ayrshire Council's performance against the Standard is illustrated below:

2006 – 2007	Number of reports submitted % in time	813 22.4%
2007 – 2008	Number of reports submitted % in time	637 20.6%
2008 – 2009	Number of reports submitted % in time	594 16.8%

5. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE

5.1 At a national and local level, considerable discussion has taken place to determine the reasons for consistent difficulties in achieving improved performance. There is no single issue which can explain this, but analysis of the performance and trends affecting the submission of reports within the timescale has been undertaken and key contributory factors identified include:

- prioritisation of need and demand
- social work workloads/complexity
- differences in recording practice
- staff vacancies
- staff absence

5.1 Over the past 10 years East Ayrshire Council has seen a significant increase in the complexities experienced by families. The contributory factors include the increase in parental substance misuse, domestic violence and the resultant effects on children.

5.2 This has resulted in an increase in child protection referrals, pre birth assessments in relation to substance misusing parents, and an increase in the number of children in need, and in need of protection. As at 31 March 2009, the proportion of children on the child protection register was 3.5% per 1,000 in East Ayrshire as opposed to the national average of 2.9% per 1,000. Referrals to the Children's Reporter have also increased significantly. At 31st March 2009 there were 15,288 children looked after by Scottish local authorities. There were 524 children looked after by East Ayrshire Council at 31st March 2009. This represents an 11% increase from the previous year.

5.4 For these reasons, the work of social work staff is screened and prioritised on a daily basis. While requests for reports to be completed will be prioritised, this needs

to be considered alongside other referrals, which at times will impact on the ability to meet timescales.

- 5.5 In addition, there is considerable duplication in the system due to reports often being requested in respect of children who have already been assessed and provided with support. While this means that the report can be produced on the basis of knowing the child, it is not always prioritised, as the child may already have received help and other children require to be prioritised. This issue has been recognised at a national level and it is hoped that the work being undertaken within “Getting it Right for Every Child” pilot initiatives will offer some options for a new approach, particularly in respect of policing policy in Strathclyde. The partnership arrangements in East Ayrshire are well placed for taking this arrangement forward due to the development of the GIRFEC Screening Group, which ensures that information is shared between agencies where concerns are identified about a child.
- 5.6 The rise in referrals relating to children has resulted in social workers in children and families teams having heavy workload commitments, with a resultant impact on their ability to meet performance targets. This issue has been the subject of detailed review activity to inform work taking place in respect of the social work sustainability plan, and is due to be reported to Cabinet before the summer recess. This work incorporates recommendations for delivering a more targeted and effective service through a new service design.
- 5.7 Historically, variations in recording practice also impacted on the quality of performance information. In particular, there were differences in the way in which SCRA and local authorities recorded information, resulting in different information being produced about performance. This was exacerbated by the lack of electronic systems within SCRA, which meant that administration arrangements were reliant on manual processing and performance information has not been readily available.
- 5.8 Finally, staff vacancies and absence have also been factors in respect of performance. This correlates with paragraph 5.4 as during periods of staff absence, the prioritisation of work becomes more challenging. For example, the workforce in East Ayrshire has a young profile, and therefore maternity leave cover is required on a regular basis. Due to the nature of the work and difficulties in recruiting qualified social workers to temporary posts, it is unlikely that temporary cover will be secured.

6. IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

- 6.1 In order to improve performance, the Senior Manager (Locality Services) has assumed a key leadership role in driving improvements in the production of reports to the hearing. This work has concentrated on tackling the issues set out at section 8 through changes in processes, systems, cultures, management and leadership.
- 6.2 The change process has been implemented via a Time Intervals Working Group, chaired by the Senior Manager with representation from professional social work staff, administration staff, and staff with a remit for performance and information.
- 6.3 The activity of this group has included:
- Process mapping to ascertain strengths and systemic errors.

- Increased administrative support with responsibility for the receipt, processing and monitoring of reports received into the locality teams.
- Improved reporting arrangements with the production of weekly reports outlining all the reports due in the period. These reports are passed to the responsible social worker and team manager.
- Improved management information highlighting the performance of individual staff with management action being taken in relation to good and poor performance.
- Improved scrutiny arrangements by the service managers at the weekly operations meetings with the respective team managers. SCRA have initiated a system for the electronic submission of reports.
- Improved monitoring systems in conjunction with SCRA, which has provided monthly reports on performance, enabling comparative analysis against the East Ayrshire Council Social Work Information System (SWIFT). This information is presented to the monthly time interval group meeting.
- Increased training and development of staff, including a programme of peer support and training on report writing.
- Benchmarking activity has taken place with a neighbouring authority to gain insight into their approach in improving performance.
- Quarterly meetings with the Authority Reporter and Children's Hearing Chairperson focusing on improved performance.
- Development of procedural and practice guidance relating to reports to the Children's Hearing.

6.4 Central to the approach has been partnership working with SCRA, enabling data to be compared and inaccuracies to be corrected. The implementation of new electronic processes by SCRA has also assisted these arrangements.

6.5 Finally, this approach to improving performance, led by senior staff is leading to a change of perception and culture in respect of the preparation of reports. This is most evident in the way in which practitioners and managers have embraced the changes and are eager to evidence improved performance, recognising that this ultimately means a more responsive service for children/young people and their families.

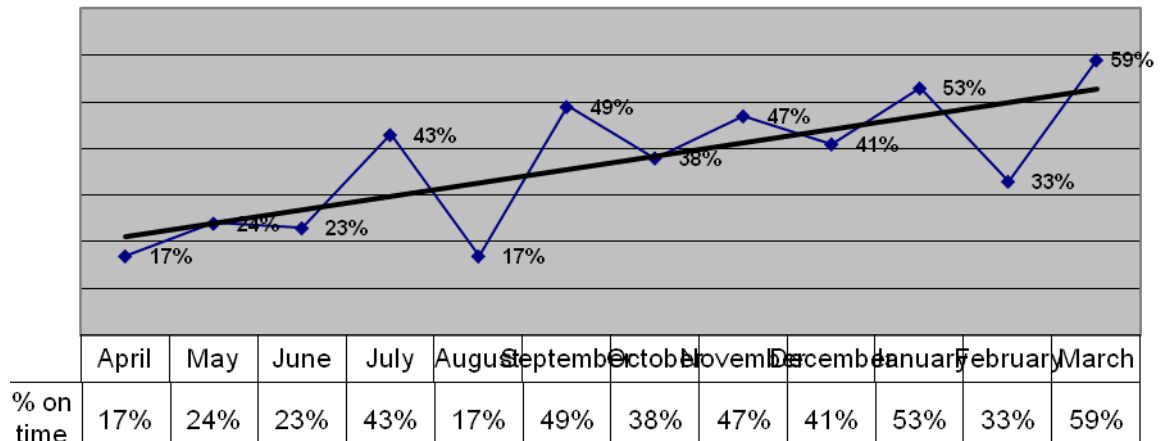
7. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

7.1 In order to evidence continuous improvement in this area, the Senior Manager has carried out a comparative analysis of East Ayrshire's performance relative to Time Interval 3 from April 2009 – March 2010.

7.2 In March 2009, East Ayrshire's performance was 16.8%. The following analysis shows an improving trend as clearly demonstrated by chart 1:

Chart 1

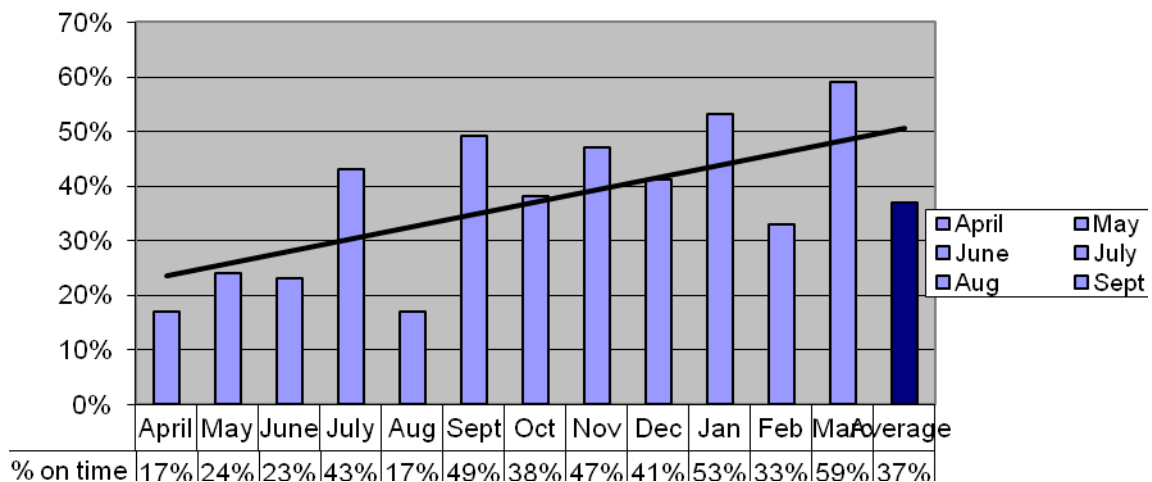
Time Intervals percentage of reports received on time



East Ayrshire's Time interval Performance has shown significant improvement in 2009-10 from 17% in April 2009 to an annual high of 59% in March 2010. Although there has been fluctuations in performance month by month, the overall trend continues upward.

Chart 2

% on time by month with yearly average



7.3 The percentage of reports produced within the standard of 20 working days has therefore increased by 122% from:

- 16.8% in 2008 / 2009 to:
- 37% in 2009 / 2010

(The latter figure is subject to confirmation by SCRA at a national level).

7.4 This is an improving trend and it is recognised that there is still work to do to achieve the national target. A range of factors are still impacting on performance and accounts for variations, including workloads, annual leave and absence. For example in February 2010 performance reduced significantly, but further analysis evidences an unusually high level of absence within this staff group (8.33%). This represents one of the highest rates of absence since 2007 and can be attributed to the winter vomiting virus and flu. The implementation of the new service design

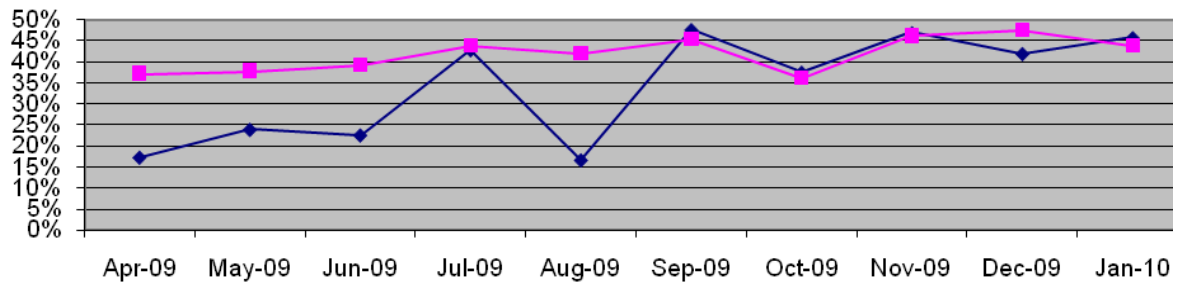
work in social work services will impact positively on this area of work, subject to consideration and approval by Cabinet.

7.5 Chart 3 highlights comparison between East Ayrshire and our comparator authorities. This highlights that East Ayrshire has significantly improved in performance across 2009/2010, with performance in recent months being more consistent between the comparator authority areas. The comparator areas are: -

- Clackmannanshire
- Falkirk
- North Ayrshire
- North Lanarkshire
- West Lothian

Chart 3

East Ayrshire's TI3 Performance with that of the comparator average



	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
East Ayrshire	17%	24%	23%	43%	17%	48%	38%	47%	42%	46%
Comparator average	37%	38%	39%	44%	42%	45%	36%	46%	47%	44%

—◆— East Ayrshire —■— Comparator average

7.6 Table 1 highlights that there is considerable scope for further improvement as shown in the historical data. In 2009/10, 8% of reports were late by one day and 60% were late within the one month period (30 days).

Days late	Number of SBR's	Percentage %
1 day	11	8.1%
1 week	22	16.3%
1 month	49	36.3%
2 months	37	27.4%
Over 2 months	16	11.9%
total	135	100%

8. LEGAL/POLICY IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no specific legal or policy implications.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no specific financial implications.

10. RISK IMPLICATIONS

10.1 A child in immediate need is prioritised for assessment and service provision, and therefore the risks mainly relate to reputational risks to the council. These relate to not meeting statutory responsibilities, not being responsive enough to families awaiting the outcome of the Reporter's decision and not performing well in comparison to other local authority areas. The performance improvement programme set out in this report is beginning to impact in practice and is designed to continuously improve performance, thereby addressing the risks outlined.

11. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no specific equality implications

12. PERSONNEL IMPLICATION

12.1 There are no specific personnel implications.

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

13.1 It is recommended that Governance and Scrutiny Committee: -

1. note contents of the report;
2. note the improved performance in this area and the plans for a programme of continuous improvement;
3. request that the Executive Director of Educational and Social Services provides a progress report in six months.

IMPLEMENTATION OFFICER:

SUSAN TAYLOR, HEAD OF SERVICE: CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Blueprint for the processing of Children's Hearing Cases - Interagency Code of Practice and National Standards

If you require any further information please contact Susan Taylor, Head of Service: Children and Families and Criminal Justice on 01563 576597 or Celia Gray, Senior Manager (Children and Families) 01563 576952.