
With Scotland Report on Child Protection Registrations

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Argyll and Bute child protection registrations have shown a downward trend over the last three years. Within the Argyll and Bute audit programme there was no easily identifiable reason for a reduction in child protection registrations. A hypothesis at the Child Protection Committee (CPC) that the possible cause for a decrease in registration rates were due to the impact of the *Getting It Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) practice model. The CPC were questioning if by interviewing and supporting families at an earlier stage through GIRFEC. Argyll and Bute had managed to reduce child protection registrations.
- 1.2 In 2015, the Argyll and Bute CPC commissioned WithScotland, Scottish experts to undertake an independent review of child protection activity. The review used methodology and included an audit of case files, focus groups with staff, managers and staff survey information. WithScotland supported their findings by analysing national and local benchmarking information.
- 1.3 WithScotland study found that child protection activity is in line with comparative authority. While the reduction in child protection registration over the last three years could be attributed to families and children being identified early and receiving appropriate help, the lack of consistency within assessment and planning made it difficult to draw this conclusion. The report highlights a number of strengths including partnership working, engagement with families, strong leadership and partnership committed to self-evaluation.
- 1.4 The Child Protection Committee and Argyll and Bute's Children will review the report and ensure robust plans are in place to address any improvement. The report needs to be circulated widely to ensure partners, staff and Elected Members understand the findings. On 5 November the CPC ratified the report and agreed the report be disseminated to various groups
- 1.5 The WithScotland findings are important and while it recognised the significant strengths in the partnership, it highlights areas for improvement. The report need to be disseminated so we understand the current child protection services in Argyll and Bute.
- 1.6 It is recommended that Community Services Committee agree that:
 - a) WithScotland's report will be disseminated across the partnership.

- b) Key areas for improvement are taken forward by the CPC and Argyll and Bute's Children.

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Since 2013 Argyll and Bute Child Protection Committee has recorded a decrease in child protection registrations, in the context of a declining population but with increasing numbers of families referred to social work for some support. In 2013, an internal audit identified no concerns with the decision-making processes for whether to register a child or not. Argyll and Bute's Child Protection Committee hypothesised that the decrease in registration rates could be attributed to the impact of the implementation of the *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) practice model. However, the review concluded that it was too early in the implementation of GIRFEC to assess impact.
- 2.2 In 2015 Argyll and Bute Child Protection Committee commissioned WithScotland to undertake a follow-up review to consider if the GIRFEC practice model and early identification was impacting on child protection registration. WithScotland are experts in field of child protection undertook a review of universal and social work services. In 2015 WithScotland undertook focus groups, audited files and used Argyll and Bute self-evaluation activity to produce an extensive report, with a summary report available for ease of reference.
- 2.3 The full report findings will be considered by the CPC on 5th November 2015 for both implementation and future actions.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Community Services Committee agree that:

- a) The findings of the With Scotland's study of child protection activity in Argyll and Bute Partnership.
- b) WithScotland's report will be disseminated across the partnership.
- c) Key areas for improvement are taken forward by the CPC and Argyll and Bute's Children.

4.0 DETAIL

4.1 The Study Aimed: -

- to explore in detail child protection activity and identify possible underlying causes for a decrease in rates of registration and consider how this compares with Argyll and Bute's comparator authorities and neighbouring areas.
- In addition the study aimed to understand if the interventions and processes which have been put in place prior to making a child protection referral. Also to consider the implications of the GIRFEC Practice Model and the role of the Named Person were making a difference to child protection registration in Argyll and Bute.

4.2 The Methodology of the Study was: -

- to map current trends and patterns of national, comparator and local child protection statistics, and identify similarities and differences with Argyll and Bute.
- the study also undertook an audit of a sample of at least twenty case files to gather information on the nature of referrals to child protection and intervention offered.
- it used information held by Argyll and Bute including the recent survey undertaken by Argyll and Bute's Children to all multi-agency colleagues to gather information about views, working routine and decision making across children's services including the GIRFEC Practice Model.
- to explore its findings further it arranged focus groups with operational staff and managers to consider the pattern of child protection activity. This included colleagues from health, local authority, police, voluntary sector, education and other colleagues identified.
- The study began in March 2015 and concluded in August 2015. The final report was presented to Argyll and Bute CPC on 5 November.

4.3 The study found Argyll and Bute has several strengths in the operation of its child protection systems and processes. Its continued commitment to ongoing self-evaluation was acknowledged and recommended. Many issues raised within this report were known through self-evaluation activity and identified by Argyll and Bute and the Care Inspectorate report (2013a). The child protection improvement Plan outlines a number of activities to support the improvement of practice across the partnership.

- 4.4 The review team were impressed with the professionalism and reflectiveness of all staff. The dedication of multi-agency professionals to meet each child's needs was striking. It was clear from focus group discussions that children are at the heart of practice. Families were thought to generally engage well with GIRFEC; for example attending Child's Plan meetings, which suggests that families knew what to expect, felt less threatened and engaged better.
- 4.5 *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) appears well embedded in the processes and practices of professionals across agencies in all areas and does appear to impact on registration rates. There was an acknowledgement that decision-making was not yet consistent across all areas and in all cases, however, there are new structures and posts in place to support this. There continues to be broad support for the principles of GIRFEC while it was recognised that challenges remain, particularly for the universal services, in relation to capacity, resourcing and skills.
- 4.6 The quality of inter-agency working and communication was a significant feature to emerge from the case file reading, focus groups and follow-up survey, and appeared a conduit for robust safeguarding. The relationships and communication across some areas was more developed than in others, but this was attributed to changes in staff and new relationships being formed rather than barriers to communication. There is a high staff turnover across the partnership and this could be a contributing factor as to why communication is more developed in some areas. The reviewers were particularly impressed by the sense of nurturing and respect staff had for each other across the agencies with supportive senior management.
- 4.7 The findings suggest that perhaps Argyll and Bute is following the national trend more closely than first thought in terms of child protection activity. The national trend currently shows that there is an increase in Child Protection activity. There may be fewer registrations, but activity may have shifted in terms of local processes. Statutory interventions and referrals to the Reporter are in line with national statistics. The picture is likely to be more complex than whether a decrease in registration is the result of GIRFEC. On one hand, the quality of inter-agency working and communication does appear to result in early intervention for children and families within Argyll and Bute. On the other, the needs and risks for some children may not be fully understood or identified at this earlier stage.
- 4.8 The picture that emerged through discussions with staff and the survey is not always reflected in the case files and through recording systems. It was difficult to determine the effectiveness of GIRFEC in Argyll and Bute as the quality of assessment, plans and reviews, adherence to processes and

assessment or risk were variable. This follow-up review did not set out to assess the impact of GIRFEC, but it is worth noting that there was a general lack of outcome data and reflections of the impact and effectiveness of actions and services for the child and family within the files. Robust evaluation measures are needed to determine whether practice is safe, but robust evaluation is only as good as the information available.

- 4.9 As yet, there is no national research, which links GIRFEC with safer outcomes for children. It has been suggested that outcomes depend on how well interventions are tailored to match the circumstances and how manageable those circumstances are (Daniel 2015). It is difficult to capture the complexity of routine interventions and attributing outcomes in the context of external variables, however, the positive culture for multi-agency challenge and dialogue and Argyll and Bute's ongoing commitment to self-evaluation should provide a basis for moving forward.

5.0 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 WithScotland study found that child protection activity is in line with comparative authority. While the reduction in child protection registrations over the last three years could be attributed to families and children being identified early and receiving appropriate help, the lack of consistency within assessment and planning made it difficult to draw this conclusion. The report highlights a number of strengths including partnership working, engagement with families, strong leadership and partnership committed to self-evaluation.
- 5.2 The Child Protection Committee and Argyll and Bute's Children will review the report and ensure robust plans are in place to address any improvement. The report needs to be circulated widely to ensure partners; staff and Elected Members understand the findings.
- 5.3 All improvements will be addressed through the Child Protection Improvement Plan and the Integrated Children Service Plan. Each agency has already taken ownership of areas of practise requiring actions that can be progressed immediately.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Policy – There are no changes required to the GIRFEC and Child Protection policies in Argyll and Bute.
- 6.2 Financial – None
- 6.3 Legal – None
- 6.4 HR – None
- 6.5 Equalities – None
- 6.6 Risk – Failure to meet the Council’s child protection responsibilities could have implications for the Council’s reputation.
- 6.7 Customer Service – will help deliver positive outcomes for children and young people.

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APPENDICES

- Appendix 1: Executive Summary Report With Scotland
- Appendix 2: Dissemination Plan