

# Small-scale Study of Child Protection Activity in Argyll and Bute: Executive summary

## Background to the study

- Argyll and Bute Child Protection Committee has recorded a decrease in child protection registrations since 2013 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. A hypothesis attributed the decrease in registration rates 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. Two years on, Argyll and Bute commissioned WithScotland to undertake the follow-up review.

## A picture of Argyll and Bute

### Argyll and Bute's strategic vision

- The vision of Argyll and Bute Council and NHS Highland is for its community to live longer, healthier, happier, independent lives. The core values of Argyll and Bute Council and NHS Highland are: compassion; respect; integrity; team work; equality; fairness; transparency; efficiency; improvement; involvement, co-production and a person centred approach (Argyll and Bute and NHS Highland 2015). Argyll and Bute's Child Protection Committee has identified a strong commitment to partnership working and improving the lives of children, young people and families. The *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) approach underpins integrated working to improve the wellbeing of children and young people.

### Care Inspection (2013)

- The report of the joint pilot inspection of Argyll and Bute Council's services to protect children and young people was published in 2013. The inspection report noted that staff were very effective in recognising when children, young people and families need additional help, and that support and guidance was put in place at an early stage to stop difficulties getting worse. Implementation of GIRFEC was progressing very well with a strong culture of trust and working together and staff highly committed to working together to consider all aspects of children's and young people's well-being. Social workers, health and education staff respond quickly to the early signs of emotional difficulty (Care Inspectorate 2013).
- The report also highlighted areas for continued development: that services need to develop a systematic approach to quality assurance with managers continuing to provide additional support and guidance to help staff raise standards; that staff need to improve how they use chronologies of significant events to identify concerning patterns and risks to children and young people; that the quality of assessment of risks and needs was still too variable; and further work was needed to improve the quality of plans.

### Argyll and Bute's internal audit (2013)

- Argyll and Bute's internal audit identified regular information sharing through multi-agency meetings, good recording, good recognition and discussion about care needs, evidence of joint discussion,

assessment and planning of needs and that decisions taken collectively and responsibilities noted. It also identified areas for improvement in terms the variety of formats and inconsistency of recording with little reference to well-being indicators and a lack of risk assessment and analysis (Argyll and Bute 2013).

### Follow-up review by WithScotland (2015)

- In 2015, Argyll and Bute approached WithScotland to undertake a follow-up review of registration rates. The review asked some key questions.

#### What has contributed to a decrease or increase in child protection registrations in Argyll and Bute?

- Argyll and Bute experienced a significant decrease in child protection registrations during 2013 with a slight increase in 2014, however, the trend that Argyll and Bute experienced was similar to child protection registrations in rural areas across Scotland although those increases in 2014 were greater. There are perhaps wider influences which have impacted on Argyll and Bute's registration rate such as the focus on the preparation for implementation of Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, which became law in March 2014. It is worth bearing in mind the data from SCRA suggests that Argyll and Bute child protection activity is more similar to national trends than perceived.
- There was a general sense that child protection registration rates may have decreased, staff were clear that child protection **activity** had remained the same or increased.
- In 2013, staff and managers had a sense that GIRFEC was impacting on registration rates. Two years on, focus group participants reported a similar picture, but were able to identify more clearly the reasons for this:
  - An increase in confidence and communication between agencies and professionals in relation to recognising and responding to a child's needs.
  - Although an increased attendance at meetings, this was targeted and appropriate.
  - The informal ad hoc advice and support from social work or child protection advisor was highly valued by colleagues working within universal services. Informal support structures from partner agencies allayed most concerns and relationships were often described as nurturing and supportive.
  - Following a period of organisational change, there was felt to be greater stability in staff and management across agencies, which had impacted positively on decision-making.

#### What has been the impact of GIRFEC on recognising and responding to a child's needs and risks?

- There was a sense that GIRFEC had helped families feel less threatened and more engaged, and that their participation was pivotal to effective early interventions. Due to its perceived success, participants from health, education and social work thought that the participatory and friendly aspect for children and families of a Child's Plan meeting should be replicated in child protection case conferences.
- Just over half (56%) in the 2015 survey of Named Person and Lead Professional agreed that they were able to spend more time with families, which was a slight increase of four per cent from 2013.

Respondents strongly agreed, however, that GIRFEC had improved the assessment of a child's needs (86%) and this had remained constant since 2013. Eighty-six per cent also recognised improvements to the way workers plan to meet children's needs; an increase from 81% in 2013.

- It appears that staff are identifying earlier children in **need** of additional support, but the identification of **risk** is more variable. There was variability across all areas and agencies of what was recorded and, the level of dialogue, assessment and planning was often more *implicit* than *explicit*:
  - The rationale for early intervention was not always clearly recorded and although current needs were often identified, there was less recognition or assessment of the risks for the child.
  - The Named Person and Lead Professionals were identified in social work files, but not always in the files of other agencies. It was also a mixed picture as to how much families' understood the distinct roles of Named Person or Lead Professional.
  - Professionals responded well to the immediate situation of the child, however, sometimes more attention was given to parents than children and to contemporary than historical information.
  - The impact of GIRFEC on professionals was in different ways. Social workers reflected that they were often working with more complex cases, health visitors spoke of the increase in the administrative demands of GIRFEC and anxieties relating to new tasks (i.e. chairing Child's Plan's meetings) without additional training, and teachers highlighted the blurring of professional roles and voiced anxieties in terms of undertaking what were viewed as social work tasks without the relevant training or expertise. Some also questioned the proportionality of some processes; the bureaucracy seemed disproportionate for a child whose level of additional need was low.
  - The process from moving from a child's plan to a child protection plan and from the Named Person to Lead Professional was thought clear and well managed across the four areas. However, there was greater variability and less confidence when a protection plan reverts a child's plan. Some felt that practice was inconsistent, resulting in drift and further unmet need and risks not identified.

### **Do systems and processes support decision-making?**

- In 2015, there was certainly greater reference to GIRFEC and SHANNARI in the paperwork across all agencies, but the formats, tools and information recorded in case files still varied across agencies and localities in several ways:
  - The range of assessment frameworks and tools used by agencies for their own purposes and versions of multi-agency formats such as the Universal Child's Assessment made it difficult to get a sense of the child, their family and circumstances.
  - It was evident that there was a lack of consistency in the application of assessment frameworks and some tools aimed at supporting staff in their decision-making.
  - There was little consistent or explicit reference to the risk assessment tool or frameworks that staff might be adopting, such as the National Risk Assessment Framework. The quality of risk assessment in Argyll and Bute was also variable.
  - The quality of plans was variable; actions were often identified for both professionals and the family, but timescales were not always detailed and the planned outcomes were often broad. Not all case files had a plan and it was difficult to determine which was the most up-to-date.

- Some files had chronologies and others did not, and different formats seemed to be in place and used in different ways; for example, chronologies, were compiled with but appeared to have little impact on planning and decision-making.
- Quality of analysis was variable with summaries of the information appearing in its place. However, there were examples of excellent multi-agency and good analysis by social workers informed and supported by colleagues within and across agencies, but these were in the minority.

### **Do structures and management approaches support staff and promote effective working?**

- Senior strategic leadership across Argyll and Bute was recognised as supportive and listening, which many felt was reflected in recent organisational changes. There was consensus that the changes were positive providing greater clarity in terms of processes, better relationships and communication, and increased confidence in decision-making.
- The governance arrangements were less evident within universal services in terms of perceived access to support, capacity and supervision arrangements. This was not discussed in relation to the substantive role of professionals, but to their changing role as the Named Person.
- The appointments of Practice Leads, Family Support Workers, the newly forming CARO team, and the Child Protection Nurse Advisor were all seem as valuable sources for advice and as a means of building confidence and supporting decision-making.
- The strong culture of trust and willingness to work collaboratively has, if anything, strengthened. Very good relationships were clear across all areas although some relationships were more recent and still taking time to embed.
- However:
  - Sometimes information recorded on social work case files did not appear in the files of other agencies and might have been useful to share.
  - Sharing information with agencies not often involved with individual children in Argyll was more challenging at times; for example CEOP. Participants also thought that perhaps more effective relationships needed to be built with wider community groups such as local faith groups, community childminders and GPs.
  - Greater discussion and perhaps training on the impact of GIRFEC should perhaps be considered, particularly in relation to the practicalities of managing the Child's Planning process although there is evidence of such developments already.

### **How do you evidence the involvement of families and better outcomes for children?**

- A clear finding from the audit was that professionals responded well to the immediate situation of children and families. Staff did not shy away from tackling difficult issues with parents and there was evidence of discussions with parents, which explored their circumstances and explained the impact of actions by parents on their children, such as domestic abuse. There was much engagement with families to ensure they understood what needed to change and consents were regularly sought to share information where appropriate.

- However, the focus on parents and carers within the case files was strong, but much less was recorded about the children who felt invisible at times. It is not a case of focussing on one at the expense of the other but rather about seeing the family as a whole with the child at the centre.
- Contemporary information relating to a case was readily shared, but the exchange of more contextual, historical information was less evident.
- There was less information about how parents may or may not contribute to decision-making and less evidence recorded in the files of staff helping the child or young person to contribute to and understand decisions.

## Conclusion

- Argyll and Bute has several strengths in the operation of its child protection systems and processes and its continued commitment to ongoing self-evaluation should be acknowledged.
- The findings suggest that perhaps Argyll and Bute is following the national trend more closely that first appears in terms of 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: 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; and on the other, the needs and risks for some children may not be fully understood or identified at an earlier stage.
- The review team was impressed with the professionalism and reflectiveness of all staff. The dedication of multi-agency professionals to meet each child's needs was striking.
- 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 acknowledgement that decision-making was not yet consistent across all areas and in all cases, but the new structures and posts in place to support this were welcomed. It was also recognised that challenges remain, particularly for universal services in relation to capacity, resourcing and skills, and the supervisory arrangements had perhaps not taken account of these changes.
- 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. This 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.
- The picture emerging from discussions with professionals and the survey is not always reflected in the case files and through recording systems. 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.
- It is difficult to capture the complexity of routine early 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.