

Contacts and Referrals to Children's Services

July 2021

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Background

The Central Referral Team (CRT) based at Ty Elwyn, Llanelli, covers the whole of Carmarthenshire providing a single point of contact for anyone who has concerns over a child's welfare. The Team deal with all new contacts and referrals into Children's Services which has provided a more consistent approach to decision-making. As well as responding to concerns, the team also provides information, advice and support to children, families, members of the public, professionals and other agencies

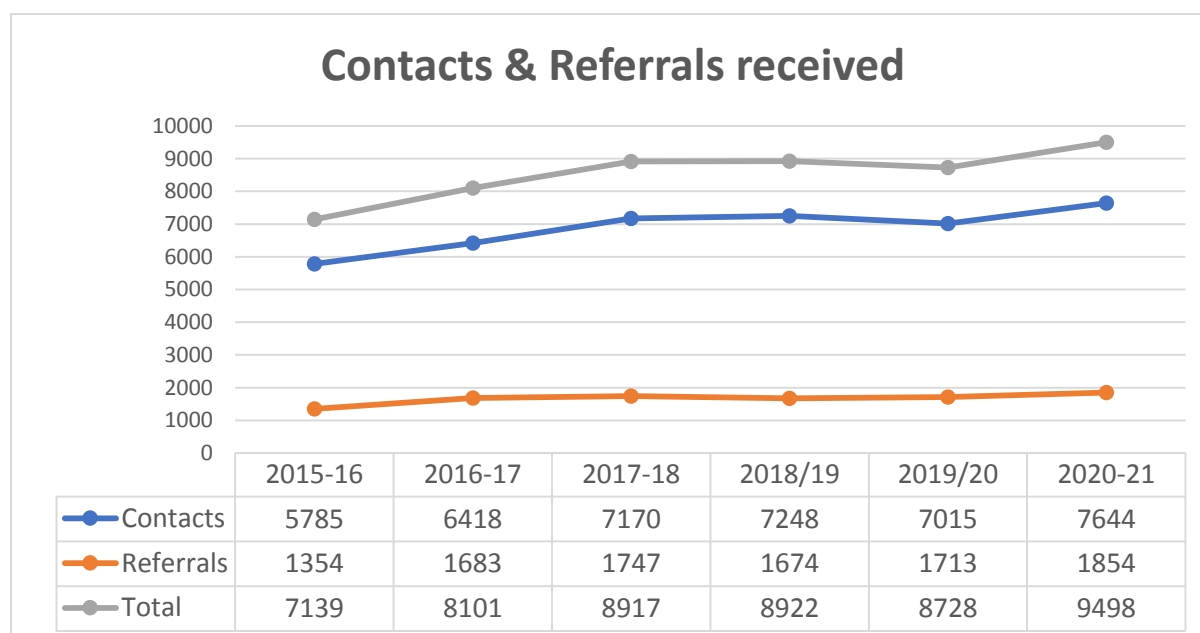
The team comprises of 1 Team Manager, 1 Assistant Team Manager and 8 FTE Duty Officers. However, during the last 12 months the team has been short-staffed due to secondment, vacancies, sickness and leave which has meant the team has frequently been functioning with only 3 Duty Officers out of a possible 7.

We have two assessment teams that cover the county. Over the past year there have been significant vacancies due to long term sickness (3 staff have finished after significant periods of time absent), and internal staff movement.

The Schools Safeguarding and Attendance Team

Current situation

Since the pandemic contacts and referrals have gradually increased throughout the year and as can be seen below as at the end of March 2021, 629 more contacts were received compared to 2020 and 141 more referrals.



All Contacts & Referrals in relation to safeguarding concerns are received by the Central Referral Team via telephone or e-mail, these are then input onto the Care First System. When information is received, a considerable amount of work is undertaken by the Duty Worker as part of this process which may involve speaking to parents, undertaking welfare checks with partner agencies such as health visitors and schools, as well as undertaking duty visits in order to gather more information to ascertain whether the family needs to be

allocated to a social worker in one of the Assessment Teams for an Assessment for Care of Support. Duty workers also provide information, advice and assistance in line with the Social Services & Wellbeing Act which may involve completing a proportionate assessment.

On receipt of a contact or referral the Team Manager/Assistant Team Manager has 24 hours to make a decision on how to proceed with the information received whether this is providing information or advice, referring on to another agency or allocating to the Assessment Teams for an Assessment for Care and Support.

Where allegations of abuse are made the Team Manager/Assistant Team Manager have strategy discussions/meetings with the Police throughout the day to decide whether the matter can be dealt with as a 'Child in Need of Care and Support' or whether it needs to be dealt with as 'Child Protection' which often requires a joint visit to the child/family by the social worker and Police. The cases are then allocated to the two assessment teams that cover the county (one for Llanelli, one for Carmarthen/Dinefwr)

The Police are the highest referrers into the Department – out of the 9498 contacts and referrals received during 20/21, 3877 were received from Police, the next being schools/college and Probation Service with 459 each. Domestic Incident reports have increased substantially from 1814 during 19/20 to 2368 during 20/21.

At the start of the pandemic, the team worked from home in line with Government guidelines but due to the volume of work coming through and the need for constant communication between all workers the team moved back into the office as the risk was too high for work to be overlooked which could have resulted in a child being placed at risk.

During the last 14 months staffing levels have been at their lowest for a variety of reasons, including vacancies, sickness and leave which has often left 2-3 Duty Officers covering the workload. Two new members of staff have started in the last 6 months, however due to them not having any previous experience they have needed constant supervision and training which has put additional pressure on the team. A third new worker is due to start this week which is positive but will mean that the team will have to train and supervise her before she is able to work independently.

In the last month the team has been struggling to keep on top of the work resulting in a huge backlog of work building up which is unprecedented for the Central Referral Team and is having an impact on the emotional and physical wellbeing of the staff.

In an attempt to catch up with the work a colleague from the Preventative Services has agreed to support the team 3 days per week until mid-June and a Social Worker from the Flying Start Service also supported a couple of days. The Chief Executive has also authorised overtime payment for the Duty Officers in an attempt to catch up with the backlog.

It is anticipated that the two members of staff currently on sick leave will return shortly which will ease the pressure on the team, however we will then be approaching the summer holidays and staff will be taking annual leave which inevitably will leave the team short staffed again.

The Central Referral Team attempts to divert as many referrals as possible from statutory services either by undertaking duty visits themselves or referring to preventative services as the least intrusive intervention for families, this does mean that only the most complex child protection cases are allocated to the Assessment teams. However, during this period of time there has been less availability with regard to preventative services. The comparison for the financial years 2019-20 (pre-Covid-19) and 2020-21 (Covid-19), visibly illustrates a reduction for 2020-21 where there has been a fall of:

- 44% in the number of referrals into the Families First programme
- 28% in the number of individuals supported
- 38% in the number of families supported
- 55% in the number of new individuals supported
- 54% in the number of new families supported

The only Families First measure during 2020-21, where there has been a 41% increase is in the number of single agency cases being stepped up by the FF projects and accepted by Children's Services. Factors to consider relating to the increase:

- The global Covid-19 pandemic
- The numeral lockdown restrictions
- Education establishments being closed
- Virtual support and not face to face
- Increased stress and anxiety on young people and families
- Existing factors that were in the domain prior to the pandemic

There has also been a 24% decrease in the number of cases stepped down from Social Services in 2020-21, in comparison to 2019-20. Factors to consider relating to the decrease:

- All the above factors, with emphasis that many of the services were only offering virtual contact at certain lockdown periods this may have had an influence on decision making to step down
- Possibly due to the complex cases referred to Social Services during the global Covid-19 pandemic, which may have influenced the decision making to open and hold cases and not stepping down
- Some families opted out of support waiting for restrictions to lift to resume face to face support.

The numbers of referrals into the programme reduced. In general, we saw a reduction across all activity compared to previous years

However, since the start of this financial year the preventative services have seen a very significant rise in referrals and are now struggling with waiting lists and having to prioritise. The absence of low level support and the reluctance of families to engage during the pandemic has of created a slow building of pressure on families and this has inevitably led to an increasing level of stress/concern that ultimately leads to an increase in referrals into CRT that could previously have been avoided.

All cases that need statutory intervention are allocated to the Assessment Teams, one being based in Llanelli and the second in Ammanford which covers Dinefwr and Carmarthen. Due to the increase in referrals received by the Central Referral Team this has inevitably had a knock-on effect on the Assessment Teams as they have to undertake an Assessment for Care and Support which has to be completed within 42 days. The caseloads within both Assessment Teams have therefore increased significantly. The table below shows the increase in child protection investigations (S.47's). A dip in the second quarter most likely reflects children not being seen or identified.

	Qtr. 1 2020/21	Qtr. 2 2020/21	Qtr. 3 2020/21	Qtr. 4 2020/21
No. of S47s (in year to date)	81	138	200	286
No. of Children	77	132	188	262

Electively Home Educated (EHE)

	Qtr. 1 2020/21	Qtr. 2 2020/21	Qtr. 3 2020/21	Qtr. 4 2020/21
Number of children that the Local Authority are aware of that are Electively Home Educated (EHE)	345	385	414	434
% of the above that have NOT received an annual visit in the last 12 months	66%	74%	42%	14.74%
Number of EHE children that have received an annual visit in the last 12 months	117	100	240	370
% of the above where the child was spoken to as part of the visit	<i>not available</i>	56%	64%	63.51%
Of the number of known EHE children (P3.1), what % have de-registered in the last 12 months	40%	32%	48.1%	54.83%

There is a new structure in place for Electively Home Educated children; the number of families electing to educate their children at home has increased since COVID 19 and is continuing to increase. The EWS have a new procedures in place to support families who are concerned about sending children to school at the moment with schools continuing to engage with the families and it is hoped that the pupils will then return to school after the pandemic.

The EWS also have an action plan to ensure that they visit every family on our EHE list and a number of workers are currently prioritising this. Additional funding from Welsh Government has allowed us to strengthen the team but it is not clear how long this funding will be available.

How the current situation has been managed

- Temporary member of staff appointed to cover seconded post
- Vacant post filled from Redeployment – this member of staff due to start this week and will be on probation for 4 weeks
- Member of staff from Preventative Services supporting team 3 days per week for a month (previously worked in CRT)
- Chief Executive has authorised overtime to enable CRT to catch up on the backlog
- The Assessment teams have elevated caseloads but staff vacancies are being filled.
- Grant funding has assisted with the increased demand in EHE

Consideration for future management

At this stage it is impossible to know what the ongoing increase in work will be over time as we have yet to fully understand the impact on children and families in terms of the subsequent return to “normality”. There is gathering evidence though that suggests that the COVID-19 lockdown measures increased abuse and neglect among newborns and infants. The Service has faced and continues to face significant pressure as a result of more families needing more support to deal with a wider range of problems and from the knock-on consequences of fewer people having received the support that would usually have been available at key moments in their lives.

Lockdown measures detrimentally affected the learning and development of all children but particularly the most disadvantaged. Some children have returned less confident and more anxious. In some cases, children had also become less independent, for example returning to their setting using dummies or back in nappies having previously been toilet trained. The fallout from Covid in terms of an economic downturn will inevitably put more pressures on council budgets and services at exactly the point where families need them most.

Over the short term we are making arrangements that we anticipate will support families and not overburden staff. Additional funding from Welsh Government in relation to EHE and also Summer activities is helping in this respect. However, if the increase continues it is clear that the service will be stretched to the point of requiring the consideration of additional funding and staffing.