

Demand and pressures on Children's Services

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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. Contacts are all requests for information and or support. Referrals are those cases that are deemed as crossing the threshold (i.e. more concerning) for assessment within our statutory social work service. 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 6 FTE Duty Officers. However, during the last 20 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 2-3 Duty Officers out of a possible 6.

If a decision is made that a child/young person needs a further assessment, these cases are allocated to one of two assessment teams that cover the county or if the child/young person has a disability then the case is allocated to the 0-25 Team. 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.

Following an Assessment for Care and Support if it is felt that ongoing support is required, the case will be transferred to one of 4 Child Care Teams, 2 based in Llanelli, 1 in Carmarthen and 1 in Ammanford. These teams have also experienced vacancies, often operating with 2-3 vacant posts.

If it is felt that statutory involvement is not required but the family would benefit from support then the case can be signposted to one of the many preventative services such as Team Around the Family, Family Intervention Service, Flying Start, Youth Preventative Services.

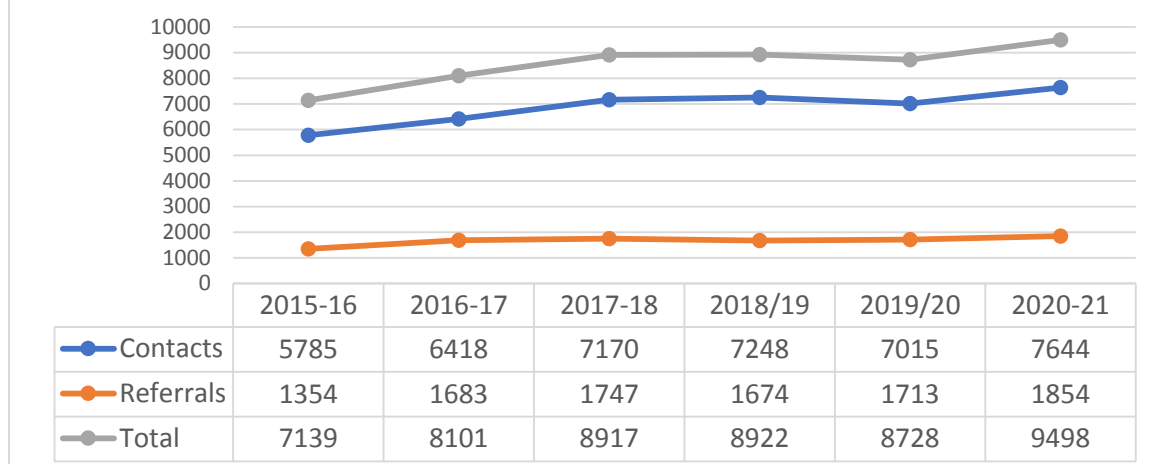
Current situation

Further to the report shared with Scrutiny Committee in July 2021 below is the current situation within Children's Services:-

Central Referral Team

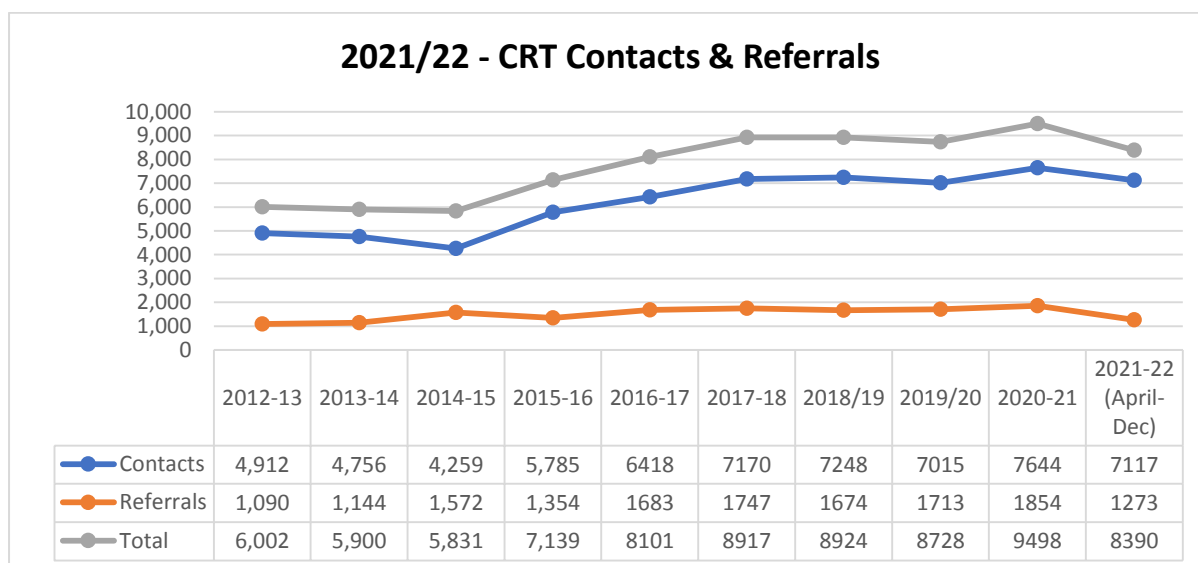
Since the pandemic contacts and referrals gradually increased throughout the year and as can be seen below as at the end of March 2021, 629 more contacts were received compared to 2020 and 141 more referrals.

Contacts & Referrals received



There has continued to be an increase in contacts throughout this year, however the number of referrals has decreased. This could well be due to the fact that Preventative Services are now providing face to face support as opposed to virtual support during the pandemic.

2021/22 - CRT Contacts & 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.

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) or if the child has a disability it will be allocated to the 0-25 Team.

The Police are the highest referrers into the Department – out of the 8390 contacts and referrals received between April – December 2021, 3069 were received from Police, the next being schools/college with 533 and Probation Service with 407.

Domestic Incident reports have increased substantially from 1814 during 19/20 to 2368 during 20/21, 1515 reports have already been received as at 31st December 2021.

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 20 months staffing levels within the Central Referral Team 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 of the temporary staff have now been offered permanent posts within the team through vacant posts. A third new worker did start in July, however due to the high volume of work and demanding nature of the role she did not feel able to continue and therefore made the decision to finish.

At the time of the last report due to staff shortages, the team were experiencing a backlog of work which was unprecedented for the team. Decisions continued to be made within the statutory timescale of 24 hours and work was prioritised in terms of child protection but there was a backlog in inputting data on to the computer system.

In an attempt to catch up with the work at that time, a colleague from the Preventative Services and a social worker from the Flying Start Service provided support and the Chief Executive also authorised overtime payment for the Duty Officers in an attempt to catch up with the backlog which was achieved.

Unfortunately, staffing levels have continued to be problematic, one member remains on long term sickness leave with 'long covid' and the others have been off with various ailments including covid. Additional grant funding was received to recruit 3 new Duty Officers until March 2022, however we have not been able to recruit to these posts due to having no suitable applicants.

The management structure has changed, the Manager of the Family Intervention Team is currently acting Team Manager and we have brought in an additional Assistant Team Manager to strengthen the team. We are also utilising a member of staff from the Preventative Service to work on a Sunday to prepare all referrals received over the weekend ready for a decision by the Duty Manager on the Monday morning, which then releases the Duty Officers to input directly on to the system. This has helped enormously in preventing further backlogs. Workers from the Family Intervention Team are also supporting when staffing levels are minimal.

Assessment Teams

If a decision is made that statutory intervention is required, the case will be allocated to one of the two Assessment Teams for an Assessment for Care and Support or a s47 investigation with the Police if an allegation of abuse has been made. There is a statutory requirement to complete the Assessment for Care and Support within 42 days.

The number of assessments undertaken by Children’s Services has increased significantly during the past 2 years, 2970 were completed between April 20 – December 20 compared to 3430 during the same period in 2021. The number of s47 joint investigations with the Police has also increased from 108 between April and December 2020 to 182 between April and December 2021. However, the teams have experienced vacancies during this period, in particular Carmarthen/Dinefwr Assessment Team having 3 vacancies at one point, fortunately the team is now fully staffed. Llanelli Assessment Team continues to have one vacancy.

The number of vacancies has impacted on the timescales for completing the assessments, as at December 2020, 94.5% of assessments were completed within timescales compared to 90% as at December 2021.

Long-term Child Care Teams

Following completion of the Assessment for Care and Support, if additional support is required the case will be transferred to one of the four child-care teams for ongoing support.

The number of caseloads within the child-care teams have remained fairly static with the exception of East Child Care Team and 0-25 Team, however the teams have experienced a number of vacancies which we have been unable to fill due to no applicants to the extent where some posts have been re-advertised several times. This has resulted in the need to recruit agency workers for the first time in many years, this problem is a nationwide crisis and the WG are looking at how they can support Local Authorities.

Caseloads as at 1.12.20					Caseloads as at 1.12.21				
CCCT	DCCT	ECCT	WCCT	0-25	CCCT	DCCT	ECCT	WCCT	0-25
114	102	116	123	179	121	106	133	121	229

The number of children on the Child Protection Register has also increased from 71 as at 31.12.20 to 91 as at 31.12.21 and the number of Looked After Children has also increased from 149 as at 31.12.20 to 161 as at 31.12.21.

This increase is likely to be significantly contributed to by the lack of community and preventative support services as well as children not being in school and professionals not seeing children during the pandemic.

Preventative Services

Flying Start – What are Flying Start doing to support Children’s Services:

This social care team within Flying Start is one of the key teams supporting the contacts and referrals to CRT.

The team had a social worker vacancy, but the assistant manager, despite her managerial duties, held some cases to prevent them going into CRT. The social care team normally work closely with CRT and will take on cases that may be on the cusp of referral to CRT, or even referred to CRT, in order that we may divert cases. This is especially so, where they know the family and already have a relationship that will help facilitate the family’s engagement. They also provide support services to prevent referral via face to face 1: 1 support, as well as face to face group work. This has been maintained throughout the pandemic.

The Domestic Abuse Project workers have supported some very complex cases within FS and some of which are in the statutory services. This work is to aid closure to statutory services and then to be maintained through ongoing support from FS. Support workers have provided 1:1 parenting support to statutory cases in order to support and aid closure and step down to FS. Health visitors will make internal referrals to FS services to support families to prevent referrals.

We have developed a case management discussion process, led by the FS social worker, where the more complex families are discussed, and plans reviewed. These cases also have input from one of our Educational Psychologists. We are now supporting families to be part of their own plan / decision making to improve outcomes / person centred approach.

We have also developed an early support panel to look at the more complex cases and the hard to reach / hard to engage families, alongside this – developing a new referral form. The first panel is due to take place once the referral form has been translated into Welsh. The aim of this is to develop more alignment / multi- disciplinary approach, reduce waiting times through identifying alternative service provision should there be a waiting time for eg in Team Camau Bach – to support the family while waiting for the more specialist service. This panel will also look at the hard to engage families, and to avoid referral to CRT due to this, look at alternative approaches / key workers, to support the family and improve outcomes.

We are flexible, and will support teams, such as CRT, in the interests of the family and child.

Families First update December 21:

In 2021 there was a reduction in activity, because it took time to establish the new, 'virtual' way of working, parents declining virtual support until face-to-face support could be offered, staff sickness/vacant posts. Group support ended and families/young people were being supported on a one-to-one basis.

Families' needs were more complex requiring longer periods of support. On a positive note, there was an overall improvement in outcomes for families, as reported via the distance travelled tool from 75% in 19/20 to 83% in 20/21.

From April – Dec 2021 all Families First projects apart from Home-Start are supporting families both virtually and face to face in a variety of locations including schools, office/community basis and families' homes.

TAF Coordinator continue to support CRT when possible.

Families First projects are now delivering their services face to face and virtually which may help to reduce the pressures on Children's Services. Project staff have been carrying out support in families' homes, in schools and in the community and office settings.

Parenting programmes (Nurture programme, Talking Teens) and the STAR programme are being delivered.

Additional funding secured from WG to alleviate waiting lists and to provide additional early help and support. Additional funding to allow staff to attend various training opportunities, to enhance their continued professional development.

Projects have been forging links and collaborating with other support services/agencies
Various activities, trips and parties were organised for young people and families

One of the main challenges faced by Families First project managers is staff sickness and staff having to isolate due to a member of the family testing positive for Covid. Vacant posts, staff movement and staff recruitment has also been a challenge. We have worked in partnership with partner programmes and agencies to ensure continuity of service provision where possible and funded external providers out of additional funding to ensure families are receiving support.

Referrals have increased in 21/22, this is due to projects adapting well to the pandemic, using a blended approach to ensure delivery of service, with more face-to-face contact being provided to young people and families.

The number of New to service families have increased during 21-22, reflecting on the increase in referrals to the programme.

The number of single agency JAFFs assessments closed have increased during 21-22, 94% of assessments had a positive forward movement on the distance travelled tool.

The number of cases stepped up to Social Services have decreased slightly during 21-22, this could be due early intervention projects successfully addressing the presenting needs of young people and families.

The number of cases stepped down from Social Services during Q1-Q3, 21-22 has increased, demonstrating that projects are open for business as usual, delivering their services both virtually and face-to-face

The table below compares the data for the same period in 2020/21 and 2021/22.

FF all-programme:	Q1-Q3 2021-22	Q1-Q3 2020-21
Total no. of referrals received	2129	1338
Total no. of families supported	2888	2197
Total no. of NEW families	2002 (69%)	888 (40%)
Total no. of single agency JAFF assessments closed demonstrating a forward movement on the distance travelled tool	382 (94%)	270 (81%)
Total no. of cases stepped up to Social Services	14	16
Total no. of cases stepped down from Social Services	58	52

Electively Home Educated (EHE)

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 School have a new procedure 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 School Safeguarding and Attendance Team 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

	Qtr. 1 2021/22	Qtr. 2 2021/22	Qtr. 3 2021/22	Qtr. 4 2021/22
Number of children that the Local Authority are aware of that are Electively Home Educated (EHE)	489	427	467	
% of the above that have NOT received an annual visit in the last 12 months	9.2%	14.98%	12.20%	
Number of EHE children that have received an annual visit in the last 12 months	433	372	410	

% of the above where the child was spoken to as part of the visit	64.4%	68.90%	61.00%	
Of the number of known EHE children (P3.1), what % have de-registered in the last 12 months	57.5%	58.78%	45.21%	

How the current situation has been managed

- Management support has been increased with an additional manager seconded into the CRT. This has increased oversight and made the decision-making process safer.
- 2 temporary members of CRT staff made permanent within vacant posts
- Member of staff from Preventative Services is supporting CRT by preparing referrals received from Police over the weekend
- Agency Workers have been appointed to both the Llanelli Assessment team and the Llanelli East Child Care Team as we have been unable to attract applicants to vacant posts. Agency workers are of variable quality and are paid a lot more than our own staff.
- Grant funding has assisted with the increased demand in EHE
- A Growth Bid was approved by Council for 6 additional social workers within the service (from 1st April 2022).

Unfortunately, the position with regard to vacancies across the statutory service, has not improved. We have 11 social work vacancies and have not attracted external applicants to vacant social work posts for the past two years. It is not just social work posts but also posts in business support. These posts are critical in supporting the social work teams and avoid social workers spending time on work that could, and should, be done by business support.

In response to the chronic staff shortages, we are currently building upon our existing “grow your own” scheme and considering how best to make ourselves competitive with neighbouring counties, particularly Swansea. There are workstreams across Children’s Services and Communities Departments working together to develop a consistent approach.