

Fast Track Children's Hearings Pilot

**Final Report of the
Evaluation of the Pilot**



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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Fast Track Children's Hearings Pilot

Final Report of the Evaluation of the Pilot

(Abridged Version)

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March 2005

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ISBN: 0-7559-4627-8

Scottish Executive
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Produced for the Scottish Executive by Astron B41197 05-05

Published by the Scottish Executive, June, 2005

Further copies are available from
Blackwell's Bookshop
53 South Bridge
Edinburgh
EH1 1YS

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Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the Scottish Executive for funding this study and providing support throughout. The advisory group set up for this evaluation provided helpful guidance.

We would like to thank the young people and parents who gave their consent for details about themselves to be used on a confidential basis for this research.

The evaluation was highly dependent on a wide range of agencies and individuals for providing information and in many cases a considerable amount of time, for which we are very thankful. Central to the study was close collaboration between the research team and colleagues in the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, who have provided much essential help to us. Special thanks are also due to the people who acted as key contacts representing reporters, local authority social work, the police, children's panel chairs, sheriffs and sheriff clerks. We valued very much the contributions made by many people to the research by giving interviews and completing questionnaires. Besides our key contacts, these included some young people and parents, reporters, children's panel members, service providers, teachers, and reporter administrative staff.

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THE FAST TRACK PILOT AND EVALUATION

Introduction to the report

This report presents key findings of the evaluation of the Fast Track children's hearings pilot in Scotland¹. The research was undertaken by staff at the Universities of Glasgow, Stirling and Strathclyde between February 2003 and January 2005.

The Fast Track hearings pilot in Scotland

The Scottish Executive decided that a Fast Track approach to the children's hearings system would be introduced in early 2003 on a pilot basis in selected parts of Scotland. The aim was to improve practice and outcomes with respect to the ways that the hearings system and associated services dealt with young people who persistently offend. Particular objectives were to:

- reduce the time taken both overall and at each stage of decision-making
- promote more comprehensive assessments which include appraisals of offending risk
- ensure that all young people who persistently offend and who require an appropriate programme have access to one
- reduce re-offending rates as a result of the concerted efforts made in such cases.

The reasons for targeting young people who offend persistently were that not only do they account for a disproportionate quantity of offences, but they were also growing in number by contrast with a stable pattern for infrequent offenders (SCRA 2002-3). Panel members and professionals involved in the children's hearings system believed it worked least well for young people who offend seriously or persistently (Hallett et al. 1998). Also there was a strong risk of graduating to adult court (Waterhouse et al. 2000).

For the purpose of the pilot, persistent offending was defined to cover young people referred to the reporter on offence grounds on five or more occasions within 6 months. It was also agreed that reporters could exercise discretion to include other young people under Fast Track (e.g. as a result of serious offences or to be pro-active where an individual appeared to be starting a persistent offending career.)

Six local authorities were chosen for the Pilot, grouped into three sites:

1. Dundee City
2. Scottish Borders and East Lothian
3. East, North and South Ayrshire

Following a preparatory period, the pilot began in February 2003, initially for a two year period. Funding was provided to the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA), the local authorities and police to facilitate the additional work required. The SCRA 'flagged' on its database (RAD) all cases as they qualified under the 5 offence

¹ This is an abridged version of a longer report that is available on Scottish Executive and University of Glasgow web-sites.

referral criterion or as a result of discretion. The point at which a case was so designated was known as 'entry'. It was for reporters to decide that a young person was no longer in Fast Track, at which point they were said to 'exit'.

The evaluation

The aims of the research were stipulated by the Scottish Executive as follows:

“To evaluate the effectiveness of the Fast Track hearings in processing persistent young offenders through the children’s hearings system more quickly than conventional hearings

To assess how and to what extent Fast Track hearings are achieving the aims of

Being better informed

Providing better monitoring of young people

Leading to better disposal outcomes

To assess the cost effectiveness of Fast Track hearings”

The Scottish Executive and research team believed it was important to include a comparative component in the research, so that evidence about practice, service provision and outcomes in the Fast Track areas could be considered in the light of what was happening in areas outside the pilot. It must be emphasised that it was not envisaged or possible to achieve precise matching of areas or cases, so any inferences drawn from the comparison need to be cautious. After consultation with the Executive and SCRA, three comparison authorities were included (Fife, Perth & Kinross and Renfrewshire). Individual authorities were not matched, but overall the comparison areas had a population only slightly lower than the pilot authorities combined, while a review of relevant demographic and youth crime data showed that each of the two types of area had similar ranges of deprivation and offending characteristics.

Information at the start of the study showed that the comparison sites together handled about 84% of the number of offence cases dealt with by the pilot sites in total. However, figures that became available later showed that there was an unexpected divergence in offence referrals to the reporter during 2002/3, which increased by 42% in the pilot areas, but by only 8% in the comparison sites. This needs to be taken into account when considering the study findings later.

Research design

The research used multiple methods and data sources to address its objectives.

1. Key contact interviews

Early in the study key contact people were identified in each relevant agency in the 6 pilot and 3 comparison areas. Interviews were held with these informants usually face-to-face, occasionally by phone, twice or three times during the main fieldwork period (May 2003-July 2004). They included reporters, social work managers, authority children’s panel chairs, children’s hearings training organisers, police,

sheriffs, sheriff clerks and reporter administrative staff. They were asked to provide copies of policy documents and relevant statistics. In the third round of interviews, a standard list of issues was presented to key contacts and their responses were recorded on a 5-point scale.

2. SCRA RAD Data

Information kept on the SCRA RAD with respect to relevant fast track and comparison site cases was made available to the research team, subject to consent from young people and parents and on the understanding that all the data would be treated on a confidential basis. When an objection was registered, the case was not included. With these omissions, the remaining large majority of cases constituted the *main sample* for the study (223). There were markedly more cases from the pilot sites (167) than the comparison sites (56). This reflects in part the wider slowing down of offence referrals noted above, but also the identification of persistent offender cases by SCRA started slightly later in the comparison sites.

3. Case questionnaire survey

To obtain perspectives on individual cases, questionnaires were issued to professionals and decision-makers involved with the 223 cases. Reporters, social workers, panel members and where appropriate teachers and safeguarders took part in this survey, though too few were received from the last two groups to be used in the analysis. Most of the hearings for which questionnaires were completed were review hearings (over half) or continued hearings. Fewer than one in ten were initial hearings.

4. Cost effectiveness analysis

The assessment of cost effectiveness drew on data converted from the RAD and certain variables from the questionnaire survey. In addition, information about the costs of services per case were provided by key social work contacts, usually on 10 cases per authority. Account was taken of offending patterns before and after the designation of a young person as persistently offending, using standard estimates of the costs of crime.

5. Intensive case study

To understand individual cases in more depth, largely qualitative interviews took place shortly after attending and observing a children's hearing, an approach that had worked well in a previous study of safeguarders (Hill et al 2003). It was the original intention to interview the young person, one or both parents, the social worker and the hearing chair in each case. However in some instances it was not convenient or possible to meet with one or more. A total of 10 hearings were studied. This part of the research was smaller than intended because of a change in researcher, the need to devote extra time to other aspects of the evaluation and cancellation of some appointments owing to changes in circumstances.

6. Service provider survey

Key social work contacts in both Fast Track and comparison areas provided lists of the main services used for young people who persistently offend. Questionnaires were mailed to all the service providers listed in the nine authorities.

Sample sizes are shown below with respect to sources from which the research team gathered information directly:

Table 1.3: Samples in the study

Elements of the study	Types of sample	Sample size
Key contact interviews in pilot sites	Reporters, social work, police, panel chairs and trainers interviewed three times each	22
Key contact interviews in pilot sites	Sheriffs and sheriff clerks interviewed once or twice	8
Key contact interviews in comparison sites	Reporters, social work, police, panel chairs interviewed twice	12
SCRA RAD data	Cases from the pilot sites	167
SCRA RAD data	Cases from the comparison sites	56
SCRA RAD data	SCRA administrative staff	6
Case questionnaire survey	Questionnaire returns by reporters	151
Case questionnaire survey	Questionnaire returns by social workers	111
Case questionnaire survey	Questionnaire returns by panel members	142
Cost effectiveness analysis	Cases on which standard information on service and costs inputs was obtained	84
Service provider survey	Agencies in pilot and comparison areas providing services for young people who persistently offend	58
Intensive case study	Cases where hearings were observed and participants interviewed	10

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF FAST TRACK

Introduction

This chapter describes:

- how the extra funding for Fast Track was deployed
- the number and nature of cases dealt with under Fast Track
- some of the *processes* for dealing with Fast track cases
- the nature of service inputs

Expenditure on Fast Track in Context

Since 2000, the Scottish Executive has provided considerable sums of money to local authorities for youth justice services and Restorative Justice initiatives, to supplement their general spending on children and families services. Both Fast track and comparison areas benefited from this income. The youth justice allocation for the Fast Track sites was about 15% greater, roughly in keeping with the difference in numbers of young people referred on offence grounds.

The additional amount of money that the six Fast Track authorities as a whole received initially was nearly £5 million to cover costs for the new approach in the preparatory year (2002-3) and first year of implementation (2003-4). About one third of this was devoted to start up costs, so the planned expenditure in the first year would be about £3.4 million. It is important to emphasise that this was *additional funding* and was not intended to cover the full costs of dealing with all Fast Track cases. Existing fieldwork and residential resources, as well as education and health services, would still cover those cases.

The funds received in 2003-4 by the pilot authorities for Fast Track and Youth Justice together was about three times the amount received by the Comparison sites for Youth Justice alone. In the preparatory year, three quarters of the Fast track funds went to SCRA, but after implementation 90% went to local authorities (in effect social work services). In each year small amounts were allocated to the police and for panel member training. Much of the expenditure went on additional staff posts, mainly for extra reporters, social workers/youth justice workers and support staff. To varying degrees, money was also invested in intensive support or specialist programmes offered by voluntary children's organisations and SACRO, on mentoring and fostering services and on purchasing specialist psychiatric input.

The Fast Track local authorities had 3 organisational models for using the additional funding to provide assessments and supervision:

1. youth justice workers placed in children and families teams – 4 authorities
2. a separate youth justice team – 1 authority
3. diffusion of case responsibility across existing children and families teams – 1 authority

Practice varied from area to area and case to case with regard to the involvement of the 'original' caseworkers. Sometimes the children and families worker withdrew, at least temporarily, as the youth justice (Fast Track) worker took over responsibility. In other instances both the youth justice worker and children and families team worker

stayed involved, but with different roles. In some social work areas, children and families teams were not required to work on Fast Track cases unless they were specifically asked to by Fast Track social workers.

The case questionnaire survey yielded information about the work context and experience of social workers dealing with persistent offending cases. One of the clear differences between the respondents in the pilot and comparison authorities was that in the latter group all but two worked in a Children and Families team, whilst in the pilot authorities 57% of respondents worked in Youth Justice and 37% in Children and Families teams (the remaining 6% had a specialist role). Even though the pilot sites had their new dedicated appointments, the workers there were more experienced than their counterparts in the comparison authorities. The average time in their present post was almost 4 years in pilot authorities, but just under 2 years in comparison sites.

Communication and training

At a national level a Fast Track implementation group was set up consisting of representatives of all the main stakeholders in each of the Fast Track areas and from the Scottish Executive. At regular meetings, experiences were shared, concerns aired and in the second year evidence from SCRA and the Evaluation Interim Report discussed. Each area also organised local inter-agency group meetings, sometimes with a total focus on Fast Track, sometimes to discuss wider youth justice strategies and issues.

Training for staff and decision-makers about Fast Track was done partly in-house by individual agencies and in part collaboratively. Children's Hearings trainers organised week-end events for panel members, to which other key agencies were invited. Information obtained towards the end of the research indicated that the majority of current panel members had received Fast Track training. For instance this was true for 82% in one authority. It had been intended that only panel members who had attended the specialist training would hear Fast Track cases, but in certain areas the unexpectedly large number of cases at the start resulted in this requirement being relaxed.

All except one of the 87 panel members in the pilot areas who completed case questionnaires had participated in initial Fast Track training. Feedback about the quality of training was generally very positive and the majority appeared satisfied that they now knew enough about Fast Track, but more than a quarter said that they would welcome further training.

Reporter, social work and Police key contacts stated that relevant staff had all received adequate information or training about Fast Track. A partial exception was that 'beat officers' had not been given formal training as such but rather had been given a 'brief' about Fast Track. No sheriffs or sheriff clerks had been given any Fast Track training and few recalled receiving detailed information about Fast Track.

Fast track and comparison cases

During the first 18 months of Fast Track 307 children 'entered' Fast Track. There was an initial surge of entries to Fast Track with 56 young people included in the first

month, because at 1st February a number of young people already met the criteria, on the basis of their offending patterns in the preceding 6 months.

By the end of the first 18 months, 76 young people had 'exited' Fast Track, leaving three quarters (231) still involved. The most common durations were between 7 and 13 months, but considerable numbers were in Fast Track for periods both longer and shorter than this.

Over the same period, 114 young people were classified as young people who persistently offend in the comparison sites, i.e. only a little more than a third of the number in the pilot sites. A small proportion of this difference can be explained by slight differences in the criterion (e.g. no discretionary cases). The much smaller number of cases and the absence of an initial surge meant that comparison sites, though lacking the additional resources, were subject to smaller demands.

Most young people in Fast Track were in their mid-teens. 85% were boys and 15% were girls, which corresponds with the wider gender distribution of young people reported for offending.

On average the number of offences committed over the period Feb. 2003 to July 2004 by young people in Fast Track was 18.2 compared with 2.4 for other young people referred on offence grounds (SCRA 2005). Three types of offence accounted for over half of the crimes recorded for young people in the pilot. These were breach of the peace (20%), assault (18%) and vandalism (16%). This pattern was broadly similar to that for all young people, although the proportion of vandalism was somewhat lower and breach of the peace higher.

In the year prior to being flagged as a persistent offender, that is 2002, the great majority of young people in both the pilot sample (86%) and comparison sample (80%) had been referred to the reporter for at least one offence. Many had also been referred on non-offence grounds (56% of the pilot sample and 41% of the comparison sample).

In the pilot areas, 80% of persistent offending cases were referred to a hearing. This was a higher proportion than occurred for similar cases in the comparison areas (68%). The percentage of children referred to a hearing on offence grounds but who were not persistently offending was much lower and also the same in both pilot and comparison sites, namely 13%. In the majority of cases that did not go to a hearing, this was because compulsory measures were already in operation or because the case was diverted for voluntary measures (SCRA 2005). Only a few of the referrals that prompted entry to Fast Track went to the Sheriff for proof, but if later referrals are taken into consideration overall about a quarter of young people in Fast Track had at least one referral go to a proof hearing.

The overall pattern for the living situations of young people in Fast track remained fairly stable over the first 18 months, but many of the individuals experienced changes. Four fifths were living in their family home at entry, most often in a lone parent household. This proportion had dropped slightly after 15 months and correspondingly the percentage of those living in residential or foster care rose to

about one quarter. However, one third had experienced a change in family carer and 10% returned home from accommodation.

Just over half the main sample were already on supervision when they entered Fast Track. About a third of them had ceased to be on supervision after 18 months, but a slightly larger number had begun supervision in the mean time. This meant that overall about one in five of young people did not experience supervision at all while in Fast Track.

Family awareness of Fast Track

Some key contacts admitted to concerns that the distinctive status of Fast Track would lead to stigma or resentment, but reported that experience had not borne this out. One reporter commented:

' ... we thought it would be a badge of honour but it's not happened... Parents? In fact they hope Fast Track will help the young person, as other options have failed.'

In the small numbers of interviews carried out with young people and parents, most knew about Fast Track, though a few did not. They usually understood that it was intended to shorten the gap between the offence and the hearing. Many were also aware of the criterion of multiple offending, e.g.

'Yeah I understood it: If I get hundreds of charges I get put on Fast Track.'

They had little awareness of the implications for assessment and services, however.

Service provision

The Fast track areas invested part of their additional funding in additional programmes and services, but key contacts in the comparison authorities argued that they too had developed effective early intervention and specialist programmes, partly through tapping into other sources of money (such as Community Safety or the Changing Children's Services Fund), as well as youth justice allocations.

For the survey of services used for young people who persistently offend, the comparison authorities suggested considerably fewer agencies than the pilot authorities and the response rate was also somewhat less good. Therefore, the survey response came from 10 services in the comparison sites and 48 in the Fast Track sites. A wide range of methods was employed, but most espoused a holistic approach to their work with children and young people. Interestingly, the majority did not specialise in offending related work, although one fifth did so exclusively and a fifth 'mainly'. In the Fast Track areas, most providers said they did not differentiate Fast Track referrals from others, though several did give them greater priority or more intensive help.

Information on service inputs to a sample of individual Fast Track cases showed that most often between 3 and 8 hours of community-based support was provided per week, of which typically between 1 and 3 hours was provided by the main social worker/youth justice worker. The usage of voluntary sector services ranged from three quarters of cases in one authority to under one fifth in two others. There was also considerable variation in the use for mentors, social work assistants, youth support

workers and through care staff. Data from comparison sites suggested that the range in time input of community based services was similar, but use of voluntary agencies occurred in fewer cases.

Although only a minority of young people who persistently offend were in residential care, the cost of this is so much higher than for community based services that this accounted for well over half the expenditure on individuals in Fast Track. Cost data were not available for education and health services, but the cost of social work community based services was under £200 per week in three quarters of cases, whereas all those in residential care cost at least £1000 per week and for one third the cost was over £3,000 per week.

Figures for the mean expenditure on young people who persistently offend showed that the spending in comparison sites was rather higher on average than in Fast track sites, presumably in part because the absence of additional funds was offset by the considerably lower numbers. For those living in the community, the mean expenditure in comparison sites was just over £9,000 for the 12 months after the case was flagged for persistent offending. This compared with just over £8,000 in Fast Track areas. The equivalent figures for young people accommodated residentially were £96,000 in comparison sites and £87,000 in pilot sites.

3. TO WHAT EXTENT WAS FAST TRACK SUCCESSFUL?

Introduction

Fast track was intended to improve both the processes and outcomes of the Children's Hearings system's responses, in the following respects:

1. Speeding up the time taken for decisions to be reached (and hence for young people to see the connection between their actions and the official response).
2. Improving assessments and action plans.
3. Guaranteeing access to suitable services.
4. Reducing the rate of offending.

This section considers each of these in turn, then concludes with the views of key participants.

Timescales

Standards were set for Fast Track to achieve quicker processes than hitherto (Audit Scotland 2002) at three stages:

1. From police charge until the reporter receives the police report.
2. From receipt of the police notification until the reporter decides on the response.
3. If the reporter decides to call a hearing, from reporter decision to hearing.

In other parts of Scotland including the comparison sites national standards with longer time-scales applied. The details are shown in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1: Target time-scales for Fast Track and comparison sites (in working days)

Stage	Fast Track	Comparison
Delivery of police reports	10 (for all cases)	10 (for 80 % cases)
Reporter decisions	28	50
Preparing for hearing	15	20

Police officers dealing with charges do not normally know that a young person is formally designated in terms of Fast Track, since that designation is made later by a reporter. Hence the police sought to improve speed of reporting for all offences thought to be perpetrated by children and young people. Data provided by SCRA and the police forces showed that the proportion of police reports delivered within 10 days increased markedly in all the forces covering Fast Track areas, much less so in other forces. Moreover the delivery rates in the divisions dealing exclusively with Fast Track areas were very high (86% to 95%), though this was also true for one division covering a comparison site (94%).

For the most part, reporters met the target of making decisions within 28 days, since the mean figure for all cases where a decision had been reached was 27 days. In only one of the 6 authorities was the mean figure over 28. In all the comparison sites it typically took much longer and in two of them the mean time taken was over 50 working days.

Local authority Initial Assessment Reports and Social Background Reports, which are requested to assist reporters make their decisions about referrals, should be submitted within 20 days. According to the PA report (2004), which used SCRA statistics, the performance of Fast Track local authorities in producing social work reports within 20 working days was much better than comparison authorities and indeed nearly all other Scottish authorities, though there were still quite a few 'late' submissions. The delivery of reports within this target from 49% to 100% in Fast Track areas, but 20% to 48% in comparison sites. Some social work key contacts in the present study argued that their Fast track submission rates were better than shown by SCRA data, as they used slightly different definitions of both what constituted relevant reports and the timing of delivery. Certain of the key contacts in the research from Police, reporters and social work suggested that electronic sharing of reports would not only overcome some of the practical problems of postal or personal delivery of written documents, but have further advantages of improved information sharing.

The national standard in all hearings cases for the gap between a reporter decision and a hearing is 20 working days, while the Fast Track target is 15 working days. Three of the pilot authorities achieved the Fast Track target for persistent offending cases, as did one of the comparison authorities. The other three pilot authorities had averages of 16 or 17 days, while the other two comparison sites averaged 19 and 22. Figures for the whole period from a reporter's receipt of referral until a hearing (when one was called) showed that the mean time taken in pilot sites for persistent offending cases was 55 working days. This was markedly less than the averages for similar cases in the comparison sites (72 working days), for other offence cases in the pilot areas (71) and in particular for other offence cases in the comparison sites (82) (SCRA 2005). In short, Fast Track cases were dealt with more quickly than others.

Assessment and care plans

Panel chair and reporter key contacts mostly felt that the quality and usefulness of social work reports had improved in the Fast Track system. Reports were considered to be more comprehensive, in-depth, timely, and focused, compared with previously or with current non-Fast Track cases.

Likewise, three-quarters of reporters' case questionnaire responses in the Fast Track areas indicated improvement in the quality of social work assessment. This was not matched in the comparison areas, where only one in six reported an improvement. In the case questionnaire survey, over three quarters of panel members were well satisfied with the social work assessment of the young person's needs in Fast Track cases. Panel members suggested that the Fast Track reports provided more detailed information, were more clearly focused on offending issues and able to draw upon a wider range of resources.

Similarly favourable comments were made about higher quality action plans compared with pre-Fast Track practice in the majority of instances. Nearly all panel member questionnaires stated that action plans in Fast Track cases were at least adequate and many were considered very appropriate. A fifth of panel members in the survey thought, however, that offending behaviour was not sufficiently addressed.

Social work key respondents indicated that the capacity to deploy dedicated workers led to better assessments, an improved format for writing reports and a clearer focus in their work. For some this represented an opportunity to make a change in previous practice, while others regarded this as an extension of their existing approach. The introduction of Fast Track could also have valuable side effects in that the dedicated resources for Fast Track allowed other workers more time to devote to family support or child protection work. However, it was also pointed out that the efforts devoted to assessments could detract from the time available for direct work, especially in the early stages of Fast Track when in some areas large numbers of more comprehensive assessments had to be carried out over a short period.

In the Fast track cases, use of a standard risk assessment form was almost universally achieved, as either YLS or ASSET was used in 95% of cases. The application of these was much less in comparison sites (one third of cases).

Generally panel members said they found the risk assessments tools useful, though it was suggested the reasons behind the risk scores and their implications should be included routinely in reports to hearings.

Access to services

Key contacts in pilot areas reported that insufficient time had been allowed to set up some of the new services by the time Fast Track started. Therefore, sometimes the desired services were not available in the early stages of implementation. However, once these initial problems were overcome, most respondents believed that Fast Track ensured ready availability of appropriate services. For instance, one social work key contact said:

Basically we have more resources for young offenders at our fingertips (now). We have health specialists, outreach support, psychiatric and psychological health support...so in general we have access to quality services and we have access to relevant supports.

A social worker commented on a particular case that:

'We have resources available now and we didn't have resources available before'.

In the case questionnaires, over half the panel members in Fast Track areas thought that Fast Track had led to quicker access to resources and a similar number thought that additional resources were now available. However, others thought that the range of services available was still inadequate, as one panel chair remarked:

'Fast Track will not make any difference unless the budgets and options for services are there to support the system....there is still a lack of options for the young person.'

Case information revealed that the Fast Track authorities arranged for higher proportions of young people who persistently offend to receive additional services from voluntary agencies than in the comparison areas. Also twice as many attended standard, offence-related programmes (40% against 20%).

In over two-thirds of the Fast Track cases (68%), reporters' case questionnaire responses stated that the range of services had increased compared to previous experience, which was less often the case for comparison cases (50%). There was a similar pattern of reported improvement in the length of time it took to access services in the Fast Track pilot areas: reporters felt that access was quicker in just under three-quarter of the cases there (72%) but in only just over one-third of comparison cases (37%). Social workers in Fast Track areas also rated more of the interventions as successful than social workers in comparison sites.

More general feedback on services from key contacts indicated that, in both types of area, most types of relevant service were seen as satisfactory or good, but Fast Track contacts rated more highly the availability of intensive support and mentoring. Both key contacts and responses from reporters, panel members and social workers on case questionnaires identified gaps in services, which tended to apply in all areas. These were:

- Mental health services
- Specialist day education
- Structured leisure provision
- Psychological services
- Particular care placements
- Evening and week-end support

Offending behaviour: Fast Track cases

A vital part of the evaluation was to chart changes in offending by the young people before and after they entered fast track, as well as parallel data for the young people who persistently offend in the comparison sites.

The study was reliant on official records on young people's offending. These are commonly used as a proxy indicator for criminal activity, but it must be borne in mind that such figures diverge greatly from young people's self reports and are greatly affected by police detection rates and charging practices (Farrington 1992; Lloyd et al 1994; McNeill and Batchelor 2005). Certain key contacts in two of the pilot sites informed us that police in their areas introduced zero tolerance policies that resulted in a substantial increase in charging especially of more minor offences during the pilot period. Others also pointed out that practice varied considerably in responding to incidents in residential care, which might be either treated as crimes or as domestic disputes not requiring a formal charge. Data provided by the police force covering one fast track site showed an increase in the number of charges by one third in the relevant division between 2002-3 and 2003-4, though there had been a similar rise in the division covering a comparison site.

Data was readily available from SCRA about referrals to the reporter by the police, but this excludes information about (alleged) crimes that are referred to the Procurator Fiscal. This gap in information is particularly important when young people are over 16, an age which many young people in the samples had reached or were approaching at the start. For some purposes, it was possible to obtain the post-16 data.

The SCRA Update (2005) analysed offence-based referrals to the reporter for the 228 young people who were in Fast Track during the first 12 months. In all, the number of

offences committed by these young people in the 6-months immediately after entry to Fast Track had reduced by over 500 (23%), compared with the period 6 months before entry. 11% were not referred at all in the 6-month after period and a further 29% were referred only once or twice.

For a smaller sample of 109 cases, Bradshaw (2005) compared offending patterns before and after a date two months after the setting of the Fast Track flag. Consultation with practitioners had indicated that it took on average about two months after flagging until direct work began with the young people, since the interim period was taken up with assessment and arranging hearings. 70% of the young people had a lower rate of offending and this resulted in a reduction by one third in the total number of offences in the ensuing 6 months. 13% of the young people had stopped offending. On the other hand one fifth increased offending.

Changes in offending compared

It is instructive to compare the offending trends in the Fast Track and comparison areas, since it might be assumed that the samples of young people who persistently offend were broadly similar. Certainly the case questionnaire and SCRA data suggested that both included similar ranges as regards previous offence referral patterns, broad age patterns, gender balance and living situation. However it was not possible to match the individuals or allow for differences in prior interventions that may have affected outcomes, so it cannot be firmly concluded that any differences in outcome were due to the differences in treatment and services. Six months after implementation is also a short period during which to assess service effectiveness, allowing little scope to assess whether reductions in offending are temporary or whether the benefits of interventions become more apparent in the longer term.

Across evaluation samples as a whole, an analysis using both reporter referral and post-16 data showed that a clear majority of young people had reduced their offending after they were 'flagged'. However the proportion with lower offending was higher in the comparison sites (81% as opposed to 69%). Similarly the mean number of offences per young person declined in both areas, but to a larger degree in the comparison sites. In the Fast Track areas the mean number of offences committed fell from 9.1 to 7.5 (N=167), whereas in the comparison sites the fall was from 10.7 to 5 (N=56). In individual pilot authorities, the proportion of young people reducing offending ranged from 50% to 82%. In comparison authorities the range was from 70%-91%.

Within pilot sites, the highest reduction in offending occurred in the age group 12-13 (85%) and the lowest (41%) in the 9-11 age group. In the comparison sites, all young people under the age of 14 had reduced their offending, 76% of those aged 14-15 and 50% of young people aged 16+. Within both pilot and comparison sites, the proportion committing fewer offences in the six months after implementation compared with the previous six months, was greater among young people initially classed as high or very high level offenders.

SCRA was asked to carry out an analysis to check the offending patterns identified in the evaluation. As data about offending after the age of 16 was not readily available, the analysis was done on young people aged less than 15 and under half years. Also

the period of 1 June 2003 to April 2004 was used, since this omitted the early Fast Track period when the comparison sites were not involved and allowed time to assess the reported number of offences before and after the case was designated as a Fast Track/persistent offender case. 111 Fast Track and 50 comparison site cases were included. Further comparable information was provided on equivalent cases for the whole of Scotland (N = 578).

Two sets of figures were produced, one including joint referrals to the Procurator Fiscal and reporter and the other using only referrals to the reporter, since these result in different timings for the registration of referrals by SCRA. In addition, the number of offences was considered as well as the number of referrals. Finally, periods of 6 months before and after were examined, first with respect to the setting of the flag and secondly to the presumed implementation date 61 days (2 months) later. Although the figures differed in detail, they were all broadly in the same direction, consistent with the main sample data, namely that the comparison site cases had *larger reductions* in offending than the Fast Track cases. Moreover the comparison sites were performing better than the Scotland as a whole, while Fast Track areas collectively were not. This is illustrated in Table 3.2

Table 3.2: Comparison of changes in offending before and after the qualification as ‘persistent offender’

TYPE OF CHANGE	Fast Track cases N = 111	Comparison site cases N = 50	All of Scotland N = 578
Number of <i>offences</i> 6 months before and after ‘Implementation’	Down 32%	Down 55%	Down 42%
Number of <i>offence referrals</i> 6 months before and after	Down 32%	Down 54%	Down 41%

In the three comparison authorities the reductions in offences ranged from 45% to 70% and all were greater than the fast track authorities (14% to 44%).

One Fast Track authority provided information that showed a marked drop in 2004 (compared with the two previous years) of the number of court reports required for young people aged 16-17 and in the percentage of these that resulted in custody. This suggests long run gains as regards involvement in the Criminal Justice System, which were attributed to the youth justice work carried out locally, including Fast Track.

Cost-effectiveness

An important component of the evaluation was to carry out a cost effectiveness analysis. This involved relating data about service inputs (expenditure of money and staff time) to outcomes and their costs. The main outcome indicator used was the incidence of offending 6 months after the ‘implementation’ of Fast track compared with the previous 6 months and the equivalent changes in offending for comparison site cases. The analysis was constrained by timing issues (the study started at the beginning of implementation and could not gather pre-Fast Track cost figures) and data limitations (information about inputs was partial and varied in format).

Social work contacts in both Fast Track and comparison sites provided information on a sample of cases about the financial cost or time input of staff from their own or voluntary services, including residential and foster care provision. Educational and health service input had to be disregarded as details were not available. The analysis included used an estimate of the costs entailed in responding to youth crime. No figures were available from the Scottish context, so an estimate based on the English system was utilised (ITV Telethon/Prince's Trust 1997) adjusted by the HM Treasury GDP deflator index. This probably over estimated costs since the Children's Hearings system is cheaper (Miller 2003). The costs of crime vary according to the type of offence. However, the effects of this could be discounted, as the nature of offences before and after implementation showed a similar range and there were also not significant differences in pattern between Fast Track and comparison areas.

First it was calculated that the quicker time for processing cases in Fast Track areas, combined with the reduction in post-implementation offending, resulted in a potential saving of approximately £350 per case, compared with comparison sites. The reductions in offending in both types of area resulted in savings of youth crime costs, but the savings were greater in the comparison areas since the decreases in offending were greater. On the other hand, young people in the Comparison sub-sample received services of a higher financial value than those in the Fast Track sub-sample.

For the Fast Track sample of young people who did not enter residential care the post-implementation service costs were on average £8,000 and the savings from reduced offending were estimated to be approximately £4,000 per case. This does not mean a net loss, as the pre-implementation service costs data should also be considered but were not available. By contrast, even disregarding pre-implementation service costs, the comparison authorities appeared to achieve a net saving. The post-implementation mean service cost was just over £9,000, while the saving from reduced offending was just under £20,000. On this evidence the comparison site interventions seem to have been considerably more effective than the Fast Track services.

Other indicators of change

Besides the data about offence referrals, the evaluation gathered other information that shed light on the effects of Fast Track.

Data based on risk assessment is, by definition, not about actual criminal behaviour, but about the likelihood of criminal activity. Nevertheless the assessment tools have been based on research on populations elsewhere showing statistical associations between their scores and levels of crime, so they can cautiously be regarded as an indicator, though their value in assessing change is open to question. Scores on YLS or ASSET for fast track cases where at least two assessments were available showed that just over half (56%) stayed in the same risk category (low, medium or high), a third (34%) showed decreased risk and one in ten (10%) move into a higher category.

Data was available from local authorities on 88 cases where a young person had exited Fast Track about the reason for exiting. In 70% of cases, the young person was reported to have improved or responded and in 10% not to have done so. In a further 16% of cases the young person was now being dealt with by the adult criminal justice system.

Analysis by SCRA of the 231 children still in Fast Track on 31 July 2004 showed that two thirds had been referred on grounds other than offences since the start of Fast Track 18 months previously. Quite often these other referrals also related to the young person's behaviour: being beyond control of a parental figure (43%), having bad associations or being in moral danger (27%) and drug or alcohol misuse (18%). However, one fifth had been victims of abuse or lack of parental care.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of Fast Track

Reporters, panel members and social workers were asked on questionnaires to comment on how effective the interventions had been in meeting objectives for the case under consideration. Many reporters were guarded in their ratings, with about half opting for a description of 'partly effective'(49%), nearly a third for fully effective (32%) and the rest doubting any positive impact. This was very similar to the pattern of responses in comparison areas, where reporters considered that services were fully effective in one quarter of cases (26%) and partly effective in just under three-fifths of cases (58%). Panel members in Fast Track areas described a higher proportion of cases as partly effective. In Fast Track areas reporters felt services were fully effective in improving other aspects of the young person's life in one-fifth of cases and partly effective in two-thirds of cases (65%).

Panel members indicated on case questionnaires that inclusion in the Fast Track pilot had had a positive impact in about half the cases and a mixed impact in a further quarter. Among the more positive comments were:

"Offending has reduced considerably and the young person has begun to take action on responsibility for himself, his actions and his future."

"A big change in this young man. In his words 'he's getting his head together'."

Others observed that the young person had failed to engage with Fast Track, though it should be remembered that quite likely such young people would not have engaged with plans even if Fast Track had not been introduced:

"Young person did not attend regularly or keep appointments. He did not engage."

Social workers were asked to rate how effective the work described in the case questionnaires had been in helping young people address their difficulties. Overall, social workers in the pilot authorities rated a higher proportion than in comparison areas as effective or very effective (52% compared with 35%). Social workers also specified which services they thought had been most effective in reducing offending as follows:

- offending specific work (28%)
- changes in care placement or the support of carers (20%)
- generally supportive relationships with workers in projects (15%);
- a good experience in school or work (12%);
- drug related services (10%).

A very similar range of services were mentioned as helping improve other aspects of young people's lives, indicating the inter-relationship between these and offending. For a number of young people, progress was not attributed to any service, but to

significant life changes, such as a partner's pregnancy or obtaining employment. Those developments had provided a new focus and dramatically changed how young people spent their spare time and the company they kept.

Social work comments on how Fast Track had made a difference include the following:

'Access to residential school has been quicker which in this case was appropriate and good for the child'

'A. has benefited from opportunities made available to him, this indicated by a reduction in offending and remaining in mainstream school'

Others described a better service on offer but limitations in the young person's response or further resources required:

'More resources available to D. (though not always welcomed by the young person)'

'Priority access to [two intensive support services] but benefits were not sustained because of delay in accessing close support residential provision'

Responses from comparison sites also identified a wide and similar range of services as particularly effective. These included: work on offending behaviour; care placements, including foster care and secure accommodation; specialist day education; flexible support and work on interpersonal issues within the family.

The small number of young people and parents interviewed in the study were usually satisfied with the service and in the few instances where they expressed negative views about the intervention, this was unrelated to Fast Track. The majority claimed that it was helping them cut down on their offending, though a few disagreed. One young person said:

'It's better now because before I was getting into trouble. Every day I was committing offences.'

Participants' Views of Fast Track

Nearly all key contact respondents in the pilot areas saw considerable advantages in the Fast Track system, often stating that, if operated properly, this was the way the children's hearing system was meant to be. When asked to provide reasons as to why they thought Fast Track was a positive innovation, interviewees tended to stress two core features of the initiative, firstly, the added resources made available and, secondly, the 'quicker' time scales. As noted above, many believed this had been instrumental in reducing offending.

The extra staff appointed as a result of Fast Track was seen by some informants, including panel chairs, as vital to ensure that there were sufficient social work staff recruited and retained to carry out assessments and report writing efficiently. The benefits were emphasised in the following remarks by service providers in Fast track areas:

'Quick referrals to reporter aids young people having to take more responsibility for their actions.'

‘Process quickly, more services. Action plans being implemented’.

‘The main advantage is the employment of specialist Fast Track workers who can employ the assistance of the multi-disciplinary team to assist and assess the needs with regard to young person’s offending behaviour.’

Similarly key contacts favoured quick action, which was thought to highlight to young people and parents that the matter was serious. As one reporter put it:

It (i.e. Fast Track) is a service that responds quickly, that takes offences seriously, and that gives a clear message to the young person that their behaviour is something that needs to be addressed

A panel chair said:

I think it reinforces to children concerned the relation between cause and effect...a lot of the children have been around the system a long time and they get very fatalistic: this brings home the link between the hearing and what they have done.

This was also said to have been a ‘knock on’ effect such that parents, too, were much more able to infer a ‘cause and effect’ relationship between the offence and the hearing.

Several key contacts pointed to a synergistic effect, whereby the whole package of quick responses, better assessments and improved access to services combined to produce a generally better approach towards young offenders. Therefore professionals’ confidence in the system was increased and staff felt energised, which led to cumulative benefits at each stage of the process. These points are illustrated by the following comments from a reporter and panel chair:

We can get the reports on time, we can make our decisions within the timescales, we get a higher quality of reports, we get an adequate assessment of the young person, young people are now prioritised.

I think it’s a package. You can’t separate the different bits out. You have a guaranteed resource in 90% of cases, so panel members can make a decision quicker. So they are both available and they are put together. This leads to better quality of decision.

Diffusion of improvements into related areas of work was observed by a number of people. The Police generalised to all juvenile referrals their improved speed of providing reports. In addition, reporter, panel chairs and social work key contacts reported positive ‘knock on’ effects for social work practice in non-Fast Track cases. This resulted from staff who applied more widely what they had learned from their work on Fast Track cases (e.g. social workers providing clearer and more structured assessments and reports).

A separate point was that improved work or resources with young offenders could assist in family support and child protection. Some social workers noted that where youth justice teams or specialist Fast Track social work teams had been adopted, there

had been a reduction of work load in existing children's and families' teams, freeing up their ability to work on family issues more readily.

The reservations about Fast Track were usually secondary but nonetheless important. These included temporary or persisting gaps in resources, information sharing difficulties that particularly affected achievement of time-scales and certain negative consequences of focusing time and energy on Fast Track cases. Also concerns were expressed about particular elements of Fast Track, notably the entry and exit criteria. It was generally agreed that Fast Track had been introduced too quickly, so that in the early days staff were less well prepared than they should have been, while some dedicated services were not yet available nor key staff in post. In certain localities, the existing shortage of social workers meant that dedicated Fast Track staff were asked to take on full case responsibility, which they thought diluted their focus on offending-based work.

The workload implications were often considerable of devoting much time and effort to produce reports and reach decisions more quickly and more often. A police representative pointed to overtime demands and added stress. In one police authority it was noted that a backlog had accumulated in their other work because of their force concentrating efforts on Fast Track cases and other priority areas, though they were now seeking to overcome that problem. Similarly some social workers believed that too much emphasis was being placed on case management and meeting paperwork and time-scale targets, which when combined with more frequent hearings, left little time for intervention.

On the other hand, several reported that the Fast Track emphasis on quick assessments meant these were not done thoroughly, especially when young people had not previously been known to social workers and they or their parents were reluctant to engage. Panel chairs, who are volunteers, experienced a significant increase in organisational and paper work, with little extra support.

The workload implications for reporters seemed more variable. In areas with few Fast Track cases, the impact on their work demands was not thought to be great, but elsewhere they were more conscious of the extra requirements and possible negative side-effects:

One of the things is that reporters are working so hard that they do not have time to think...reflection time is squeezed out. I think there is a huge risk that we become process driven and lose sight of being child centred.

Entry criteria

Respondents from all agencies, both managers and case workers, questioned the targeting of extra resources on the sole basis of persistence of offending. Few suggested that persistence should be ignored, but many wanted seriousness to be taken into account as well.

Reporters did have discretion to include young people with one or a few serious offences, but it was thought by some that this should have been part of the official criterion. During the final stages of the research, one of the statements presented to

key contacts in pilot sites was ‘Reporters should have discretion to exclude from Fast Track young people with five offence referrals in six months when the offences are not serious’. Strikingly 18 out of the 19 (95%) Fast Track interviewees agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. As a hearing chair said:

‘I think Fast Track should be concentrating on serious offenders and it’s not: there must be some way of sorting out ‘the wheat from the chaff’.

A range of people cited examples of what they saw as minor or trivial offences that triggered inclusion in Fast Track, when they believed it was not necessary, e.g.

‘Stuff like littering, and kicking council trees! You wouldn’t treat adults so harshly for things like that, we need to discuss who we really are targeting.’

In some quarters it was also argued that younger children (under age 12) were too young for Fast Track. It was preferable for them to be dealt with by children and families teams rather than youth justice and cognitive-behavioural approaches.

Offences in residential care

In the first stage of this research several respondents observed that some young people qualified for Fast Track because of offences committed in residential care. There are two separate issues here. The first concerns offending away from units and schools committed by young people without an offending history who became involved in criminal activity as a result of associating with young people in residential care who are inclined to offend. The second issue concerns incidents within establishments, usually involving ‘violent’ behaviour towards staff or other residents.

Key contacts referred to young people with little or no previous offending history who accumulated offences as a result of incidents in residential units, thereby qualifying for Fast Track even though their offences appeared to be very specific to their living situation. A few reporters thought that such offending might be compounded due to cramped conditions in establishments or staff difficulties in managing young people with a variety of different needs. No respondent felt offending in establishments should be ignored, but some reporters and authority panel chairs noted that there was a serious need for residential staff to receive training that might help to ease tensions.

In the light of concerns expressed at the Interim Report stage of the research, the extent of this ‘problem’ was explored by Bradshaw (2005). He found that 13% of offences committed by young people in Fast Track prior to being flagged took place in a residential establishment. Many of these young people only met the entry criterion for Fast Track, because offences committed inside the establishment took them above the 5 referrals in 6 months threshold. Strikingly, over three quarters (86%) of those who had been living in residential establishments had such an offence.

Exit criteria

In the earlier parts of the research, some respondents expressed dissatisfaction or uncertainty about the basis on which young people could or did leave Fast Track. The Scottish Executive Guidance Booklet did not refer to an upper age limit, but described the two main considerations for the exit strategy as completion of programmes that address offending behaviour and reduction in offending episodes. Some confusion was expressed about how and when to judge that a young person had not responded

well or whether an exit should automatically result from the end of a supervision requirement or the young person reaching age 16 or 18. As a result of such concerns, changes were made to the exit criteria. In the third round of key contact interviews general satisfaction was expressed with the new criteria and complaints about this issue had largely ceased.

Personal and electronic communication

Interpersonal contact and communication was generally reported to be good and to have improved as a result of Fast Track. A number of key contacts pointed out that there had been improvements in inter-agency communication at local level. This covered strategic and managerial co-operation (mainly through joint meetings and agreements) as well as co-ordination and discussion on particular cases.

Sharing of detailed case information across agency boundaries, especially electronically, was regarded as problematic. Fast Track did not cause the problems but highlighted them. This was apparent both from the need to achieve targets for the delivery of reports and from the requirements of tracking individuals' progress over time, especially as regards offending. There were some differences in viewpoint about definitions of basic terms, such as what constituted a referral, which kinds of report were relevant for the timescale target and what counted as a timely or late report.

Several respondents from police, social work and SCRA pointed out that some of the difficulties and resource demands arising from postal or personal delivery of reports could be overcome if there were a suitable confidentially secure e-mail connection. It was also recognised that information protocols had to be established which could also assist wider monitoring and planning. Alternatively, some interviewees suggested that having a central database accessible to all, with all the data on a relevant young person, might be a better way of organising the data.

The evaluation itself, as well as attempts at local monitoring, emphasised the importance of being able to track young people's offending patterns between the children's hearings and adult criminal justice systems. At present, court records about young people are not collated in a systematic way, while the SCRA information about offence referrals is not directly connected to information held by the Police, Procurators Fiscal and Scottish Criminal Records Office about offences post-16.

Links to the Court system

The research team wanted to gain the viewpoints of Sheriffs and clerks, since they affect and are affected by Fast Track. Sheriffs have an interest in measures to tackle persistent offending, since if these are ineffective the young people are likely to appear before them from the age of 16 onward. More specifically, when cases go to proof for guilt to be established or not, this inevitably influences the gap between incident and hearing decision. Most reporters and social workers thought that proof hearings would have a negative impact on meeting Fast Track time scales, and that factors affecting these were outwith their personal control. Some had already had experience of this. One reporter described how some of the cases going to proof '*held things back by 6 weeks*'.

Sheriffs and clerks covering all the pilot areas were invited to take part in the research but some declined, so only a few of each contributed their viewpoints. Most admitted to having little or no knowledge of Fast Track. Some indicated that they would have liked more information.

Clerks normally tried to prioritise any child protection or offending case involving a child, but were under no special obligation to deal with Fast Track cases quicker. They were often not clear whether a case was formally Fast Tracked, so tended to treat all hearings cases the same as regards time-scales. Several Sheriffs and clerks suggested it would be helpful if reporters and Procurators Fiscal let them know which cases are Fast Track in order to aid prioritising of early hearing dates.

Views on the future of Fast Track

In the final round of key contact interviews, respondents were asked to give their views and advice on the question of whether Fast Track should be rolled out across the whole of Scotland. Interestingly, support for this was voiced not only in Fast Track areas, as some contacts in comparison areas also wanted Fast Track extended nationally. Nearly everyone from the Pilot areas was in favour of making the Fast Track system more widely applicable, but often this was accompanied by fears that this might not work well unless:

1. a similar level of resources was provided
2. lessons were learned from the pilot about timing and information-sharing.

Respondents also urged that there be a longer preparatory period and that information-sharing between Police, reporters and social work services be improved. It was suggested by a few interviewees that there might be difficulties in extending Fast Track nationally without some form of overall overarching body or arrangement to co-ordinate implementation.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This evaluation obtained several different kinds of information from a wide range of sources in order to examine the ways in which the new Fast Track approach to children's hearings was put into effect and to assemble evidence about the apparent consequences. A multi-faceted study was necessary to reflect the reality that the existing children's hearings and associated service system involves a complex and geographically varied set of activities across several key agencies, while Fast Track itself had multiple components and was introduced in six diverse authorities. These elements would all interact with other features of the social and policy environments to influence the behaviour of young people and their families in complicated ways.

Information about the nature and impact of the Fast Track approach was compared with similar data from comparison areas. However it must be emphasised that the comparison areas, although chosen to have a similar spread of social advantage/disadvantage and youth offending patterns, could not be precisely matched with the Fast Track authorities. Indeed certain important differences emerged during the course of the study. Likewise the samples of young people who persistently offend in the two types of area had broadly similar ranges of key characteristics, but may also have differed in significant ways that were not detected in the study. Hence the contrasts that emerged could be related to factors other than Fast Track.

Resource deployment and service development

A considerable sum was provided to the pilot areas to resource Fast Track (£5 million over the preparatory year and the first year of implementation). Part of this was specifically directed at speeding up the processing and decision-making in relevant cases, particularly through SCRA, though also by means of Police organisational changes and panel member training. Part was directed at dedicated interventions, provided by local authorities, voluntary agencies or partnerships. A considerable portion was spent on additional local authority social work/youth justice staff to fulfil both purposes. In all, local authorities received about three fifths of the Fast Track financial allocation from the Scottish Executive, which worked out at about £13,000 per case in the first 18 months.

Nearly all the spending was directed at faster assessment, communication and decision-making and on community based social work services with an offending focus. Very little was directed at education, health or residential care, yet these were often crucial. Firstly residential care in particular was very expensive. It was used in more than a quarter of the cases, yet accounted for about two thirds of all the spending on fast track cases, little of it derived from Fast Track funds. Very limited information was available about the costs of additional learning support or mental health services, but respondents said that their presence or absence was critical in a number of cases.

The comparison authorities did not receive an additional sum, but were able to deploy 'routine' services, boosted by youth justice and restorative justice funding and access to other sources such as community safety programmes.

In addition to their field social work services, more than 100 different agencies or projects were used by the 9 local authorities in the study. About one fifth of these were focused exclusively on people who offend and one fifth mainly so, with the majority covering a range of client groups and referral reasons. The evaluation could not attempt to evaluate these interventions individually, although several of the programmes developed under Fast Track are based on previous evidence about effectiveness in reducing criminal reconvictions (see e.g. Lipsey 1995).

Opinions about Fast Track

Key contacts in Fast Track areas generally approved of Fast Track, as indeed did most people in comparison sites, although some of these suggested that their own youth justice strategies and resources were as good. Many respondents expressed the opinion that ideally all children dealt with by the children's hearings system should be treated with the speed and additional resourcing of Fast Track. The focus on quicker timescales was generally welcomed and it was felt there was a definite improvement in these and in youth crime rates as a result of Fast Track. A common fear was that if Fast Track were to be rolled out without similar levels of funding the system, it would no longer function properly.

Most people involved with Fast Track thought that the approach was not in tension with the importance to addressing young people's needs as well as deeds. Also the main service providers in both Fast Track and comparison sites included attention to non-offence related matters, even when this was a primary focus. However a minority did voice concerns that there was too much concentration on offending.

Some respondents identified disadvantages in Fast Track. They thought it risked diverting resources away from other young people or was concentrating resources too much on 'offence orientated' schemes. Early on it was argued that the criteria and processes of exiting were too rigid, but later this issue was seen to have been largely sorted out. However, concern remained among a number of people that the entry criteria should take more account of offence seriousness as well as persistence. Nearly all key contacts in the Fast Track areas wanted reporters to have discretion to exclude from entry to Fast Track young people whose 'persistent' offences were not serious.

Fast Track and comparison cases

In the first 18 months just over 300 young people were included in Fast Track. Data on the comparison sites has suggested that they should have had about 20% fewer young people classed as 'persistent offenders', but in fact over the same 18-month period there were only a little over a third of the number in the Fast Track pilot areas (i.e. 114). Moreover, information that became available after the start of the study showed that the comparison sites collectively were experiencing a much smaller increase in offence referrals to the reporter than the Fast track areas as a whole (an 8% increase from 2001/2 to 2002/3, compared with a 42% in Fast track sites). This meant that the comparison authorities could concentrate resources on fewer offending cases generally and also on fewer cases of young people who persistently offend. That helps explain why, contrary to expectations, *social work service* expenditure on a sub-sample of Fast Track cases was on average somewhat lower than a sub-sample of comparison cases.

On the whole, young people who had been persistently offending in the two kinds of areas received similar ranges of both level and type of service, although young people in Fast Track were more likely to be referred to a standard intensive support programme or be allocated a mentor. The mean expenditure per case was higher in comparison sites, both for young people who spent time in residential care and those who did not.

Evidence about impact on procedures and interventions

The study showed that in most respects Fast Track was largely meeting its objectives, except significantly when it came to offending trends.

Data on the interval between key stages of decision-making showed that the speed of handling cases of persistent offending in the pilot areas was faster than in the comparison sites and, with only a few exceptions, met the targets. As police officers do not know in advance whether a case will be included in Fast Track, the Police set targets to improve the speed at which offence-based referrals were made to reporters for *all* young people under 16, i.e. not only those who were persistently offending. The introduction of Fast Track was accompanied by a marked improvement in the Police meeting of these time-scale targets (86% to 95% in the divisions covering Fast Track sites, much higher than in most other parts of Scotland).

In five Fast Track areas reporters met their target of making a final decision as to whether a young person should be brought to a hearing within 28 working days. The sixth area had a mean time only slightly above the target. The comparison sites were not expected to achieve the same time-scales and two of them had mean figures for over 50 working days. Similarly the submission times for social work reports showed a big improvement compared with both previous practice and comparison sites.

Nearly all respondents were supportive of the emphasis on quicker responses, but some representatives of each of the three main agencies suggested that at times the speed was detracting from quality or that other work was suffering in order not to be late with Fast Track cases.

All the pilot authorities used a standard offending risk assessment tool, either YLS or ASSET. Almost all social work respondents dealing with Fast Track cases stated that a risk assessment tool had been used, as opposed to about one third responsible for comparison cases. In general panel members reported these to be a useful tool.

Evidence from reporters and panel members indicated that social work assessments and action plans were better in Fast Track areas. A number of respondents stated that assessments for hearings had become more focussed and that more emphasis was given to offending. Action plans and service provision in the pilot authorities were reported to concentrate more on accommodation and living arrangements and lifestyle issues than in comparison sites. Panel members also reported greater confidence in recommended services being available, but fewer than half of action plans for Fast Track cases that were said by reporters to be adequately implemented.

Some new dedicated services funded by Fast Track were not ready at the start. Nevertheless, in most cases suitable services were accessed, though this was also true in the majority of comparison cases too. Social workers in Fast Track areas rated more of the interventions as successful than social workers in comparison sites. The main deficiencies in interventions were similar in both types of area, especially with regard to mental health services and additional day learning support.

Interpersonal and electronic communication

Interpersonal communication among agencies was usually reported to have improved in pilot areas, assisted by frequent and regular planning and review meetings. However, problems in sharing information were identified by respondents in relation to their own operations. This was also highlighted by the difficulties the research team found in obtaining certain crucial data. Of particular importance was the absence of secure and convenient electronic means for transferring qualitative and quantitative data between agencies. This affected practice with regard to the delivery of social work reports to reporters, which require postal or personal delivery of hard copies, leading in some cases to late arrival and/or disagreement about whether a report was received on time. Also considerable staff time was sometimes taken up in order to save a few hours or 1 to 2 days delay that would otherwise render the report late. In only about half the cases was information about the time of charges effectively transferred between the Police and SCRA.

The study also identified substantial issues about information at the interface between the children's hearings and the adult criminal justice system. In general it appears that some courts do not keep or collate consistent numeric records of cases where children and young people offend. When cases were referred to proof, clerks and sheriffs were rarely knew which were included in Fast Track. Especially important with regard to the monitoring of offending careers is the lack of connection between SCRA data on re-referrals on the one hand and police and court records on the other about charges and convictions of young people under 18. It is recognised that these matters raise ethical as well as technical and inter-agency issues.

The impact on young people and offending

Reports from social work contacts about cases that had exited Fast Track were largely positive, though it must be borne in mind that young people who were thought to need further help to achieve or maintain gains would often not have exited. 70% of young people who had exited were said to have done so because they had improved or responded to the programme. About a quarter had not responded and/or were now involved in the adult criminal justice system. Just over half of the young people with two or more risk assessment scores had remained in the same broad grouping, while one third had moved to a lower risk category and 10% were not rated as higher risk than before. In the majority of cases in the evaluation sample, reporters and panel members thought the intervention had had positive results, which was true for only slightly smaller proportions in comparison areas. Moreover, the general view was that young people's welfare needs had not suffered from a focus on offending.

Official indicators showed a decrease in offending behaviour by most young people after they became involved in Fast Track. SCRA data showed a decline of one quarter

in referrals for offences in the 6 months after Fast Track designation compared with 6 months before. This was confirmed by data for the evaluation sample, which also included post-16 data, though the impact was least for those at the younger end of the age spectrum (9-11 years).

However, when the trends in the performance of the similar (but not matched) cases in the comparison authorities were considered, the data revealed a greater reduction in offending there than in Fast Track areas. Moreover each comparison authority had a better record of reduced offending than all of the Fast Track areas. The findings did not appear to have been skewed by a small number of high offending individuals. The conclusion that comparison sites had a greater impact on offending should be qualified by noting that the period of judgement was measuring only short-term effects over 4-6 months.

Discussion and implications

The study has shown that Fast Track largely captured the hearts and minds of those engaged in implementing it. Also it has been successful in speeding up the time taken for decision-making and delivery of reports, while the quality of assessment and action plans had improved.

Two other conclusions were less expected. Firstly social work expenditure per case did not appear to be greater. However, it must be borne in mind that Fast Track areas had to spread their resources over higher numbers of cases and in the early stages some interventions were not yet available. Moreover, the cost estimates were based on relatively crude data, omitting consideration of education, health and other costs.

Secondly, the numbers of (officially recorded) offences went down, But the reduction was considerably less than in the comparison areas, suggesting the latter were more successful. When the costs of crime were taken into account, on average Fast Track cost more than comparison sites per young person, because the drop in offending had been smaller.

Since the ultimate aim of Fast Track was to reduce offending more than conventional hearings, the meaning of the data merits exploration. Official offending data always bears a complex relationship to actual law-breaking activity, since it depends on a host of factors including police detection rates and charging practices which vary over place and time (Lloyd et al 1994). The research team was not in a position to establish whether there were marked variations that could account for the differences across the two types of area. These each encompassed different divisions of three forces, so it might seem that an unlikely combination of circumstances would result in all three comparison areas having more stringent practices than all the Fast Track areas. On the other hand, variations were described in responses to minor offences and incidents in residential care, while significant changes towards charging for more minor offences were reported from some of the pilot divisions, so this explanation cannot be ruled out.

Differences in the sample may also have been important – perhaps those who persistently offended in the comparison sites were less disposed to carry on to the same extent. The comparative sample did have a lower average rate of offending in

the 6 months prior to Fast Track, but otherwise the samples were broadly similar on key characteristics such as age, gender and living situation. The differences in post-implementation offending patterns were not due to a few exceptional cases, as the spread of trends was similar.

It is also important to recognise that within the time-scale of the evaluation it was possible to track offending for an adequate number of young people only over 6 months. Most research that examines post-intervention trends considers 1 or 2 year periods, while arguably the eventual extent of criminality in adulthood is a crucial outcome measure (Burnett and Roberts 2004).

With those caveats in mind, if it is assumed that the offending data is accurate, then the comparison sites have been particularly successful not only in achieving longer term reductions in overall offending by young people, but also in the offences committed by those classified as persistent offenders. It will be recalled from Chapter 1 that the comparison sites had an overall decline in their rates of referral on offence grounds from 2002 to 2003 much greater than in the pilot sites.

This may reflect better preventive and intervention strategies set up before Fast Track, as some comparison area key contacts suggested. Moreover, despite not receiving the added resources of Fast Track, the lower numbers of persistent offending cases did allow for somewhat higher expenditure per case, which may also be a contributory factor. Those lower numbers may themselves represent a virtuous circle achieved by earlier investment. Also relevant may be the comments from a number of participants in the research, especially within social work but also reporters, that time was being diverted into assessments, report-writing and more frequent hearings, which meant less time for intervention. A few also suggested that haste in decision-making might have resulted in less appropriate decisions.

Whatever led to the reductions in offending, the accounts given by social workers about the reasons for improvements in individual cases indicated that these factors were wide-ranging, varied according to individual circumstances and included external changes as well as formal interventions. In both pilot and comparison areas they referred to offending-related programmes (more often in Fast Track cases), relationship work, a change in living situation, the support of trusted people, good experiences of school and life events. This fits with previous evidence about the success of multimodal approaches, the importance of personal relationships and the need for time to engage with young people (Lipsey 1995; Utting and Vennard 2000), but highlights the difficulty of isolating simple explanations for changes across populations of young people.

Final Conclusions

The Fast Track system was implemented largely as planned, although a few delays occurred in setting up intervention services. In retrospect, more attention could have been given to shortfalls in mental health and education services, while the crucial impact of residential care on both costs and outcomes also merits further consideration.

The evidence indicates that the approach was clearly successful in speeding up the processes for dealing with and deciding about young people who persistently offend. In some respects the resources had led to improvements in this respect with a wider population of young people. Concerted efforts by Police, reporters and social workers all contributed to this. The quicker processing of cases in Fast Track areas should mean that there are savings to society from the earlier onset of reduction in offending. However, there is considerable scope to improve inter-agency sharing of information electronically.

The evaluation produced mixed results with regard to the effects of Fast Track on young people. The majority of young people were said to have engaged well and feedback on cases indicated more all round improvements than in comparison sites. Offending by the young people in Fast Track did decrease, but the reduction in comparison sites was even greater. Therefore, contrary to some expectations, the cost effectiveness of work in the comparison sites was on average better. This might be accounted for by differences in the areas and samples as well as limitations in the data. However there is also evidence to suggest that the choice of comparison areas had by chance settled on locations where strategies were already producing reductions in offending. This in turn means that resources were focused on fewer cases, so even though the range of interventions available was somewhat less, the overall service input per case was higher, which may help explain the difference in offending trends.

In short, the verdict from the evaluation on the effectiveness of Fast Track is definitely positive with regard to time-scales and other aspects such as assessment and action plans, but not proven with regard to impact on offending.

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