

More haste, less speed?

An evaluation of Fast Track policies to tackle persistent youth offending in Scotland

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Abstract

In 2003 the Scottish Executive introduced a new Fast Track policy on a pilot basis, which was intended to speed up the processing of persistent youth offending cases and reduce rates of persistent offending. Additional resources were provided to promote access to dedicated programmes, as well as quicker assessment, report delivery and decision-making. This paper, based on a multi-stranded comparative evaluation, describes how the policy was welcomed by a wide range of practitioners, decision-makers and managers involved with children's hearings, most of thought it was a positive innovation consistent with the hearing system's commitment to a welfare-based approach. Fast Track cases were handled more quickly than others. After two years, however, the policy was discontinued, largely because of negative evidence about re-offending.

Key Words Youth crime; Youth justice; Children's hearings; Scotland; Policy evaluation

Introduction

In 2003 the Scottish Executive piloted a new policy for dealing with persistent offending by young people that was widely welcomed by practitioners and managers at local level. The policy was called Fast Track Children's Hearings, though the characterisation of the policy as 'fast tracking' only conveyed part of the story, since thorough assessment and guaranteed access to dedicated programmes were as integral to the policy as speed. The Executive provided additional resources to promote access to such programmes and to facilitate quicker assessment, report delivery and decision-making. Two years later the policy was discontinued following a multi-stranded comparative evaluation. This article discusses the nature and findings of this research, with lessons not only for this particular policy but also for evidence-based policy more generally.

Over the last 20 years support has grown for the idea that it is desirable to target youth justice interventions on young people whose offences are serious or persistent. Not only do they cause a disproportionate amount of harm to society and victims, but they are most at risk of becoming 'life course' offenders (Hagell and Newburn 1994; Smith 1995; Whyte 2006). However, there remain uncertainties and disagreement about how best to deal with minor or less persistent offenders, since there are well documented dangers of net-widening and up-tariffing, while early or pre-emptive intervention strategies aiming to nip youth crime careers in the bud are by definition directed at those who have not yet become heavily involved in offending, if at all (Muncie and Goldson 2006; Smith 2003). In Scotland young people who offend are not normally dealt with by courtsⁱ, but by children's hearings, which also handle 'care

and protection' and school non-attendance referrals (Lockyer and Stone 1998; Hill et al 2006). Hearings are conducted by three lay people (panel members) and referrals to the system are managed by children's reporters. A survey carried out in the mid 1990s of panel members and professionals involved in the hearings system found that most thought it was generally effective, but did not work so well for young people who offend seriously or persistently (Hallett, et al. 1998). Also such young people are at high risk of graduating to adult court (Waterhouse, et al. 2000).

The Scottish First Minister in 2003 expressed concern that the hearings were not coping well with young people who persistently offend, though as Whyte (2006) points out *failing* to deal effectively with this group is not the same as *being unable* to do so. Even so, concern that hearings were not dealing adequately with criminal and anti-social behaviour led the Scottish Executive to carry out a review of the Children's hearings system over much the same period as the Fast Track pilot (Scottish Executive 2005). Also there was a wider policy focus on youth crime, with a managerial emphasis on targets and procedures (Audit Scotland 2002; Scottish Executive, 2002a and b) and new legislation targeting anti-social behaviour. McAra (2006) has argued that such recent policies have been in tension with both the welfare-oriented tradition of the hearings and its own social inclusion goals, resulting in 'somewhat contradictory rationales' (p. 127).

A key component of the Youth Crime Strategy was to reduce persistent offending by 10% in four years. In developing its policies, the Scottish Executive was aware of the substantial body of empirical evidence showing that certain kinds of programme with an emphasis on challenging attitudes and behaviour have been effective in reducing

rates of offending, though some inconsistency in the results has also been identified (Hollin 1995; McGuire and Priestley 1995; McNeill forthcoming; Utting and Vennard 2000). A second key influence was an assumption that speeding up the processing of cases would also improve the impact of hearings. This follows a trend across Europe (van der Laan 2003).

Hence the Executive decided to introduce a Fast Track approach to the children's hearings system in early 2003 on a pilot basis in selected parts of Scotland. The aims were to:

- reduce the time taken at each stage of decision-making
- promote more comprehensive assessments including 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.

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).

Six local authorities were chosen for the pilot. Nearly £5 million was allocated to cover costs for preparing systems and services (2002-3) and the first year of implementation (2003-4). Over 90% of the allocation was given to the reporters Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA) and local authorities to implement the policy. Small amounts went to enhance the training and infrastructure

for police and panel members. It is important to emphasise that this was *additional funding* on top of the sums received by all authorities for youth justice and children and families services. Thus it was not intended to cover the full costs of dealing with Fast Track cases. Existing fieldwork and residential resources, as well as education and health services, would still cover those cases.

The evaluation and its aims

The research was undertaken by staff at the Universities of Glasgow, Stirling and Strathclyde between February 2003 and January 2005 (Hill et al 2005).

The Scottish Executive stipulated multiple aims for the research. These included assessing whether Fast Track hearings

- processed cases more quickly than conventional hearings
- were better informed and led to better outcomes
- were cost effective

The primary concern of the Scottish Executive in commissioning the evaluation was to assess whether Fast Track ‘worked’ – in particular was it effective in reducing offending? A wider concern, recognised by the Executive, was that the new initiative might be seen by many participants in the children’s hearings system as deviating substantially (and negatively) from core principles of the hearings. In particular the hearings are based on the idea that all children should be treated in broadly similar ways regardless of the reason that they come to official attention and that the child’s interests should be the primary consideration, even if it is their behaviour that prompts the need for compulsory action (Lockyer and Stone 1998; Hill et al. 2006). Fast Track potentially breached this principle in two ways. Firstly it singled out a set of young

people to be dealt with differently from the majority of referrals. Secondly it required a programme focusing on the young person's behaviour (though also giving consideration to her/his welfare).

For some this could be seen as reinforcing a growing cleavage in how the hearings deal with care and protection cases and with youth crime. Although the decision-making has remained integrated, the associated policies and services have become more separate in recent years, with the setting up of youth justice teams separate from children and families teams in local authorities and National Standards for Youth Justice services. New legal measures such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, Parenting Orders and Intensive Support and Monitoring Services ('tagging') have introduced what some have seen as a more punitive approach. This also appears to show more convergence towards the greater politicisation of youth justice policy in England and Wales, with a shift away from the 'welfarism' seen to characterise the Scottish approach (Bottoms and Dignan 2004; Pitts 2005; McAara 2006. However, Whyte (2006) notes that failing to help young people desist from crime is detrimental to their welfare, as well as that of the community, so there is not necessarily a contradiction between focusing on the attitudes and behaviour surrounding offences and a young person's long term interests.

Hence the research gathered not only data about the nature and effects of Fast Track, but also views on how far the new approach was seen as acceptable and compatible with the hearings' principles.

Research design and samples

The research had a comparative component, 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. Similar data from the same kinds of sources were obtained from three comparison authorities whose total population was close to that of all the pilot authorities together. Individual authorities were not matched, but a review of relevant demographic and youth crime data showed that the two groups of pilot and comparison areas each had similar ranges of deprivation and offending characteristics.

Information at the start of the study showed that the comparison areas together handled about 84% of the number of youth offending 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 areas. This difference in trend would be important in interpreting the study findings later.

The research used multiple methods and data sources to address its objectives. In the 6 pilot and 3 comparison authorities interviews were conducted with reporters, social work managers, senior panel members, children's hearings training organisers, police, sheriffs, sheriff clerks and reporter administrative staff. In most cases, interviews occurred twice or three times during the main fieldwork period (May 2003-July 2004). A postal questionnaire survey was carried out of service providers in the nine authorities that worked with young people who persistently offend.

To obtain perspectives on individual cases, questionnaires were issued to reporters, panel members and social workers. Information from the reporters' national database on the same cases was made available to the research team. Permission to send questionnaires and use the database was sought from young people and parents on the understanding that all the data would be treated confidentially. 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 difference reflects in part the more general slowing down of offence referrals in the comparison areas relative to pilot areas noted above, but also small differences in the process for identifying persistent offender cases on the database.

To understand individual cases in more depth, largely qualitative interviews took place shortly after attending and observing a children's hearing. Time constraints meant- that this part of the research was restricted to 10 cases.

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

Table 1 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 interviewed three times each; sheriffs and sheriff	30

	clerks once or twice	
Key contact interviews in comparison sites	Reporters, social work, police, panel chairs interviewed twice	12
Reporter database data	Cases from the pilot sites	167
Reporter database data	Cases from the comparison sites	56
Interviews on database	Reporter 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 data	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

The following presentation of selected findings from the data concentrates firstly on views about the consistency or not of Fast Track with the integrated children's hearings system, then with evidence about time-scales and effectiveness, the two key components of Fast Track.

Key informant viewpoints on the relationship between Fast Track and fundamentals of the children's hearings

Information was gained in various ways on views about Fast Track and its compatibility with perceptions of essential and desirable aspects of the children's hearings system. Several questions on this matter were asked in interviews with key informants, including those in comparison authorities who did not have an interest in favour of Fast Track. Also open-ended questions related to this issue were included in questionnaires to reporters, panel members, social workers and service providers.

With hardly any exceptions, key informants in both Fast Track and comparison areas did not see Fast Track as in tension with the fundamental principles of the children's hearings system. Indeed many said that it was helping to put those principles into practice effectively. More than one person stated '*This is how the hearings system should be*'. In explaining this, they clarified that the main elements of Fast Track should be available to all children dealt with by the hearings (i.e. more thorough assessment, prompt response and guaranteed access to appropriate resources). Some accepted that it was right in the first instance to pilot this with one priority group (young people who persistently offend), while others wanted it to be universalised. Only a small number, however, explicitly criticised Fast Track for potentially stigmatising young people. Also the interviews carried out with a small number of young people and parents indicated that they were not conscious of being labelled or treated differently, except that their case was being considered more quickly than usual.

Most respondents highlighted additional and more varied resources as the most critical benefit of Fast Track compared with 'normal' hearings cases:

Guarantee of provision of services... in the normal system there is no guarantee of services. (Panel chair)

(The quality of services) has improved, definitely. Also the use of services has been more imaginative, especially with the use of mentors and outreach workers. (Police)

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. (Reporter)

The main affects (of Fast Track)...are that we can now access resources that we could not access before...(leading to) a more positive approach... (we are) more confident that care plans can be implemented, that resources (for the care plan) will be there. (Social work)

Most respondents also believed that the additional money given to agencies in Fast Track areas was associated with an improvement in the service. One panel chair reported that the feedback sheets routinely completed by panel members on each case '*are on the whole incredibly positive.. they see results*'.

Some people suggested that the better quality of work in Fast Track was being reproduced when dealing with other kinds of case (or might generalise given time). A further indirect benefit, observed particularly by social work managers, was that better resourcing of youth justice and specialist Fast Track teams led to a reduction of work load in existing children's and families teams, freeing up their ability to work on family issues more readily. A panel chair also commented favourably about a knock on effect for social work in non-Fast Track cases:

Fast Track has taken the pressure off other services, and has allowed them to focus on more day to day services.....there has been a freeing up of resources.

Asked if Fast Track would give rise to difficulties in balancing responses to a child's needs and deeds, most key contacts felt that no problems resulted, provided that all the elements of Fast Track worked effectively. Several valued the redressing of the balance to give more priority to addressing behaviour, supporting the Executive view that this was a desirable change in orientation. The emphasis on a prompt response was thought to motivate young people to change:

I think it reinforces to children concerned the relation between cause and effect...() this brings home the link between the hearing and what they have done. (Panel chair)

Drawbacks to Fast Track were identified, though many of these related to its initial operationalisation, including some issues such as lack of clarity about exiting the Fast Track that were sorted out during the course of the evaluation. Panel chairs were all conscious of a significant increase in their own workloads (e.g. in relation to training, advice, attending meetings, assisting with the research). 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:

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. (Reporter)

This last comment illustrates a wish expressed by certain others too that ‘managerialism’ as well as the focus on offending should not override concerns with young people’s needs.

Survey data on opinions about Fast Track

In the questionnaires filled in by panel members during the later stages of the research they were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a number of statements about Fast Track, based on their general experience of the pilot. The results are summarised in Table 2. There was fairly widespread agreement that Fast Track had resulted in quicker decision making and an enhanced focus on offending behaviour. At the same time, a big majority of the panel members believed that Fast

Track has not adversely affected attention to young people’s needs and very few thought it applied unhelpful labels to young people. The point about which panel members were most divided or unsure was whether Fast Track had produced readier access to resources as intended.

Table 2: Panel members views on changes after Fast Track

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
Quicker decision making	31	4	4
More focus on offending behaviour	29	6	4
Quicker access to resources	23	9	9
Additional resources available	12	10	11
Reduced focus on young person’s needs	6	29	4
Attachment of unhelpful label to young person	3	30	7

[N=41]

Some suggested that, aside from the speedier timescales and additional resources, Fast Track was in practice little different from traditional hearings:

Great to see referrals coming quicker. I do not regard or treat Fast Track differently. (Panel member)

I don't think there is much difference between Fast Track and normal hearings apart from additional resources. I think that all hearings should be fast-tracked, not just offenders. (Panel member)

Some panel members suggested that the resources provided for Fast Track should be made more widely available in order that the benefits were not restricted to young people who persistently offend

Besides seeking general opinions about Fast Track the questionnaires asked about the application to a particular case. Nearly all the panel members stated that action plans in Fast Track cases were adequate, appropriate or very appropriate. As one panel member explained “*it seemed to be flexible and thorough enough to meet the needs*”. In most cases panel members believed that the plan paid sufficient attention to both offending issues and welfare issues. Interestingly the minority who identified an imbalance were more concerned about a neglect of the young person's deeds rather than needs. In all a fifth of panel members thought that offending behaviour was insufficiently addressed in the case under consideration:

There is little specific action on offending and more focussed on 'child minding', leisure activities, filling child's day. (Panel member)

Details of how offending behaviour was to be addressed could have been clearly identified. (Panel member)

The reporter questionnaires also asked for case specific information about attention to the offence and other matters at the hearing. In the Fast Track areas (N=69) over four fifths of responses indicated that an appropriate amount of attention had been given to both the offence and family matters, with three quarters stating that coverage of school was about right too. This supports the views of panel members that Fast Track was paying due regard to the offence, but not at the expense of 'welfare' issues. Furthermore, the reporters considered that in the vast majority of instances these issues were discussed no differently whether or not the case was part of Fast Track.

Similarly, reporters commenting on the Fast Track cases were mainly positive about the effectiveness of services in improving aspects of the young person's life *other than* offending. They felt services were fully effective in one-fifth of cases and partly effective in two-thirds of cases (N=77). In the comparison authorities, reporters considered that services were fully effective in only one in ten cases but partly effective in a similar proportion of cases as in the pilot authorities (N=17).

Most social workers who completed questionnaires indicated that the amount and type of services available under Fast Track were good. Though a few mentioned continuing shortages (e.g. mental health services), several noted an improvement in availability:

(The voluntary agency) has provided services to stabilise the level of offending and it has dropped...(these services) helped by taking him out and engaging in activities as diversions.' (Social worker)

The version of the questionnaire for service providers sent to those in the pilot authorities included questions asking for their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of Fast Track and its impact on their work. The main gains emphasised were the shorter time between offences and the hearing, enlarged capacity to provide and combine services, sometimes on an inter-disciplinary basis, and the way this enabled focussed intervention.

The speed of system: consistent assessment model; targeting of services to identified need'. (Service provider)

Addresses serious behaviour in a timescale that is meaningful to the child. Better focus on coordination of services and responses.' (Service provider)

The majority of *service provider* respondents expressed support for Fast Track but a number argued that Fast Track risked diverting resources away from other important needs of young people or detracted from a holistic welfare orientation to young people.

Has altered the agenda/value of service negatively: too little emphasis on welfare care and protection. Highlights offending disproportionately. (Service provider)

The potential for stigma was also noted by some service providers.

Can label young people. Does not take holistic approach (Service provider)

Characteristics of Fast Track cases

To make sense of the evidence about the impact of Fast Track, it is necessary to review briefly the nature of the cases covered by the new policy. During the first 18 months of the pilot, 307 children 'entered' Fast Track. Young people could 'exit' if work was deemed to have been completed successfully or conversely if no progress was made. Also a young person could exit on reaching adulthood. By the end of the first 18 months, 76 young people had 'exited', leaving three quarters (231) still involved. The most common durations were between 7 and 13 months.

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 (Moffit and Caspi 2001; SCRA 2002).

On average the number of offences committed over the period February 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 Update 2005). The main types of offences committed were broadly similar to the patterns for offences by young people as a whole, i.e. breach of the peace (20%), assault (18%) and vandalism (16%).

It might be expected that young people who persistently offend require some form of compulsory intervention. In Scotland this normally consists of a supervision requirement by a children's hearing, which may apply to a young person living at

home or direct that s/he live in residential or foster care. Just over half of 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.

Views on the effectiveness of Fast Track

While *general* feedback about Fast Track by participants was largely favourable, comments on *individual cases* showed more mixed perceptions of its effectiveness. 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%).

Social workers in both types of area were asked about the reasons for improvement (if this had occurred) and collectively provided a wide-ranging list of issues, which suggests that there was no single or simple answer to the young person’s needs and deeds. 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. Fast Track social workers specified the following services as ones 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 work (10%).

Responses from comparison sites identified a similar range of services as particularly effective.

Outcomes with respect to time-scales

The case studies indicated that parents and young people had limited understanding of Fast Track, but did tend to see the quicker process as its key element, not the services. The Government had set Standards 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:

Table 3: 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

Data provided by SCRA and the police forces showed that the percentage of police reports delivered within 10 days increased markedly in all the forces covering Fast Track areas, much less so in other forces. 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 all the comparison sites it typically took much longer and in two of them the mean time taken was over 50 working days. Similarly the Initial Assessment and Social Background Reports provided by local authority social workers to reporters had an average submission rate in the Fast Track areas (49% to 100% within 20 days) that was much quicker than in comparison authorities (20% to 48%).

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 was 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 days.

Overall it may be concluded that at each stage, agencies in Fast Track areas processed cases more quickly on average (a) than they had previously and (b) than occurred in

comparison areas, though in a small minority of cases targets were not met. This in itself meant there was a shorter period of opportunity for re-offending, while the comparatively quick response could have deterrent effects. However, at both central and local government levels it was recognised that specialist assessment and services were also required to modify the offending, so we now consider the impact of Fast Track on these.

Assessment and care plans

In the Fast Track cases, use of a standard risk assessment form was almost universally achieved, as either YLS (Hoge and Andrews 2001; Hoge 2002) or ASSET (Burnett and Roberts 2004) was used in 95% of cases. The application of these was much less in comparison sites (one third of cases).

Most panel chair and reporter key contacts said that, since the introduction of the Fast Track system, social work reports had typically become more comprehensive, 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. Similarly more panel members rated social work assessments and action plans as good in Fast Track cases than comparison cases.

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. However, once these initial problems were overcome, most respondents believed that Fast Track ensured ready availability of appropriate services, e.g.

Basically we have more resources for young offenders at our fingertips (now).

We have health specialists, outreach support, psychiatric and psychological health support... (Social work manager)

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 of mentors, social work assistants, youth support workers and through care staff. Data from comparison sites suggested that the range of time input of community based services was similar, but use of voluntary agencies occurred in fewer cases. Also only half as many attended standard, offence-related programmes (20% against 40%).

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.

Offending behaviour outcomes

Thus far the evidence has suggested that young people in Fast Track were normally dealt with more quickly, given a standard risk assessment and had a more thorough report written about them. They were more likely to access an ‘appropriate’ intervention, though the evidence also suggested that service provision over all was not that different between Fast Track and comparison areas. The expectation was that this improvement in processing and services would result in reduced offending.

Within the time-frame of the evaluation it was only possible to examine follow-up offending data for 6 months after young people entered Fast Track or met the equivalent criteria in the comparison areas. The Scottish Executive intention was (and is) to track offending outcomes for a longer period after the evaluation.

It was not feasible for the study to obtain self-report data about offending, so reliance had to be placed on official records of young people's offending. Evidence from reporters for all 228 young people who were in Fast Track during the first 12 months showed that the number of offences committed by this population in the 6 months immediately after entry to Fast Track had reduced by over 500 (23%), compared with the 6 months before entry (SCRA 2005). 11% were not referred at all in the 6-month after period and a further 29% were referred only once or twice.

Thus the young people in Fast Track were to some extent desisting, but it was important to contrast this result with that for the comparison areas. It was not possible to match the individuals or allow for differences in prior interventions that may have affected outcomes, so it could not be firmly concluded that any differences in outcome were due to the differences in treatment and services. Nevertheless the case questionnaire and SCRA data suggested that both Fast Track and comparison samples included similar ranges as regards previous offence referral patterns, broad age patterns, gender balance and living situation, so that broadly similar outcomes might be expected.

For the comparison of the two study samples, information was obtained from the police about charges of young people aged 16+ years, which were added to the pre-16 referrals to reporters. These combined data showed that in both types of area a clear majority of young people had reduced their offending after being identified as persistently offending according to the Fast Track criterion. However the proportion with a decrease in the number of offences was higher in the comparison sites (81% as

opposed to 69%). Likewise, 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%. Further analysis of a larger sample over a longer period confirmed this pattern: reductions in offending by young people who persistently offend was smaller in the Fast Track than comparison areas.

A cost effectiveness exercise suggested 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. However, the greater official crime reductions in the comparison sites represented a much greater saving (£20,000 per case in contrast to £4,000 per case in the Fast Track areas).

The evaluation team recognised limitations in the evidence about offending trends. Virtually all research on offending rates for individuals has to rely on proxy indicators such as arrests or charges (e.g. Cottle et al 2001), as it is not possible to observe and record the criminal activities of large numbers of young people. Self-report data is clearly affected by honesty and response rates, but is probably the best approximation. The present study was not resourced to obtain such information.

Data on offending recorded by the police and those with a 'prosecutorial' role (in this instance, reporters) is affected not only by 'real' levels of activity, but also by the

relative success of detection and discretion about which incidents are reported and included as matters warranting a charge (Farrington 1992; Lloyd et al 1994; van der Laan and Smit 2006). In this study, a number of informants pointed out that a considerable number of offence referrals arose from incidents committed in residential care. In that context, the same event (e.g. a fracas or theft) may or may not be reported or dealt with by the police as a crime depending on the specific context. There appear to be considerable variations in practice (Bradshaw 2004), though there was no reason to think that the Fast Track areas, spread as they were across Central Scotland, should systematically differ from others. A separate point made was that two of the forces covering a Fast Track area adopted stringent policies towards youth crime, which resulted in more charges than previously and elsewhere. However, all the comparison areas had better offending figures than all the Fast Track areas, so it might be thought unlikely that the research happened by chance to select comparison areas all of which had a different policing approach to the Fast Track sites.

The period for examining offence trends was also relatively short in this study. Most research that examines post-intervention offending trends considers one or two year periods, while arguably the eventual extent of criminality in adulthood is a crucial outcome measure (Burnett and Roberts 2004).

Thus it remains possible that the offence data did not accurately represent trends in actual behaviour. If the findings do reflect reality, though, then the comparison areas appear to have had more effective policies and services. As the approaches in each of the three areas were quite different, it is hard to generalise. Nevertheless the qualitative data obtained in the study produced a number of possible explanations for

greater success in the comparison areas, including an emphasis on early intervention, the cumulative benefits of falling numbers of 'difficult' cases allowing more to be spent per case and perhaps a better balance of spending time on direct work as opposed to assessment and report writing.

Conclusions and implications

The key elements of Fast Track were supported by most of the practitioners and decision-makers in the pilot areas. Nearly all thought that the focus on prompt targeted action towards young people who persistently offend was consistent with the hearings system's priority towards the child's best interests. In most cases, improvements in assessment, planning and access to resources were reported. The study showed that Fast Track had been successful in speeding up the procedures for dealing with offences at each stage.

However, the Scottish Executive regarded the data on offending, despite its limitations, as conclusive. This suggested that the additional resources had not produced the desired reductions compared with elsewhere in Scotland, so Fast Track was not rolled out nationally as had been intended. Instead the Executive decided to concentrate on seeking improvements in decision-making and services by means of National Standards. Interestingly at about the same time, the review of the Children's Hearings which had been prompted by critical comments, produced a largely positive report committed to the centrality of the child's welfare, while also recognising the need for changes. One proposed alteration that is particularly relevant here is to have a single ground of referral to the children's hearings, namely a need for compulsory

measures (Scottish Executive 2005). On the face of it, this would reinforce the welfare basis of the system as a crime would no longer be a separate ground of referral, though doubtless records would continue to distinguish offence cases in some way. Thus the Scottish approach to youth crime continues both to be influenced by the wider politicisation apparent across the UK and to retain the essential features that have made it distinctively welfare-oriented since 1971 (Whyte 2006).

It is not often that policy initiatives in the UK are discontinued on the basis of adverse evidence. Reliance on statistical and quasi-experimental evidence as the sole or main basis for policy decisions has been questioned elsewhere (Hill 1999; Trinder and Reynolds 2000). The present study highlighted the need for evidence from official sources to be accompanied by detailed intelligence about how that data has been generated, especially given the well-known recognition that statistics are socially produced from the often varying practices of front-line workers that affect both responses to and records of incidents. The evaluation also showed how it can be hard to assess and interpret changes in large complex interacting systems. The multiple nature of the data types and sources sought to overcome this to some extent, but at the end of the day it was mainly one criterion (figures on re-offending) that was deemed by the policy makers to be critical in their decision not to proceed. It would have been inconsistent with the Executive's commitment to evidence-based policy and best value to continue to devote substantial resources to this high profile initiative, when statistics (albeit possibly an inaccurate representation of offending trends) suggested that the main objective in tackling youth crime was not being fulfilled.

Since the evaluation was intended to assess Fast Track, the research team had to devote much of its energies to gathering information from those areas. Although information was gathered, mostly second hand, about service and policy developments in the comparison sites, this was not specific enough to identify why they had a particularly good record, apparently. It is important for future comparative evaluation to assess the so-called 'normal' services equally along with the 'special' intervention and its own interaction with existing interventions and local policies.

Above all the study demonstrated the complexity of evaluating the impact of multiple systems across broad areas. A range of evidence from many sources was deployed to provide an account of how Fast Track worked and what its effects were, but in the end the conclusions remain suggestive rather than conclusive. If the evidence had shown that Fast Track did impact positively on offending as well as time-scales and morale, it is quite possible that the reasons for its success would be even more opaque, as the design and outcomes would have been subject to less close scrutiny. Herein lies perhaps a warning against overgeneralisation and oversimplification of lessons from research and official data. It is vital to take a wide range of evidence into account in policy-making, but the implications are rarely simple and straightforward.

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¹ Except for very serious offences. Also any denial of guilt is dealt with by the Sheriff Court, returning to a children's hearing for a decision if the charge is proven.