

SCRA response to the National Convenor's consultation

Background

The Children's Hearings System is Scotland's distinct system of child protection and youth justice. Among its fundamental principles are:

- That children who offend and children who are in need of care and protection are dealt with in the same system
- That the welfare of the child remains at the centre of all decision making

SCRA operates the Reporter service which sits at the heart of the system. SCRA employs Children's Reporters who are located throughout Scotland, working in close partnership with other professionals such as social work, education, the police, the health service and the courts system.

SCRA's vision is that vulnerable children and young people in Scotland are safe, protected and offered positive futures. We will seek to achieve this by adhering to the following key values:

- The voice of the child must be heard.
- Our hopes and dreams for the children of Scotland are what unite us.
- Children and young people's experiences and opinions guide us.
- We are approachable and open.
- We bring the best of the past with us into the future to meet new challenges.

Introduction

SCRA is fully supportive of the reforms introduced by the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 and welcomes the appointment of the National Convenor and the establishment of Children's Hearings Scotland. We consider that the legislation presents real opportunities to drive improvements in support for panel members, in the experience of children and families and a more efficient and effective use of resources across the Hearings System. We look forward to continuing to work in co-operation with Children's Hearings Scotland and the National Convenor.

We recognise that this consultation takes place at a time when the public sector landscape is in flux and a number of significant changes have either recently taken place, or are in the offing. SCRA itself is in the process of moving to its new locality model, while the Scottish Government is consulting on proposals for a single police force and preparing its response to the recommendations of the Christie Commission on public service reform. Such significant changes present opportunities as well as challenges and it is incumbent on all those in the public sector to act in such a way as to allow those opportunities to be realised and to work more effectively in partnership while sharing resources and expertise.

Response

SCRA considers that the precise number and make-up of the Area Support Teams (ASTs) is a matter for panel members and the National Convenor to determine. We do not therefore propose to comment individually on any of the proposed AST arrangements. We do however have a clear interest in the reforms achieving the improvements that all partners in the Hearings System want to see, as well as in the operational interaction between ASTs and SCRA's own locality teams. We will restrict our comments therefore to the overall impact of the decisions, whether we feel the solution proposed will realise the necessary improvements and whether it is workable from SCRA's point of view. We will, of course also be making a more detailed response in relation to any consultation on national standards.

We agree with the National Convenor's decision not to attempt to mirror precisely SCRA's own move to nine locality teams. While there are some factors, such as volume of hearings, that have rightly informed both SCRA and the National Convenor's decisions, it is clear that the needs of panel members and the purpose of ASTs are sufficiently different from our own requirements that it is no surprise that different conclusions have been reached. We consider that this pragmatic decision is the correct one and is more likely to achieve better support for panel members than simply aligning with the SCRA model of nine localities.

We recognise however, that this does present some challenges in terms of ensuring effective communications, liaison and partnership working between SCRA's locality teams and the ASTs. These relationships are a crucial part of how the Hearings System operates and we are committed to ensuring that the important local link between our staff and panel members continues to be maintained. We hope that the ASTs will quickly establish efficient lines of communication that can be utilised by other bodies, including SCRA, to deliver key messages to panel members and to allow their views to be transmitted to us.

While we recognise the challenges inherent in moving from the current arrangements based on 32 local authority areas and the need to ensure that panel members and local authorities can be brought along with the changes, we also consider that it will be necessary to review the new arrangements at regular intervals to establish whether additional efficiencies could be realised by further consolidation of ASTs once the principles and benefits of cross-boundary working have been established. A means of measuring the impact of the reforms, linked to the outcomes they are intended to achieve would be a helpful contribution to this process.

Finally, it will be important to establish as quickly as possible some more detail on how the ASTs will work in practice. This will provide important reassurance to panel members and certainty to local and national partners, which will in turn enable the greatest benefit to be extracted from the new arrangements. For example, a more detailed explanation of the specific functions that the ASTs will be performing and how these will be fulfilled by the various classes of AST member would be helpful. SCRA has a particular interest in who might be acting in a leadership role for each AST, as that individual will be the obvious point of contact for our locality teams and will have a crucial role in defining and shaping relationships at a local level. We are keen to explore ways in which children and young people might be appropriately involved in decision making at AST level. It would also be useful to see greater clarity on how it is envisaged that local authorities could continue to provide support to ASTs without that resulting in blurred and potentially confused lines of accountability.

Conclusion

SCRA is fully committed to ensuring that the vital link between panel members and SCRA staff at a local level is maintained and strengthened. We look forward to further discussions with the National Convenor and her staff as these proposals develop.

SCRA
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