



SCRA update to the Education Committee

Background

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

- whether concerns relate to their welfare or behaviour, the needs of children or young people in trouble should be met through a single holistic and integrated system
- a preventative approach, involving early identification and diagnosis of problems, is essential
- the welfare of the child remains at the centre of all decision making and the child's best interests are paramount throughout
- the child's engagement and participation is crucial to good 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 panel members and 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.

Response

We understand that the Committee is seeking an update from SCRA and other partners in relation to the issues raised in the "Inquiry into Decision Making on Whether to Take Children into Care". We welcome the opportunity to update Committee members on progress, specifically around the two themes which in particular raised specific concerns relating to the Children's Hearings System.

Theme 2: Assessments

The Committee identified "clear challenges for social workers in undertaking assessments to a standard that is always acceptable to other decision makers. It is important that all parts of the decision-making processes have a better understanding of each other's roles, so that this inefficiency is addressed and the burden on social workers is reduced." In particular for SCRA, robust assessments are critical to support good decision making in the children's hearings system.

Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership

SCRA is leading a workstream within the multi-agency Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership (CHIP) focused on GIRFEC as a framework for enabling improvements within the Children's Hearings System, and promoting greater cohesion between GIRFEC and Children's Hearings. This may include:

- Strengthening understanding of referral criteria across all agencies, including Police Scotland and the Justice system, in line with SHANARRI.
- Emphasising the role of communities and local authorities in identifying the right children and young people for referral, based on needs and risks to enable more effective decision making.
- Clarifying the purpose of a referral to the Reporter – establishing what a supervision order can add to a child's life and how success can be measured.
- Considering the use of the Child's Plan, and its suitability for use and adaptation during a Hearing.
- The development of a national approach to information sharing.
- An analysis of the variance in thresholds of referral practice and agency roles across Scotland.

Research

We have recently undertaken a piece of research which looked critically at Reporter decision making. While broadly positive about the quality of decision making, which was found to be proportionate, evidence-based and child centred, the report identified a number of areas for improvement which we will be taking forward, including:

- Recording of reasons for decisions should be reinforced through training and in supervision.
- Protected time should be allocated for Reporters' supervision with their managers, to discuss performance, casework and developmental needs
- Multi-agency working needs to be more widespread and integrated into the practice of all agencies involved in child protection and youth offending.
- There needs to be a greater common understanding between referring agencies on thresholds of referral.
- Referring agencies need to have a better understanding of the evidential basis of Reporter decision - making, and the importance of provision of clear, factual information focused on the child referred.
- Agreements need to be reached between SCRA and the NHS on the sharing of information where the child has been referred. Reporters were concerned at not being able to get information from some health sources, or the delay in getting this information.

SCRA is also conducting further research on Permanence, which will build and follow on from our 2011 report. The new research is intended to assess progress in delivering improvements in permanence processes in relation to the implementation in 2009 of the Adoption (Scotland) Act 2007. As with the previous research, it will examine the assessments made at different stages of the child's journey. We intend to publish the research in the Spring of 2015.

Theme 3: Hearing the voices of all participants in the process

The Committee heard from children and young people that the Hearings System experience could be "intimidating, stuffy and stressful". This largely mirrored the findings from research conducted by SCRA, the Children's Parliament and Who Cares? Scotland over the last few years and in advance of the implementation of the 2011 Act. The Committee was particularly concerned about the experiences of parents with learning difficulties in the Hearings System. Effective and meaningful participation is at the heart of the Hearings System and is reflected in the outcomes set out in SCRA's Corporate Plan.

Participation Group

SCRA established a Participation Group in 2008. The group draws on staff members from across the country and now also includes representation from Children's Hearings Scotland. This group has driven significant improvements in the way we communicate and engage with children and young people both in



terms of individual hearings and more strategically. It continues to generate and explore additional ideas. For example, in partnership with CHS and Who Cares? Scotland, we have set up a National Participation Forum, which allows young people with experience of the Hearings System to suggest improvements to the system's operation.

Research

SCRA published the results of its most recent Children and Families Survey in 2013. As a result of the survey, an Action Plan has been developed to address the following areas of concern:

- Provision of appropriate information to adults, young people and children
- Improvement of means to ensure that the child's view is available to the Hearing
- Improving the experience of attending a Hearing
- Engagement with social work to improve levels of pre-hearing support

SCRA's current group of Modern Apprentices has conducted a follow-up inspection of our facilities and services. The results are contained in the report "It's All About Change". Recommendations to be taken forward include:

- A greater variety of age-appropriate toys and reading materials should be available in waiting rooms
- Consideration should be given to redesign the layout of Hearing rooms to make them more informal and child-friendly
- More prominence should be given to children's rights information posters and materials within hearings centres
- Continue the program of redecoration to make facilities more colourful and welcoming

Disability and equalities

SCRA's Participation Group is working with the Scottish Consortium on Learning Difficulties to improve the accessibility of our website and information materials. We are also considering whether additional content might be needed in terms of Reporter training or resource materials available to support good decision making.

Furthermore, SCRA's Equalities Network has been exploring how to incorporate a Children's Rights Impact Assessment into the existing Equalities Impact Assessments we conduct in fulfilment of our duties under the Equalities Act. This will allow us to ensure that strategic and financial decision making properly takes account of children's rights and of equalities issues in an integrated and holistic way.

Conclusion

SCRA has taken the Committee's report and recommendations extremely seriously. We note and welcome the recognition that change can take time to bed in, but we hope the information presented above provides encouragement that progress is being made. We recognise that the Committee only sought a brief update but would be happy to expand further on any area of work if it is of interest to Committee members.

SCRA
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