

SCRA External Survey on Feedback from Participants at Virtual Hearings (July 2020)

Introduction

During lockdown as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, all Children's Hearing Centres have been closed, and SCRA has been conducting Hearings using a virtual platform called VScene. Vscene was chosen as the platform because of its levels of security and its use was approved across the Scottish Government network. Participants join the virtual Hearing via the VScene app on a phone or tablet, or by email link for joining on a laptop or computer.

The following information details the feedback provided in response to SCRA's survey on virtual Hearings, which was e-mailed directly to people attending a virtual Hearing during May and June. The results here are based on responses to surveys sent between 4th May and 15th June 2020. All questions within the survey were voluntary and anonymous.

The report has been themed with high level messages drawn from comments, and direct quotes included. Within this report some of the comments include references to the specific products deployed to deliver virtual Hearings. Whilst we have not published these comments due to their commercial sensitivity, we are committed to learning from these comments to help evaluate our deployment of these products now and in the future.

The Themes

1. Who completed the survey
2. The overall experience of attending a virtual Hearing
3. Information for the Hearing
4. Preparation for the Hearing
5. Technology and connectivity
6. Participation, representation and children, young people and relevant person's views
7. Management of the virtual Hearing
8. What can SCRA and other partners learn from this feedback about virtual Hearings?
9. What next?

1. Who completed the survey

268 people completed the survey. Their roles were:

Social worker	46.04% (122)
Solicitor, safeguarder, representative of child or relevant person	36.60% (97)
Parent	7.55% (20)
Carer	7.17% (19)
Other professional (e.g. residential worker, throughcare and aftercare worker, relevant person)	2.64% (7)
Total responses	265

No children or young people responded, however many of the responses included views and feedback around the Hearing experience and participation of children and young people.

2. The overall experience of attending a virtual Hearing

High level messages

- Throughout the survey there was a very mixed response to the questions regardless of the role someone had in the Hearing, ranging from very positive to very negative
- Half of the people who responded said that being in a virtual Hearing, in comparison to attending in person, was better or the same, but half of the people who responded thought it was worse
- Half of the people who responded rated being in a virtual Hearing as good. 15% of people rated it as poor or very poor
- Virtual Hearings can work well, and be less stressful and anxiety provoking for some people
- Virtual Hearings can work well when there are processes in place which are followed by everyone attending the Hearing
- Some people are not able to attend a virtual Hearing as they do not have suitable technology
- Virtual Hearings can be a negative experience for people for various reasons and some people would prefer to attend in person

Attending the virtual Hearing in comparison to attending in person was:

Better	14.04% (32)
Worse	50.44% (115)
The same	35.53% (81)
Total responses	228

Being in a virtual Hearing was rated as:

Good – I felt involved in the discussion and got the chance to say what I wanted	51.91% (136)
Okay – I was able to speak and hear what others were saying	32.82% (86)
Poor – I could follow what was happening but I didn't get the chance to speak when I wanted	8.78% (23)
Very poor – I did not know what was going on, the connection was terrible	6.49% (17)
Total responses	262

Click on the link [here](#) to read the comments on the overall experience of virtual Hearings.

3. Information for the Hearing

SCRA has a duty to give Hearing papers to children, relevant persons and panel members. These are usually sent by post. As a result of the current pandemic with SCRA staff working from home, a secure electronic solution was set up to enable Hearing papers to be accessed remotely.

Objective Connect is the name of the electronic system for papers to be made available for the virtual Hearing. Children, relevant persons and panel members log in to view the papers with a secure PIN number for each document. The papers cannot be downloaded or printed off, and cannot be accessed after the Hearing.

People who responded provided comments about the means by which they got the information (Objective Connect) and the information (e.g. reports) available for the Hearing.

High level messages

- 90% of people who responded said that they got the information they needed for the Hearing. 10% said they did not or were not sure
- People would like to be able to download or print the papers
- Some participants, particularly children and families, do not find it easy to access the papers using objective connect and some do not have any device for them to do so
- There is no inventory of Hearing papers so it could be difficult to work out if everything that should be included was actually there
- Sometimes there was a lack of up to date, relevant information

This is what was said about information for the Hearing. Click on the link [here](#) to read more comments.

 *“We usually get background info on paper and this time it came through a very complicated and frustrating computerised system which logged us out in mid-reading and wouldn't let us download or print anything”*

✚ *“Full social work reports not been provided, reports from residential units not being submitted. Full papers sometimes not provided to parents in advance of the hearing”*

4. Preparation for the Hearing

When someone is due to attend a virtual Hearing (or having a test run with SCRA’s Virtual Hearings Team), SCRA sends an email with the details of how to join via the Vscene App which people download onto their device (phone or ipad) or browser link for a laptop/computer. The person attending gets a room and PIN number for joining via the app or link for joining by laptop/computer.

High level messages

- Participants liked being able to do a test of Vscene in advance of the Hearing and thought it was important to do so
- A central point of contact would be helpful if someone is having problems accessing the hearing
- If there is a delay to the start of the Hearing it would be helpful to let people know
- 3% of people who responded would have liked some support to prepare for the Hearing but did not get any

Help to prepare for the Hearing was provided by:

No-one	58.43% (149)
Reporter	29.80% (76)
Social worker	10.98% (28)
Solicitor	4.31% (11)
Carer, Support worker, residential worker	1.96% (5)
Parent	1.18% (3)
Friend	1.18% (3)
Advocate/children's rights officer	1.18% (3)
Total responses	255

The support to prepare for the Hearing was described as:

Excellent	42.86% (114)
Okay	30.83% (82)
I didn't get any support – I didn't need any	19.55% (52)
Poor	4.14% (11)
I didn't get any support – I would have liked some	2.63% (7)
Total responses	266

The experience of logging into the virtual Hearing was described as:

Easy	59.55% (159)
A few problems but I got in by myself	19.10% (51)
A few problems but I got some help	13.11% (35)
I couldn't get logged in	4.49% (12)
Total responses	267

This is what was said about preparation for the Hearing. Click on the link [here](#) to read more comments.

✚ *"I had the opportunity to check logging onto the virtual hearing the day before which I think helped me prior to logging in on the day - something I would recommend"*

✚ *"If the hearing is delayed then you should be informed. It was half an hour later starting and I spent most of this waiting"*

5. Technology and connectivity

Vscene is the platform that SCRA uses for virtual Hearings. This application has been approved by the Scottish Government and provides a secure on-line meeting room which attendees join via a link that has been sent to them by SCRA.

People who responded provided comments about the software product (Vscene) and their experience of connectivity using a variety of devices for joining the Hearing.

High level messages

- People fed back that they found that Vscene was not as good as other virtual platforms that they had experienced
- Not being able to see everyone on their device makes it difficult for people to keep track of who is in the Hearing and who is speaking
- People found it difficult to attract the attention of the chairperson when they want to speak
- People who had attended more than one Hearing described variable experiences on different days, from good to bad
- Delays in the Hearing starting is frustrating for people, especially when they do not know how long it is going to be for
- Connection problems throughout the Hearing negatively impact on the flow of the hearing and overall experience
- Following guidance such as muting microphones can help the flow of the Hearing
- Some professionals were not able to download the app on their work devices and had to join the Hearing by phone

Connection to the virtual Hearing:

Sometimes I couldn't hear everyone	51.34% (134)
Sometimes I couldn't see everyone	50.19% (131)
I could hear everyone all of the time	36.02% (94)
I could see everyone all of the time	24.14% (63)
Total responses	261

This is what was said about the technology. Click on the link [here](#) for more comments.

✚ *"I don't think it's an issue with the idea of virtual hearings. I think the issue was the software used. This hearing had a lot of people within it, so I think the software struggled as well as members struggled to stay online before getting kicked off by the software"*

✚ *"Variable connectivity.....Yesterday I attended a hearing with a large number of participants and it went reasonably well, could hear everyone and everyone got chance to speak. Today I attended a hearing and it was very poor"*

✚ *"It is less than ideal as only six of those attending the virtual hearing can be seen at any one time and people drop out of sight making it extremely difficult to ensure that everyone is still in attendance and has not been disconnected"*

✚ *"It would be helpful for participants to mute themselves until it is their turn to speak as there was a lot of background noise from some participants due to being outside and children present inside. This made it difficult to hear participants who were speaking at times"*

6. Participation, representation and children's and relevant persons' views

High level messages

- 91% of people said that they got the chance to say what they wanted to in the hearing, but 9% did not
- The experience of attending a Hearing is so personal to each individual. The comments provided ranged significantly from the positive to negative:
 - For one person a virtual Hearing can work really well, and be preferable to attending a Hearing in person (e.g. less stressful, not having to travel to a hearing centre, getting the chance to speak without interruption, less intimidating, feeling listened to)
 - For another person, it can be more difficult (longer process, increased anxiety, effective participation affected by connectivity problems)
- It is difficult for people supporting the child, young person and family to pick up on and respond to non-verbal cues/body language in a virtual Hearing
- Not being able to see everyone prevented a natural flow of discussion and interaction

90.94% (241) of people got the chance to say what they wanted to in the Hearing, but 9.06% (24) did not.

This is what was said about participation. Click on the link [here](#) to read more comments.

-  *"I noted my young person as appearing more relaxed in this virtual setting and he made a greater contribution, It was also preferable as cut out all the anxiety building travel for him. I would be happy to continue with virtual Hearings as was better for the young person and for me. It felt more effective and concise"*
-  *"I think it was very difficult to engage effectively with them (the family) to maintain relationships and support them through the hearing. This is my concern about all virtual meetings just now - not just SCRA"*
-  *"I preferred the virtual Hearing as felt it was better for the young person to be in the comfort of their own home instead of in a strange room with many people"*
-  *"The process appears to be less traumatic for the child especially in cases with multiple professionals. I do think short written submissions by agents representing parents and children help focus and reduce the time of the hearing"*
-  *"Without talking over people it was impossible to respond in an appropriate manner or check in with the YP (I am supporting)"*
-  *"One of the.... young people taking part had a connection issue so had to have her contributions relayed by a staff member which wasn't great"*
-  *"However the young person I was supporting could not hear some people and this resulted in them become anxious and leaving the virtual hearing"*

7. Management of the virtual Hearing

High level messages:

- A good virtual Hearing needs strong chairing, with clear direction and focus to the questions and discussion

This is what was said about management of the Hearing. Click on the link [here](#) to read more comments.

-  *"I thought the chair managed the virtual Hearing very well, was clear and explained ahead of time, "I will ask you by name to speak when I need to hear from you. That cut down the cross over arguing that can happen when it takes place in person"*

- ✚ *“Panel need to have more control over who speaks and when, however this is no different in virtual hearings to face to face hearings. Panel members need to be able to stick up to solicitors and I feel many panel members are intimidated by solicitor presence”*
- ✚ *“The hearing was chaired well and everyone was asked for their input in turn. If it hadn't been chaired well, then experience may not have been as inclusive”*

8. What can SCRA and other partners learn from this feedback about virtual Hearings?

- ✚ Virtual Hearings was a response to lockdown and not being able to hold hearings where people attend in person. Virtual Hearings could have a place in the future, as one of a range of options for hearings, and for some children, young people and families, they can work really well. They should not however be a complete replacement for Hearings where people attend in person.
- ✚ For virtual Hearings to be effective, the technical platform needs to be stable and reliable. People need to be able to get connected to, and stay connected in the Hearing, and see and hear everyone. It is important to continue to work closely with software service providers to improve the service offerings by SCRA to Hearing participants
- ✚ Preparation of and by everyone for a virtual Hearing is really important, as is the provision of support in advance of a virtual Hearing where that is needed.
- ✚ Lack of access to suitable technology can prevent participation.
- ✚ It is difficult to provide the right kind of person centred support for a child, young person or relevant person when people at the hearing are not physically in the same room.
- ✚ Good chairing and Hearing management is essential for a virtual Hearing to run effectively.

9. What next?

SCRA is committed to working with our partners to deliver a Children’s Hearing System which is informed by the experience of the children, young people and their families, professionals and panel members.

The feedback provided in this report is one element of a wider suite of information that is being gathered about the experience of Children’s Hearings during lockdown. This includes:

- ✚ SCRA feedback from Children’s Reporters;
- ✚ Children’s Hearings Scotland feedback from Panel Members; and

 CELCIS (Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland) research on experiences of virtual Hearings.

This feedback gives us really valuable information about what has been good and what has not been good, and we can use a lot of it to help shape our plans for the future of Children's Hearings. We thank everyone who has taken the time and effort to provide this to us.

We are also doing work with Our Hearings Our Voice and groups of other young people, to hear from them about what Hearings should and should not look like now and in the future.

We will deliver this report to the Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership, so that all our partners can hear about and learn from experiences of virtual Hearings during lockdown. The [Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership](#) brings together a range of people from organisations across Scotland who have a common interest in the Children's Hearings System. Chaired by the Scottish Government, it is built on partnership and co-ordination of initiatives and activities to bring about positive change and improvement to the Children's Hearings System.

Scottish Children's Reporter Administration
Ochil House
Springkerse Business Park
Stirling
FK7 7XE

Tel: 0131 244 8600

www.scra.gov.uk