



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

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Children's Hearings System: Structural Reform

I am writing to update you on a change in thinking in respect of proposals to reform the Children's Hearings system.

As you know, in 2004 consultation reaffirmed the need for trained members of local communities to continue to be involved in deciding what was in the best interests of troubled and vulnerable children. However, the Scottish Executive also identified a need to improve the support arrangements for chairmen and members of the Children's Panel. The volunteers made clear that, while they did not wish to be paid, equally they did not wish to be out of pocket. In addition, the volunteers wished to see more flexible arrangements for training and support.

In June 2005 the Scottish Executive therefore proposed to develop national standards for support and consulted on two possible options for structural change, i.e. to move the support arrangements for members of the Children's Panel into either a regional or national structure. In the light of responses to that consultation, in January 2006 Ministers asked Scottish Executive officials to work closely with you in order to explore further the "regional" option. This process was still under way when in December the Executive issued the draft Children's Services Bill for public consultation. At that point an undertaking was given for further consultation on the support arrangements "early in the New Year".



The current structure of the Children's Hearings system can be characterised as being national in nature, but with a high degree of local flexibility in terms of delivery. The national element is provided by the Scottish Executive's co-ordination of a recruitment campaign, control over appointments and sponsorship of training. The detailed work undertaken last year demonstrated that replacing the national element of the current system with a number of regional co-ordinating bodies would be likely to create additional cost to the public purse. In addition, regions on their own would not necessarily improve standards of support for the volunteers. Following a detailed process of analysis and discussion with interested parties, I have therefore concluded that a regional structure should not be established.

Clearly the delivery of support to unpaid volunteers should be local and flexible in nature. However, it has become clear that this should be supported by the establishment of a light-touch national body which should also ensure high and consistent standards of support across Scotland. The precise nature of such a new arrangement will require further work and consultation on the available and most effective options.

I have therefore asked my officials to work with you in order to prepare advice for the Scottish Ministers to consider following the Scottish Parliamentary Election in May.

I am conscious that this process has taken considerably longer than was originally anticipated. However, it is worth taking the time to ensure that the new framework for support will make a real difference to sustaining and improving the decision making function for children.



ROBERT E BROWN



Letter issued to:

Chairmen and Clerks of Children's Panel Advisory Committees

Chairmen of Children's Panels

Cllr Tommy Williams, COSLA's Integrated Children's Services Task Group

Chairman Scottish Children's Reporter Administration

Children's Hearings Training Units

Chairman, Scottish Committee of the Council on Tribunals