

West Lothian Panel response to Consultation for establishment of Area Support Teams.

General Response:

West Lothian Panel members welcome the consultation document proposals for the structures of Area Support Teams.

Overall the proposals achieve a reasonable balance between increasing joint working potential and not 'super sizing' the support areas. This is highly significant given the support will still largely be delivered by volunteers.

We appreciate the determination and effort of the National Convenor to consult with all areas, to gather as much relevant information as possible and to use this in her deliberations.

The proposals also strike the balance, in terms of the numbers of partners who are needed to provide support and their representation on any Area Support Team, between co-operation with Local Authorities and maintenance of independence of the decision makers in Hearings.

West Lothian Proposal:

The specific proposal for West Lothian will provide a number of opportunities as well as challenges. Panel Members are extremely mindful of how their ability to make decisions, in the best interests of children, is affected by any change.

In West Lothian there is a long involvement in piloting & driving change where these contribute to improved outcomes for children and Panel members' ability to deliver effective, legal & ECHR/UNCRC compliant decisions.

Strong teamwork while respecting individuality & independence in decision making, striving for improved understanding of everyone's roles, skills development and effective liaison with professionals are all important in West Lothian and have been established for many years. Effective & strong Panel leadership has been a hallmark in West Lothian.

The proposal to have support from a larger area provides an opportunity to share these. The strengths in West Lothian mean that openness to alternative ways of working is there and change where necessary would be embraced and adopted (following proper consideration & deliberation).

It is also likely that West Lothian can benefit from the experiences that Stirling, Clackmannan & Falkirk already have of joint working while maintaining separate local Panel membership. Shared solutions to shared problems will lead to improvements across many areas of Panel member support.

It is interesting to note however, that the 5 concurrent Panel members from Falkirk who sit on Panels in West Lothian find many aspects of support in its widest sense, to be very different. Therefore change and co-operation will be required by all partners. (Some differences may be due to the widely different demographics, geography & economics, as well as Hearing workloads & each Panel may need to remain 'different' in some ways).

Other considerations:

National training should be exactly that and provide a consistently high standard across Scotland. In core training, skills development and implementation of procedures for any new legislation, location should not make any difference.

Consequently, it should be reasonable to expect that monitoring of Panel members (& Area Support Team members) can be carried out using the same framework & by any competently and appropriately trained person throughout Scotland.

However, understanding the local framework in which social Work, Child protection committees, Police and education operate is crucial to effective local decisions.

For each of these West Lothian operates within the Lothian & Borders context and practice. Up until now, this has been delivered within the Training Unit led programmes. Clearly, Stirling, Clackmannan & Falkirk operate in different boundaries (that of Central) with significant differences in geography, demographics and social policy.

Other differences arise, as will be the case for many areas, from the provisions of Local Authorities & access to the relevant information (EG Service Plans). [If comment & contribution to local service plans remains part of the support remit (currently Panel Chairs) then determination of who from the local context should contribute needs to be contained in detailed description of roles].

For this grouping (Stirling, Clackmannan, Falkirk & West Lothian) to work effectively, continuing delivery of local Development Sessions will be crucial for maintaining Panel member knowledge and awareness. But, careful planning will be required as to how these inevitable differences & different contexts are acknowledged and covered in 'National' training; as well as how clarity is given to those operating in the different local areas. These will be important in maintaining the local decisions for local children ethos.

If, as would appear necessary given AST roles, constituent Panels of an Area Support Team would train together then maintenance of relevance for the Lothian context is essential. It is difficult to comment when the training context is not yet known but if West Lothian trained with Stirling, Clackmannan & Falkirk at their currently used venue, then it is likely that approximately 75% of WL Panel members would travel further than they do now. West Lothian panel members would seem willing to do this

but would be more likely to claim expenses which would be greater per claim than currently.

Therefore, to achieve maintenance of current standards some greater duplication may be required as well as additional expense. Although it is recognised that a number of different training options might be followed and if the best model to maintain the standards is adopted then the potential advantages from joint working should outweigh or obviate such duplication and additional expense. But, significant different needs will remain for constituent areas of this AST and that will have to be embraced & accommodated; with no one Authority model being suitable for all 4 .

The grouping of Stirling, Clackmannan, Falkirk and West Lothian creates a very large and sprawling area. It is extremely diverse and the constituents have not been grouped in this way for any other purpose over the many Local Authority changes that have occurred in the past. There are therefore some dangers in this grouping as West Lothian could be looked upon as a 'bolt on'. This could make for some further challenges in joint working. West Lothian in many aspects of Local Authority working, including Children's Panel and related operations, has been a trailblazer and is recognised for working very effectively and to very high standards. How this will be viewed and worked out across the support Team Area is going to require a lot of planning and co-operation. All partners will necessarily have to contribute and each will have requirements that have to be met.

West Lothian is keen to learn and share as already described and to help make the new arrangements work to the greater benefit of Scotland's children but equally we remain willing to stand alone were any review of the current proposals considered.

Conclusion:

There are many natural concerns that Panel members have about the impact of the new proposals and particularly, whether they will continue to receive the very high standard of support they currently enjoy and what the impact will be on outcomes for the Children of West Lothian.

It is also clear that new ways of working to ensure the future of the Hearing system are necessary and the need for this system remains as crucial as 40 years ago.

West Lothian panel members want to be involved in these changes and to make them work. If the strong partnerships are maintained, the rota management support which has been crucial to retention of panel members and the pastoral support and sharing of knowledge & good practice continue then we can work in any support structure. As long as the support is there it does not matter who delivers it. 'They' have to be willing to act quickly and decisively.

We would welcome the opportunity of sharing with & learning from other areas and as long as our views & experiences are taken into consideration & we can help shape the ways in which functions are carried out we will work hard to implement the structure proposed. We are sure these will be similar to the considerations across all areas and new groupings.

West Lothian Panel members are determined to improve the outcomes for all children who become involved with the Hearings system whenever possible and will continue to campaign for the best ways to ensure consistent delivery within the legal framework operating at any given time.

15th October 2011