

Response to Consultation on Proposals for the establishment of Area Support Teams (ASTs) by the National Convener (July 2011)
Aberdeenshire Children's Panel

The proposal is to establish one area support team to cover Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, two significantly different Children's Panels who are currently serviced by two CPACs.

Background of the Area and Panel Support

Aberdeenshire is a large rural Authority which has varied transport links and standards of living; there are areas of significant affluence and deprivation within the Authority. It has previously been part of a larger Children's Panel, namely Grampian, and the unmanageable size of this Panel became apparent to the extent that it was broken down into smaller areas. Members that were active previous to the time of this change remember the larger panel being unwieldy.

Aberdeenshire extends to 2,400 square miles, representing 8% of Scotland's overall territory. It is the fourth largest area in Scotland. The population represents nearly 5% of Scotland's total, standing at 240,000 residents.

A very good, long standing and supportive relationship exists with Aberdeenshire Council and we view the preservation of this as essential. The Children's Panel is currently provided with a full time Secretary (it is understood that the omission from the Proposal Paper about the Secretary's post remaining is an error) and a Clerk who, amongst his other duties as a Council Officer, provides administrative support to the CPAC. Aberdeenshire Children's Panel has a record of high retention levels of panel members which is indicative of the desire of local people to help vulnerable Aberdeenshire children and young people. Our wish is that the forthcoming organisational changes are matched by a local structure which reflects the current arrangements in Aberdeenshire. We do not feel this in anyway conflicts with our support for a nationally consistent Children's Hearings System. It has not been established, or agreed, that if a joint AST is organised, that the current high level of support will continue.

Aberdeenshire Panel currently has 93 Members, who live throughout the Authority and are usually put on rota within their own area within Aberdeenshire. The "North" rota, covering hearings from communities in and around Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Turriff, Banff and Huntly, and the "South" rota, which covers hearings from Ellon, Stonehaven, Inverurie, Banchory, Ballater and Westhill. This ensures travelling time and expenses of Members are kept to a minimum, and that the Kilbrandon principles are best supported. The Panel Chair is supported by two Deputes to carry out his functions.

Response to the Consultation – Joint Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST

The Consultation document is clear in stating that new arrangements are to be made to deliver *better* support for panel members than current arrangements.

Members who have had experience of being part of a larger Children's Panel in the past have stated that the only effective way to organise and run the larger Panel was to sub divide it into smaller areas which were more manageable.

The proposals state that there would likely be the need for two "sub-committees" to function under the joint AST in order to provide enough support for the two panels; it is unclear therefore why the larger joint AST is necessary; surely this will be an additional group; there will be the necessity for some Members to attend two meetings instead of one. In actual fact, the proposed "sub-committees" themselves are the ASTs, and as far as can be seen from the proposals, they will be tasked with the same responsibilities as the larger joint AST. It is difficult then to see the necessity for this additional tier, which will add expense and unnecessary bureaucracy to the system. It seems that the only benefit to this is in name alone, the systems will be joint, but in working practice they will remain as separate entities – again raising the question as to the purpose of the joint group. There are no examples given in the proposals as how this new arrangement would provide better support to Panel Members than current arrangements, it would likely maintain the same level of support as the "sub-committees" would function as small ASTs.. However the formation of the larger joint group would require additional support from Authorities to administer, and would increase the number of meetings that some AST members needed to attend, without any measureable benefits to Members.

There are significant differences between the Authorities; Aberdeenshire is a predominantly rural area, while Aberdeen City is the third largest city in Scotland. The children within these areas have very different needs, the Panel Members who serve within these areas require different support and resources. By having a single AST to serve Aberdeenshire, it can be ensured that the people who serve on that AST have an understanding of the needs of Panel Members, families and communities within Aberdeenshire. A dedicated AST for Aberdeenshire will provide the best support to Panel Members within the area.

Some existing joint working does exist and will continue; pre-service training is partly combined, however, in-service training is no longer combined because of the impracticality and lack of venues for managing what would be a joint Panel Membership of approximately 225 Members.

It has not been demonstrated that having two sub-committees, under one joint AST would be *more* cost effective than having two separate ASTs, and there would be no loss in the ability to continue joint working as exists at the moment. This is in contradiction to the statement in the Proposal "*I do not intend to create ASTs of more than one Local Authority area where the costs of operating would outweigh any gains of joint working*".

We would therefore recommend that Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City should have their own Area Support Teams.

Response to the Consultation – Recruitment, Roles and Responsibilities

The proposed recruitment and composition of the AST is generally agreed, and with an Aberdeenshire AST it would be expected to have a minimum of one Panel Member appointed to the AST who would then support Panel Members in the same way as is currently provided by the Chair and Deputies. We think this is important in order to make the duties manageable, and would agree with the Consultation document that a person can only support a certain number of Members well. Currently the duties of the Chair are shared between 3 volunteers, and this system has proven to work well over the years and provides good support to Members in Aberdeenshire.

It is agreed that responsibility for handling complaints should be removed from the responsibilities of the Panel Members appointed to the AST, (currently the responsibility that sits with the Panel Chair) as this can take a great deal of time, which could be better spent in a pastoral role as suggested. It is important that national standards for complaints are developed so that these can be dealt with in a consistent and fair way, while not having a system that is overly time-consuming and bureaucratic.

We would consider an Aberdeenshire AST should comprise a minimum of 5 National Convener appointees, 1 Local Authority nominee, and three Panel Members.

We would also support the retention of the services of a Clerk and a full time Panel Secretary provided by the Local Authority.

We therefore generally agree with the proposals for recruitment, roles and responsibilities of Members of the Area Support Team, however we would recommend that this should be a single Authority Area Support Team for Aberdeenshire.

Submitted on behalf of Aberdeenshire Children's Panel
18th October 2011