

## **ABERDEENSHIRE CPAC RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AREA SUPPORT TEAMS BY THE NATIONAL CONVENER OF CHILDREN'S HEARINGS SCOTLAND**

Aberdeenshire CPAC recognises the challenges faced by the National Convener in introducing and implementing a new structure for the Children's Hearings System. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation document.

### **Background**

Aberdeenshire is a predominantly rural area in the North East of Scotland. Traditionally, it has been economically dependent upon the primary sector (agriculture, fishing, forestry) and related processing industries. Over the last 35 years, the development of the oil and gas industry and associated service sector have broadened Aberdeenshire's economic base, leading to rapid population growth.

Aberdeenshire extends to 2,400 square miles, representing 8 percent of Scotland's overall territory. It is the fourth largest area in Scotland. The population represents 4.6 percent of Scotland's total, standing at 240,000. The major towns are Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Inverurie, Stonehaven, Westhill and Ellon.

Aberdeenshire Children's Panel currently has 93 members.

### **Response to the Consultation**

This response concentrates on the proposals from the National Convener for Area Support Teams (ASTs) to replace existing Children's Panel Advisory Committees (CPACs).

In making this response we have particularly noted that the stated criteria used in proposing 17 ASTs are: geography & boundaries; size of panel to be supported; existing effective cross-boundary working between CPACs or panels; the minimum number of AST members required; & how the proposed arrangements would deliver better support for panel members.

Regarding the proposed role and responsibilities of ASTs, as outlined in the consultation document, we are in general agreement with these.

### **National Convener's Proposal for an Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST**

A description and the stated reason for this proposal is detailed at pages 29 & 30 of the Convener's consultation document.

Very significantly, it is proposed that at a level below this AST there will be an Aberdeenshire sub-committee & an Aberdeen City sub-committee. To a large extent these proposed new sub-committees mirror the current arrangement whereby an Aberdeenshire CPAC and an Aberdeen City CPAC exist.

Paragraph 11.6 in the consultation document is supposed to detail how the National Convener envisages that the new arrangements would deliver better support for panel members than the current arrangement. It does indeed highlight that it would build upon existing collaborative working, although does not state how. However it then goes on to simply restate the point made earlier that the creation of a sub-committee for each area would be necessary. **This is not a description of how or what better support would be provided, but rather a recognition that a similar model to the existing arrangement of two separate CPACs will continue to be absolutely necessary to provide appropriate support. The proposed introduction of an Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST above these two sub-committees is a new, costly & entirely unnecessary tier.**

**The proposed Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST with an Aberdeenshire sub-committee & an Aberdeen City sub-committee below is not an improvement that will provide superior support to the alternative of establishing an Aberdeenshire AST (with all the benefits of continuing an established and successful direct link to the resources of Aberdeenshire Council) & an Aberdeen City AST (with similar direct links to that Council). The proposal for a Joint Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST would require three separate groups as opposed to two. This would be more expensive, would require a larger number of members, would require more support from the local authorities to administer, and would potentially vastly increase the number of meetings required. In addition it would lead to potential confusion with lines of responsibility being blurred between two local authorities. The proposed sub-committees are themselves ASTs. An argument has not been made which justifies the necessity for an additional tier above them. No benefits to panel members are detailed.**

A structure with a separate Aberdeenshire AST and a separate Aberdeen City AST would not prevent the continuation or further development of collaborative working between the two areas. It is fundamentally wrong to assume that because two CPACs already work collaboratively when appropriate, that by joining these two CPACs together permanently there will be an increase in the benefits to be derived.

### **Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City**

There are obvious and significant differences between Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City. Aberdeenshire is a predominantly rural area, whilst Aberdeen City is Scotland's third largest city. There is a strong desire within both areas to recognise these differences by establishing two entirely separate Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Area Support Teams. Two dedicated ASTs with knowledge and understanding of their areas, communities and people would be hugely beneficial, particularly compared to the tensions and challenges which would arise in the administration of a single Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST.

### **Position of Panel Secretary**

The National Convener has acknowledged that there was an error in the consultation document in that it did not make mention of the proposal to retain the position of the current Aberdeenshire Panel Secretary. The intention that this position will be retained has since been confirmed and we very much welcome this. If a separate Aberdeenshire AST is established Aberdeenshire Council would continue to support the position of Panel Secretary.

### **Position of Clerk**

The consultation document proposes 1 full time dedicated Clerk for the Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST. However, given our position being that we oppose a Joint AST, this has not been given detailed consideration.

If, as we wish, a separate Aberdeenshire AST is established Aberdeenshire Council would continue to support and provide resources for the position of a Clerk.

The postholder currently carries out Children's Panel work as additional duties to their core work of being a Senior Committee Officer in Aberdeenshire Council. The Hearings System undoubtedly benefits from this largely uncosted approach which allows the postholder to dedicate as much time as is necessary to Children's Panel work whilst balancing this with the demands of Aberdeenshire Council committee work. It can not be assumed that Aberdeenshire Council would support changes to this approach, particularly any which may result in a proposal for them to fund, or contribute funding towards, a full time dedicated position of Clerk.

### **Provision of Training to Panel Members**

There are significant reservations regarding the practicalities of delivering all training on a "joint" basis to the large combined Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City panel membership of approximately 225 members. Undoubtedly some joint training will continue, particularly elements of pre-service training. However, in the past joint in-service training simply became impractical because of the lack of suitable venues.

### **Conclusion**

In considering the terms of this response to the proposals for a Joint Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST, the CPAC has focused on the important point that the current administrative arrangement, ie 2 CPACs, is effective and works very well. In Aberdeenshire there would be no benefit derived by replacing this with a combined Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST.

In Aberdeenshire a single CPAC becoming a single AST would undoubtedly help to retain local knowledge and identity which is essential for the administration and coordination of a widely dispersed large area. Whilst we will continue working collaboratively with neighbours and partners to achieve

improved outcomes, there is absolutely no benefit to be gained by the loss of local identity that regionalisation through a joint Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City would bring. One only has to recall the difficulties encountered by the former Grampian Children's Panel which was far too large and impossible to administer effectively.

Aberdeenshire requires an AST that has its focus primarily on the needs of our own large and dispersed area and population. We genuinely believe that a combined Aberdeenshire/Aberdeen City AST would have significant challenges relating to competing tensions between the requirements of Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City. Clearly this would have a major and negative impact upon the AST's ability to focus upon delivering the best possible support to our panel members. In making Aberdeenshire a part of a larger area with Aberdeen City this would undermine the sense of local ownership which the current Aberdeenshire membership enjoys. There is a compelling case for Aberdeenshire, with a panel membership of nearly 100 and covering a huge area, to have an Aberdeenshire AST in its own right.

Earlier in this response we stated our support for elements of the proposals which are genuinely beneficial. These include the clarification of roles for members of ASTs; & the move to national standardisation & consistency in various important areas such as: training; complaints procedures; allowances; & general support to panel members. These are not dependent upon combined Area Support Teams for successful delivery. More specifically, the Aberdeenshire AST should include three panel members. This would reflect the current successful arrangement whereby the Panel Chair and two Deputes provide excellent peer support to panel members. Thereafter, the Aberdeenshire AST should include at least five National Convener appointees and at least one local authority appointee.

**In summary, Aberdeenshire CPAC confirms that it strongly recommends that an Aberdeenshire Area Support Team be established in its own right.** This will continue to guarantee that panel members serving in Aberdeenshire have an understanding of the diverse needs of the people and communities of the large Aberdeenshire area.

Aberdeenshire CPAC  
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