

PROPOSALS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AREA SUPPORT TEAMS

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We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation document.

General Comments

The passing of the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 required the establishment of a National Children's Panel and of Area Support Teams. It is envisaged that these structural changes will lead to consistency and improved standards which are necessary within the system.

Our initial response to the proposals put forward by the National Convener is not altogether positive and we feel that the opportunity to drive forward real radical change appears to have been missed. There is also a sense that the changes may have been limited by financial constraints and pressure from existing parties interested in protecting the status quo.

The proposals as set out seems to suggest merely a change of accountability for existing CPACs – from local authority to National Convener – as the implication from the document is that if they wish, those appointed by Scottish Ministers can transfer en masse to the new ASTs. Currently they do not appear to understand that roles will change and regrettably many panel members see it as being 'same old same old'. This also seems to assume that there is no need to look at how effective they have been and whether their current practice is 'fit for purpose'. If that were the case there would be no need to change.

One example of this is the reference to CPAC Training Committees / Sub Committees. This is contained in current guidance but in the West of Scotland this has been widely ignored. Only three of the thirteen authorities have such a committee and most are only involved with the Training Unit for mandatory induction training. Clearly there is a need for continued activity in monitoring, appointment etc during the period of transition and we suggest that the initial period of appointment to the AST should be short allowing an assessment of their effectiveness sooner rather than later.

Allowing single authority ASTs appears to seriously undermine a National Panel, particularly for those local authorities who since the start of the system have never faced change of boundaries and whose practices could be entrenched. This could also encourage them to think of themselves as an authority rather than a national entity. It also encourages an insular rather than national approach and panel members in single authority panel are rarely given the opportunity to train with others the benefits of which are many including challenging their own practice and sharing good practice with others.

Proposed ASTs model

We have limited our response to consideration of the changes within our Unit boundaries. There appears to be no consistent criteria or justification for the suggested groupings and many assumptions have been made. Issues of natural groupings, training groupings, deprivation indicators, access, panel member numbers, hearings undertaken etc are inconsistent and in some cases incorrect. Many of the anomalies will continue and these are evidenced in Appendix 2 where panel member numbers, hearings per panel member etc will still continue to have wide variation not consistency.

An example in training terms is that although the Lanarkshire do, when they can provide facilities, undertake all Stages of the Induction Courses together many of their members opt in to the central courses which are held mid-week and undertake training in multi authority groupings. The Lanarkshire do not join forces for in-service training. The only other local authority training as a single authority, when possible for Induction Courses is Dumfries and Galloway but again they do not share in-service training with other authorities. The Ayrshire panels undertake Induction Courses in the central multi authority groupings and do share in-services training events annually but these events also include the other neighbouring authorities of East Renfrewshire and Inverclyde – the MidWest grouping.

We are very concerned that allowing Glasgow to remain a single authority AST will not address any of the problems which this large authority currently faces but will encourage continuity of the existing difficulties. If size is a factor leaving this authority untouched does not make sense and perhaps consideration should be given to splitting Glasgow into two ASTs – Glasgow North and Glasgow South. Access to training in Glasgow has been difficult for many panel members and this is understandable given the size of the authority and financial constraints and this is an issue which could remain in the proposed structure.

We recognise that there are no simple solutions but urge that the current proposed AST's are reconsidered. The new structure should not be constrained by existing allegiances or finance but should aim to create the best possible - a structure that will be effective and responsible to the new body. We would further urge that each AST is given a new title with no reference to current local authorities.

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