

CHILDREN'S HEARINGS SCOTLAND
CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
AREA SUPPORT TEAMS

OCTOBER 2011

This response is from the Scottish Association of Children's Panels (SACP), an organisation which was formed because it had been clear for a long time that Panel Members throughout Scotland needed to share in the development of the Hearing System and to be able to communicate with each other through a recognised national body. A great deal of work and political support went into the formation of the SACP. A national consultation took place and the Constitution of the Association was adopted at an inaugural meeting held in Glasgow in May 1977.

Given this, it was difficult to understand why the above Consultation stated in its initial paragraphs that it would be "the first time Panel Members would have a national voice". Panel Members, through SACP and other organisations, have long been involved in putting forward views about the system and its issues both locally and nationally. It would certainly be hoped that this would therefore continue to be the case.

Turning to points made in the Consultation and following a dedicated meeting of the SACP to debate this, (with prior canvassing of Panel Member views), several issues were raised which were generally felt to leave more questions than answers. These included:-

- There was felt to be a lot of piecemeal information with no real substance and offering no real change to the present system. This was believed to be a greatly missed opportunity. The purpose of the Consultation should be meaningful reform with the ASTs being an organisation independent of the Local Authorities. Why, e.g. is there a requirement and/or the ability to have up to a third of the membership as Local Authority nominees? This close attachment to Local Authorities would then make it difficult to apply National Standards and have the Children's Hearing system being seen as truly independent. There would also be the difficulty of ensuring consistent service throughout the country.
- There was the general feeling that there needed to be more grassroots input and it appeared that the system was now becoming very bureaucratic and top heavy.
- There was further concern about where AST 'staff' was to be based especially with the amalgamation of different areas and in this it was felt that the Consultation displayed a lot of bones, but not much flesh.

- If Panel Members are to be appointed to the ASTs, how will this be achieved – hopefully by some kind of election rather than simply by appointment?
- The time factor for those involved on ASTs would exclude many people. How could 'business' be distributed to be more inclusive?
- Would the Panel Member representative be the present Chair of the Area and if so, how would this be negotiated in Areas being amalgamated? It would be hoped, since no specifics were given in the document, that there would be an openness in the appointment and it would be by election open to all Panel Members and not restricted to present and future Chairs. It would further be hoped that the same process would apply for the election of the Chair of the AST itself.
- Separate pastoral and monitoring roles within the AST – how would be this be done realistically?
- With regard to complaints – what would the procedure be for taking these beyond the local ASTs?
- It was felt by many that there was still a need to have a separate organisation for Panel Members (such as SACP, who have been the voice of PMs for many years) which would work alongside the ASTs but also independently.
- Given the diversity of Areas and the potential for different ASTs to 'do their own thing', especially with the close links proposed with Local Authorities, the big worry would be the monitoring and overseeing of all ASTs and the great difficulty of standardisation. There was a universal belief that the system should be looking towards total independence from the Local Authorities. If we do not have this in our ASTs, how can families believe that they will receive a fair and unbiased Hearing?
- With regards to Training – in order to be in keeping with the general intention of the Act to offer standardised training, monitoring and conditions for Panel Members across Scotland, thereby offering all children the same high level of 'service' wherever they reside – there is a requirement for Core training as well as local training which should be compulsory. Refresher training should also be made compulsory for reappointment thereby ensuring the upkeep of standards and knowledge. This would go some way to achieve the statement in the Background of the Consultation that Panel Members should be "more focused, prepared and confident".
- One of the main issues and complaints from Panel Members is the poor quality and difference across the country in relation to monitoring which, it was felt, should be of a much higher standard and more closely linked to training otherwise it ceases to have meaning. There should be an indication during monitoring for identifying training needs and addressing these. The present

system does not cope with this and other groups/organisations should be sought to address this, thereby ensuring the above mentioned national standards. It would be hoped following this route that Panel Members would then be “better equipped to determine the best decisions for children and better supported to perform their role”. The current monitoring and support mechanisms do not work and the Consultation’s hope in this area will not succeed given the current status quo.

- If there requires to be standardisation for Panel Members across the country, it needs to be remembered that these members are Scottish Panel Members and should be able to serve in any Area as necessary and not restricted as at present. They should ‘enjoy’ the same conditions of service and therefore there should not be the wide difference of expected number of Hearing sessions, as depicted in Appendix 2, i.e. 10.6 per annum for Dunbartonshire, 11.5 for Glasgow PMs, 15 for the Western Isles and 20 for the Ayrshires.
- There was concern regarding the proposed sizes of different ASTs and in particular concern at the intention of keeping an Area such as Glasgow as one AST grouping. Why is Glasgow being allowed to remain as a single entity? The proposal too that there should be one Panel Member representative for the 650 members in that Area seemed ludicrous compared to other Areas (e.g. one for Glasgow, but 2 for Lanarkshire). It was felt that there should be a bare minimum of 1 AST Panel Member representative to 50 Panel Members.
- Given the numbers quoted, e.g. for the Glasgow AST, and the fact that the Convenor is planning to subsume current CPAC members into the new ASTs, the given membership figures do not tally. We would therefore be grateful for clearer information here.
- There was concern also in regard to the perceived and real independence that Clerks should not be employees of the Local Authority.

The collective and overall view of this Consultation is that it is rather piecemeal, woolly and a missed opportunity. It does not appear that much will change from what is currently happening and thus it will never achieve improvement and standardisation given its suggested current format.

