

Proposed response of Renfrewshire Council and Renfrewshire Children's Panel Advisory Committee to Consultation Paper on establishment of area support teams

I refer to your email dated 29 July, 2011, enclosing the consultation paper issued by the National Convener Children's Hearings Scotland on the proposed area support team structure and thank you, on behalf of Renfrewshire Council, for the opportunity to submit comments on the issues raised within the consultation document entitled "Proposals for the establishment of Area Support Teams".

Enclosed for your attention is the completed Respondent Information Form. Please note that Renfrewshire Council and Renfrewshire Children's Panel Advisory Committee are happy for the content of this response to be made public.

Renfrewshire Council wish to record that it has not been possible to fully consider the implications of the proposals for the establishment of Area Support Teams (ASTs), due to the lack of detail relative to the operational arrangements of the proposed structure but that the Council is willing to engage with you further in respect of your proposals to ensure that the structure for the AST adopted in the Renfrewshire area ensures that panel members are fully supported and that children and young people who attend hearings receive a high quality experience.

It is noted that the National Convener has taken a pragmatic approach and is proposing a structure that she believes will work. Clarification is required as to whether it is intended that the AST once established will support the existing Children's Panels in the East Renfrewshire and Renfrewshire areas or a combined East Renfrewshire/Renfrewshire Panel. Following consideration, however it is the preference of Renfrewshire CPAC to seek the retention of the individual Children's Panels in the East Renfrewshire and Renfrewshire geographical areas and the establishment of one area support team. This Council accords with this view.

In the event it is in fact proposed that the AST support a combined Panel for the East Renfrewshire/Renfrewshire areas the Council and the CPAC are of the view that this may address difficulties experienced in the past in this area in terms of achieving the required gender balance on Panels at hearings.

The ASTs will depend largely on the commitment and goodwill of volunteers. As a minimum the composition of the local AST as suggested would be 10 National Convener appointees (based on the current CPAC Ministerial appointees of 7 for Renfrewshire and 3 for East Renfrewshire), 1 local authority nominee and 1 Panel member for each local authority area and 1 Clerk. The consultation document proposes that current members of the local Children's Panel Advisory Committees appointed by Scottish Ministers transfer to the local Area Support Team. It is highlighted that the Renfrewshire CPAC currently includes 2 local authority nominees, who may change following the local government elections scheduled to be held on 3rd May, 2012, accordingly the proposed composition would result in this local authority having 3 nominees on the AST.

The proposed number of members of the AST appears appropriate, although it is suggested that the number of members in the AST from each of the categories be reconsidered to better reflect the proposed roles and current practices. This issue is considered further below.

Based on previous experience, it is suggested in view of the time constraints of elected members of the Council, who are normally the local authority nominees, that consideration

be given to appointing the local authority nominees, if they are elected members, to the AST on an 'ex-officio' basis where they would gain an overview of the Children's Hearing system, be aware of local issues and act as a link between the system and the local authority but there would be no expectation for them to be involved in the monitoring and recruitment roles undertaken by members of the AST.

In addition, currently there are two vacancies for members of Renfrewshire CPAC. It is not considered worthwhile to recruit replacements at this time as the Children's Hearings Training Unit have no plans to organise the training required to enable new CPAC members to participate fully in the work of the committee and undertake their monitoring/interviewing role. Should the proposal that members of the AST do not hold a position that involves close oversight of children's social work services be accepted, two further current members would be precluded from membership of the AST. This will result in a significant loss of knowledge and experience to the local children's hearings system. It is also highlighted that due to the existing vacancies and the proposal that members of the AST do not hold a position that involves close oversight of children's social work services only 3 of the current members of the CPAC will transfer to the AST.

Based on current levels of panel membership it is anticipated that the Renfrewshire/East Renfrewshire AST would support approximately 110 panel members. It is doubtful whether 2 panel member representatives would be sufficient to provide the level of pastoral support required. At present pastoral support for the Renfrewshire panel members is provided by 3 individuals while many of the roles which it is anticipated would be undertaken by the panel member representative on the AST are delegated, due to other commitments, to a number of other panel volunteers.

As stated in the consultation document there is no specific provision in the Act for local authority staff to be appointed to the AST. Clarification is sought as to which of the two local authorities comprising the local joint AST area will provide clerking and administrative support to the AST, the level and nature of any contribution to be made by the other local authority and how it is to be delivered. It is highlighted that Renfrewshire Council staff currently providing clerking and administrative support to stakeholders in the local Children's Hearing system are responsible for performing a wide range of other Council duties and undertake this role for less than 50% of their employment. As such it is not considered appropriate for them to be transferred to Children's Hearing Scotland in terms of the provisions of Schedule 4 of the 2011 Act. Notwithstanding that there has been a reduction in the number of staff employed by the Council with an involvement in this area of work, this Council would consider negotiating a service level agreement with the National Convener regarding the provision of services to the AST. Further discussion and agreement is required in respect of the envisaged accountability, support, supervision and performance management of local authority staff while undertaking work in support of the local AST.

I trust that the above comments will be considered during your analysis of all of the responses received.