

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON AREA SUPPORT TEAMS

ON BEHALF OF MORAY CHILDREN'S PANEL

PROPOSED FUTURE CONFIGURATION FOR MORAY, ABERDEEN CITY, ABERDEENSHIRE AND HIGHLAND PANELS.

Paras 12 – 12.8, pages 31/32

- 1.1. The North of Scotland currently has a panel in each of the four Local Authorities and it is proposed that these should be combined to become two panels: Aberdeenshire with Aberdeen City and Highland with Moray.
- 1.2. Until the reorganisation of local government in the mid 1990's Moray was a division of Grampian Regional Council and its panel part of Grampian Children's Panel. In this model recruitment was conducted across the region and training shared but the geography of the region made it necessary for Moray to have its own CPAC members and a Children's Panel chair and depute.
- 1.3. The proposal is now for Moray to become part of a Highland and Moray panel and for Aberdeen City and Shire to be combined. This proposal is based in part on an understanding of current collaborative working between Highland and Moray Panels and a desire to avoid creating additional burdens for members and panel members having to travel greater distances to meetings or hearings. However I believe that this is a misunderstanding of the current joint working arrangements which were made to address a shortage of male panel members which has been resolved and a specific and extremely unusual threat to the safety of Moray panel members and other professionals that is unlikely to continue. It may also neglect to take into account the geography of this region.
- 1.4. Because of its size Moray Panel and CPAC members have always had to accept the need to travel either to Inverness or Aberdeen for training, a journey of up to 70 miles each way, but there is real concern that panel

members may be expected to travel to hearings outwith Moray and that this would cause experienced panel members to leave the service. Panel members have pointed out that an assumption that what has or may work well in an urban area or where there are established links between a cluster of local authorities may not work at all in a rural area as large as the north of Scotland. The Moray element of such a panel would therefore seek to operate as it has always done but, if necessary, under the umbrella of a larger organisation.

- 1.5. It is also of concern that Moray, because of its size, will inevitably become less visible within a larger panel and that its agenda will be influenced unduly by the needs of its much larger neighbour.
- 1.6. It is surprising that consideration was not given to aligning Moray with Aberdeenshire. The current proposals will create two large panels of 223 members in Aberdeen/Shire and 168 in Highland/Moray but the reasons for this choice are not clear. If three panels were created they would be, on present membership, Aberdeen City, 130 members; Aberdeenshire and Moray, 134 members; Highland 127.
- 1.7. Moray/Aberdeenshire panel has much in common that is missing from the proposed alignment with Highland. Our Local Authority boundaries are coterminous with those of the region's Health Board, Grampian Police and the North east Scotland Child Protection Register. Our educational services developed during the Grampian Regional Council era. All of these things may make it easier for some cross boundary working and the delivery of training focussed on a locality model. But there are as many differences as similarities between Moray and either of its neighbours. We have a large military presence here which will continue. Many of our panel members are recruited from within this population and over the last ten years several panel members have been on active service in Iraq and Afghanistan for long periods. Recruitment to Moray Panel has to reflect this. Moray, which is an important distilling area, also has an unenviable drinking culture which affects many of the children who come to hearings. Moray's population is small but its geography is not.

1.8. All of these issues are well understood by our CPAC and Local Authority but making Moray Panel a small element of a larger panel may marginalise it and undermine the commitment and sense of ownership evinced by its current membership. Our unanimous view is that there is a strong case for Moray to remain a small panel in its own right.

2. AREA SUPPORT TEAMS - THE ROLES OF MEMBERS

paras 3 – 3.1.12, pages 18,19

2.1. Although the composition of the proposed AST's follows closely the current structure of the CPAC and its Local Authority the information about the way the panel will participate in the new structure implies a considerable change to the current role of panel chairs and an erosion of their independence from the CPAC and Local Authority.

2.2. Para 3.1.7 of the consultation document introduces the *panel representative* and describes this role as one of providing pastoral support to panel members. This is expanded in para 3.1.8. Disconcertingly this paragraph also removes the responsibility for the investigation of complaints from the *panel representative*. Appendix 1, para 14 (1) indicates that the responsibility for the allocation of panel members to hearings will also become the responsibility of the AST.

2.3. The current role undertaken by Panel Chairs is demanding and considerably more complex than simply providing pastoral support. Relationships between the Panel Chair, the CPAC and the Local Authority and SCRA are conducted with a degree of formality appropriate to their different roles. Panel Chairs represent the panel in Child protection, youth justice policy committees and contribute to the development of children's services. They meet regularly with SCRA managers and Local Authority Reporters and most chair a panel liaison group of some kind that focuses on the quality service we provide and receive. In Moray the panel chair provides a report for each CPAC meeting covering the activities of the panel, workload, training and panel member support and similar mechanisms exist elsewhere. Panel Chairs also meet regularly on a national basis and in the north of Scotland Panel chairs meet with each other, SCRA and the training team

on a quarterly basis to discuss matters of mutual interest and concern. In this way the voice of panel members, unmediated by CPAC or local authority opinion can be heard.

- 2.4. All panel chairs investigate complaints and concerns raised by families and professionals involved in hearings and many of which can be resolved informally. They also initiate complaints and raise concerns on behalf of panel members. There is a clear need for the current complaints guidance to be reviewed but it is the view of Moray Children's Panel that it is appropriate for the current arrangements to continue. The role of panel chair is highly regarded by most panel members and there is an expectation that issues that affect panel members will be dealt with by their Chair, if necessary, in conjunction with their CPAC or Local Authority. No indication is given in the consultation about who might be responsible for this role in future beyond the assertion that it is inappropriate for it to be the person who provides pastoral care to panel members. The proposal for the AST is for its members to be provided with adequate training for their roles. Were a similar arrangement introduced for Chairs/panel representatives at the commencement of their appointment and practical support provided during a formal investigation of a complaint much of the anxiety about this aspect of the role would be allayed.
- 2.5. The only requirement of the current legislative framework of children's panels specifically placed on panel chairs is that they must ensure that sufficient panel members are available for hearings. Many, but not all, local authorities provide secretarial support, IT and office accommodation to panel chairs to enable them to discharge this responsibility. This responsibility now rests with the National Convener who may devolve it to each panel and it is proposed that this will become the responsibility of the AST. If the panel chair/representative will no longer be the person responsible for this function another member of the AST will be required to develop a robust working relationship with panel members similar to that currently enjoyed by panel chairs. It is unclear why this model is preferred.

3.CONCLUSIONS

3.1 The Children's Hearings System has three elements:

- The Local Authority and its CPAC
- Children's Panel
- Children's Panel Training Unit responsible for delivering training to panel and CPAC members

3.2 Without an understanding of how Panels and Training units will be structured and managed within the national panel it is difficult to be certain if the proposals for AST's are acceptable.

3.3 The model for the area support team that emerges from the consultation document makes them feel much more like management committees. If this is the case and the way in which the panel is managed is to be undertaken in a different way this needs to be made explicit and panel members must be specifically consulted about this before decisions are made.

3.4 We believe that the current arrangements for the three elements of each Children's Panel and the way in which they relate to each other are essential to its integrity. Many Families are already suspicious of the relationship between panel members and the local authority/ social work department and panel chairs work hard to ensure that there is no basis for this perception. There is deep concern amongst Moray panel members that diminishing the role of the panel chair and absorbing it into the AST, if this is what is intended, will undermine this necessary separation and compromise our independence.

3 Susan Anderson,

Chair

Moray Children's Panel

20th October 2011

