

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE CHILDREN'S PANEL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Response to the Consultation on Proposals for the Establishment of Area Support Teams

The West Dunbartonshire Children's Panel Advisory Committee (CPAC) considered the National Convener's Proposals for the Establishment of Area Support Teams at a meeting on 5 September 2011 and agreed to respond in the following terms.

The CPAC agrees with the National Convener's proposal for an Area Support Team (AST) to be established comprising of East Dunbartonshire and West Dunbartonshire.

Role of the AST

The CPAC proposes that sub-committees should be established for each constituent local authority in the AST and that each sub-committee should separately have responsibility for the recruitment, reappointment, monitoring and pastoral care/support of panel members in its area.

Paragraph 8 of the consultation paper recognises that "panel members sign up to serve largely on the panel in their local area and that this will not change with the introduction of Area Support Teams or the National Panel".

The CPAC considers that its members have also volunteered to serve in their local area and would therefore propose that AST members should carry out their responsibilities predominantly within their locality and that the majority of the functions currently administered by the CPAC should be administered by each sub-committee of the AST in the future.

The CPAC has concerns at the workload which may be associated with the position of the Chair of the AST, particularly in view of the fact that this person would be a volunteer.

Recruitment and Reappointment

The present guidelines for the recruitment of new panel members states that "prospective panel members... will generally live and/or work within, or have good knowledge of the areas for which the panel is constituted" (paragraph 12 of the Children's Hearings Guidance Circular CH2008).

In view of this, and particularly in recognition of the significant socio-economic differences which exist between East Dunbartonshire and West Dunbartonshire, the CPAC proposes that the recruitment of new panel members, and the reappointment of existing panel members, should be carried out by AST members who have a knowledge of the particular local authority area and who would be able to establish a relationship with panel members.

It is also considered that it would be impractical and off-putting to request that residents of East Dunbartonshire who were interested in becoming panel members attend for interview in West Dunbartonshire or vice versa.

Composition of the AST

Paragraph 3.1.8 of the consultation paper acknowledges that the pastoral role to be undertaken by identified AST members would require them to get to know, and be known to, panel members, and that for ASTs which would be composed of more than one local authority area, an adequate number of panel members should be appointed for each constituent authority.

In recognition of the larger size of the West Dunbartonshire Children's Panel (at present 77 panel members compared to 33 panel members in East Dunbartonshire, as stated in paragraph 17.3 of the consultation paper), the CPAC would propose that a greater proportion of panel members from West Dunbartonshire should be appointed to the AST than are appointed from East Dunbartonshire.

Local Training

The CPAC has concerns that fully-integrated local training for all panel members in East Dunbartonshire and West Dunbartonshire would incur a significant increase in panel members' travel expenses.

Panel members in West Dunbartonshire are required presently to attend 50% of local training sessions and it is considered that increases in the time and distances required to be travelled by panel members in order to attend local training may have a negative effect on the attendance and retention rate of panel members. It is important to bear in mind that panel members are volunteers.

It is therefore proposed that the majority of local training should be provided separately in East and West Dunbartonshire, with one or two training sessions being held jointly each year to provide opportunities to share learning and examples of good practice.

The CPAC agrees with the National Convener's comments in paragraph 17.7 of the consultation paper that the proposed AST "would facilitate the sharing of good practice and learning" and considers that this could be achieved through the sharing of some local training activities.

The CPAC considers that local training should be flexible and that panel members should be able to choose whether they attend the programme of local training in East Dunbartonshire or West Dunbartonshire in view of the fact that a small number of the present members of the West Dunbartonshire Children's Panel are residents of East Dunbartonshire.

Monitoring of Hearings

As stated above, it is considered that AST members would best be able to establish relationships with panel members who serve in the same locality and it is therefore anticipated that AST members should conduct the monitoring of panel members predominantly at their local Reporter's Office.

It is anticipated that panel members in West Dunbartonshire may sometimes be requested to attend hearings in East Dunbartonshire, and vice versa, but it is considered important that this be at the discretion of panel members.

Conclusion

The CPAC considers that two sub-committees in an AST comprising of East Dunbartonshire and West Dunbartonshire, each with responsibility for monitoring, recruiting, reappointing and providing pastoral care/support to panel members in its locality would be cost-effective, efficient and would allow the continuation of the good relationships which have been developed among the relevant agencies.