



**Children's Hearings  
Improvement Partnership**

---

# **Fife Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership**

## **Better Hearings Update October 2020**

## Introduction

This is not the update that the Fife CHIP anticipated providing when we undertook to provide 6 monthly updates back in February 2020! The last 6 months have seen huge changes to the way in which the Children's Hearings System has had to operate. This is thanks to the efforts of all those involved – social workers; panel members and CHS staff; Reporters and SCRA staff; safeguarders; legal representatives; not to mention children and their carers and families. So rather than an update on the improvement plans we had for 2020, this update attempts to capture the vast efforts that have been made over the last 6 months and looks towards what the next 6 months may now look like.

## Virtual Hearings

On 23 March 2020, all SCRA offices and hearing centres closed. From the outset, this required huge efforts by all those involved in the operation of the Children's Hearing System to ensure that all compulsory orders protecting children remained in force.

Almost overnight all children's hearings took place virtually using Vscene technology. Vscene is an online platform similar to Microsoft teams or Zoom which allowed participants to take part in the Children's Hearing through the use of devices such as laptops, tablets and smart phones. As of 4 May 2020, SCRA was also able to securely share written reports and legal documents with panel members, children and their families.

Since Albany House closed on 23 March 2020, and as at the date of writing, 344 Children's Hearings have been

held virtually for Fife children. Initially these Children's Hearings focussed on maintaining the legal status quo. However, this quickly evolved to fully participative Children's Hearings, able to make substantive decisions based on written reports provided by social workers and safeguarders and with full participation of children, families and their legal representatives.

Virtual hearings have not been without their challenges though. Connectivity has been the biggest challenge with some participants dropping out or unable to connect. That said, the ability to participate virtually has seen some children participate who would not previously have attended their Children's Hearing and families have reported feeling more comfortable and able to participate more effectively remotely.

Approximately 10-14 virtual Children's Hearings are currently taking place each week.

## Resumption of face to face hearings

On 21 May 2020, the First Minister announced that face to face children's Hearings would be resuming during phase 1 of a 4 phase Route Map. The emphasis in the published Route Map was on a gradual resumption of key support services and this is the approach that SCRA has taken.

As such, the first face to face hearing took place on the 28th July following a robust risk assessment of the Glenrothes office. Previously vacant space within Albany House has been repurposed and set up to accommodate face to face hearings, ensuring the current requirement for 2m social distancing is adhered to in the hearing rooms and waiting rooms.

As of the 6th October, multiple face to face hearings will be held per day.



This will be possible as a result of the electrostatic misting of the hearing rooms, public areas and waiting rooms.

This misting will treat surfaces and protect against transmission of bugs and viruses, including Covid 19. In addition, the enhanced cleaning measures that have been in place since Albany House reopened will continue.

As at the point of writing, SCRA are on the cusp of taking delivery of the IT equipment necessary to facilitate virtual participation in the face to face hearings. This will allow partners who have been restricted from participating up until now, the opportunity to participate virtually.

## SCRA/SW virtual joint meeting

Lisa Sutherland, Senior Practitioner, SCRA and Linda Sheret, Service Manager, Children and Families were invited to present an online joint SCRA/SW training session at the newly qualified social worker's forum on 21st July 2020. This training is normally delivered face to face several times per year by SCRA and SW, so this was a first attempt at delivering this training virtually.

With the support of Bernie O'Beirne, the Workforce Development Lead Officer, the usual powerpoint presentation was reviewed to make it more 'virtual friendly'. The training session normally lasts for half a day however this was reduced to about an hour and a half in this initial 'test' training session to encourage engagement, participation and to prevent people becoming 'screen weary'.

The sessions included an overview of why we write reports and when to use a specific report template; delegates were taking through the new initial referral to the Reporter and how the format directs the writer to complete much more relevant and accurate information and focusses on the evidence required by the Reporter to draft grounds. The new strengths based SW report links well to the initial referral report with the aim of avoiding duplication of work and being more focused and concise in relation to assessment, hearing the voice of the child and making relevant recommendations.

Given the current challenges with IT (V-Scene and Objective Connect) delegates talked through the need for the condensed SW referral report for SCRA and how this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. Currently the new initial referral to SCRA has been paused. We hope to be able to hold another joint training session soon.

## Launch and roll out of new SW reports

At the beginning of 2020 there were plans to roll out a new strengths based social work report and the initial referral to SCRA following a 3 month pilot. This work was stalled when COVID-19 impacted on our everyday lives both at work and at home.

Despite these challenges, we refocussed and albeit much later than planned, we are launching the new social work assessment report (alongside the new child's plan) on October 1st. We have been able to make such positive progress due to the hard work and commitment of those teams involved in the pilots and who provided their valuable feedback to make sure we finished up with a template that was user friendly as well as purposeful.

We plan to review the template for the referral to SCRA and combine any new learning from the use of the condensed report which was implemented at the beginning of the crisis. We will update everyone with a timeframe for this and whether we initially test this with a pilot as soon as we can.

## Panel Member Development Day

In February 2020 the local Area Support Team of Children's Hearings Scotland held a development day for the CHS Fife Community. The event saw over 100 people attend and participate with a focus on 'Looking to the Future'. We welcomed Jacqui Dunbar and two young people from Our Hearings Our Voice, and Elliot Jackson, National Convenor, CHS as key note speakers. The panel community attended workshops delivered by Who Cares? Scotland, Barnardos, the CHS Digital team and a practice workshop from SCRA. In addition to the key notes and workshops, fifteen organisations contributed to a marketplace sharing information and insight on topics ranging from domestic violence, trauma informed practice and family support.

### Panel member feedback:

***"A very worthwhile event. It helped remind us, once again, the impact of the hearing on the child/young person and the difference we can make during the hearings."***

***"I am a training panel member and felt the extremely helpful, knowledgeable and I learnt a lot about what is out there for families and young people."***

***"Excellent day, I learned so much from speakers and current panel members."***



## New Panel members welcomed

During the last few months CHS have welcomed 36 new panel members who have completed their panel member training virtually and are now starting observe hearings and sit as panel members for the first time. Understandably, not all of the volunteer panel community have been able to sit as panel members during the pandemic and support and learning is in place to enable their return.

## Fife Advocacy

The Fife AST welcomed the invitation from Barnardo's to be involved in the recruitment of advocacy workers as part of the new national advocacy provision. CHS, Children & Families and SCRA will be working closely with Barnardo's to ensure the new post-holders' smooth induction and welcome to Children's Hearings in Fife.



## Working in partnership – lockdown and beyond

Throughout lockdown, leads from the various organisations involved in the Fife CHIP have met regularly. This partnership approach has ensured that we have been able to quickly respond to issues as they have evolved, and to make plans for our recovery.

The Fife CHIP met in full for the first time, post-lockdown, at the end of August. It was recognised that many of the actions on the previous Better Hearings Action Plan are now dated and do not reflect the current priorities, or recent changes to the system. As such, a plan is now in place for a development session in December that will see the Fife Better Hearings Action Plan realigned with the priorities that have emerged over the last 6 months and will put us in the best possible position for 2021.