



A REPORT
APRIL 2004
EVA LEARNER
Practice Improvement Network
PIAsNET

The Multi Agency Steering Group for the
Development of Supervised Contact Services in Coventry

DEVELOPING SUPERVISED CONTACT FACILITIES IN COVENTRY

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**DEVELOPING SUPERVISED CHILD
CONTACT FACILITIES IN COVENTRY**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1. BACKGROUND

Coventry Social Services has had long standing concerns over the lack of provision for safe and supervised contact for children with their families and over the past couple of years has worked closely with NCH to identify examples of good practice in this field, with a view to the eventual development of a high quality dedicated service. In 2002 the then Lord Chancellor's Department produced draft guidance identifying the importance and place of child contact services and the requirement on all parties to pay greater attention to the assessment of safety in the provision of contact and this development acted as a further catalyst to action.

In light of the Lord Chancellor's Departments recommendations it seemed appropriate to consider social services developments in the context of multi-agency provision and the need for a multi-agency strategy. Social Services approached the Domestic Violence Partnership and later other local agencies. Together they established the Multi-Agency Steering Group for the Development of Supervised Child Contact Services in Coventry. As the work of this Steering Group evolved, it became clear that many issues were the same for the families involved in both public and private law.

Membership of the Steering Group includes the following agencies:

- Coventry Social Services Children's Locality Services
- Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS)
- Coventry Domestic Violence Partnership
- Children's Registration and Reviewing Services
- NCH
- Coventry Children's Contact Centre

The Steering Group is chaired by Social Services with admin support provided by the Domestic Violence Partnership.

The Steering group obtained funding from the Children's Fund to commission a needs analysis and consultation regarding the development of child contact services for the public and private law sectors in Coventry. The consultant's brief included the scoping of existing provision and gaps, identifying options and making recommendations within a final report to be presented at the multi-agency conference in April 2004. This work has involved consultation with all major stakeholders including families and children.

2. DEFINITIONS OF CHILD CONTACT

"Supported contact provides general services for facilitating child contact with the non-resident parent (post separation) in a neutral and pleasant environment. Supervised contact is a professional service providing assessment and family support, and is invariably ordered by the court and other professionals, when there is a medium to high risk (of abuse, violence or abduction), both to children, the resident parent and other family members, following family breakdown."

Child Contact Working Group – Lord Chancellor's Department 2002

3. ISSUES FOR SUPERVISED CONTACT

The importance of child contact in private and public law

The issues are common to the wellbeing of children in both private and public arenas.

Commonly many children suffer identity problems at times of family breakdown and contact may facilitate some resolution to these problems. The need for a continuum of supervised contact arrangements is equally relevant to all children needing contact with the non resident parent. While the aim should be a reduction of supervision in a contact arrangement, a child-centred service would be flexible and allow movement between the supported and supervised arrangements, in either direction.

Safety

Analysis of reported case law in the 1980s and 1990s shows that the view of most judges is that contact is in the best interests of the child (Furniss, 1999). However experience has shown that contact with an abusive or violent parent may put children at further risk, particularly where there is a history of child abuse and/or domestic violence. Since 1998, nine children have been killed by their fathers during contact visits and a study by Women's Aid found that children had experienced every single form of violence and abuse during contact including abduction (WAFE 2002)

The complexities of contact

A child contact service requires a high level of trained and skilled professional supervisors. Safety and therapeutic factors demand a high level pre service risk assessment and ongoing assessment. Both assessments may contribute significantly to the outcomes for the child.

Research indicates the benefits to children returning home to live with their family if the child experienced positive contact while looked after.

There may be child protection issues within the context of the contact situation itself.

Children who have experienced situations of domestic violence may not always benefit from contact with the violent parent.

There may be difficulties in contact with parents who have mental health difficulties.

Supervised contact may contribute to the adequate resolution of difficult child parent relationships, as well as assist in the learning of parenting skills.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research from children looked after parallels divorce findings in relation to the decline in contact over time. As the length of placement increases, parental contact declines.

Erosion of contact may leave young people in long term care without the knowledge and understanding of personal history needed to develop a positive sense of identity.

Dartington Social Research Unit found that frequent changes of placement and social worker mean that the birth family may be the most stable influence in the child's experience.

Contact can make a positive contribution to placement stability with lower levels of fostering breakdown associated with frequent access to parents in several studies.

Where a permanent return is unlikely, particularly with adolescent placements, research indicates that contact could lead nevertheless to supportive relationships with family and friends.

5. LOCAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR CONTACT SERVICES IN COVENTRY

In Coventry, Children and Families Services, located within the Department of Social Services and Housing is the main agency providing supervised contact services for children in the public law arena.

Supervision of contact is undertaken by a range of support workers attached to locality offices, social workers and on occasion foster carers. Venues used are chiefly the locality offices, Cornerstone Family Centre and the North East Family Support Team base (N.E.F.S.T.)

The Coventry Child Contact Centre is a service run by volunteers and is the only provision of a supported contact service for the private law sector.

6. PERCEPTION OF LOCAL CHILD CONTACT SERVICES (based on information from/consultation with professionals, families, children etc)

The venues are mostly inappropriate for child contact purposes. They have no safety arrangements (buildings) or equipment, are not child / family friendly, little age appropriate toys/equipment, and no safe outdoor spaces. They operate business hours only.

Note: The partial exceptions to the above are the venues at Cornerstone Family Centre and the North East Family Support Team base.

7. STAFFING ISSUES

- There is little or no co-ordination of staffing arrangements outside of the locality team.
- Social workers are forced to step into cover which is often an inappropriate use of social work time.
- There is little consistent use of one worker.
- There is no specific induction or preparation for support workers starting this job.
- There is little or no specific training for supervised contact services; workers in the private sector are currently being given training by the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) .

- There is no back up/cover for contact supervisors.
- The contribution which can be made by well-supervised contact to the welfare of the child and the progress of a case needs to be better understood by staff at all levels.
- There is no professional sharing of resources between private and public sector child contact services

8. TRANSPORT

Transport to attend contact sessions for children who need it is currently provided by a mix of taxis, support workers and social workers. Arrangements can be confused, children may be late or emergency arrangements made involving inappropriate time and costs. Contact can be an extremely emotionally charged and sensitive experience for children and the advantages of a regular transport arrangement for them appears not to be fully understood.

9. STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

Children and Families Services have established a broad approach to referral for child contact. However, there are no set policies in the area of supervised contact and no standards of practice set by the Department. There is little rigour in contact supervision practice approaches or comprehension of the potential offered to the overall development of best practice.

There is little or no capacity to offer flexible supervision of contact which is sensitive to the changing needs of a situation and shifting the degree of supervision along a continuum of practice.

These issues are exacerbated by the lack of an appropriate environment in which to conduct contact. The environmental dimension is intrinsic to best practice in this field.

10. FUNDING

Private sector

Presently there appears to be no specific funding for contact services. The private law sector receives minor funds from CAFCASS to pay for rent and incidental expenses at the Coventry Children's Contact Centre. The current costs of this Centre are some £3,500 per year.

Public sector

The costs of contact within the public sector is by far the bigger cost given it is mostly required by the courts to provide supervised contact arrangements

Social service costs: Analysis undertaken by Social Services Finance.

- Staffing costs: detailed returns from a sample of two locality and two specialist teams identified approximately 16,518 hours of staff time per year (8 to 9 staff) involved with supervised contact at an estimated cost of some £226,000 per year.

- A calculation to estimate transport costs which included only the worker mileage identified for transporting children to and from contact (no taxi or other transport costs were included) suggested a figure of £ 29,000 per year.
- This demonstrates that Children and Families Services currently spend in the region of £255k per year on supervised contact excluding taxi and accommodation costs.

11. CONCLUSIONS

Coventry supervised and supported child contact services are without the basic conditions offering a safe environment. These services take place in a variety of venues which are not child / family friendly and are not always available for sessions. The services are chaotic and uncoordinated with variable and inconsistent quality of practice. While staffed by a range of committed hardworking staff, they are mostly without relevant training.

The financial analysis demonstrates that the costs of this service are currently in excess of £300k per year. This suggests a considerable waste of valuable resources : the use of current inappropriate venues, lack of a co-ordinated trained staffing team with agreed practice policies and standards, and the loss of the benefits to the wellbeing and case outcomes of looked after children are all areas of identifiable waste.

The current situation is characterised by risk due to the poverty and inconsistency of safe practices in the arrangements for supervised (and supported) child contact, and the lack of focus on best practice in assessments and best outcomes for children.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

That the substantive funding expended on the present arrangements be converted to an opportunity to fund a model of an integrated supervised child contact service for Coventry. The service would reflect the safest and best practice in this field, offering a continuum of contact from supported to supervised, with a trained and skilled staff and a transport service. It is essential to the model that an appropriate level of financial contribution be identified and agreed to support the private law aspects of an integrated scheme.

Advantages of this model

- Demonstrably best practice in this field with all the advantages to children
- Reduced authority/family conflict; reduced contact /court hearings; reduced section 34 reports, section 11 and 7 reports
- Consequent savings to legal costs/social work time
- Reduced assaults, sick leave etc, improved staff morale
- Improved quality supervised contact reflects on improved child/family relationships; more successful returns home, fewer readmissions
- Increased placement stability
- Public/private service offers cross fertilisation; shared resources/expertise; children in need crosses public/private boundaries; economy of resources

Recommendation 2

That the present Multi-Agency Coventry Supervised Children's Contact Steering Group move from a working group operating on the strategic level to become the implementation body, with formal approval from the relevant represented agencies.

Consideration be given to the need for any additional representation in the light of these recommendations.

APPENDIX 1

Executive Summary

Identified principles for best practice (consultation and research)

- The best interests and wellbeing of the child takes precedence
- An integrated service: public and private law clientele
- Keeping children safe (professional practice and buildings)
- A child centred, age appropriate, family friendly environment
- Purpose – designed lay out in the venue
- Best practice approaches consonant with policy, referral procedures and practice
- A flexible service offering the possibility of moving between supported and supervised contact as necessary
- Facility provides capacity for preparing meals; baby changing, etc
- Diversity friendly
- Formally trained dedicated staff
- Salaried staff for supervised contact
- Staff expertise to include highly experienced social worker/s
- Contact supervisors to have 'back up' or 'cover' staff as necessary
- If possible a dedicated centre (with satellite venues if desirable), well located to motorways, bus routes
- Safe outdoor activity area
- Integrated transport service

APPENDIX 2

Executive Summary

Legislative framework

The Children Act 1989 has an underpinning principle that in all court decisions the welfare of the child is the first and foremost consideration. With the Children Act came the presumption that children in care or separated from one parent, through family breakdown, should have continuing contact with their parents and relatives unless such contact can be shown to be not in their best interests

Public law – CA89 Section 34

Local authorities in seeking a Care Order must advise the court of its plans to promote and allow reasonable contact or if contact is to be restricted, satisfy the court as to the grounds for this

CA 89 Section 2

married parents or the unmarried mother of a child subject to a Care order have continuing responsibility for their child even if they are not living with them

Children themselves have a right to to apply for contact with a significant individual

Private law – CA 89 Section 8

Non resident parents of children may under the private law provisions in the Children Act apply to the court for a contact order providing for the child to visit or stay.

Adoption

The Children Act 1989 provides for a contact order to be made when a child is freed for adoption or when they are adopted (CA 89 Section 8)

The European Convention on Human Rights

Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (now incorporated into UK law) guarantees the right to respect for private and family life. The paramountcy of the welfare and human rights of a child under article 3 outweigh the rights of a parent if a choice has to be made.

THE MULTI – AGENCY STEERING GROUP FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUPERVISED CONTACT SERVICES IN COVENTRY

A REPORT DEVELOPING SUPERVISED CONTACT FACILITIES IN COVENTRY

1. INTRODUCTION

Coventry Social Services has had longstanding concerns over the lack of provision for safe and supervised contact for children with their families, and over the past couple of years has worked closely with the NCH to identify examples of good practice in this field. In 2002 the then Lord Chancellor's Department produced draft guidance identifying the importance and place of child contact services in children's services, and the requirement on all parties to pay greater attention to the assessment of safety in the provision of contact.

In the light of the Lord Chancellor's Department recommendations at that time, it seemed appropriate to consider social services developments in the context of Multi-Agency provisions with the need for a Multi-Agency strategy. The Social Services Department approached the Domestic Violence Partnership in Coventry and later other local agencies including CAFCASS, The Coventry Children's Contact Centre, and Relate and together they established the Multi-Agency Steering Group for the Development of Supervised Child Contact Services in Coventry. The aim of this Steering Group was to look at the feasibility of setting up a supervised Child Contact Centre in Coventry. While there was a recognition that many of the issues in respect of contact were common to the children and families in the public and private law sectors, it became increasingly clear as the work of this group evolved, that the principle of establishing an integrated service for both sectors must be considered.

An interesting feature of the history of Coventry is the earlier work in the area of domestic violence and the development in the 1990's of a unique women's refuge service, Panaghar, for women from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The latter developed a number of refuges in Coventry and Leicester to service women in domestically violent relationships, as well as those needing other forms of assistance. The work evolved in its strategic and policy approaches and with the development of the Children Act in 1990, consultative approaches became more focussed on working with service users.

The Domestic Violence Focus Group emerged from this period and was the forerunner to the present Domestic Violence Partnership. Part of the interests of these groups was the concern around safety, the standards and the facilities for contact for the children of Coventry. This has fed into the present work of the Steering Group.

1.1 The Coventry Multi-Agency Initiative

The Multi-Agency Steering Group for the Development of Supervised Contact Services in Coventry (The Multi-Agency Steering Group) believed that a joint strategic approach was required to make an impact and achieve improve supervised contact arrangements, and its work has developed within this approach.

There is a general consensus among the Multi-Agency Steering Group that current provision is diverse and often ad hoc. That there is a lack of consistency about quality and good practice and that provision is not accessible to everyone who needs it. There is consensus over the need for the development of a service open to families involved in both the public and the private sectors. The Steering Group recognised that many of the issues are the same for both sectors.

In addition the Multi-Agency Steering Group viewed the challenge of providing good quality contact facilities as complex, requiring highly developed staff skills, co-ordination among agencies and shared expertise and resources.

As a result of these discussions the Multi-Agency Steering Group sought funding to initiate a project to consult, analyse and report on child contact services, The outcome to be a plan offering a strategic solution to meet the needs of all the partner agencies involved in children's contact services in Coventry.

1.2 The Multi-Agency Steering Group for the Development of Supervised Contact Services in Coventry

Membership of the Multi-Agency Steering Group include representatives from Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS), the Coventry Children's Contact Centre (CCCC), Coventry Domestic Violence Partnership, NCH, Social Services Children's Locality Services and the Children's Registration and Reviewing Services. The Multi-Agency Steering Group is chaired by the Commissioning Officer for Children in Social Services, and administrative support is provided by Coventry Domestic Violence Partnership.

1.3 The Vision of the Multi-Agency Steering Group

In its considerations, the Steering Group identified the following principles and definitions of a contact service that best matched its vision.

The principles of a supervised contact service include:

- The best interests and wellbeing of the child to take precedence
- An integrated service for private and public law clientele
- Keeping children safe – fundamental to the professional practice approach, and the buildings used as venues.
- A child centred, age appropriate, family friendly, environment
- Purpose designed layout and arrangement
- Best practice approaches need to be consonant with policy, referral procedures and practice
- The Service to offer the possibility of a continuum of supported to supervised contact (in any direction)
- The venue to have facilities for cooking, baby changing, etc
- Diversity friendly
- Formally trained dedicated staff (Coram Training)

- Salaried staff for supervised contact
- Staff expertise must include highly experienced social workers (for high risk), and more than one worker as to provide 'cover' or backup.
- Well located to motorways, bus routes
- Safe outdoor activity areas
- Integrated Transport service

A Definition of Supervised Child Contact

The definition of supervised contact offered by the Coram Family (see *Guide to Best Practice in Supervised Child Contact*, p3) fits well the broad approach identified by the Multi-Agency Steering Group:

"Supervised contact aims to ensure safety from physical harm and emotional abuse and requires a high level of constant supervision from supervisors experienced and confident enough to intervene immediately and firmly if anything of concern arises. If safe contact is achieved supervision becomes therapeutic in the widest sense. The contact is managed so that the child is supported in resolving issues with the parent which he or she needs to understand; or to provide opportunities for a parent to apologise or in other ways make amends; or to effect a planned and humane ending to contact. In supervised contact, the supervisor plays a role in guiding parents to improve the quality of interactions and parenting; this may include 'mediating' to improve the quality of interactions between a child's parents or between parents and substitute carers." (adapted from *The Experts Report, Contact and Domestic Violence*, Drs Sturge and Glaser) It needs to be made explicit that supervised contact may not always have any emphasis on a 'therapeutic' aspect. Much supervised contact, may be non intrusive but rather to ensure the safety of the child.

In the light of the above principles and definition, the service would be expected to create a set of common practice standards, referral procedures and assessments. To establish a continuum of service incorporating the range of sessions from those at one end being only supported or observed by contact supervisors, to that at the other being moderately, and beyond that highly supervised. This would allow parents and children to make progress in their relationships with their parents and families, and within a stable contact environment be able to move along a continuum of supervision in contact. That is towards less supervised contact and ultimately no supervision, or towards more supervision as may be required. This approach matches the requirements of families in both the public and private law sectors.

Over the period of this consultancy the Multi-Agency Working Group met on a number of occasions. It accepted that the standards and models set by the current government working parties and other beacon services in the area of supported and supervised contact, are central in guiding the development of practice in Coventry, and offer criteria against which we could measure the need for change in our present contact arrangements and practice.

The main concept identified was that the service could only be fully operational if it was housed in a dedicated building; purpose built or

a building suitably renovated and designed. It was thought that this could best integrate the principles basic to the models now recognised as best practice. Above all it could offer absolute safety to those children and families who might be vulnerable in this way.

It was also suggested that an integrated transport resource capacity for the picking up and delivery of children to and from contact would be very advantageous.

The Service itself should be staffed by dedicated, selected and trained staff, sufficient in status and numbers and located on the premises. They, with their management to work very closely together with the agencies involved in the referral of clients of both the public and private legal sectors.

Referral procedures, both documentation and instruction must be standardised.

The hours of operation should be seven days a week until early evening.

1.4 The Brief for the Consultancy

The Brief for this Consultancy was to undertake a needs analysis and development plan to address and include the following elements.

- A scoping exercise to establish what provision currently exists in Coventry, where it is sited and who it caters for
- Information gathering about the policies and procedures, including how organisations operate, access routes, quality of buildings, time available for each contact, security provision, arrangements for escorting children etc
- Identification of best practice in Coventry and elsewhere in the UK
- An analysis of where the difficulties are in relation to existing provision
- An analysis of gaps and needs
- Consultation with key practitioner's, courts, children, parents/carer's to inform recommendations
- A final report to be produced and to include recommendations for the way forward

1.5 The Consultant

Initially the task for undertaking the project was offered to a consultancy partnership involving Peter Davies then of SECTA, and Eva Learner of Practice Improvement Network (PIAsNet). Unfortunately Peter Davies was unable to continue the work but Eva Learner remained as Co-ordinator to complete the project.

1.6 Methodology

The methodology adopted in the work for this consultancy task, has been an eclectic range of activities aimed at scoping the nature of contact services in Coventry, exploring the views of service users, voluntary and professional workers and their managers, directly involved in the provision of contact services in all sectors; and those

professional 'stakeholders' who operate in the directly relevant areas of legal matters, judges, magistrates and solicitors, police and those senior managers who are involved in the strategic planning and development of services. These views have been collected through the distribution of questionnaires; through face to face meetings, and telephone discussions. The further work to be undertaken prior to a major 'launching' Conference at the end of April 2004, will be a further series of meetings with selected groups to confirm and refine the recommendations and views reflected in this report, as well as to motivate subsequent action.

The Multi-Agency Working Group has been closely involved and directing the work of the author.

2. THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

2.1 National Context – The Need For Contact Services: Facts And Figures

The term Contact is a familiar word in the language of child welfare and is understood to be the maintenance or promotion of links between children and their absent families. The Children Act 1989 sought to bring together public and private law and the provision of services for young people and their families. In private law the Act introduced the principle of continued parental responsibility for young people affected by divorce and separation and assumed that contact would be maintained unless shown to be harmful to the child. In public law the Children Act placed a duty on local authorities to promote family contact for children looked after wherever this is practical and consistent with the child's welfare. Whilst there has been a presumption that the promotion of contact is in the best interests of the child there has also been an increasing awareness of the potential dangers both physical and emotional at contact to mothers and children who have suffered domestic violence.

Contact arrangements are provided by a range of services including National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC), social services and commissioned voluntary services. Child Contact Centres have a vital role in facilitating contact. There are 290 centres registered with the National Association of Contact Centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland staffed by 3,500 –4,000 volunteers and facilitating contact with some 12,000 children per year. There is a reported lack of resources to meet the demand (National Association of Child Contact Centres Directory 2001) The NACCC offer a monitoring and quality assurance role nationally; providing standards of practice and training for the volunteers working in these centres.(National Association of Child Contact Centres Directory, 2001)

2.2 Private law

An increasing number of children are experiencing parental separation through divorce and marital separation.

In 2000 Lewis (Lewis C.A.,2003) estimated that four out of every ten children born to married parents in the UK experienced their parents' divorce by the time they were 16. In the same publication Lewis also estimated that at most 70% of divorced fathers have some contact with their children. In 2002 the number of divorces granted in the UK increased by 1.9%, from 157,000 in 2001 to 160,000. This is the highest number of divorces since 1997, but still 11% less than the peak of 180,000 in 1993. In England and Wales 70% of divorces were to couples where both parties were in their first marriage whilst the corresponding proportion was 80% in 1982, reflecting the fall in the number of first marriages. In 2002 the most frequent fact on which divorce was granted to a woman in England and Wales was the unreasonable behaviour of her husband, while for a man, it was separation for two years with consent (DfES 2002).

The latest available statistics show that in 2002 61,356 contact orders were made by the UK courts in private [divorce and separation] law proceedings . This represents a significant rise from 2000 when 46,070 contact orders were made and 2001 when the number granted was 55,030. Contact orders were refused in 1276 cases in 2000, and 713 cases in 2001 (DfES 2002).

These figures do not relate to children whose parents are not married and whose fathers do not have parental responsibility.

2.3 Public law

Equally the number of children separated from their parents and looked after by local authorities has risen to 60,800 in 2003 which is an increase of approximately 5,000 from the year 2000. Of this number 10,200 were on interim care orders, 29,400 full care orders and 18,900 young people were accommodated as a result of voluntary agreements, 1,900 were freed for adoption. The number of care orders increased by 3% from 1999 to 2003, interim care orders increased by 4% during the same period and the number of children freed for adoption rose by 1% (DoH, 2004).

2.4 A National Initiative – Child Contact Centre Working Group

The development of child contact centres were a response to increasing levels of divorce and separation and were being established widely in England and Wales, from the mid 1980s. A variety of research findings at that time were indicating the value in sustaining contact between children and parents and a number of voluntary organisations established meeting places for children with their non custodial parent and/or siblings. These centres aim to provide a safe place for meetings between children and the non custodial parent/siblings when they are unable to manage contact independently. The figure suggested is that some 20,000 children a year use the child contact centres with 30% referred by the courts. The provision of child contact centres varies from region to region, as do the facilities and services they provide.

There are two main types of contact, supervised and supported. (See also Appendix 1)

“Supported contact provides general services for facilitating child contact with the non resident parent (post separation) in a neutral and pleasant environment. Supervised contact is a professional service providing assessment and family support, and is invariably ordered by the court and other professionals, when there is a medium to high risk (of abuse, violence or abduction), both to children, the resident parent and other family members, following family breakdown.”

(Child Contact Working Group – Lord Chancellor’s Department, 2002)

In 2001 an informal Working Group of providers and funders of child contact centre services was set up to consider the development of a new model for child contact centres. The Working Group was facilitated by the then Lord Chancellor’s Department, and consisted of the following representatives. The NACCC (the National

Association of Child Contact Centres), Coram Family, NCH, Welcare Accord, CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service) and the Lord Chancellor's Department (Family Policy Division 2)

See paper: *Developing A New Model For Child Contact Centres, A Consultation By The Child Contact Centre Working Group.*

"The overarching aim of the Working Group is to promote and secure the safety and best interests of children, and their families. The Working Group believes this can be achieved through the development and application of standards, management arrangements and procedures, and improving the arrangements and facilities at child contact centres."

The Working Group undertook the task of exploring various key aspects of the practices underpinning contact with the object of then consulting with the wider interested public as to its considerations, and finally to engage in a formal consultative process for all interested parties. The results of the latter were completed by end October 2002. This indicated that there are some 520 voluntary sector child contact centres throughout England and Wales, with most affiliated to either NACCC or managed by NCH (National Children's Homes) NACCC was recognised as the most suitable organisation to deliver national standards for supported child contact centres. The Lord Chancellor's Department's exercise also identified the need for more supervised contact facilities.

The Working Group worked with the Government to develop a strategy for a national network of child contact centres and it launched national definitions of supported and supervised contact in May 2003 at NACCC's AGM, where NACCC and CAFCASS signed a protocol on best practice.

Following government department changes in July 2003 the working-group moved to the new DfES Children, Young People and Families Department, under the auspices of the Vulnerable Children's Division and was renamed the Implementation Group.

At time of writing notice of further developments being launched by the implementation group have become available. A further programme of research, see below, is to be launched to evaluate the impact of the variety of current initiatives on the quality and nature of both supported and supervised child contact centre provision, and will be undertaken between 2004 to 2006.

2.5 The Research

The specific aims of the research are:

- To evaluate the impact of the NACCC Change programme on services provided by member child contact centres.
- To undertake case studies of supervised contact centres, in order to evaluate the different practices resulting from the NCH, Coram and Accord models of supervised contact. This will include looking at how effective the definition of supervised contact is through an analysis of the cases that are referred and either accepted or rejected by the centres.

- To identify the processes involved in setting up child contact centre partnerships in inner London, the West midlands and Greater Manchester
- To identify the best mechanisms for funding child contact centres in order to achieve the best value for money.

2.6 Legislative framework

The Children Act 1989 has as an underpinning principle that in all court decisions the welfare of the child is the first and foremost consideration; the 'paramountcy' principle.

With the Children Act 1989 came the presumption that children in care or separated from one parent through family breakdown, should have continuing contact with their parents and relatives unless such contact can be shown to be not in their best interests. The legal term 'contact' was formerly known as access and refers to face to face meetings, telephone calls, letters, birthday cards, presents and photographs.

Public law-CA89 Section 34

Local authorities in seeking a Care Order must advise the court of its plans to promote and allow reasonable contact or, if contact is to be restricted, satisfy the court as to grounds for this [CA89s34].

Under the Children Act, married parents or the unmarried mother of a child subject to a Care Order have continuing responsibility for their child even though they are not living with them [CA89s2]. Children themselves have a right to apply for contact with a significant individual. As in all contact applications, the child's welfare rather than the parent's right to see the child is the paramount consideration.

Contact for children voluntarily accommodated is arranged without a care order.

Children of divorced and separated parents

Private law-CA89 Section 8

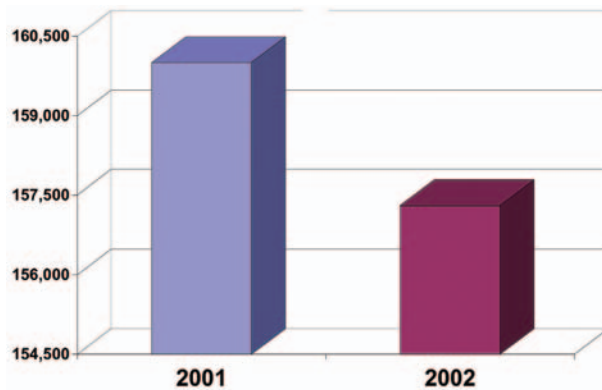
Non-resident parents of children may under the private law provisions in the Children Act apply to a court for a contact order providing for the child to visit or stay. In deciding whether to grant a contact order the court will apply the 'paramount' principle. The court has to decide whether the fundamental need of every child to have an enduring relationship with both parents is outweighed by the risk of harm that may be caused by contact (White, Carr and Love, 1995). The court may attach conditions to a section 8 contact order, for instance, that the contact be supervised [CA89s11].

Adoption

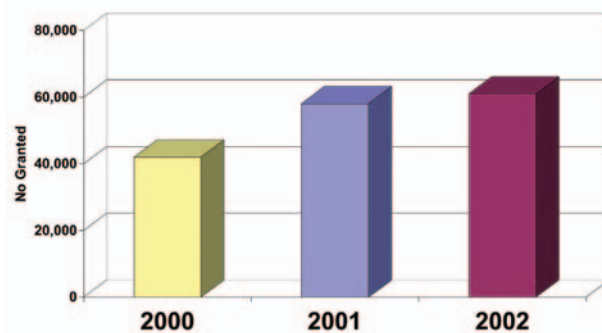
The Children Act 1989 provides for a contact order to be made when a child is freed for adoption or when they are adopted [CA89s8]. In practice, courts do not usually impose an order for contact against the wishes of adopters (Slade, 2002).

The European Convention on Human Rights

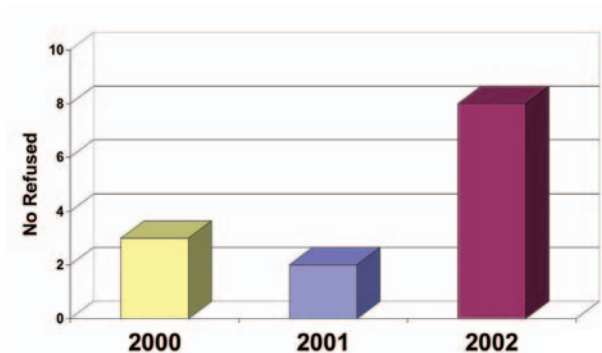
Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights which has been incorporated into UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998, guarantees the right to respect for private and family life. Current European court case precedents make clear that the paramountcy of the welfare and human rights of a child under article 3 outweigh the rights of a parent if a choice has to be made (The Lord Chancellor's Department, 2002).



Divorces Granted in England & Wales (2001 & 2002)



Private Law Proceedings in England & Wales (Divorce & Separation) Contact Orders Granted in 2001, 2002 & 2003



Private Law Proceedings in England & Wales (Divorce & Separation) Contact Orders Refused in 2001, 2002 & 2003

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTACT FOR PLACEMENT STABILITY AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The Children Act 1989 saw a major shift in public policy towards contact with parents for children both looked after temporarily and in permanent substitute care.

In response to earlier research findings about the impact on children of loss of contact (DHSS, *Social Work Decisions in Child Care*, 1985), the Children Act 1989 highlights the importance of children retaining links with their families whilst away from home. In 1993, the Dartington Social Research Unit has pointed out (Bullock et al 1993) that frequent changes of placement and social worker mean that the birth family may in fact be the most stable influence in the child's experience and research with care leavers has shown that the majority of young people in care return home to their family at discharge (DHSS, *When Leaving Care is Leaving Home*, 1995).

Research in relation to children accommodated and in particular adolescent placements where a permanent return was unlikely has encouraged the view that contact could lead to supportive relationships with family and friends (Bullock, R., Little, M. Millham, S., 1993) Evidence from a number of studies has shown that no matter if links have been weak or turbulent most children and young people who experience care do return to their parents or at least to some member of their family (Fanshel and Shinn, 1978).

The review of relevant research in *Patterns and Outcomes*, 1991, as above, enabled the identification of a 'leaving care curve' which slopes up very sharply at first and then flattens out abruptly; children either leave care within the first six weeks or are destined to remain for a long time. The research from children looked after shows parallels with divorce findings in relation to the decline in contact over time. As the length of placement increases, parental contact declines (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987, Thorburn and Rowe, 1988, Wedge and Mantle, 1991).

Lower levels of fostering breakdown have been associated with frequent access to parents in several studies (Ryburn, 1994). These studies suggest an association between continuous contact with significant adults and positive effects on children's behaviour.

In relation to long term substitute care Ryburn highlights the positive contribution contact can make to placement stability and suggests the erosion of contact may leave young people in long term public care without the knowledge and understanding of personal history needed to develop a positive sense of identity (Ryburn, M. 1994).

Slade in 2002 noted that the 'drive towards greater openness has also come from retrospective studies linking children's sense of identity with their understanding of their origins, and the possible adverse effects of secrets and deceptions in families'

A small scale study by Fratter et al in 1989 explored access [contact] in permanent placements and concluded that a child's need for contact does not necessarily conflict with the achievement of permanence.

Place in 1999 described the purpose of contact as being:

- a preliminary to rehabilitation
- to assist in a therapeutic resolution between parent and child
- to maintain links between the child and the birth family to improve the child's sense of identity.

3.1 The issue of contact and domestic violence

The Children Act 1989 does not make reference to the needs of children affected by domestic violence and it was not until 2001 that Guidelines for Good Practice were issued by the Advisory Board on Family Law (The Lord Chancellor's Department, 2001).

Whilst the courts in Northern Ireland, Australia and New Zealand take domestic violence into account when considering contact [access in Australia] Lindsey Mendoza, Department of Law at Anglia University wrote "there have been many cases on the issue of child contact and 'the hostile parent'. There had been a presumption that contact would be in the best interests of the child unless there was a good reason for refusing it. However, it appeared in some cases that genuine fears of the mother both for the child's and her own wellbeing were being overridden in favour of contact going ahead."

Mendoza goes on to note that recent case law in England has shown a shift towards a more sympathetic approach to contact where there has been domestic violence. Courts are recognising that there will be cases where contact is not appropriate or in the best interests of the child and that fathers must now address those aspects of their behaviour which have caused the problems in the past before contact can be safely granted.

On 18th June 2003 the Government published the 'Safety and Justice', a consultation paper which sets out the strategy on domestic violence. One element of this strategy is to ensure that child contact arrangements improve the safety of all parties where domestic violence has been a feature in parental relationships.

In a press release from the West Yorkshire Police 'Don't suffer in silence over the festive season and beyond' (23rd December 2003), Sergeant Jill Latham, Force Vulnerable Victim Co-ordinator noting that the Government is to create a register of civil orders so officers can check if a child contact order is in place said "Quite often, child contact is the channel used to facilitate violence on a partner or former partner. Hopefully, officers will be able to check this register and be better informed when attending an incidence of domestic violence. It is all about risk assessing and seeing how safe the victims and their children are".

Research suggests that there may be some circumstances, such as family violence, when contact is not in the child's best interests.

Justice Butler-Sloss LJ (Butler – Sloss, 1993), one of the most eminent family law authority's in the country, stresses that contact must not be allowed to destabilise or endanger the arrangements for the child.

3.2 When Contact may not be in the child's best interests

When parents separate, the majority are able to make their own arrangements for contact between the child and the non resident parent, who is most usually the father (Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Jaffe et al, 2003). Over recent years there has been concern about the increasing levels of separation and divorce and the impact of this on children, and about the tendency for contact following separation to diminish rapidly for a sizeable number of children (Rodgers and Pryer, 1998). This has led to a number of initiatives to encourage and maintain contact with fathers, including the rapid growth of (supported) contact centres.

At the same time, where there has been a history of domestic violence or other child protection concerns, the issue of child contact is much more contentious (Radford et al 1999). Not only have we become aware of the extent of violence towards women, which often commences or escalates during pregnancy (BMA, 1998), but also we have begun to recognise the very negative and long lasting impact of this on children and young people (Parkinson and Humphreys, 1998; Mullender et al, 2002). Male violence towards partners and ex partners is a major source of adversity and harm in terms of both its direct and indirect effects on the health and wellbeing of children. In somewhere between 75% and 90% of families where men have been violent to women, children will have been witnesses (Mullender et al 2002; Taylor-Browne, 2002). Hence the extension through the Children and Adoption Act 2002, of the definition of significant harm in the Children Act 1989, to include the witnessing of violence towards another person. It is known also that levels of post separation violence are high in separated families where there has been domestic violence. Thus contact can be used to further perpetrate violence (Jaffe et al, 2003).

Those children living with the impact of post separation violence may be amongst the most distressed children in the population, with the highest levels of behavioural and emotional disturbance and enduring depression (Buchanan et al, 2001).

In addition the relationship between the occurrence of domestic violence and direct physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children has increasingly been documented. Estimates of degree of correlation vary between 30-66% in greater or lesser amounts. One study in U.S.A found that in the most chronic and severe violence towards women, there was almost an 100% occurrence of contact being used to perpetrate violence (Ross, 1996).

Several studies have argued that children who have post separation contact with violent men show the slowest rates of recovery from the effects of violence (Strategic Partners, 1998) and that where children have no contact the harm they have sustained can be ameliorated and their fears subside (Sinclair, 2000).

This leaves us with conflicting principles that are very difficult to reconcile: the general principle of promoting contact with the absent parent posing risks for those children who have lived with the effects of domestic violence. (see Sturge and Glaser)

This is a difficult dilemma but while assessment is important the biggest predictor of violence in contact is past history.

4. COVENTRY – POPULATION/DEMOGRAPHIC DETAIL

The multicultural nature of the population in the UK is a factor intrinsic to the planning of any human service or facility in the country. No less important is that consideration in any work undertaken for child contact services. The implications of family breakdown and the position of children in the family for children and families of ethnic minority groups, will be as important for these children as for any other. Their traditions and attitudes towards family life remain in many current situations little changed from that of their land of origin, and thus remain very intrinsic to their current lifestyle. The stresses and strains of contemporary life impact considerably on these factors, not least in the way of conflicting values and other complexities. For whatever reasons there may be a falling out in parental relationship, there are bound to be individuals and groups in the surrounding family wholly disapproving of these breakdowns in relationship and causing additional tensions and stresses. The children are often in the midst of generational conflicts and bear the brunt of trying to understand the family traditions along with the values of their peers and the society around them.

While it is important that diversity be identified and respected in any social circumstance, it is equally critical that in the circumstances surrounding contact arrangements the particular sensitivities in this activity be understood and respected.

Thus the population mix in Coventry needs to be understood in order to plan any contact services appropriately. The following statistics gives some indication of the range and numbers of different ethnic communities living in Coventry and the nature and range of Coventry children who are looked after.

We need too, to bear in mind the range of people experiencing marital breakdown who are referred for contact, supported and supervised, whose children are not looked after but remain living in the family.

COVENTRY POPULATION – PROFILE

The following information has been taken from the 2001 Census Data

4.1 Country of Birth (United Kingdom) – Table KS05

Coventry has a total population of 300,848 persons as calculated in the 2001 Census

Of these people, 247,958 were born in England, 6536 in Scotland, 4764 in Wales, 2446 in Northern Ireland, 7948 the Republic of Ireland, 3679 other EU countries, and 27,517 elsewhere. This indicates that over 13% of the population were born outside the UK.

4.2 Ethnic Group – Table KS06

A consideration of the ethnicity of the population of Coventry offers the following picture:

Of the 300,848 total population:

- White British, White Irish and White other White = 84%
- Mixed White and Black Caribbean, mixed White and Black African = 0.9%
- Mixed white and Asian, mixed other mixed = 0.8%
- Asian or Asian British: Indian ;and Asian or Asian British : Pakistani; Asian or Asian British : Bangladeshi; Asian or Asian British : other Asian = 11.3%
- Black or Black Caribbean; and Black or Black British: Black African And Black or Black British : other Black = 1.8%
- Chinese or other ethnic group: Chinese and Chinese or other ethnic group: Other Ethnic Group = 1.2%

4.3 Religion (England & Wales) (United Kingdom) – Table KS05

The breakdown of the Coventry population by religious connections is as follows:

Christian	65.3%
Buddhist	0.3%
Hindu	2.6%
Jewish	0.1%
Muslim	3.9%
Sikh	4.6%
Other religions	0.2%
No religion	15.1%
Religion not stated	8%

4.4 Marital Status (Coventry) – Table KS04

All people 16 and over

All People – 237,174

Single – 81,396

Married – 96,160

Re-married – 13,779

Separated – 5461
(but married)

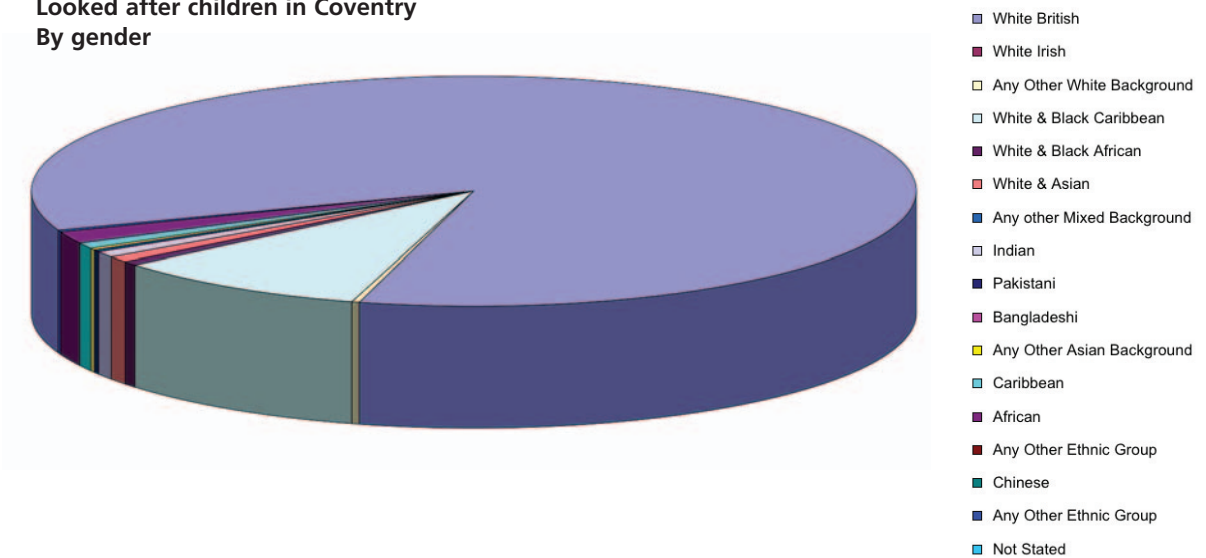
Divorced – 19,734

Widowed – 20,644

Children by ethnic origin

White British	416
White Irish	0
Any other White background	1
White and Black Caribbean	47
White and Black African	2
White and Asian	4
Any other mixed background	0 (0.0%)
Indian	4
Pakistani	2
Bangladeshi	0 (0.0%)
Any other Asian background	2
Caribbean	4
African	7
Any other Black background	0 (0.0%)
Chinese	0 (0.0%)
Any other ethnic group	2
Not stated	0 (0.0%)

**Looked after children in Coventry
By gender**



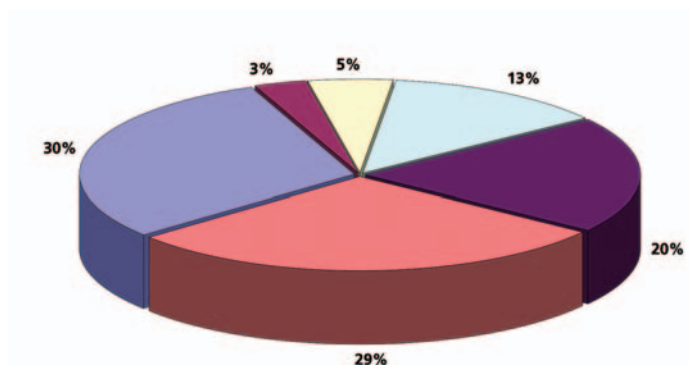
The demographic data is especially helpful in establishing something of the ethnic background and religion of the wider population, and of the group of children looked after. While the numbers of looked after children in the various ethnic minority groupings vary a little from those in the general population in Coventry, there is a degree of similarity in the range of diversity represented in these children. As stated below, the fact that there is a range of children looked after from the ethnic groups indicates the importance of the need for appropriately sensitive services.

Children Looked After by time

1-55 days.	16
56 -182 days	23
183-364 days.	62
365-729 days.	96
730-1825 days.	143
1826 + days.	151

**Children looked after in Coventry
Percentage by time**

1-55	3%
56 - 182	5%
183 - 364	13%
365 - 729	20%
730 - 1825	29%
1825+	30%

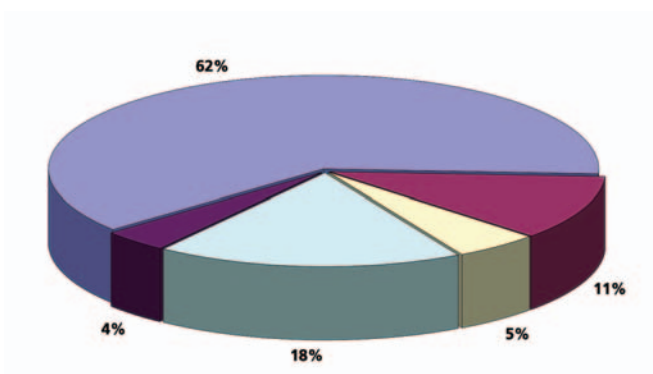


Children Looked After by care arrangement

Children in foster care, (in & out of Coventry).	299
Children in homes/hostels, residential school, mother & baby homes	52
Children placed for adoption	25
Children placed with own parents	84
Kinship placements.	18

**Children looked after in Coventry
By care arrangement**

Children in foster care (in & out of Coventry)	62%
Kinship placements	4%
Children placed with own parents	18%
Children placed for adoption	5%
Children in homes/hostels, residential schools, mother & baby home	11%

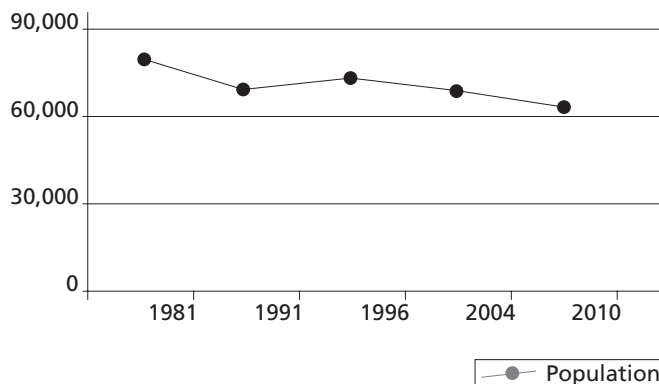


4.7 Children – Population and Population Projections

From Census, Mid Year Estimates, 2000 Based Sub National Projections

Age Group 0 to 17

Children - Population & Population Projections (Age Group 0 - 17)



This Chart indicates a very high point in 1981 to some 82,000 children, dropping by over 10,000 by 1991, peaking again in 1996 at about 73,000 children, and from then on to 2004 at about just 70,000 children. The projections show a gradual reduction in the number of children to 2010 at about 64,000.

Some analysis of children likely to require contact services in Coventry

The following analysis may be perceived to be very simplistic, but it is important to identify the nature of the population in Coventry and to evidence the need for an emphasis on sensitivity and awareness of diversity and the differing needs of any population being offered a contact service.

The data also assists with a picture of the trends in the numbers of Children and Young People population. The Coventry children population projections (see 1981 and 2001 Census figures) indicate that in the various age groupings the figures are likely to steadily reduce :

- 0-4 years - 1981 19164 children
2010 17900 (projected)
- 5-9 years - 1981 20872 children
2010 16800 (projected)
- 10-14 years - 1981 26381 children
2010 17800 (projected)
- 0-17 years - 1981 82973 total Children and Young People
2010 64600 (projected)

The population for whom contact may be an issue are children and families who are involved in separation and divorce, for whom the

court has ordered either supported or supervised contact arrangements. In addition are the group of children looked after by the social services department, for whom there are court orders. While there are many separated and divorced and single parents, many manage to make their own agreeable arrangements. It is difficult to calculate with precision the numbers in both public and private law sectors requiring a contact service, however we know that for the group of looked after children in Coventry alone (the public law sector), an estimate has been made that some 16,500 supervised contact hours were undertaken in 2003.

The demographic data is especially helpful in establishing something of the ethnic background and religion of the wider population, and of the group of children looked after.

The data provided on the looked after children in the care of Coventry Social Services, indicates a mix of ethnicity in the group, reflecting the wider Coventry population in a very general way. For example, the wider population has some 84% in the category of White British persons, the group of looked after children also suggests some 84% White British children. The remaining 16% of children are from a variety of ethnic minorities, with the other biggest group of children, 9.5%, being White /Black Caribbean. This is a rather bigger proportion of children from this ethnic group than that reflected in the general population figure. Additionally however, there are as mentioned above a range of children from different ethnic backgrounds and religion.

The message in this analysis confirms the points made throughout this report, that any service for children and families must reflect a sensitivity and awareness to the need for incorporating in any service the aspects of environment and staffing which will ensure full access to people of different ethnic backgrounds, as well as making them feel comfortable and secure.

5. CURRENT CONTACT SERVICES IN COVENTRY – AN OVERVIEW

Contact services in Coventry are divided by the criterion of whether the case falls into the private law sector, or the public law sector. For private law cases, referrals are made to the Coventry Children's Contact Centre.

The public law cases are serviced by the Children and Families Services, Coventry Social Services. The venues used include four locality social service offices and/or the Cornerstone Family Centre and the North East Family Support Team. For private law cases, there is essentially only one contact facility in Coventry; referrals are made by CAFCASS officers to solicitors for the Coventry Children's Contact Centre.

There are no integrated facilities offering a contact service with a clientele mix of cases from both legal sectors.

5.1 Current Provision in Coventry of Supervised Contact Services, for Public Law Cases

Coventry Children and Families Services, located in the Department of Social Services and Housing, is the main agency providing supervised contact services for children and their families involved in

the public law arena. These children and families need a supervised contact arrangement because of the emotional and social situation and often the complex relationship problems in each case.

The number of children looked after by the Department due mainly to court directions, totals some 491 children, as at February 2004. Of these it could be reckoned that at least two thirds require a contact arrangement with their families. The reasons for a child's removal from her/his family frequently relates to an incapacity to parent the child for a variety of reasons.

Supervised contact is usually part of a child's plan (care plan), and /or court order. Contact is the most crucial aspect for children in respect of their links with their family, and impacts not only on the child's emotional and social state, but her/his identity, self esteem, the possibility of a return home. Contact can have a major impact on the resolution of problems which could assist in the child's return to the family. There is strong evidence that good contact experience makes for more successful return home for children looked after.

The social worker is legally bound to undertake the directives of the court orders and is the worker centrally responsible for organising contact. Coventry Children and Families Services workers are given general guidance about providing supervised contact, but there are no detailed policies, or standards of practice in respect of supervising contact per se. (See: Coventry Children and Families, Looked After Services : Manual of Procedures for Children's Services).

The current arrangements of contact services for children looked after or involved with the Department, are uncoordinated, and can be chaotic.

Referrals

- This process is based on general policy, but the specific actions are not detailed, and are not consistent across teams or between different workers.
- Parents are given little or no preparation or expectation of what contact is about or what is expected of their participation.

Presently each area locality team arranges its own provision for supervised contact.

Referral for contact supervision is made by the social worker responsible for the case through a request usually to the manager of the staff undertaking supervision. The completion of a set of forms is undertaken by the social worker, together with instruction on specific observations relevant to the case; the file notes may also be made accessible. This process can vary between locality offices and workers.

The social workers organise the venue and times for the contact to take place.

Supervision of contact for service users involved with Coventry Children and Families Services is undertaken by Family Assistants, and Family Support workers, and social workers. These groups of staff are attached to locality field offices at Woodend, Foleshill, Willenhall, and Coundon.

Presently, the Woodend locality office has its family support workers located in a team at the North East Family Support Team. The Bell Green location also offers its own space for holding contact sessions for Woodend service users can be accommodated.

However, space is limited and there is only one entrance and exit point.

The Foleshill Children and Families services locality team has access to contracted services from the Cornerstone Family Centre (NCH), and can also use the Centre's building spaces for contact sessions. The latter are supervised by the Foleshill staff – family assistants, support workers and the community care assistants.

Social workers in all localities have access for supervision of contact to a further resource, a team of Community Care Assistants, currently part of the Community Support service. As with all the contact workers, social workers have to formally refer the case to this service and arrange venues, times and dates.

Occasionally social workers undertake the supervision of contact. This might appropriately be undertaken as part of an overall assessment for the court, or of the parenting capacity as a professional part of working together with parents and the family, when a child might be in care. Too often, however, social workers are forced to undertake supervision of contact due to the shortage of workers for the purpose, taking up social work time inappropriately; it should be undertaken by workers trained and skilled for the purpose. (See Coram Family: A Guide To Best Practice in Supervised Child Contact)

Foster carers are another group of people occasionally involved in contact supervision for the child(ren) they are looking after; this may sometimes take place in the foster carer's home.

Venues for the holding of contact sessions are mostly in meeting rooms and offices within the four locality offices of children's services. Additional venues used are those described below at North East Family Support Team, and Cornerstone Family Centre.

The Children's Services Locality offices – Woodend, Willenhall, Foleshill and Coundon

The spaces available are generally meeting/conference areas used by the teams; there is very little developed in the way of specific facilities suitable for contact sessions. One locality office has been able to develop some more suitable environment within their office premises for this work.

Generally the spaces are too large or too small, with only one entry or exit, not family or child friendly, inappropriately furnished, few toys, untidy, sometimes not very clean and without changing facilities for babies. The times available are only office hours – Mondays to Fridays, 9.0.am to 5.0.pm .

North East Family Support Team

The Bell Green meeting room offers a good sized space. It is family friendly with settees, easy chairs, and small table. It is welcoming, and informal, with a good range of toys. It has an outdoor space and a well located kitchen and bathroom with baby changing facilities.

Cornerstone Family Centre – NCH

Cornerstone Family Centre in Hillfields, offers the part time use of three large rooms for supervised contact. The supervision of contact in this venue is undertaken by Children and Families Department staff. As mentioned earlier this venue is largely used by the Foleshill locality office for its contact service.

The primary role of the Centre includes specialist assessments, social work lead risk assessments, a counselling service and direct work with children and families. There is a small crèche operating. The demand on the Centre is considerable, and presently some 14 hours per week is offered for contact sessions. The Cornerstone Family Centre is funded through a block grant with Social Services to provide services for the Foleshill area of the city.

In regard to supervised contact, social workers may book space in the centre for specific sessions, supervised by the locality team staffing. The Cornerstone facility offers a very pleasant environment for contact, with 3 large spaces; up to 3 families at a time may have access to this space. There is a good variety of toys and play equipment, a very clean and ordered set up with cooking facilities. There is an outside space. There is a video camera available for use in assessment work, or for example to record a last contact in adoption cases and there are two entrance and exit points.

5.1.3 The Staff used for Supervised Contact

Training for Supervised Contact

There has been little or no specific training given to any of the workers undertaking the task of contact supervision in Coventry. They report having a variety of background experiences. Some workers have a qualification, these may include child care, and/or work experience within other areas of social services. Many have attended various short courses including: child protection, working with aggressive clients, observation, first aid. The contribution which can be made by well supervised contact to the welfare of the child, and the progress of a case needs to be better understood by senior managers and social workers alike.

Risk assessment

Risk assessments are always required to be undertaken by the social worker as part of the referral for a supervised contact. Instructions to the supervising worker identifies any specific vulnerability or threat, in the case.

Staffing

Social Services utilise a range of staff to undertake supervised contact. There is a degree of uniformity between the locality field teams in that they use Family Assistants, and Family Support workers who are attached to each field team. All teams have access to the use of the Community Support Service workers :

Family Assistants

Family Assistant's help social workers in undertaking various practical tasks related to a case for which the social worker is responsible. Part of their role and workload may be responsibility for supervising contact. In the best arrangement, the same worker will be responsible for supervision of the contact of a particular family, though this is not often possible.

Family Support workers

Family support workers hold responsibility for a caseload of their own, as well as assisting social workers. They may like the family assistants undertake supervised contact.

Community Care Assistants

This group of staff are primarily part of the Care in the Community Service, a service for adults. Three years ago this team became involved in an interim capacity in children's work which includes some work with supervised contact.

The team thus provides an additional resource for supervising contact to all locality field teams and offers seven workers, known as Community Care Assistants to undertake contact sessions. Of the children's work undertaken in the team some 50% is supervised contact. This team works in a number of locations including the locality field offices as well as several other venues commonly used in the department including North East Family Support Team and Cornerstone Family Centre.

It should be noted that the team remains attached to adult services rather than children's services, and at time of writing awaits a final decision as to where in the Department it will be located.

Foster carers

As is common in all children's services, where appropriate, Coventry uses foster carers to supervise contact in respect of children they are caring for. This supervised contact may be undertaken in the home of the foster carer, or in other premises and foster carers are also frequently involved in transporting children to and from a contact session. A risk assessment must always be undertaken prior to this foster carer's task, together with an agreement by the carer to undertake contact for the child. Foster carers receive no special training for contact supervision.

Social workers

Social workers responsible for a case may attend contact when observation is required as part of an assessment process. In principle general social work practice does not expect the case worker to undertake supervision of contact as well as the general management of the case. Current practice would see the task being that of specialised skilled and trained workers, whether support workers or qualified social workers. In Coventry as in many other authorities, social worker time is being substantively used to supervise contact in cases that should be supervised by support workers.

5.1.4 Transport

Transport arrangements for the attendance of children at contact sessions are undertaken in various ways. Some supervising workers offer transport, and on other occasions taxis are used. There can frequently be difficulty in arranging transport, and the costs to the Department are very high. There appears to be little consideration of how transportation to and from contact can be used in a positive and supportive way for the child, nor how damaging transport breakdowns can be, with their effect on the contact arrangement.

5.1.5 Observations and Comments Made on the Quality of the Supervised Contact Venues and Services in the Public Sector

Supervised contact sessions are mostly held in a range of social service locality offices; these venues are not suitable for contact services of any kind. They are basically working offices for Children's Services including reception areas; interviewing rooms; staff offices, and other meeting rooms.

- These locality meeting offices are not equipped with safety measures. For example there is usually one entrance and exit point available to the public and there is no planned layout offering the safety factors appropriate to buildings used in supervised contact sessions. There are no safe outdoor play areas available to contact sessions.
- These offices are not family friendly/child friendly in the way suggested for holding contact sessions. The general environment needs to be fully comfortable with appropriate furnishing, toys and materials.
- These offices have no features reflecting a sensitivity to catering for people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- While every effort is made to sustain a degree of consistency and stability with the use of the same worker with a family, this is not often possible
- There are no facilities for cooking light meals
- There are no facilities for baby care.
- There is usually a lack of age appropriate play equipment; the few toys can be limited, dirty, and are often lost.
- Available space at the times required is often a problem
- The service is offered at business times only; between 9.0am to 5.0pm. Monday to Friday.

5.2 Supported or Observed Contact Provision for Private Law Cases

The Coventry Children's Contact Centre is a member of the NACCC (The National Association of Child Contact Centres). Established some fifteen years ago, by a group of volunteers and managed by a Management Board, the service provided is classed as a 'supported' contact service, in which general support and observation is the key element in the management of contact with families.

It is rare for any intervention during a contact session, but workers will intervene if it is necessary. In principle it is understood that parents referred to this centre do not require a supervised service, although in occasional cases experience indicates that there has been an under estimation of risk, or exacerbating circumstances caused changes in relationships making it difficult for supported contact alone.

Referral to the Centre

A court order will indicate the nature of contact agreed by the court. Families are referred to the Coventry Children's Contact Centre most usually by their Solicitor. It is often possible that CAFCASS (the Children and Family Court Assessment Service) will have been involved in providing a report to the court, but the referral for contact is usually undertaken by solicitors

Staffing

The service is staffed by a group of 18 highly committed voluntary staff many who have been involved for a number of years ranging from a couple of years to over 12 years. The present staff group are highly experienced in the work of this service, are generally in an older age group and are almost all female and British/white by background. Workers each undertake contact duty about once in every 5 weeks, and there are some four workers on duty at each session.

Training

While staff are not formally trained, training courses are offered by the NACCC and the present group of workers have attended some of these short courses.

Organisation of the Service

The Coventry Children's Contact Centre's service is provided from 2.0pm to 4.30pm every Saturday in the year, except for Christmas Day.

The location for the service is the hall at the Baptist Church, Queens Road, Coventry. A car park is available, and Queens Road is a fairly central location in Coventry.

The hall offers 3 large spaces which are prepared for the contact session every Saturday, in which up to 5 family groups can meet in each of these areas simultaneously.

The members of each family group tend to be very involved in their own family, but sometimes a child will interact with children in another family. Chairs and toys are spread throughout. Parents use the toys, and will play with their children, talk etc.

A tuckshop operates at low cost to the families, providing hot and cold drinks, sweets and biscuits etc. Parents make good use of this and are able to buy small treats for their children if they wish.

There is only one entry point to the hall:

The role of Volunteer Supervisors

Their main task of volunteers is to 'support' the contact sessions, wander about in a relaxed and friendly manner and ensure the contact meeting goes well for the children and parent.

The service does not report to the court or give any feedback on the contact sessions. Staff record the time of arrival and departure of the family members and the child, and may make short comment on the record if appropriate.

There are occasions when special instructions are given to the workers; but the service is not equipped to manage any very complicated or likely violent behaviours.

Volume of service provided

The Coventry Children's Contact Centre provides on average between 20 – 24 contact sessions per week for some 30 children. The sessions may last between half to 2.5 hours each. Currently referrals to this service are generally met and there is no waiting list.

Comment

In general the service provides a warm, supportive and friendly meeting place for supported contact. It is well located, but held in a Christian church hall. This environment may be uncomfortable for some of families using the service, many of whom may not be Christian. There is a single entry/exit point which can on occasion cause difficulty if antagonistic parents meet, and which does not offer a safety capacity. The activities are limited to play with toys and games indoors.

CAFCASS – Supervised contact arrangements in private law proceedings

From time to time CAFCASS officers will recommend up to three supervised contacts which will be undertaken on an order by the court. These are to help build up what may have been a non-existent relationship between the child and the non-resident parent. They are designed to offer a safe environment to the child and give reassurance to the resident parent with a view to the contact moving on, usually to the contact centre. What has been observed in these supervised sessions is reported to the court in order to assist them in making any further order required to promote regular contact.

5.3 The Domestic Violence Partnership – contact arrangements

The Domestic Violence Partnership operates a variety of women's centres and refuges in and around Coventry. These include: Panahgar, Relate, OSABA Women's Centre (African-Caribbean), Coventry Haven, and the Valley House Association.

The various refuges, hostels and day centres are involved with women and children who have experienced domestic violence but are not presently arranging contact for children with their non-resident parent. Mostly these women are not yet involved in court proceedings, and thus contact may not be an issue at this stage.

There has on the rare occasion been an attempt to arrange contact for the child/ren, and in these situations a neutral venue is sought. Sometimes social services is approached for a contact supervisor. If a service user is known to social services, the contact arrangements would be made in the usual way.

Valley House, one of these facilities for women and children, does have a nursery and some capacity to organise contact there, but staff are neither funded nor trained for this task.

Recently there has been a shift in social policy within the Partnership and some thought that for the few women who may be in the early stage of proceedings, but not yet involved with other support services some contact service could be considered. For example there is a plan at Valley House to build a play room in the next year. While this is to be for visiting professionals, it is to have a friendly and safe environment, and thus might also offer a meeting place suitable for contact arrangements.

5.4 Standards of Practice

The need for establishing formal practice policy, and quality assurance through articulated practice objectives and standards are as critical for the area of supervised contact for children, as it is in any other social care operation in children's services.

(See Coram: Guide to Best Practice in Supervised Child Contact) see Appendix 2, for some examples of Objectives and Standards set in the Coram Family model for a contact centre.)

In the Private Law sector, the NACCC has now established a set of practice standards and the Child Contact Centres are being monitored through their membership of the NACCC . The Public Law sector, that is Children and Families Services are presently expecting the formal outcomes of work being undertaken by the Implementation Group (previously The Child Contact Working Group, initially set up by the Lord Chancellor's Department). A number of beacon contact centres, like the Coram Family Centre, have developed sets of practice Standards. While these too are currently being evaluated by the Implementation Group, they offer the model most appropriate to the recommendations in his report. Coram especially has been in existence for many years and undertakes a regular customer evaluation of its services. It offers a real history of success and experience.

5.5 Funding for Contact Services

5.5.1 Public sector

The costs of contact within the public sector is by far the bigger cost given it is mostly required by the courts to provide supervised contact arrangements for its population of looked after children.

Social service costs: Analysis undertaken by Social Services Finance.

- Coventry Social Services expenditure on supervised contact is currently an integral part of the children's locality social work, family support and community support service and as such is difficult to fully disaggregate from all of the other costs associated with operating the functions as a whole. However, an exercise was undertaken to analyse the staff, transport and accommodation related costs, connected with supervised contact to give the following estimates of expenditure in this area.

- Detailed returns from a sample of two locality and two specialist teams were analysed to determine the number of hours staff were involved in supervised contact. The figures for the two locality teams were used as a basis for extrapolated expenditure for the other two locality teams in the City. This exercise identified approximately 16,518 hours of staff time per year (8 to 9 staff) involved with supervised contact at an estimated cost of some £226,000 per year.
- A calculation to estimate transport costs which included only the worker mileage identified for transporting children to and from contact suggested a figure of £ 29,000 per year. This calculation only includes the worker mileage identified for transporting children to and from contact. It does not include departmental taxi transport, nor any costs paid to foster carers on occasion for the transport of children to and from contact.
- Accommodation and building costs are particularly difficult to determine, as contact is only part of the overall usage of the locality and other offices in the city. In addition contact is also provided away from the locality office bases in a number of cases. In preparing costs for staff accommodation the amount used per person is normally £1,500 a rough estimate of these costs based on 9 full-time equivalent staff has been calculated at £13,500.

Total expenditure identified

The financial analysis demonstrates that the cost of this service are currently well in excess of £300k per year, £255k of which can be attributed to staffing costs and mileage allowances.

5.5.2 Private Sector

Costs of the Coventry Contact Centre

Presently there appears to be no specific funding for private law supported contact services. The private law sector in Coventry currently receives no funds from CAFCASS to pay for the rent and incidental expenses at the Coventry Children's Contact Centre.

The main cost to the service is the hire of the church hall which is currently let to the Children's Contact Centre for £20 per Saturday session.

The funds for the service are received from local charities. Up until 2 years ago, the Centre received a small contribution from the then Court Welfare Service (before it became CAFCASS). Sundry other costs include that for telephone, stationary, renewing toys, the cost of open evenings and the AGM.

The nature of the staffing means this service is provided at almost no cost to any establishment. The current costs of this service are estimated at about £3,500 per year.

CONCLUSION

Coventry supervised and supported child contact services are without the basic conditions offering a safe environment. These services take place in a variety of venues which are not child/family friendly and are not always available for sessions. The services are chaotic and uncoordinated with variable and inconsistent practices. While staffed by a range of committed hard working staff, often undertaking contact tasks in addition to their direct work they are mostly without relevant training.

As in many other parts of the country they are short staffed. However Coventry does not offer a contact service that meets a number of important basic principles of good practice. – i.e. a safe and quality contact experience to children and families, with a focus on best practice in assessments and which impacts on the general progress of a case.

The Coventry public law sector, presently has no set practice standards in regard to contact services and their delivery has a capacity to be chaotic at times. While the Department's supervised contact service has established some general approaches to referral and communications between staff, this service suffers from the a lack of rigour in regard to its practices, safety measures, reliable organised worker arrangements, and unsafe and inappropriate venues.

The Coventry Children's Contact Centre, dealing with private law cases in turn, needs a safe and appropriate building which offers safety and privacy to its clientele, and more flexible facilities, for example an outdoor space. The present service cannot offer any degree of supervisory contact, and while in the main it may not be required to do so, there are the occasional situations which may require a more flexible approach than that of a supported contact service.

The separation of private and the public contact services is not conducive to the sharing of professional expertise and facilities.

Best practice guidance in this field indicate the specialist nature of managing the very complex range of tasks in supervised contact including the skills in appropriate intervention, and the issues of safety. The need for a unified appropriate training for all workers involved in supported or supervised contact has been clearly identified in the work of the project.

There has been no formal user evaluation of the contact services in either the private or the public law sectors.

The financial analysis demonstrates the costs of the public law service are currently well in excess of £300k per year. This suggests a considerable waste of valuable resources: the use of unsafe and inappropriate venues; unreliable and costly transport arrangements. There is a lack of a co-ordinated trained contact staff ; agreed objectives, practice policies and standards, and the loss of benefits to the wellbeing and case outcomes of looked after children.

6. INDICATIONS FROM CONSULTATIVE ACTIVITY IN COVENTRY

6.1 Consultation in respect of attitudes to, experience of, and the vision for contact services in Coventry was undertaken through the distribution of a range of questionnaires, meetings with groups and individuals, and the consultant's work with the Coventry Multi Agency Steering Group, in the context of the trends and directions identified by Government policy and the research literature.

The data from all these sources has been analysed to identify views on a range of issues related to the contact services.

6.2 The Questionnaires

500 questionnaires were distributed, to groups of interested parties. Some 70 responses were obtained, including several collective group responses. At time of writing the response has been limited but broad ranging. This project was not a research exercise dependent on proper sampling and hard methodology, but rather a combined information and community development exercise aimed at identifying key issues relating to the experience of contact services in Coventry. Information from all sources has been analysed and used to inform the identification of options for developing of a more appropriate supervised contact service. Responses to the questionnaires, issues and concerns identified through meetings and discussions with key stakeholders and the research literature have all contributed to this process.

6.3 Consultation took place with the following groups of people

- Children
- Parents
- Social Workers, reviewing officers
- Contact supervisors/observers, Family Support Workers, Family Assistants, Community Care Assistants
- Foster carers
- Police
- Magistrates, Solicitors, Guardian Ad Litem
- Agency senior managers
- Education, Health

6.4 *Main themes addressed through the questionnaire and in meetings included*

6.4.1 Current contact services in Coventry

- The quality and appropriateness of the environment
- Venues and buildings currently used for contact
- Child/family friendly issues
- Safety issues
- Referral procedures
- Quality and efficiency of supervised/observed contact services

- Attitudes toward contact by service users
- Training for the task of supervising contact
- Issues relating to ethnicity and diversity
- Transport issues

6.4.2 Ideas/vision of future services

6.5 VIEWS

"I look forward to contact very much, I love seeing my Mum, Dad, Nan because I really really miss them"

6.5.1 Venues

At present there is no dedicated venue for child contact in Coventry. "Current venues vary, some are very good, many are poor". The general view expressed was that while there is a degree of variation, mostly the facilities currently used for contact are inappropriate in terms of location, child-friendliness and suitability in terms of room size, security and safety. Typical comments were:

"The location may be geographically inaccessible, nothing to do or see, unwelcoming ... available toys broken or dirty"

" Impersonal, toys for younger children and nothing for the older ones"

"Premises can be unprepared, uncomfortable, too big or too small, totally inappropriate, dull uninviting, lacking facilities – for example to change a baby or feed children"

These environments are not perceived as family friendly, the building "lacks family, community feel", "tense atmosphere", "not always the best place for parents and children to meet" "children and families want a venue for contact to be relaxed and homely".

Children's responses also indicated they like a child friendly environment where they know people;

"We are happy with the place we have contact because we know everyone"

"I like to talk, and play together", "I like to play in the garden, and for Dad to read me stories".

Buildings mentioned by support staff as more appropriate included North East Family Support Team and Cornerstone Family Centre.

Comments on provision at the Child Contact Centre were largely positive:

"The church hall is adequate, is warm, there is a coffee bar, it is also centrally located" (worker)

"Is adequately spaced (hall) clean, comfortable, more toys needed" (parent)

"Not bothered by support workers – they supervise and they all do a good job" (parent)

"We are in the playroom with other parents and children, nice atmosphere" (parent)

"I would like to be able to go outside, maybe play in the park, or sit at a table and make a meal" (parent)

"Its great they way it is but you could have a kids room and a junior room as well" (child)

However, support workers reported a small number of inappropriate referrals, a persistent source of concern:

"Even at CCC very occasionally one feels a family needs supervised contact"

The issue is reflected in comments from the judiciary:

"The centre is not a supervised environment and it is therefore not appropriate that all cases in the private law sector are referred here". The experience of some parents support this view; as in the case of a mother reporting concerns about the non-resident parent communicating abusive ideas or language:

"I am unhappy in the Children's Contact Centre, I felt father is not behaving positively, I feel he should be supervised".

6.5.2 Availability and consistency of venues and staffing

Social workers described difficulties in obtaining venues for contact, which frequently changed for different contact sessions. Children also experienced changes of contact supervisors. Support workers undertaking contact are very busy and may not be available at the time required.

Social workers have to step in where there is no other available supervisor, and this causes difficulties with the pressure of other work. "I have frequently had to undertake supervision of contact – too often to recall how many times".

Hours of operation of current services are very limited, mostly within office hours, and not always suitable. There was general agreement that the service needed to be available during evenings and weekends.

6.5.3 Safety

The need to ensure the child's safety and well-being was emphasized by most respondents including some children: "I think it should be run safely". Indeed there was general recognition of the importance of an environment that was safe for all participants – children, parents and staff.

A number of factors were identified by professionals as essential or contributory to the safety of contact: properly qualified supervisors, suitable venues and making sure that all participants are aware of rules and potential consequences. It was felt that people would respond to a regime which is understandable and fair, within which difficult behaviour would be appropriately challenged.

Support workers emphasized the importance of physical measures – dual entrance and exit points, panic alarms, two-way mirrors in contact rooms, access to phones etc and adequate arrangements for handover to ensure the safety of all concerned. Some parents reflected these concerns about the safety of the building and expressed fears about bumping into their estranged partner. Others expressed no safety concerns.

Family Assistants felt they needed mobile phones; "Supervision if held at home can be very unsafe".... workers "may be called lots of horrible names by parents and children".

Adequacy of staffing ratios were seen as essential, with back up or cover supervisors and two workers allocated to a case where appropriate, e.g. where there are too many people in the contact group for one worker to supervise adequately. Back up can also be needed where high levels of supervision are required if, for example, a child needs to go to the toilet.

Knowledge about the family, special needs of children, and any history of violence and/or factors that trigger conflict were all identified as contributory to the safety of contact: "Where risks are identified they are usually addressed, but risks are not always identified by social workers".

6.5.4 Training

Professionals consistently identified the skills and expertise of the person supervising as essential to the provision of a safe supervised contact. Training for contact supervisors, support staff and social workers was seen as essential. This training should include awareness of the purpose of contact, child developmental needs and skills in observing and assessing the quality of contact, together with issues of safety and confidentiality.

Workers reported that they had no special training: managers might explain what to do but generally the task was learned on the job. Some had a form of induction, and some had attended various short courses. Overall there is serious inconsistency with regard to training for this job, as illustrated in the following remarks:

"on the job training"

"no training but my manager explained what to do"

"have had inductions, and an in-service contact training course, also shadowing on the job"

"supervised by my line manager"

"have had a little training at the Family Court, listening skills, First Aid" (volunteer)

Among foster-carers training and preparation for supervising foster children's contact was an issue of interest. Carers felt that they were not well prepared for supervising contact, even when it was with tiny babies.

Cases were mentioned where a difference of view about the need for supervised contact existed – for example, the child wanted supervised contact and the non-resident parent did not. This could result in tensions between the carers and parent(s) and sometimes the child may arise.

Carers felt thorough training was needed for the development of skills for the supervision of contact, and also in relation to managing children's reaction after a contact visit: they also said that very considerable distress and disturbance can occur after contact with a family, and foster carers have to manage this.

6.5.5 Planning and Preparation for Contact

Social workers stressed the need for "free information sharing with contact supervisors and social workers". This should include the child's support plan with basic details of people involved, times and venues. It was emphasized that contact should be activity based and carefully planned to ensure that it is a positive experience for child and family.

"Preparation of the parent should be properly managed", "communication confirmed in writing" and "the end of contact properly managed to avoid distress at separation".

However, parents typically reported no preparation for contact: "there was no preparation. We were told where to come for contact and what time to be there". "I just turned up, was checked on the list, and shown around". Child Contact centre staff also reported that "many solicitors fail to inform clients of the arrangements despite being reminded – leaflets are available".

6.5.6 Transport

Difficulties were reported in arranging transport to and from contact. This was seen as an important issue by support workers who relied upon taxis or transported children themselves.

Workers had mixed views on the appropriateness of their own involvement in transporting children; some commented on the opportunities for additional support to the child if transport arrangements were appropriately handled.

6.5.7 Diversity

Issues were reported for minority groups around dietary, religious and cultural factors, and the need for supervisors who can assist communication for these groups. There were mixed views on the appropriateness of providing contact in a church hall for people of a minority ethnic background.

6.5.8 The Vision

Overall there was broad consensus on the need for a dedicated venue, specifically established for contact services:

"A facility (safe place) available with supervisors trained to deal with sensitive and difficult cases", "a starting point for contact in difficult cases. It should be properly funded by the Court system or CAFCASS and run by a combination of paid staff and volunteers".

Workers described a purpose built unit, multi-purpose in function, with safety and security precautions, two entrances to avoid parents meeting.. Meeting areas should be friendly and inviting, with rooms to suit all ages. There should be provision for food preparation, a location for outside play and the availability of more than one supervisor when needed. The view that the centre should provide an integrated service for public and private law cases was well supported. It was generally felt that hours of operation should include evenings, weekends and holidays and that transport provision should be integrated into the service.

Child-orientated premises were seen as essential, with a relaxed atmosphere and free from any impression of establishment background. Facilities would include a wide range of toys, games and equipment appropriate to all ages and possibly a small library area. " I would like the place to be friendly, comfortable, tidy, bright and clean" (12 year old).

There was a clear view that contact supervision should be undertaken by paid professional staff trained in child development, child protection issues, recording and court processes:

"Professionally trained staff – waged – the only people who could be asked to do this work: volunteers are very willing but would not be able to conduct supervised contact".

A number of respondents spoke of the need for a facility which allows a continuum of supervised contact, from supported/observed contact to supervised, allowing movement or progress between these points.

"Supervised contact should be seen as part of a continuing process ideally moving on to facilitated contact and then unsupervised contact when the parent has proved that the children are safe in their case". Centres in Solihull and Birmingham were referred to as models of good practice.

For foster carers the idea of having a centre where they could supervise their foster children and their parents was thought to be useful and sometimes preferable to having contact supervised at the carers home by a contact supervisor or by the foster carer. It was also observed that parents often had little or no spare money, and carers felt a contact centre which offered a friendly environment and had plenty of place facilities and cost nothing or little to users would be useful, even if supervision were not needed.

It was suggested that the centre should seek young people's views more often, and regularly review the contact experience with the young person to ensure their needs are being met; and even appoint "an independent counsellor to advocate for the views of ... service users".

"I would just say that user friendly contact arrangements are desperately needed in Coventry" "to be opened as soon as possible".

6.5.8.1 The role of Coventry Contact Centre within the Vision

Mixed views were reported about integrating contact services for people in the private and public law sectors. There was a strong view among some magistrates that the Coventry Contact Centre should be retained, and an equally strong view among other magistrates and professionals that the existing service should be recognised and incorporated into a more formal service providing supervision:

"Use the expertise already available at the Coventry Contact Centre – they have much to offer although I know they care concerned about providing supervised contact".

Under an integrated model for supervised and supported contact it was felt "a manager is required who knows how to utilize and motivate volunteers as well as paid staff".

6.5.8.2 Funding the Vision

There was a strong view that a dedicated centre should attract support from a variety of sources, including the Court system:

"Central funding should be available – through CAFCASS".

"Private finance and lottery money".

"There is money from various organisations willing to help fund such a centre".

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A CONTACT SERVICE IN COVENTRY

7.1 In determining an appropriate model for the development of a supervised contact service for Coventry, consideration has been given to the following factors:

- The present contact service arrangements in Coventry, for both the public law and private law cases; the strengths and weaknesses in respect the contribution the service is making to the welfare and wellbeing of Coventry children.
- The current costs and the question of the best value for the service offered and possible models of future service
- National developments and directions recommended in recent reports and researches in respect of best practice
- Appropriate recognition to the hidden value of the work undertaken in contact which contributes to the overall outcomes of the case in a very critical way.
- The scoping exercise undertaken and the data analysed including responses to the survey undertaken through questionnaires, meetings with various individuals and groups
- The views of the Multi-Agency Coventry Supervised Contact Working Group
- The ideal models reflecting these criteria are models like the Coram Family Contact Centre and the Leeds NCH facility.

7.2 The Model of Service Recommendations

A dedicated facility, offering a continuum of supported to supervised contact service is the model recommended for Coventry.

- The facility should be purpose designed and planned
- preferably an integrated provision catering for the mix of public-private law clientele
- with its own management, established practice policies and standards reflecting best practice;
- trained specially skilled staff,
- A transport service for those children requiring it
- supported by an appropriate financial contribution from both public and private law sectors
- A robust inbuilt evaluation of the new service

This model also offers the possibility of using satellite venues and an outreach supervised contact service to foster carers and private homes where desirable; various facets of the model as indeed the core model itself could be evolved over time.

7.3 The case for a dedicated contact centre

The case for a dedicated children's supervised contact centre is well made by the literature and particularly the experiences of the several beacon models offering supervised contact services. These include services like that of the Coram Family, Leeds NCH, and some social services departments such as Camden in London, and Solihull in Birmingham.

The Coram Guide proposes “that children and parents who must manage the abnormality and artificiality of professional supervision of their contact to one another should be afforded the greatest sense of privacy and homeliness that resources and circumstances can manage. Given the indisputable impact of environment on human behaviour, we maintain that the management and assessment of supervised children’s contact is more cost effective, evidence based and humane if carried out in a discrete and carefully planned and managed environment”

“Coram’s environmental priorities when it set up its supervised contact facility in 1987 were to provide:

- A self evidently child friendly and stimulating environment
- Homeliness and privacy: an environment that would pay attention to children’s, parent’s, and carers’ needs and concerns and that would make the most of the inevitably artificial circumstances in which children and adults were meeting
- A culturally sensitive environment that would reflect and value the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of service users
- Maximum safety in terms of the frequent need for parents or for carers and parents not to meet and to prevent child abduction and ‘worker isolation’.
- Pleasant and technologically well provided offices for workers

Quality assurance, standards and practice

Part of the development of a dedicated centre is the need for best practice and quality assurance. Hence a set of practice objectives and standards should be developed as to set the requirements for staffing, referral procedures, and practice standards.

Specific advantages of a dedicated centre for supervised contact:

- An appropriate child / family friendly environment, furnishings, and facilities. These include culturally diverse refurbishment as well as cooking and baby care facilities.
- A safe building, with safe practices, with a trained and equipped staff, and preparatory procedures with parents, both written and verbal. The model offers back up /cover staff and access to a service early evenings and weekends
- Age and culturally diverse appropriate toys, and creative materials; well maintained and ordered
- Best value practices in respect of use of staff, use of buildings / venues etc. For example a substantial reduction in the waste of social work time.
- Best value practices in respect of quality of service provided for children and families, and the benefits in outcomes related to children’s wellbeing.

- Management focussed on the supervised contact service, offering specialised supervision, support and the capacity to professionalise the practices including those of referral procedures, and supervision of contact.
- Staff selected for the service, with opportunity for appropriate training and ongoing development
- The use of volunteers as part of the service (if the private law sector is incorporated or partially incorporated)
- Flexible potential in the capacity of staff to undertake outreach service and of use of buildings in that possible satellite venues.
- The integration of a transport service will offer an additional advantage for children being transported in terms of familiarity of escort. It will likely also decrease the degree of inefficiency currently experienced by some children and carers, for example, when booked taxis do not arrive or are late.
- The consistency of venue offered to children / parents
- The consistency of supervisory staff for children and parents.
- The possibility of offering a continuum of supervised contact along a spectrum of supported to high level of supervision is made feasible by this model. Family's would be able to move in the direction of need, and hopefully to the point of no need for supervised contact. The Private Law cases would fit well into this context.

7.4 Recommendation 1

That the substantive funding expended on the present arrangements in both the public and private law sectors to be converted to an opportunity to fund a model of an integrated supported / supervised child contact service for Coventry. This service would reflect safest and best practice in this field, offer a continuum of contact from supported to supervised, with a trained and skilled staff and a capacity to offer transport.

7.5 Recommendation 2

That the present Multi-Agency Coventry Supervised Children's Contact Steering Group move from a working group operating on the strategic level to become the implementation body, with formal approval from the relevant represented parties. Consideration to be given to the need for any additional representation in the light of these recommendations.

7.6 Implementation of Model

An evolutionary approach to service development would initially sustain the current separation in the main, of services for private and public law cases, with the Coventry Children's Contact Centre continuing the present arrangement in offering a supported service to its current group of children.

Preparatory Activities

- Preparation of a Business Plan for the evolution of a dedicated integrated supervised contact facility and staff team
- Financial modelling, planning, and money raising
- Working towards a dedicated building – with property departments etc
- Remaining informed of the national context and picture, i.e. The Child Contact Centre Implementation Group (DfES)

Preparation of Staff

A range of training and standards reflecting best practice in supervised contact would be introduced for all workers in the public law sector (Family Support Workers, Family Assistants, Community Care Assistants, a range of social workers, and the relevant managers). This would over time institute into Coventry professional practice, the attitudes, approaches and tasks intrinsic to a supervised contact service at best practice level, including

- The standardisation of referral procedures, documentation, including quality assurance processes.
- The standardisation of processes for the preparation for service users for supervised.
- The sensitisation of all staff to relevant factors in supervised contact related to cultural difference

8. WHAT ARE THE GAINS OF RECOMMENDED MODEL

8.1 Likely Outcomes of this Model

- Best practice for children and families in the operation of this new supervised contact service – a safe and appropriate environment; consistent staff; emotional, physical wellbeing, and the chance to optimise relationship building with family
- Reduced contact breakdowns
 - reduced authority/family conflict
 - reduced contact/court hearings
 - reduced section 34 reports; section 11 and 7 reports
 - consequent savings to legal costs/social work time
 - reduced assaults and consequent replications/sick leave etc
 - improvements to staff morale
- Improved quality supervised contact reflects on improved, (safe and beneficial) child/family relationships
 - speedier resolutions of proceedings of cases
 - more successful return home of children (see Quinton et al)
 - less re-admissions
 - increased placement stability (proven by research, DoH)
- Raised awareness of supervised contact's significance in child's health and wellbeing
 - research awareness
 - replicating national initiatives – DfES
- Improved cost effectiveness in use of social workers and other resources
- Reduced logistical errors (parents, taxis not arriving; go to wrong place, etc) links to reduction of court hearings
- Improves ease of access for parents, families
 - same building, same room etc
 - reduced breakdowns, reduced costs
 - flexible hours of service

8.2 Why public and private law cases in an integrated model

- Government policy – CAFCASS is an integrated court service
- Domestic violence – children in need cross the public/private sectors
- See the amended Children Act 1989 S31 “harm that is witnessed”
- Cross fertilisation of practice dissipates stigmatisation
- Economy of resources

APPENDIX 1

What are Contact Services – as devised by the former Lord Chancellor's Department, Contact Centre Working Group

1.0 Private and public law contact arrangements

(definitions & approach)

- 1.1 As mentioned in the report contact services are required for families who are being directed within the private law court system; and those who are within the public law legal arena. Basically, a contact service facilitates contact (or 'access' as it is referred to in some countries, vis a vis Australia) between a child/ren and her/his non custodial parent and/or siblings. The group of children and families within the private law sector are largely not required to have supervised contact as such, but due to parental differences and disagreements, or a perceived risk to the child because of drug or alcohol abuse, or allegations of sexual abuse. Domestic violence could also be a factor. The courts direct them to have contact in some formal centre or location. In Coventry, these cases are mostly managed at the Coventry Children's Contact Centre.

The families within the remit of public law are those families whose children are looked after by Coventry Children's Services and/or on a court order of some sort.

These children are mostly in the care of the authority, maybe living in foster care, and/or adoption maybe the longer term plan for them. In most cases these children have a care plan for a return home, or even if on a care order and living at home may require supervised contact with their non custodial parent. In most of these cases supervised contact is the directed court plan. In Coventry at present as is described below, a variety of venues for meetings are provided in respect of the contact arrangements with their parent/s, siblings and other significant family or friends.

Definitions of Levels of Contact

These definitions have been devised by the DfES Vulnerable Children Division, Child Contact Implementation Group (formerly the LCD Child Contact Centre Working Group) and have been ratified by the President of the Family Division, the implementation group and the NACCC

Child contact

There are two basic levels of child contact provision: 'Supported' and 'supervised'.

In all contact provision the welfare of the child is paramount, and all decisions are made in consideration of the child's best interests and safety.

Supported child contact

Supported contact takes place in a variety of neutral community venues where there are facilities to enable children to develop and maintain positive relationships with non resident parents and other family members. Supported contact centres are suitable for families when no significant risk to the child or those around the child has been identified.

The basic elements of supported contact are:

- Impartiality
- Staff and volunteers are available for assistance but there is no close observation, monitoring or evaluation of individual contact/conversations
- Several families are usually together in one or a number of rooms
- Encouragement for families to develop mutual trust and consider more satisfactory family venues
- Apart from attendance dates and times, no detailed report will be made to a referrer, CAFCASS, a party's solicitor or court, unless a risk of harm becomes apparent to the child, parent or centre worker
- An acknowledgement that it be viewed as a temporary arrangement to be reviewed after an agreed period of time.

Supervised child contact

A Supervised Child Contact Centre should be used when it has been determined that a child has suffered or is at risk of suffering harm during contact. Referrals will usually be made by a court, CAFCASS officer, local authority or another child contact centre, but in exceptional circumstances a child contact centre may accept a self referral. Supervised contact ensures the physical safety and emotional wellbeing of a child. It also assists in building and sustaining positive relationships between a child and members of their non resident family. This requires supervisors who are skilled and confident enough to intervene immediately and firmly if necessary and can work professionally in a planned way with vulnerable children and highly distressed adults.

Supervised contact requires:

- Individual supervision of contact with the supervisor in constant sight and sound of the child, which in turn requires they have the support of a nearby colleague.
- A high commitment of resources including continuity of supervision and the professional oversight of staff
- The supervisor and the centre have access to all relevant court papers and transcripts of any judgements in order to supervise effectively. The party making the referral ensuring that the court gives permission for such disclosure.
- All contact to be closely observed and recorded in a manner appropriate to the purpose of protecting children and working in a planned way with parents.
- A venue that provides privacy and confidentiality to each child and family and is structured to provide maximum safety to all concerned and maximum stimulation for children.
- Contact is time limited with a planned aim to regularly assess and review progress and the possibility of safer future outcomes.

The level of supervision may be reduced in a planned way after a professional assessment has been made. Some families after being assessed may move from constant supervision to an intermediate level of supervision, escorted outings, or support or unrestricted contact, while others will always need the security of full supervision.

Supervised contact is provided by a variety of agencies both in the voluntary sector and by local authorities. Facilities will therefore vary and different models will be offered.

APPENDIX 2.

Objective 1: *To enable children and young people to maintain safe and beneficial links to family from whom they are separated from and yet may return to or with whom they may develop a relationship that helps promote their sense of identity and self worth.*

Standards:

- To provide a maximum of... Sessions per week of professionally supervised contact, of which may be out of school hours
- To provide a maximum of ... sessions per week of supported contact, ... of which will be during out of school hours
- A formal contract for use of the service will be agreed with each family, which recognises the reasons for referral, needs and risks and the terms and conditions for the use of the service. Families will be provided with written schedules of contact, that accord with Court orders or referring agencies contact conditions, and the service will in all cases obtain sufficient and relevant oral and written information from referring agencies to ensure safe practice with families.
- Where appropriate and with the signed agreement of all parties, closely supervised contact will be provided by a suitably qualified, skilled and experienced worker who will monitor, assess and where necessary intervene in child-visitor contact to protect and promote the children's welfare and provide support and guidance to visitors. Detailed, relevant records of al supervised contact sessions will be entered on individual case files.
- Referrals of children subject to care / supervision proceedings will be responded to in ... working days.....*
- Supported contact sessions will be managed by a paid Centre co-ordinator assisted by volunteers and at all times a qualified staff member will be available for support/consultation
- A stock of well maintained toys, activities and creative materials will be provided for children of all ages and care will be taken to ensure children's room/areas are consistently set up according to each child's particular needs and wishes in order to ensure continuity of experience."

** note – the author has used judgement for the abbreviation of these extracts*

Objective 8: *To provide a well equipped, homely, culturally sensitive and comfortable environment with the privacy necessary to moderate tense and painful family situations*

Standards:

- CCCS will provide a sufficient stock of age appropriate, varied and culturally sensitive toys, activities and creative materials, and will ensure that these are maintained in good working order and state of cleanliness

- Clients will have free access to a variety of refreshments and open access to kitchens, crockery, and cutlery in order to re-heat and prepare light meals, snacks, etc during visits
- CCCS undertakes to provide all clients with an environment for contact that is comfortably furnished, in a homely fashion and in a good state of repair and decoration. As much privacy as is possible in the circumstances will be afforded the families and all supervised visits will take place in a private room.
- CCCS undertakes to reflect the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of its clients by providing artefacts, art, decoration and furnishings that represent such diversity in the fabric of the building and in the environment
- CCCS will endeavour to provide a non – institutional environment that also complies with health and safety legislation.
- CCCS will ensure that 70% of all children’s visits take place in the same room.

Objective 4: *To work in partnership with children and young people, parents and carers to prepare families for resuming full parental control of contact or to help them cope with eventual reduction or termination of contact*

Standards:

- In supervised contact with children of family breakdown/divorce, staff will be allocated to work with the family throughout their use of the service and 70% of their visits. Staff will listen to the anxieties, concerns and wishes of the children and of both parents, in order to moderate tensions, identify potential problems and enable families to aim toward resolution of court proceedings.
- In all cases staff will have as their prime concern the observed experience and needs, and the stated wishes of, children and young people.
- Staff will be sensitive to and able to work directly with the pain and distress caused to parents by loss and termination of contact. Workers will liaise closely with relevant professionals to ensure plans for contact take account of this suffering and the rights of people to be treated with dignity and courtesy.
- Where termination of contact is planned staff will meet with relinquishing parents prior to the final visit to help them prepare emotionally and physically and to provide them with information in respect of agencies and therapies aimed at helping in these situations.

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