



## Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

# CONTENTS

- 1. About the National Association of Child Contact Centres ..... 1
  - Who we are? ..... 1
  - Our Vision Statement..... 1
  - Our Mission Statement ..... 1
  - What are Child Contact Centres and Services? ..... 1
  - NACCCs Standards ..... 3
  - Terms of Reference and Governance ..... 3
- 2. Steps that Churches could do to support individuals and couples ..... 4
- 3. Public Policy across all areas of government ..... 5
- 4. Non-Governmental Organisations..... 7

## 1. About the National Association of Child Contact Centres

### Who we are?

- 1.1 The National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCCC) is a UK registered charity dedicated to ensuring children of separated parents have a safe place to meet the parents and family members they don't live with and to help them understand and process what is happening.
- 1.2 There are approximately 2.4 million separated families in Great Britain including 3.5 million children (Department of Work and Pensions 2020). Many of these children risk losing contact with a parent within the first two years of separation; this could be as many as 1 million young people (Centre for Social Justice, 2013).
- 1.3 There are nearly 1 million children/young adults in the UK growing up without any meaningful contact with their father. A lack of contact or exposure to conflict, has a negative impact on a child's emotional health (RCPsych, 2017) and educational wellbeing (Institute of Education, 2009), as well as having a negative impact on the wider economy (Relationships Foundation, 2016). These negative impacts can start from 6 months-old and last into adolescence and adulthood (Action for Children, 2017).
- 1.4 Children who experience family breakdown are more likely to experience behavioural problems, perform less well in school, need more medical treatment, leave school and home earlier, become sexually active, pregnant, or a parent at an early age, and report more depressive symptoms.
- 1.5 NACCCC is the only charity in the UK dedicated to solving this problem. Child Contact Centres provide an invaluable service for children when parents separate, by providing a safe and appropriate environment for them to meet and spend time with the parent they are not living with and with their broader families including grandparents.
- 1.6 NACCCC are the central body that supports the network, our guiding ethos is keeping children in touch with parents following separation when it is safe to do so. We are proud that there are around 300 centres across the UK with 3,200 volunteers and 1,300 staff. Over 17,000 children have benefitted from accredited services in the past year.

### Our Vision Statement

- 1.7 A child contact service that works better for children.

### Our Mission Statement

- 1.8 To keep children in touch with parents following separation in a safe environment because parenting shouldn't end when relationships do.

### What are Child Contact Centres and Services?

- 1.9 Child contact services are designed for children to maintain or re-establish contact with a parent, grandparent, sibling, other relative, or another person important in their life. It

may be that trust has broken down or communication has become difficult following parental separation. If there is a risk of harm to children, then a supervised service needs to be used. If a neutral venue for contact is needed, a supported service would be utilised.

- 1.10 There are two main types of child contact. Supported contact and Supervised contact, which is usually provided at Child Contact Centres. These Centres may be purpose build facilities for children, more usually village or community halls. There are also child contact services which provide contact in the community rather than at Child Contact Centres.
- 1.11 Supported Contact: parents do not have to meet but children are able to keep in touch with parents if communication has become difficult. Supported Contact Centres provide safe, neutral centres mainly staffed by volunteers who keep a watchful eye on the children and families using the centre. Several families can use the facilities at the same time.
- 1.12 Supervised Contact: deals with cases assessed as having an element of risk and ensures the physical and emotional well-being of children in a one-to-one observed setting. Supervised Contact Centres are staffed by qualified social workers and children and the parent who they don't live with have their own space.
- 1.13 Other Contact services: Supported child contact centres can also be used for a short period for a handover as a drop off / pick up point meaning that parents do not have to meet. Supervised contact centres can offer services for supervised contact assessment, indirect contact, escorted contact, and life story identity contact.
- 1.14 Listed below are some of the services that NACCC offers to its member centres, families, and stakeholders:
  - Provision of National Standards and quality benchmarks.
  - Accreditation support – achieving and maintaining national standards.
  - Practical support and advice in achieving and maintaining accreditation.
  - Training offered on a regional and individual basis, including Co-Ordinator, safeguarding, and e learning training modules.
  - DBS Service.
  - AGM and conference.
  - Information Line for parents and carers.
  - Information and advice for parents, carers (and referrers) needing to set up contact at a local Child Contact Centre.
  - Safeguarding Advice Line open 365 days a year 24 hours a day.
  - Information and advice for Members on all aspects of running a Child Contact Centre.
  - The coffee shop online networking.
  - Advice and updates regarding important changes in legislation.
  - Signposting to community services that would support parents.

- Parent planning.
- Advice on Children's needs.
- Website – Resources for parents and children.

### **NACCCs Standards**

1.15 NACCC's independent standards board, currently chaired by Sir Mark Hedley, a former High court Judge of the Family Division, keeps a continuous watching brief on the standards operating in child contact centres and makes recommendations for improvement. The accreditation process follows the fulfilment of a checklist examined by an assessor and a narrative report will be provided giving details of the centre. A centre will be examined for re-accreditation every three years. This work is funded by the Ministry of Justice.

NACCC ensure that its members: contact centres and services and local authorities are operating to the same high standards achieved through the accreditation process.

### **Terms of Reference and Governance**

1.16 The NACCC is governed by their Articles and the Trustee Board are the custodians of these. The organisation has all necessary policies to ensure good governance, and the Trustee Board meets quarterly where these are reviewed, and decisions made about issues relevant to the smooth running of the service provided.

## 2. Steps that Churches could do to support individuals and couples

### 2.1 Is the church an outmoded institution?

Although Christian teachings on divorce/separation differ between denominations it is generally frowned upon. This leads to individuals feeling guilty and if not handled sensitively may mean that people turn away from the church. It may also mean that couples when they are beginning to experience difficulties might not seek help of the church.

### 2.2 If the church is consulted early on when a couple have problems, there may be some hope of retrieving the situation. There needs to be an awareness of the resources in the community available for couples.

### 2.3 There also needs however, to be an acknowledgement that when something is broken it may not be possible for it to be fixed. I have worked with many couples for 40 years both as a practitioner court welfare officer, mediator, and counsellor and if one of the parties has decided the relationship is finished as far as they are concerned no amount of exploration, in my experience, can change it. The person who wants to end the relationship whilst probably feeling a sense of loss has come to terms with it and already moved on.

### 2.4 The Catholic Church does not recognise divorce and further penalises individuals by not allowing them to remarry in church unless the marriage has been annulled. This seems unfair as it might not be a choice by one of the parties.

It is important that the church:

- a. Supportive but non-judgemental.
- b. Alert to Domestic Abuse issues both male and female.
- c. Considers the value of early intervention and be aware of resources available.
- d. Encourages couples to explore differences rather than attribute blame.
- e. Helps with the ending of the relationship if it cannot be salvaged for the sake of the children who might be experiencing conflict.
- f. Encourages couples not to go down the court route.

### 3. Public Policy across all areas of government

- 3.1 Multiple departments are involved in family breakdown. Ministry of Justice, Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Education, and the Home Office. There would be more coherence if Children and Families came under one department.
- 3.2 The government needs to put some effort into diverting couples from the court being the first port of call. Sir James Munby and Sir Andrew McFarlane have said in speeches that in their experience about 30% of couples who apply to court have no risk issues and should not be there. They take up valuable court time that is needed for the 70% of couples where there are difficult and often risk issues.
- 3.3 One of the practical steps the courts could do is to say to couples where there is no risk that before they can enter into court proceedings, they should direct them to out of court services. If there are children ensure that contact arrangements are made, this could be either through a family member, a friend or at a Child Contact Centre. Child Contact is one of the contentious issues which cause conflict. If this is sorted out at the beginning, it is one less problem to solve. Then the parties attend a Parenting Information Programme which most parents say they wish they had done early on and puts them in to the right frame of mind to then go on to mediation to sort out long term arrangements. Contact Centres, Mediation and Parenting programmes are readily available in the community. They are inexpensive and responsive to need.
- 3.4 Resolution strategies should consider wide-ranging needs. Information is most crucially required at the early stages of separation. People find it difficult to obtain clear information. There is an appetite for authoritative online resources to help people understand the options and provide clear information about relevant processes. Family issues often occur along with other legal issues and wider problems e.g., Domestic Abuse, Substance Abuse, Mental Health issues.
- 3.5 Whilst the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education have a programme for schools teaching pupils about relationships. As a school governor it is apparent that teachers feel ill equipped to do this. Not all schools have taken up the offer of videos, infographics and lesson plans developed by the University of Exeter, NACCC and NYAS about family separation. It is important to learn at a very young age the value of relationships and churches have a role to play here so this needs to be an important part of the curriculum not an add on.
- 3.6 Other jurisdictions appear to be ahead of the UK in what is offered to separated families,
- 3.7 Australia provides:
  - Education for lawyers and the community.
  - Accessible, authoritative information
  - Appropriate assessment and referral (effective triage)
  - Service and intervention options to assist decision making
  - Ongoing support.

They have Family Relationship Centres to provide information, referral, advice, and dispute resolution services to separating families, including triage, referral and mediation

- 3.8 In New Zealand, Australia and Norway attending out of court dispute resolution is a mandatory step before applying to court to resolve child arrangement issues.
- 3.9 In Canada It is Mandatory to attend a parenting programme like what we have in the UK. They also provide Family Justice Centres and Justice Access Centres which provide information, free counselling, and free mediation
- 3.10 Why can't the UK learn from other jurisdictions? Develop a service away from courts and lawyers which triages cases, diverting those where adjudication is necessary because of risk, into the court system. Much of the money (which is considerable) is spent by the UK government in services for separating families when they have got into the court process.
- 3.11 This is much too late and can contribute to parties getting into unnecessary conflict and doing damage to children. It also creates lengthy delays of in some cases a year or more which causes stress for a child who has lost a loving parent.
- 3.12 The government needs to provide money for early intervention services, providing there are no safety issues, such as Counselling, Mediation, Parenting Programmes and Child Contact Services free of charge at the point of need. The government need to convey to the world at large who have very little sympathy for family breakdown and parents in conflict, that it is the children that they need to protect.
- 3.13 We know from the Department for Work and Pensions in their Fractured Family Research that around 1 million children do not have contact with the non-resident parent. We know the damage done to children of not having a role model (usually a father in 92% of cases). Some have walked away and started new families, some have just found the whole process too difficult, challenging, and expensive.



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## 4. Non-Governmental Organisations

4.1 Firstly, Non-Governmental Organisations must be properly funded.

Secondly there needs to be an awareness campaign outlining the value of using services which will divert parents from the court process.

Thirdly, Non-governmental organisations need to provide good quality information both online and in different outlets.

4.2 All organisations supporting children and families need to be aware of what each other does and have a referral system which is well known to all services in the areas in which they work. Non-governmental organisations including churches work in silos they need to be much more outward looking.

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