

## **NOTE ON CHILD CONTACT CENTRES**

The Family Court has advised social workers to follow the protocol for referring children and families to child contact centres in family proceedings.

This protocol takes effect immediately.

Under the protocol, for supervised and supported child contact, courts must inform parties that their case will be referred to an accredited child contact centre or service, details of which are available on the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC) website. Parents and children must attend a pre-visit assessment. A centre may refuse families in line with their safeguarding policy, or if they do not have the necessary facilities. The court should ensure parties know that the centre is usually a temporary solution for contact. After three months, there should be a review of whether contact can move out of the centre.

For local authority referrals, the individual social worker and team manager should provide their details to the centre.

When referring families, the court order should include certain matters, including directions about how the referral will be made and the parties' next steps if the referral is refused. The court should direct that specific safeguarding information about the family be sent to the centre.

The order should also contain information about the following:

- The preparation that the child will receive before contact starts and who will be responsible for providing it, whether any other family members and significant adults can be included in a contact visit, whether photographs can be taken of or shown to the child and shared on social media, and whether the child may be taken outside the centre and, if so, for how long.
- Whether a social worker, CAFCASS officer or children's guardian will be attending any contact sessions, and whether a report will be prepared based on contact observations, and how the costs of the report will be met.
- If possible, an exit plan with a timetable for contact to move from the centre into a different level of contact or the community. One party should be responsible for informing the centre when a place is no longer required.

The protocol contains pro-forma text for an order for supervised and supported contact at a child contact centre, contact centre directions and conditions for direct contact, and contact service directions and conditions for virtual contact.

The President of the Family Division pointed out that there is currently no legal requirement for child contact centres and services operating in private or public law

settings, to have accreditation status. This means there are no minimum standards operating for unaccredited child contact centres and services (for example including oversight of the requirement even for DBS – police checks). However the President urged courts to ensure they refer families only to accredited centres so that every child whose circumstances necessitate the use of child contact centres or services, will benefit from the same high level of care and safeguarding. There is a register of all Accredited Child contact centres and services on the NACCC's website.

There are 4 types of Child Contact Centres and Services:

**a) Supervised contact centres**

- provides one-to-one contact which is observed by professionally qualified workers who always remain within sight and sound of the children to ensure their safety.
- A supervised contact centre will work with families where there is a higher level of risk.
- If required, supervised contact centres can be directed to provide contact notes to the court and the parties.
- Many supervised centres also provide a range of other services such as parenting assessments and parenting education.
- If the parties have a preferred child contact centre, the court should require the parties to get in touch with the centre before the hearing, to ensure (in principle) that a referral would be appropriate and that the centre has the availability and resources to meet the family's needs.
- A supervised child contact centre will usually expect that their service is used as a short-term stepping-stone.
- Contact may progress to a supported contact centre or community contact via a supported handover.
- In some cases, supervised contact may be required for a longer period in which case families, legal representatives and the court should ensure that their contact centre is willing and able to meet the timescale that the court considers will be necessary.
- Supervised contact centres are used in a wide range of circumstances that include: a. where there is risk of harm, b. where there are issues such as drug and alcohol addiction, c. if there is a history of domestic abuse, d. where there are concerns about parenting ability, e. where a child is refusing contact, f. to introduce a child and parent or resume a parent and child relationship after a long gap in contact.

**b) Supported contact centres**

- Supported contact centres provide safe, pleasant, impartial surroundings for children to spend time with their parent, family members and other important people.
- Most supported centres are run by trained volunteers with a paid co-ordinator. They usually operate on a not-for-profit base. Volunteers and staff can give practical assistance (for example calming a tearful child) and keep a watchful eye. They do not monitor or evaluate contact or conversations between parent and child.
- The centre can confirm attendance dates and times, but will not provide reports to the parties, legal representatives, social workers, mediator, or the court.
- Supported contact centres are suitable for families where there is either no risk, or very little risk of harm to the child. Several families are usually together in one or more rooms in the same space.
- Centres undertake risk assessments as part of the referral process and are free to accept or decline referrals based on their assessments and the facilities they can provide.
- Contact at a supported child contact centre is a temporary arrangement, usually for about three to six months. Families are encouraged to use the time to build up trust in each other's abilities and commitment to contact, so they can move on from the centre and begin making their own arrangements.
- A supported child contact centre may be able provide longer term contact solutions for families in some circumstances. If a long-term solution (i.e., more than 6 months) is needed, the court and the parties should make sure that this is discussed with the contact centre before making a referral

#### c) **Supervised contact services**

- Supervised Child Contact Services offer supervised contact which takes place somewhere other than a contact centre.
- Child contact services might be offered; a. at a parent's home; b. at the child's home; c. at another residential premises, like a residential unit for children or an adult care home; d. in a community building, like a library or children's centre; e. in an outdoor community setting, like a park; f. in a community attraction, like a cinema, bowling alley, restaurant, or soft play centre.
- The level of service is the same as that provided by supervised centres.

#### d) **Virtual (online) contact** providing both supervised and supported contact centres

- Virtual Child Contact, also referred to as 'remote' or 'online' contact.
- Virtual contact facilities are now offered by many child contact centres and can be supervised or supported.
- Where virtual child contact is provided on a supervised contact basis, written reports will be produced if required by the court.
- Virtual contact uses video technology (for example Skype, Zoom, Teams).
- It is set up by the contact centre following a referral from the parties or the court.
- The centre will assess the suitability of contact in the same way as they would for face-to-face contact.
- In all cases the child contact centre remains the host for the contact. As the host, the centre operator remains in control of the virtual contact session and can end the contact session immediately if there are concerns.
- In the case of a supervised contact session, a qualified social worker remains in sight and sound of the child throughout.
- The process for acceptance of families and reserving places for virtual contact sessions is the same as used for face-to-face contact (including the pre-meeting and assessment of suitability of the case). Assessment of suitability is particularly important in cases where there has been domestic abuse, to ensure the parent does not feel that virtual contact will bring the abuser into their home.
- Virtual contact is not an alternative to face-to-face contact. It provides a valuable mechanism for keeping in touch where face to face contact is not possible due to distance or physical restrictions (such as in the pandemic).
- Virtual contact can be helpful to prepare children or their parents, carers, and guardians for face-to-face contact where it has been a long time since contact took place or there has been little or no previous contact.

Where a referral is made to the contact centre by a Local Authority children's services department, the individual social worker and team manager will be expected to provide their details to the contact centre coordinator.

Child contact centres and services are independent third parties and cannot be directed by the court to accept a referral or to provide services to any family. The decision whether to proceed with a referral rests with the centre or service. The parties are expected to consult with the contact centre co-ordinator to review whether contact can move out of the Centre. The review should take place after contact has been taking place at the Centre for three months. Only in exceptional circumstances will contact continue to take place at a Contact Centre after a six-monthly review has taken place.

### **Court Orders:**

When referring families to child contact centres and services whether the centre is supported, or supervised, courts should ensure that the following matters are included in the order where necessary:

- Directions that specific safeguarding information about the family is sent to the child contact centre. Specific safeguarding information should include copies of any injunctive or other relevant orders made within the preceding two years, as well as a section 7 report and any other record where particular concerns may not have been raised with Cafcass prior to preparation of the Cafcass safeguarding letter (a copy of the safeguarding letter is required in every case).
- A direction that, if copies of a referral order and safeguarding information are not provided by the parties themselves, then the child contact centre coordinator shall be permitted to obtain a copy from the court without payment of a fee or obtaining a further court order.
- Details of the preparation that the child will receive prior to contact beginning at a child contact centre, and which party or agency, will be responsible for providing this.
- Provision for an independent interpreter and for the costs therein, where there are communication issues related to language, including British Sign Language.
- Directions as to parties' next steps in the event their referral to an identified contact centre is not accepted by that centre.
- Whether any other family members and significant adults are to be included in the contact visit and if so, when, and for what part of the visit.
- Whether photographs and video can be shown to the children and/or taken of the children; and if so and where those photographs/video can be posted/exchanged using social media.
- Whether or not the child may be taken outside the Contact Centre and if so for how long; and whether this will take place at the first or subsequent contact visits.

- Whether a social worker, Cafcass officer or children's guardian will be attending any of the contact sessions and, if so, the details of that professional, and their role in the contact.
- Where the order is for contact at a supervised child contact centre, whether a report is to be prepared based on contact observations and how the costs of the reports are to be met. Courts should not make orders requiring supported child contact centres to provide reports or attend court in any capacity. Nor should such contact centres be required to become involved in resolving any disputes between the parties.
- Directions as to how the referral will be made, including who will make the referral, and the timescales in which the other party should respond.
- If possible, an exit plan setting out a timetable for contact to move from the child contact centre into different level of contact or the community. This may include a plan for how the child will be told that contact is moving from the child contact centre and how contact will then take place.
- One party should be made responsible for informing the child contact centre when the place is no longer required.