Law firm fuels Children Need Contact Centres campaign

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A national campaign calling for the creation of a countrywide network of Child Contact Centre's (CCCs) has been launched by The National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) in a bid to get such facilities on a statutory footing and adopt minimum standards for the training, support and supervision of CCC coordinators and volunteers. The aim of the Children Need Contact Centres campaign is to plug the current shortfall and address widespread concerns that the absence of properly regulated centres is putting vulnerable children at risk.

National Law firm Simpson Millar LLP, an affiliated member of the **National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC)**, is backing the campaign spearheaded by a team of solicitors from its Family Law Department who have worked with the NAPO Family Court Section on other national campaigns.

"Child Contact Centres are a lifeline for families and child law practitioners. Frequently they are the only solution to help a child maintain a relationship with a parent, especially in situations where there are concerns about safety and the ability of the other parent to meet the child's needs. These centres play a vital role in gradually reintroducing a child to a parent after a long period of absence on neutral territory, or where there has been a complete breakdown of trust between the parents," says Emma Hopkins, associate solicitor in Simpson Millar's Family Law team.

Under the present system, there is no requirement for there to be a CCC to meet the needs of families in any particular geographical area, nor are there any mandatory minimum training standards for those that operate or work within a CCC. The lack of provision of CCCs coupled with inconsistency in the expertise they provide, means that in many areas families are not receiving the help they need.

As a result, children and their parents are missing out on the opportunity to build positive and essential relationships.

"In many cases there are extensive waiting lists and on top of this, families are expected to travel long distances – sometimes a round trip of 100 miles – in order to attend a centre. The travel costs for many parents are prohibitive" says Emma. "The valuable contribution CCCs make within their local communities has not had the public recognition it deserves. The majority are operated by charities, staffed by volunteers and we applaud the work they do. Now it's time to take this a step further."

The key aims of NAPO's campaign are to implement a nationwide network of CCCs with a statutory obligation to provide at least one venue for supported and supervised contact for every Family Court Centre. NAPO wants to ensure CCC coordinators have proven knowledge and experience of working within the Family Justice System, and to have or employ a member of staff who has a social work qualification or other professionally recognised training in identifying safeguarding issues such as domestic abuse.

There will also be a requirement that during a Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting (MIAM), where there are children of the relationship, the Mediator considers the issue of contact, provides information to the parent about local CCCs and undertakes a risk assessment as to whether contact at a CCC is appropriate. All centres will be obliged to retain or recruit and develop a group of volunteers, trained to a national standard and DBS-checked.

It is also hoped that improved and secure funding for CCCs is will be achieved through increased third sector funding and the diversion of resources from savings to the Legal Aid budget as an outcome of recent reforms.

"Not only is there a pressing need for a national network; it is critical we ensure that every centre gets the funding and training it needs to carry out this invaluable service to the highest possible standard. That is why we strongly believe in and support the aims of NAPO's campaign," says Emma.

To add your name to the on-line petition visit Child Contact Centres Campaign

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