Legal aid reforms trigger huge increase in parents seeking help from child contact centres.

Tuesday 15 October, 2019

The number of parents self-referring directly to child contact centres has drastically risen in the last ten years, according to new figures released by the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC).

Self-referrals from separating parents have risen astronomically from 3.7% of total referrals in 2009/10 to 35.8% in 2018/19, in the same period, referrals from solicitors have reduced from 67.8% to 21.9%. [1]

The stats released today are a clear indication of the consequences of legal aid reforms for families experiencing separation.

The consultation process for legal aid reforms started in 2011 and came into force in 2013. Since then, legal aid for family law has only been available for a limited range of cases including domestic violence and international child abduction.[2]

The NACCC accredits 350 centres nationwide run by around 4,000 volunteers and 1,000 staff. Over 17,000 children benefited from accredited services in the past year.

NACCC collected referral data from centres nationwide and found that in 2018/19, 3,879 self referrals were made out of a total referral number of 10,825 (35.8%) while solicitor referrals accounted for 2,375 (21.9%). This compares to 372 (3.7%) self referrals and 6,729 (67.8%) solicitor referrals in 2009/10 from a total of 9,925. [3]

Elizabeth Coe, Chief Executive, National Association of Child Contact Centres

said:

“Parenting shouldn’t end when relationships do and we know many parents who separate feel the same way, which explains why the assistance from child contact centres is in such demand.

“We have noticed a huge change in source of referrals since legal aid reforms led to a reduction in provision for most family cases. Families who are going through a separation now often need to negotiate the family law system without the support of a legal professional.

“Our centre staff and volunteers are trained to support families through this process but the potential of increased stress and anxiety for parents is significant and the implications of reduced support is having an impact beyond child arrangements.”

Sarah Avery, Cheltenham Child Contact Centre Manager added:

“Child contact centres enable parenting to continue after a relationship ends, ensuring children feel supported and are safe. Our role is to work with families to help them build trust and resolve issues so that children can continue to have contact with both their parents.

“We know that family separation is stressful for everyone involved and many parents now have the additional challenge of managing legal processes without support from a solicitor. The emotional strain this puts on individuals can be huge.”

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As well as providing safe spaces where children can meet the parents they don't live with, NACCC centres support families by promoting the use of mediation and other services so that separating parents don’t need to go to court to arrange contact with their children.

ENDS

[1] https://naccc.org.uk/what-we-do/annual-statistics

[2] https://www.thefamilylawco.co.uk/blog/2017/12/11/legal-aid-update/

[3] https://naccc.org.uk/what-we-do/annual-statistics/annual-statistics-2009-2010-archive

Notes to editors:

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About the National Association of Contact Centres

- More than a million children have no contact whatsoever with one or other parent after separation. Unfortunately some children experience behavioural issues including antisocial behaviour, distress, unhappiness, and both physical and emotional problems.
- The National Association of Contact Centres (NACCC) is the only charity in the UK dedicated to solving this problem, by providing safe spaces where children can meet the parents they don't live with.
- The NACCC accredits 350 centres nationwide and around 4,000 volunteers and 1,000 staff run these centres. Over 17,000 children benefited from accredited services in the past year.
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