



Executive Summary

Final Evaluation of the Barnardos/One Family Pilot Child Contact Centre

'A Child Contact Centre is a safe, friendly and neutral place where children can spend time with the parent/s they do not live with. It is a child centred environment which allows the child to form or develop a relationship with the parent at their own pace and in their own way, usually through play and child centred activities.' <http://www.barnardos.ie/what-we-do/specialist-services/child-contact-centres.html>

Why Child Contact Centres are needed

Key messages from the international research and literature points to the following:

- Contact arrangements, post-separation, provide an opportunity for the child/children and the non-resident parent to continue to see each other regularly, in order to maintain and sustain, and in some cases develop, the parent-child relationship;
- For approximately 10-30% of separating/separated families, the process by which contact is agreed is an 'uphill battle', that is emotionally charged, problematic and potentially dangerous¹.
- Contact centres have emerged internationally as a much needed resource where there are concerns about children losing contact with their non-resident parent, where there are concerns for the welfare and protection of the child regarding contact with their non-resident parent, and also for what are considered high-risk or custody disputing families who are litigating before the court.
- Research conducted by One Family - *Supporting Child Contact: the Need for Child Contact Centres in Ireland* (2009)², recommended that specialist Child Contact Centres should be set up in Ireland initially on a pilot basis to meet the growing need for such services. The research recommended that such centres should be modelled on international good practice and should be geared wherever possible to moving on to self-arranged child contact and should provide handover, supported and supervised services.

About the Barnardos /One Family Child Contact Centre

The Child Contact Centre based in Dublin and run by Barnardos and One Family received funding in December 2010 from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Family Support Agency and Ballymun Regeneration, for a two year period. The development of this service was informed by comprehensive research carried out by One Family on the need for Child Contact Centres in Ireland³. The service began operating on a pilot basis in October 2011 and was scheduled to conclude at the end of July 2013. Through a combination of savings and additional funding it was possible for the service to continue for existing families only until the end of 2013 and for some family supports to continue to be provided to families into early 2014. However no new families entered the service from July 2013.

The Child Contact Centre service is for:

- Children whose parents are separated and who are unable to agree safe and appropriate arrangements for the child /children to have contact with the parent they do not live with;
- Children who are in the care of the Health Service Executive who need support to have contact with their parent(s).

¹ Dunn, J.H., Flory, B.E. & Berg-Weger, M. (2004) 'An exploratory study of supervised access and custody exchange services: The children's experience' *Family Court Review*, 42(1), 60-73

² *Supporting Child Contact: the Need for Child Contact Centres in Ireland* (One Family, 2009). This research was endorsed by the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and by The Family Support Agency, and was carried out with the support of Barnardos, the Family Mediation Service, the Department of Social and Family Affairs, Ballymun Community Law Centre and Geoffrey Shannon, Family Law Expert.

The objective of the pilot Child Contact Centre service was as follows:

'The benefits for children are that the child's emotional well-being is promoted through supporting their sense of identity and through having safe, positive, nurturing relationships with their key family members.'

The Child Contact Centre service provided:

- Assessment to identify whether contact is in the best interests of the child and what supports the child and family require
- Preparation for contact for both parents and for the child
- Supervised contact, supported contact and handover contact services
- Supports for parents including parent mentoring, mediated parenting plans and counselling
- Supports for children including play therapy and art therapy
- Regular reviews with inputs from both parents and from the child wherever possible
- Post contact supports
- Information on and referral to other services

About the Evaluation

This report presents the results of the final evaluation of the pilot. Please note that the data analysed in this evaluation covers the period from commencement of the service in October 2011 to April 2013, a total of nineteen months.

Informed by the findings of the mid-term evaluation, the purpose of this final evaluation was to evaluate the pilot Child Contact Centre's performance and impact and to identify key issues for future child contact service provision.

The final evaluation included the following:

- A comprehensive review of the international literature on child contact centres.
- An analysis of the quantitative client data collected by the Child Contact Centre staff.
- Presentation of the findings from the qualitative interviews with Child Contact Centre clients.
- Presentation of feedback from engagement with internal and external stakeholders.
- Overall evaluation of performance and impact.

Key findings from the Evaluation

A comprehensive Child Contact Service model was developed and implemented during the period of the pilot. All those consulted during the course of this evaluation - parents, children, volunteers, staff and referrers - expressed satisfaction with the quality of the services provided in the Child Contact Centre. High quality supervised, supported and handover contact and related family support services were seen to have been provided to the families progressing to this service within the catchment area.

However a number of the Contact Centre activities proved to be more challenging than originally expected, with the evaluation concluding that a lower number of families received contact services compared to the target number set out in the original project plan. This, the evaluation found, reflected the complexity of families presenting to the service with multiple issues requiring considerable staff resources in conducting assessments and providing on-going key working with the referred families. Typical issues in families worked with included domestic violence, addiction, mental health difficulties and child protection concerns.

The service received 426 enquiries and had 128 families referred to it, of which 56 families received a service. Of the 56 families who received a contact centre service, 24 families received an assessment service only while the children of 25 families proceeded to contact, with 11 families moving onto post-contact. In 56 other families referred to the service the case was not opened principally due to the absence of the consent of parents or agreement to contact by the child.

Users of the service provided very positive feedback about their experience of the staff. Parents interviewed for this evaluation referred to how staff made them feel that they were *'being supported whilst not feeling judged, being understood but most of all for being neutral, and for not taking sides.'* Participating children also remarked on their experience of being understood – *[they] had my back, not just listened to me but also understood why I felt the way I did. They were there for me and supported me through it. They understood my situation better than other people would.'*

The importance of being listened to emerged as a strong theme for parents and children alike: *[contact centre staff] 'really listened to me. [Staff] asked me if I wanted to see my Dad and when I said that I didn't, they said that that was ok. I thought they would try to make me but they didn't.'*

The centrality given to the child's best interest by the Child Contact Centre service in the decisions made about contact emerged with a potent force, with this evaluation concluding that the practice and policy in this pilot service placed the child as central to all decisions and practices.

Key findings on Child Contact Centre clients

- Referrals to the service were from the courts (35%), self referrals (29%) the HSE / Social Workers (22%).
- The average age of parents was 33 and 79% of parents were unmarried.
- 72% of families had been or were in court proceedings with 58% of families having Access Orders in place while 40% of families had an HSE Social Worker.
- There was an average of 2 children per family and 66% of the children were aged 8 or under.
- 77% of children had either never lived with their non resident parent or not lived with them for over a year.
- At the time of the referral, 61% of children had no contact with their non-resident parent.
- 59% of families in the service (N=56) were assessed as having a current risk of child abuse and 50% of families had a current risk of domestic violence.
- Twenty three Child Protection Notifications were sent by the service to the HSE in respect of 38 children.
- The service offered families 455 contact opportunities of which 333 (73%) were taken up.
- The service offered a total of 502 counselling or parents mentoring sessions of which 387 (77%) were taken up.

Conclusions

1. The pilot Child Contact Centre has clearly demonstrated the need for and benefits of a child contact service to meet the needs of children and families in high conflict contact disputes. Enquiries to the pilot service greatly exceeded the capacity of the service to provide a service.
2. The pilot has demonstrated a clear need not only for specialist contact services for families, especially where there is a high level of conflict over contact, but also for a specialist assessment, family support and review service for such families in order to ensure that the best interests of children in contact disputes are professionally identified and met.

3. Parents and children reported on the positive outcomes for children of attending the Child Contact Centre with safety for both parents and children reported as improving significantly.
4. Hearing children's voices in relation to contact decisions has emerged as a key element in the development of an effective child contact service in Ireland and in ensuring that children are assisted in making informed decision as to what they believe is in their best interest.
5. Parental relationships remained fractious however which made move-on from the contact centre problematic.
6. The prevalence of domestic violence demands specific attention in the development of child contact services in Ireland. This includes the need to develop a coherent and co-ordinated policy and practice in relation to how child contact in cases of domestic violence are dealt with by the courts, by the HSE and by child contact services.
7. The findings of the pilot should be fully captured, developed into transferable training and accreditation tools and widely disseminated and discussed with all relevant professionals and related services, both statutory and community based.
8. A decision now needs to be made on what organisation/ Department or combination of same should be given responsibility for ensuring that the best interests of children in relation to contact are addressed in child protection and child welfare cases and in cases in the family law courts and related services.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been split into those that Barnardos and One Family can progress and those that require action by other organisations.

Barnardos and One Family

1. Disseminate the findings of this evaluation widely in order to generate an informed debate on the future role of child contact services in Ireland, to raise awareness of the important role such centres can play in facilitating safe contact for children, especially in high conflict families, aimed at seeking agreement on how best to meet the need for locally accessible professionally run Child Contact Centres in Ireland.
2. Facilitate a meeting with relevant Departments, representatives of the family law courts and of the Child and Family agency as well as of community based child and family services in order to explore potential opportunities to divert funds from other services where savings can be made (e.g. due to reduced court appearances, reduced social worker time dealing with contact issues) to fund Child Contact Centre services.
3. Seek funding to fully document the model of a Child Contact Centre developed and implemented during the pilot, including the development of a service manual and of a training and accreditation process thus ensuring that the learning from the pilot is fully captured and can then be utilised in a wider roll-out of the service.
4. Further the learning from this service by seeking funding to follow up drop outs from the Child Contact service as well as those who for a variety of reasons did not engage with the service to explore their alternative contact arrangements and the impact of these on family members and on their support needs.
5. Seek funding to reopen the existing Child Contact service and to develop it as a model of child

contact and related service provision; including provision for families that may not be able to move on to self-arranged contact. This should be based on a thorough review of the resources required to optimise the utilisation of available contact space without compromising safety and other objectives and to ensure that resources are available to disseminate the learning and to engage in an information campaign with key stakeholders both nationally and locally.

Other Government Departments and state agencies

To compliment and reinforce the work of the Child Contact centres there is a need for relevant Government Departments and/or agencies to take responsibility for:

- Ensuring that children’s voices are heard in court proceedings in relation to contact.
- Ensuring that children’s need for positive contact with the parent or parents they do not live with are comprehensively addressed.
- Agreeing how best the contact needs of children can be addressed when domestic violence, child welfare and child protection issues arise.

This should include the provision of:

1. An information, advice and referral service regarding children and parenting issues attached to the family law courts.
2. An assessment service for families whose cases come before the family law courts
3. A service which supports children in articulating their wishes and which ensures that their voices and best interests are central to all contact decisions.
4. Relevant contact services offering supervised, supported and handover contact.
5. A range of family supports for parents not living together and their children including counselling, parent mentoring and child therapy.
6. An agreed policy on how best to address issues in relation to child contact in situations of domestic violence.

Overall an integrated response by the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs and Justice and Equality, supported by their relevant agencies (The Child and Family Agency, the Courts Service, the Probation Service, the Legal Aid Board, the Family Mediation Service and COSC) would appear to be the best approach to progressing these issues.

For further information on Barnardos services, visit www.barnardos.ie.

For further information on One Family services, visit www.onefamily.ie.

This pilot project was funded for two years by:



Department of
Children and Youth
Affairs



Family Support Agency

Family Support Agency



Health Service
Executive



Ballymun
Regeneration