

CHILD CONTACT CENTRE: KEY LEARNINGS



IN BRIEF: CHILD CONTACT CENTRE PILOT PROJECT

Child Contact Centre services were run on a pilot basis in two locations in north and south Dublin between 2011 and 2013 by One Family and Barnardos in a partnership arrangement. The service offered a range of assessment, contact and family support services to high-conflict families who were frequently in legal disputes in relation to contact arrangements for their children. Common challenges for families included domestic abuse, poor mental health and addiction.

Families ranged across socio-economic backgrounds and the services were mainly used constructively by courts. The welfare and safety of children was held as the primary concern for the project. An independent evaluation of the pilot was undertaken which confirmed widespread support and need for an expanded Child Contact Centre service nationally. These services cost approximately €209K per year and have now closed due to lack of funding.

WHAT ARE CHILD CONTACT CENTRES?

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.

In December 2010, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Family Support Agency and Ballymun Regeneration provided funding to One Family and Barnardos to establish a pilot Child Contact Centre service for a two year period. This funding built on innovative research undertaken by One Family entitled *Supporting Child Contact: the Need for Child Contact Centres in Ireland (2009)*. One Family undertook the research recognising the challenges faced by families, social services and the courts in facilitating safe contact where there are disputes, or concerns about safety within families.



‘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. ‘

- Child Contact Centres provide an opportunity for the children of separated parents to maintain and sometimes develop their relationship with their non-resident parent.
- For approximately 10-30% of separated families, the process by which contact is agreed is an ‘uphill battle’; that is emotionally charged, problematic and potentially dangerous.
- Child Contact Centres have emerged internationally as an important resource where there are concerns about children being able to have contact with their non-resident parent, where there are concerns for the welfare and protection of the child, and in high-risk or custody disputing families who are engaged in the courts.
- Child Contact Centres can be used for children who are in the care of the state and who need support to have contact with their parent(s). The One Family research recommended that Child Contact Centres should be set up in Ireland initially on a pilot basis which has now been achieved. This pilot followed the research recommendation that such centres should be modelled on international best practice, should be geared to moving families on to self-arranged contact wherever possible, and should provide handover, supported and supervised contact services.

‘Professional experienced child orientated service when there was nowhere else within the system offering the support we needed.’

Parent

- The pilot Child Contact Centre service began working with families in October 2011. The initial funding ended in July 2013 but funding was secured to continue the service for existing clients until December 2013 when contact services ceased. The remaining engaged families are being provided with family supports by One Family until June 2014.

The services to families that the Child Contact Centre provided included:

- Assessment to identify whether contact is in the best interests of the child and if so what supports the child and family require including risk assessment.
- Preparation for contact for the child and for both parents.
- Supervised contact, supported contact and handover contact services.
- Family supports for parents including individual parent mentoring, mediated parenting plans and counselling.
- Family supports for children including play therapy and art therapy.
- Regular reviews with inputs from the child and from both parents whenever possible.
- Pre and post-contact family supports as required.
- Information on and referral to other services as required.
- Court reports as appropriate.

'(Worker) really helped me understand that it was not all about (ex-partner) trying to stop me seeing (child)... that maybe (ex-partner) was struggling to trust me... and in fairness there had been incidents. She helped me understand that and that made it easier for me to accept it (supervised contact) and just get on and manage it as best I could.'

Parent



'They had my back, they 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.'

Child

MAINSTREAMING

Costs

On average the Child Contact Centre pilots worked with 35 families per year at a cost of €209,000 for all services and related overheads for the year. Therefore the average cost per family is €5,971. However, some families received an assessment service only and some used all services available to them so the cost per family can vary widely.

For an average family, the costs can be divided as follows:

€2,239 for assessments; €2,239 for family support; and €1,493 for contact and case management.

With an average of two children and two parents per family, this is an approximate cost of €1,493 per person.

The estimated reduction in the use of in-court time at District Court level for an average of ten families comprising high, medium and low court users after they have used the Child Contact Centre service is **67%**. A case example from the service was a family who had attended court on 20 occasions over a three year period. Following their involvement with the Child Contact Centre service this was reduced to a need to attend twice per year for court review.

Resolution of high-conflict custody and access disputes frequently involving child protection concerns have other benefits that are more challenging to cost but with significant positive outcomes for children's, parent's and society's wellbeing. These include a safer contact for family members who experience domestic abuse, the opinions of children and parents are heard which can result in less adversarial engagement and the courts are resourced with high quality assessments on which to base decisions.

We believe that Child Contact Centres offer good value for money given the comprehensive family assessments available to court, the good outcomes achieved for family members, the decreased use of court time, reduced legal fees both for the Legal Aid Board and privately for families, the reduced need for Section 20 reports and Guardians ad Litem, reduced use of other family and child services including the freeing up of social work time. This pilot has offered high impact child-centred services that are not expensive when compared to legal services.

National Rollout

It has long been acknowledged that Child Contact Centres are required throughout Ireland as well as in the greater Dublin area. One Family research from 2009 established that 37 centres are required nationally. We are aware of the constant requests for contact centre services from parents, legal practitioners, social workers and courts.

In order to achieve cost-effective mainstream provision of Child Contact Centre services we recommend that existing organisations and services are leveraged. Following a small initial investment of €30,000, a training and accreditation system for service providers who wish to run Child Contact Centres can be developed and piloted. This can then be used to create a national network of regional Child Contact Centres at an annual cost of €209,000 each if they provide all services.

In three years Ireland could be resourced with 17 regional Child Contact Centre services (one per Child & Family Agency Area) that are trained, accredited and networked at an annual cost of just over €3.5m. Courts throughout Ireland would then have an accredited quality holistic service to use for high-conflict families available to them in their region.

If the Department of Justice & Equality and the Department of Children & Youth Affairs take joint responsibility for this provision and the associated budget, it would cost them €1.77m each annually which is only 0.084% of the former's annual budget and 0.425% of the latter's.

'Child Contact Centres need to be seriously considered as part of the ancillary services to users of family law courts along with counselling, mediation, post-separation family supports, DNA testing and section 47 reports.'

One Family's submission on the Children & Family Relationships Bill 2014

KEY LEARNINGS FOR POLICY MAKERS

- Courts benefit from good quality information in order to make good quality decisions. They would benefit greatly from robust family assessments and risk assessments where needed, such as those provided in this pilot.
- Currently children may be court-ordered into unsafe contact/access situations due to inadequate information available to court.
- Some parents (both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence) may not see that domestic abuse impacts negatively on their ability to parent well or that such abuse may negatively impact their children.
- Where there is alleged or proven abuse in the home, the family would benefit from referral to a Child Contact Centre for contact assessment and family support following an investigation by the Child & Family Agency and/or Gardaí.
- There can be a reluctance to address child protection concerns when a family is in private family law proceedings which can result in a lack of information to court and possibly unsafe contact for a child.
- Parents with safety/barring orders may be required to break them in order to facilitate court-ordered contact between their child and the other parent.
- Child Contact Centres are part of a range of support services that are required for high-conflict families to ensure safe contact for children.
- It may be challenging for courts to balance the competing issues of the best interests of the child, child protection issues, and their right to have a relationship with both parents given the inadequate provision of ancillary family assessment and support services to court.
- Family assessments undertaken in the Child Contact Centre provide an excellent way to consult with the child in relation to contact issues, and to hear their voice.
- When properly consulted, some children and young people choose not to have contact with their non-resident parent.
- It is appropriate in some cases for children not to have contact at all with their parent for safety/child protection issues.
- Resources could be saved if an appropriate information sharing system is put in place across agencies with parental permission or by direction of courts.
- It is important to consider the quality of a parenting relationship when making access orders rather than a standard length of time for contact.
- Supported contact might be more appropriate than supervised contact; an assessment will determine this.
- Some families will never be able to move on to self-arranged contact due to high levels of need.
- Many families have multiple challenges that may only arise during legal conflicts, so courts may have an opportunity to ensure the family receives the help required.



'One Family was where (worker) helped with the parenting and the parenting agreement. She was really good, told me I was doing parenting right. That helped move things on. I can't say a bad word about them.'

Parent

EVALUATION FINDINGS

An evaluation of the service was conducted by Candy Murphy of CMAAdvice and Dr. Stephanie Holt of the School of Social Work & Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin based on data for the period October 2011 to April 2013. This report, *Final Evaluation of the Barnardos/One Family Pilot Child Contact Centre*, established the pilot Child Contact Centre's performance and impact and identified key issues for future child contact service provision.

The final evaluation includes 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.
- Policy and practice recommendations to a range of stakeholders in their areas of responsibility.

Key Statistics

- During the 19 months covered by the evaluation, 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. A further 7 families were still in assessment or preparation for contact at the end of the evaluation period. 25 families had proceeded to have contact. Of these, 14 were still in contact and 11 families had moved on to post-contact support.

- In the cases of the other families referred to the service, their cases were not opened primarily due to both parents not consenting and non-agreement to contact by the child.
- Referrals to the service were from the courts (35%), self-referrals (29%) and the HSE/Social Workers (22%). 40% of families had a HSE Social Worker.
- The average age of parents was 33 years old and 79% of parents were unmarried.
- There was an average of two children per family and 66% of the children were aged 8 or younger.
- 72% of families had been in or were in court proceedings with 58% of families having Access Orders in place.
- 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 were assessed as having a current risk of child abuse and 50% of families had a current risk of domestic violence.
- 23 Child Protection Notifications were sent by the service to the HSE in respect of 38 children.
- The service offered children and parents 455 contact opportunities of which 333 (73%) were taken up.
- The service offered a total of 502 counselling and parent-mentoring sessions of which 387 (77%) were taken up.
- Typical issues in families worked with included domestic violence, addiction, mental health difficulties and child protection concerns.

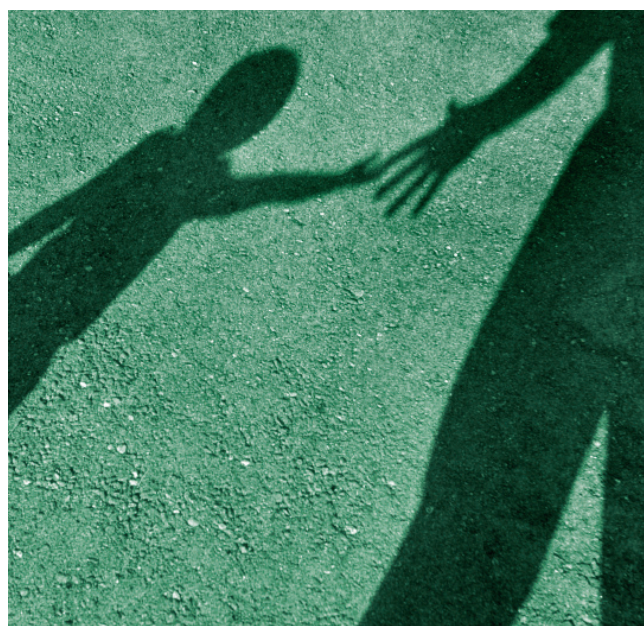


'Play therapy helped [child] come to terms with our separation, helped with the frustration and upset.'

Parent

Extract from Evaluation Conclusions

- A comprehensive Child Contact Centre service model was developed and implemented during the period of the pilot. High quality supervised, supported and handover contact and related family support services were seen to have been provided to the families accessing the service.
- The pilot Child Contact Centre has clearly demonstrated the need for and benefits of such a 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.
- All those consulted during the course of this evaluation i.e. parents, children, volunteers, staff and referrers expressed satisfaction with the quality of the services provided.
- The pilot has demonstrated a clear need not only for specialist contact services for children and 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.
- Families who do not use a Child Contact Centre service for whatever reason may then have contact in other locations either court-ordered or by agreement. These contact sessions may involve significant levels of risk to children as well as to parents as they may not receive the type of supports, or provision of the kind of safe environment, that they require.
- While a lower number of families received contact services compared to the target number set out in the original project plan, the evaluation found this reflected the complexity of families presenting to the service with multiple issues and risks requiring considerable staff resources in conducting assessments and providing on-going key working with the referred families.
- 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.
- The practice and policy in this pilot service placed the child as central to all decisions and practices. Hearing children's voices in relation to contact decisions emerged as a key element in the development of the child contact service and, ensuring that children are assisted in making informed decision as to what they believe is in their best interest.



- Parental relationships remained fractious, however, which made move-on from the Child Contact Centre problematic.
- The prevalence of domestic violence and abuse demands specific attention in the future development of Child Contact Centre 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 Child and Family Agency and by child contact services.

“The effects on families of a possible closure of the service are seen to include: some children may be exposed to abuse and may witness more violence, some won’t see their non-resident parent, parental stress levels will increase, some families will need to be referred to the HSE because of child protection concerns while some will re-enter court proceedings.”

The text of the Evaluation and Summary are available on www.onefamily.ie

'I felt I was being supported whilst not feeling judged, being understood but most of all for [it] being neutral, and for not taking sides.'

Parent

Evaluation Recommendations to Policy Makers

The findings of the pilot should be fully captured, developed into transferable training and accreditation tools, widely disseminated and discussed with all relevant professionals and related services, both statutory and community based.

The effective provision of such services will require:

- An information, advice and referral service regarding children and parenting issues co-located in the family law courts with referral of families to Mediation Services wherever appropriate.
- For complex family circumstances, the courts need access to professionally conducted assessments.
- Supports for children in articulating their wishes and which ensure that their voices and best interests are central to all decisions.
- Relevant Child Contact services offering supervised, supported and handover contact.
- Access to a range of family supports for parents not living together and their children including counselling, parent mentoring and child therapy.
- An agreed policy on how best to address child contact in situations of domestic violence.

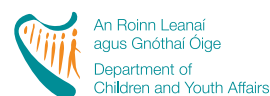
To effectively meet the needs of this group of children, effective cross departmental and interagency working would be required involving:

- Department of Justice and Equality including the Courts Service, the Probation Service, the Legal Aid Board, the Family Mediation Service and COSC; and
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs including the Child and Family Agency which now has responsibility for child protection and welfare services as well as domestic violence services.

'I think that this is a very important service as I was fearful of Y's safety with her father. I wish the contact centre the best of luck in the future. I appreciate everything they did for myself and Y. I hope there are more centres like this in the future as judges can leave parents facing desperate measures to ensure the safety of their children. If this contact centre didn't offer me support when they did I would most likely have refused any access, court ordered or not. I have never broken the law before, but when it comes to your child you will keep them safe no matter what the price. There should be more centres and more funding for these centres. Children have to be protected'

Parent

The pilot Child Contact Centre service was financially supported by the Department of Children & Youth affairs; the HSE; the Family Support Agency; and Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.



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