



## In Focus

### **Child Contact Centres (Accreditation) Bill [HL] (HL Bill 25 of 2016–17)**

#### Key Provisions

The [Child Contact Centres \(Accreditation\) Bill \[HL\]](#) is a private member's bill introduced by Baroness McIntosh of Pickering (Conservative). The Bill had its first reading in the House of Lords on 6 June 2016 and is scheduled to receive its second reading on 3 February 2017. The Bill would make it a requirement for any child contact centre or organisation that offers facilities or services for child contact—when children of separated families make contact with non-resident parents and sometimes other family members—to be accredited by the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC). The NACCC is a registered charity and describes itself as a supporting membership body for around 350 child contact centres and services located throughout England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Republic of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Under the provisions in the Bill, accreditation, or re-accreditation, would only be extended to centres that adhere to relevant NACCC standards. The Bill would insert sections into the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2004, and would extend to England only.

Baroness McIntosh has described the Bill's context and intentions as follows:

NACCC has set national standards and had accredited child contact centres in a private law setting for 25 years. NACCC has ensured robust quality standards in terms of the training of staff and volunteers and in developing processes for safe delivery of contact, which is in the best interests of the child.

Since 2007 these standards, which operate in private law settings, have been revised with input and approval from the relevant government departments and [the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service] Cafcass. For more than a decade there has been a judicial protocol issued by the President of the Family Division [of the High Court] that states when making orders for arrangements for children (contact orders), courts must only refer to a NACCC accredited centre.

NACCC has an independent standards board chaired by Sir Mark Hedley, a former high court judge in the Family Division. As the number of children involved in the public law system where their care is the responsibility of the local authority—'looked after children'—increases, and local authorities have a statutory obligation under section 34 of the Children Act 1989 to promote contact between children and their parents and relevant others, it is essential to make certain that these same high standards of practice that operate in the private law sector are met in a public law setting. This Bill will ensure that any child contact centre or organisation that offers facilities or services for child contact must be accredited by NACCC.<sup>2</sup>

## Background

Mary Lower MBE, a former Nottingham magistrate, founded the first child contact centre for private law—that concerning relations and dealings between private individuals—before forming the NACCC.<sup>3</sup> She is the current president of the organisation and is supported by vice presidents and two patrons—Sir James Munby QC, President of the Family Division, and Lord Alton of Liverpool.

The NACCC has stated the following in relation to child contact centres within its network:

Child contact centres and services are neutral places where children of separated families can enjoy contact with their non-resident parents and sometimes other family members, in a comfortable and safe environment. Over six thousand volunteers and two thousand staff work in these centres and thousands of children use them each year. They are run by a variety of independent organisations that form the membership of NACCC, along with affiliated members such as family lawyers, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru and the judiciary.

Child contact services are classified into two distinct categories, supported and supervised, so that families can be referred to an appropriate environment and level of support.<sup>4</sup>

On the need for legislation, the NACCC has stated:

NACCC has been aware for some time that there are child contact centres operating outside of any accreditation or external audit. Children using these unchecked services could potentially be at risk and therefore NACCC is campaigning to make the accreditation of child contact centres a legal requirement.<sup>5</sup>

Cafcass, which looks after the interests of children involved in family proceedings, only refers to and works with child contact centres that are accredited by the NACCC.<sup>6</sup> Cafcass is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Ministry of Justice.<sup>7</sup>

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## Further Information

- National Association of Child Contact Centres, '[What We Do](#)', accessed 30 January 2017; and [NACCC National Standards for Child Contact Services Offering Supervised Contact](#), 2012

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<sup>1</sup> National Association of Child Contact Centres, '[What We Do](#)', accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>2</sup> This text was provided by Baroness McIntosh of Pickering on request from the Library.

<sup>3</sup> National Association of Child Contact Centres, '[History](#)' and '[NACCC Team](#)', accessed 30 January 2017; and *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Private Law', accessed 30 January 2017.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> National Association of Child Contact Centres, '[What We Do](#)', accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>5</sup> National Association of Child Contact Centres, '[February Date Announced for the Second Reading of the 'Child Contact Centres \(Accreditation\) Bill'](#)', 24 January 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, '[Supported Contact Centres](#)', accessed 30 January 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Gov.uk, '[Cafcass](#)', accessed 30 January 2017.

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