

# **Gosport Children's Contact Centre.**

***GosConCen***

**3 year Business Plan**

**In support of an application for funding.**



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## Contents

Business Description.....	3
Business Aims & Aspirations. ....	3
Supported Contact.....	4
Supervised Contact. ....	4
Ethos.....	4
Key Issues, Opportunities & Actions.....	5
Strategy & Planning. ....	5
Marketing & Promotion. ....	6
Operations & Productivity .....	7
Efficiency summary.....	7
Staff & Skills.....	7
Finance & Systems.....	8
Conclusion.....	8
Appendix 1 .....	9
Appendix 2 .....	10

## **Business Description.**

The Gosport Children's Contact Centre [**GosConCen**] was founded in January 1999 as the result of identifying a geographical gap in provision of a contact centre in the Gosport area. The nearest alternative centres are located in Portsmouth, Southampton [2 centres] and Havant. The gap was originally identified by researchers of The Women's Royal Voluntary Service [WRVS].

***A Contact Centre is a facility that provides a safe and secure environment where children of divorced and separated parents maintain contact with the absent parent on a regular basis. Families are referred either by way of a Family Court Order or by solicitors acting for one or other of the parents.***

The WRVS approached members of Gosport Methodist Church, located centrally to the Town Centre, as being a suitable venue for a contact centre and this suggestion was accepted by the church council. Gerry Williams, a member of the church, was asked to assist in this project and was appointed Area Co-ordinator together with a number of WRVS volunteers and following a suitable period of training, the first family was referred to the centre in January 1999.

The WRVS continued to support the contact centre until April 2003 when, due to an internal reassessment of services by the WRVS, they withdrew funding and additional support to concentrate their efforts solely on the elderly housebound. The WRVS did, however, ensure that the contact centre received sufficient funds to ensure its continued operation for the short term.

At this point, a number of alternatives as to the future of the contact centre presented themselves:

- [1] The contact centre could close its operations when the money ran out.
- [2] The contact centre could align itself with another funding and support source.
- [3] The contact centre could continue its operations as an independent organization and seek funding as necessary.

Option 1 was never seriously considered. It was recognised that GosConCen provided an essential service in the Gosport and surrounding area, reflected in the number of referrals received from both the Family Court in Portsmouth and solicitors representing individuals outside of court proceedings.

Option 2 was considered but not pursued at the time [a] because of the lack of information concerning alternative funding sources and [b] the relatively low level of financial support required at that time in order to maintain the service.

Option 3 was adopted as the most pragmatic course available to ensure the continued operation and provision of the service.

As a result of the service available at GosConCen, the organization became well known to The Family Court in Portsmouth and the major legal practices in the Portsmouth, Fareham and Gosport area from where 98% of the referrals to the centre originate. Representing GosConCen, Gerry Williams has been a regular attendee at the annual Family Court Forum held in October each year.

In the 11 years that GosConCen has been operating, it is estimated that we have assisted over 300 families to maintain contact between the children of divorced and separated couples and the absent parent. Such contact in the centre may be for a few weeks or some months dependent upon individual circumstances. [*The longest period one family made use of the centre was two years.*]

## **Business Aims & Aspirations.**

It is important for the purpose of this document that distinction is made between the current service offered by GosConCen and some other contact centres.

GosConCen provides what is termed and recognised within the Family Court system as “*supported contact*” as opposed to “*supervised contact*” such as is available at The E C Roberts Centre in central Portsmouth.

### ***Supported Contact.***

Contact in this category consists of the provision of a safe and secure venue, contact being held regularly every fortnight on Saturday afternoons between 2:00pm and 4:00pm. Contact centre staff provide support only in the form of providing refreshments and ensuring that children are at ease with their surroundings and answering general questions from parents and children visiting the centre. They do not note or report on the substance of the contact except in situations where child protection issues arise.

### ***Supervised Contact.***

Contact in this category may include closer interaction between centre staff and families utilising the centre. It may also include reporting on the substance of the contact and this will generally be undertaken by a Court appointed CAFCAS officer [**Child And Family Court Advisory Service**]. It may also involve the participation of child psychologists and family counsellors.

### **GosConCen has, to date, only been available to offer Supported Contact.**

During the course of 2009 and 2010, Gerry Williams has undertaken a Diploma Course in Counselling financed by a Grass Roots grant awarded by Hampshire County Council. The aim is to provide counselling services to those individuals and families who request it or is recommended by The Family Court, to further the maintenance of the relationship between ex-partners and children of the relationship. Accordingly, it is felt appropriate to extend the range of services at GosConCen to include Couples and Family Counselling and upgrade the service to Supervised Contact.

### ***Ethos.***

Since its inception, GosConCen has always provided its services free of charge to the families that use the centre. This ethos is based on a number of core principles:

- [a] The vast majority of families using the contact centre are either working class with low income jobs or families on social security benefits [*social grade D/E*]; it is beyond their capability to pay significant amounts of money in order to maintain contact. Many contact centres do make charges to arrange contact; for example The E C Roberts Centre in Portsmouth makes the following charges:

Referral fee - £100

Pre-visit fee - £25 (both one off payments for all referrals)

Observed Supervised - £75.50 per hour

Supervised - £64.50 per hour

Handover - £15 mid week (free on Saturdays in Portsmouth once referral fee and pre visit paid)

Supported – free once initial referral and pre visit fee paid [*Source: E C Roberts web site 2010*]

It can be seen that a minimum charge for the lowest level of supervised contact involves a cost of £189.50, and even a supported contact would incur costs of £125; again well beyond the reach of the vast majority of the users of GosConCen. [*See Appendix 1*]

- [b] Many of the families that use the GosConCen have already expended significant amounts of money in legal fees [*solicitors fees, Court fees etc*] and it is not considered reasonable or desirable to subsequently make further financial demands of these families in order that contact between a parent and child can be maintained.
- [c] The principles behind the Social Responsibility and Mission Outreach programme that supports GosConCen mitigate against charging the beneficiaries of the service [*the families*] for the use of the service.

- [d] GosConCen has never found it necessary to operate a waiting list to accept families for referral. It is recognised that by the time families have been through the legal process, it may be some considerable time since the absent parent and child/children had contact. Accordingly, GosConCen's procedures are designed to minimize the time between a referral being made to the Centre and the first contact taking place.

During the 11 years that GosConCen has been providing services for families, the single most mentioned "criticism" is that the facility is only available on a fortnightly basis. The reasons for this are both historical and practical: when the Centre first opened in January 1999, it was agreed with the WRVS, the organization providing the funding for the project, that they would pay for the hire of the rooms on a fortnightly basis. Secondly, all the Centre staff are unpaid volunteers who have full-time employment and consideration has to be given to the amount of time these volunteers are prepared to commit to the Centre. During the course of the 11 years in operation, the Centre has had to replace 6 [six] volunteers who have felt unable to continue with the project, either through work and family commitments or because of transport and travel difficulties. At the present time, these obstacles to volunteering have been overcome by the recruitment of committed personnel living close to the Centre.

**In order to address the problem of frequency of contact, GosConCen would wish to increase the available sessions to at least twice weekly, thereby providing 8 [eight] sessions every 28 days instead of the current 2 [two] sessions.** This would provide:

- ✓ a much needed level of flexibility for families.
- ✓ increase the frequency of contact.
- ✓ provide additional capacity so that more referrals can be made to the Centre.

It is self-evident that the reason for the existence of GosConCen and, indeed, all other Contact Centres is that parents whose relationship has broken down and who have separated or divorced retain unresolved issues about contact with the children of the relationship. In some cases, there may be concerns over one parent's substance abuse [*drugs and/or alcohol*]. In yet further instances there may be issues surrounding the capability of the absent parent to adequately care for a child outside the safe and secure facility provided by a Contact Centre.

In any event, such issues need to be dealt with if all parties to the contact [*resident parent, visiting parent and the child/children*] are to be in a position to move on with their lives, both individually and as a family unit, albeit one where the parents relationship has come to an end. It was in order to address these issues that Gerry Williams has, for the last year, [2009 to 2010] been studying to become a registered Counsellor. These studies have now been completed and Gerry Williams has been awarded a Diploma in Counselling by The Institute of Counselling. He is qualified to counsel clients in the following areas:

- Couples and Families.
- Grief and Bereavement.
- Crisis and Trauma.

On the basis of research carried out to date, the provision of counselling services is one that 70% of clients using the Contact Centre would take advantage of if it was offered.

## **Key Issues, Opportunities & Actions.**

### **Strategy & Planning.**

As is the case with users of the Centre and previously mentioned, the ability to pay for such a service is generally beyond the reach of those who would most benefit from counselling. Further, in the ethos of GosConCen, it would be against the principles on which GosConCen operates to refuse counselling to anyone who requests it.

The dilemma, therefore, is to provide additional services by way of extended contact sessions and counselling sessions amounting to a full-time service as opposed to the minimal service [*2 hours fortnightly*] as delivered at present and to obtain financing to support these additional services.

Third sector organizations have always played an important part in filling the gaps in provision of services in the community. The problems that these local groups face can be summarised as follows:

- They are generally small groups.
- They are almost always operated by a group of dedicated volunteers.
- They have no regular or guaranteed source of income.
- They have no “voice” when negotiating the provision of services.

GosConCen is actively seeking to bring such groups in the local area under the umbrella of a loose strategic alliance that will strengthen their combined effect in the community. For example, GosConCen recently led a funding bid together with the Fareham & Gosport Family Aid group to provide a programme in Gosport to address the incidence of domestic abuse. This combined bid, to Gosport Borough Council, was successful leading to an award of £2,218. The programme includes counselling modules for the victims of domestic abuse, abusers and others affected by the abuse.

GosConCen is also working with Rowner Access Point from where the residents of Rowner can access information on various subjects such as Housing, Benefits, Job search, F.E., Support Groups, and agencies such as C.A.B., Southern Focus Trust, Cool2bHealthy and Gosport Voluntary Action.

The current economic situation in the UK generally highlights the increasing importance of Third Sector organisations in providing services that are not available through public sector channels. The new Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government has created an Office of Civil Society to drive through its 'Big Society' agenda and appointed former shadow charities minister Nick Hurd as minister for civil society. The government has pledged that policy will focus on three fundamental issues: Making it easier to run a charity, social enterprise or voluntary organisation . Getting more resources into the sector: strengthening its independence and resilience . Making it easier for sector organisations to work with the state.

Third Sector organisations have the advantage of providing more flexibility in their approach to provision and delivery of their services albeit that they rely almost entirely the commitment of volunteer staff and the availability of whatever funding they can identify and apply for.

The question of whether there is sufficient demand for the proposed services to be offered under the umbrella of GosConCen [*Children's Contact Centre, Family Counselling, Domestic Abuse programmes, Life Balance*] is answered by the current demand from end-users who have, over a period of the last 3 years, been inquiring as to whether these services are available and where they are not currently being delivered, if they will be available in the future.

With the experience, knowledge, qualifications and strategic alliance between local groups, there is now a very real possibility that such services could be made widely available to the benefit of people in the area providing that a secure and regular source of funding is in place to ensure the continuity of service.

## **Marketing & Promotion.**

The target market has been positively identified as being:

- ❖ Families already registered with GosConCen,
- ❖ Those families who will be registered with GosConCen in the future,
- ❖ Those who have hitherto not been able to access counselling services,
- ❖ Those who would benefit from additional services included in the domestic abuse programme and other social programmes.

There is currently no single entity within the local geographical area that is providing a similar range of services.

The marketing strategy is based on the following precepts:

- ✓ Exploiting existing referral agency contacts including Family Courts, solicitors and established contacts with other service providers
- ✓ Establishing new contacts by the use of business networks; GosConCen is a member of The Portsmouth & South East Chamber of Commerce & Industry.
- ✓ Establishing a new network of contacts with doctors surgeries, Social Services, special interest groups operating in the community, hospices and youth groups.

The costs of marketing have been factored into the proposed budget [*Appendix 2*]

## **Operations & Productivity**

Much work has already been done to raise the efficiency level of the operation of GosConCen:

- All administration with outside agencies is now conducted electronically and the operation is 99% paperless,
- A generic software programme is used to handle all aspects of referrals of families and communication with referring agencies; this was purchased from funding supplied by Hampshire County Council under their Grass Roots Funding programme,
- At his own expense, [£400] Gerry Williams has commissioned additional programming for the software to speed the referral process ensuring that all necessary information is forwarded to GosConCen in the first instance.
- The current administration process allows for timely reporting of all statistical data as required.

If the current proposals included in this document are to be carried through, it is envisaged that in addition to the extra time to be devoted to families and individuals for child contact and counselling, there will also be a further call on time for administration and confidential record keeping, the costs of which have been factored into the proposed budget.

## **Efficiency summary.**

- ❖ Paperless operation.
- ❖ All administration functions carried out electronically and by telephone.
- ❖ A pool of volunteers who willingly devote their time to the operation of GosConCen negates the necessity of employing paid helpers.
- ❖ GosConCen has a presence on the internet by way of a web site provided free by British Telecom through which anyone can access information and contact GosConCen directly.
- ❖ GosConCen is registered with e.volve, the directory of community and voluntary groups in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

## **Staff & Skills.**

The primary requirement at the present time is to provide a full-time, paid member of staff [Gerry Williams] to carry out the following duties and responsibilities:

- ✓ Continue to co-ordinate existing and future referrals to GosConCen,
- ✓ Make the necessary provision for the extension of contact facilities from fortnightly to twice weekly,
- ✓ To introduce the provision of counselling services for families and individuals.
- ✓ To support in an administrative role, the delivery of domestic abuse programmes by Fareham & Gosport Family Aid,
- ✓ To support clients referred by Rowner Access Point for counselling.

GosConCen benefits from a dedicated pool of volunteers that give freely of their time to support the existing functions of the Centre. With the proposed increased frequency of contacts to twice weekly, there will be a requirement to recruit additional volunteers which will be done through the offices of Gosport Voluntary Action. It will be necessary to subject such volunteers to a Criminal Records Bureau [CRB] check before they are allowed to assist at the Centre and to register them with the Independent Safeguarding Authority, subject to the outcome of the recent changes in registration criteria announced by the government.

Subject to satisfactory checks being returned, it will then be necessary to provide a training programme for new volunteers in respect of child protection measures in accordance with current legislation.

### ***Finance & Systems.***

GosConCen has sufficient funds [c. £3,000] to maintain its current level of operations for a period of approximately 16 and 20 years.

**However, this sum would only provide sufficient income for a little over FIVE WEEKS based on the proposed additional services and costs.**

The bank account associated with GosConCen is held with Lloyds TSB and requires two signatures for any cheque to be issued. Yearly accounts are submitted and audited by the Treasurer of Gosport Methodist Church as maintaining independent oversight of expenditure.

GosConCen has always operated under the need to be supported financially from outside agencies. In the first instance, this was the WRVS; subsequently the Centre has relied on voluntary contributions and grants. Examples of this include a grant of £4,407 from Hampshire County Council under the Grass Roots Grant Scheme; £750 from Portsmouth Family Court; £200 from The Squires and £50 from Gosport Methodist Church.

### **Conclusion.**

There are tangible and demonstrable benefits to supporting the proposals set out in this document including:

- ✓ Cost savings to the Family Court system,
- ✓ Provision of child contact services at a greatly increased frequency than present,
- ✓ Provision of counselling services to improve “quality of life” for families,
- ✓ Additional support for allied agencies providing “quality of life” programmes,
- ✓ Sustainable level of service provision over the lifetime of proposed funding [3 years].



## **Appendix 1**

## Appendix 2