

## Judge wins backing for UK's first drug court

By Grania Langdon-Down

Family judge Nicholas Crichton has won financial backing for his initiative to set up the UK's first US-style drug dependency court to help the growing number of babies and children who are being taken into care because of their parents' misuse of drugs or alcohol.

District Judge Crichton, resident judge at the Inner London Family Proceedings Court, was inspired by the US's "tough love" approach after visiting the Drug Dependency Court in San Jose, California, where a team of specialists, including substance abuse experts, lawyers, social workers and child advocates, help draw up an immediate tailor-made programme for the parent based on rewards and consequences.

After intense lobbying and a year-long development project, he has secured nearly £1.3 million over three years from the Department for Education and Skills, the Department of Constitutional Affairs, Westminster City Council and the London Boroughs of Camden and Islington. Advertisements have been placed for drugs experts and the court will open at his Wells Street court in January next year.

District Judge Crichton said: "We have to change the culture where we see a procession of mothers addicted to drugs whose babies are taken into care, they become pregnant again and the whole tragic cycle is repeated."

He added: "This is very exciting. We need to change the whole way we address the future of children of drug misusing parents. A drug dependency court which addresses the whole range of problems these families face, including relationship problems, domestic violence, housing, health and income support, holds out the hope of more children staying with their birth families or, where that is not possible, getting them into an alternative permanent placement more quickly."

He is planning a series of presentations at barristers chambers and solicitors firms to explain their plans for the court and ask family lawyers to encourage their clients to go into the programme. "This will be a real first for the UK. The single most important message I learnt from the San Jose court is that the moment you remove children into interim care is the moment you start working with the mother, otherwise it is too late." <http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/law/article1831355.ece>