



## Annual European FGC Network Meeting

# CYFARFOD CYMRU GYFAN ALL WALES FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE NETWORK

In Wales we have a healthy National Network and meet regularly to discuss national Welsh issues and share information on the different projects across Wales. It struck us that we are lucky in Wales to have so many projects using the FGC model in different circumstances. Like every country, Wales has its challenges and we have lost some projects in a few areas, however we still have a good representation across Wales and we offer FGCs to families in a number of situations - from preventative work to the more challenging FGCs for families affected by parental imprisonment.

## The use of Family Group Conferencing In Wales

### USING FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES IN PREVENTION WORK - GWYNEDD

*Cwlwm is the Family Group Conference project for the Y Bont service (previously known as Cartref Bontnewydd).*

3 years ago Cwlwm was awarded funding through the Welsh Families First programme to provide FGCs as part of a consortium of preventative services. We now have Families First funding in 3 of our 4 Local Authorities in North West Wales. Referrals can come as a single service referral where the family require only one service or where there are a number of services involved with the family in which case we work alongside the Team Around the Family (TAF) co-ordinator.

We have seen many benefits in working in a preventative way with families, timescales are set by families, not by the court or other safeguarding processes. Families are brought in at an earlier stage, and the whole process is very much driven by the family.

As with all the Families First services we hope that by providing support to families at an earlier stage we can prevent some future intervention by Social Services.

As with any FGC service the referrals come with a variety of needs, we might see a family where a young person is at risk of offending, or a mum with a child with special needs who would like a bit more help from her ex partner and his family. This way of working has not been without its challenges, and has resulted in some longer timescales from referral to meeting and less referrals completing the whole FGC process. However the Families First model allows for this and there is less emphasis on the quantitative evidence and more importance placed on families experiences and qualitative outcomes.

Cwlwm recognises that this preventative approach has been a positive development in Wales and hopefully will continue to run alongside the various levels of interventionist FGC services throughout the country.

## **FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES (FGC) IN EDUCATION - FLINTSHIRE**

Flintshire Family Group Meeting Service received a referral from a school Inclusion Welfare Officer (IWO), for a young person who was not attending school. The young person had a history of such behaviour and his mother had previously been sentenced to a prison term relating to this. The young person had been accommodated by the Local Authority during this period as no family members were identified who were able to provide support.

When this pattern continued, despite support from Social Services for Children, a referral was made for an FGC. The Local Authority was again considering legal action against the mother. The Independent FGC Co-ordinator contacted the young person and his mother and identified a network of extended family members who, once aware of the situation, were keen to engage with the process.

An FGC was arranged where the family was able to hear accurate and up to date information from the professionals present. When the extended family heard first hand how serious the situation had become, they used the Private Family Time to create a robust plan to support the young person to return to school and avoid another prison term for his mother.

Following the FGC, the young person moved to live with a nearby aunt and uncle who were supported by Social Services to obtain a bed, bedding and other necessary items. The Family Plan included arrangements for the young person to maintain contact with his mother and siblings, with the long term goal of him returning home.

At the FGC Review the IWO reported attendance had risen from zero to 100 per cent, whilst the young person noted he was enjoying school and was beginning to develop a new circle of friends.

## **BARNARDO'S CYMRU - INVISIBLE WALLS WALES – FGCS WITH PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES – SOUTH WALES**

Personal testimony by Johanne Jones, FGC Coordinator

When I took up the position of Family Group Conference Co-ordinator for Invisible Walls in Wales, I knew that I was opening the door to a whole new venture. Prior to joining the team, I had no real understanding about the impact of parental imprisonment on families, nor had I ever set foot inside a prison before! I knew there was much to learn but with five years experience of convening FGCs under my belt, I felt ready for the challenge.

The idea of holding a FGC within HMP Parc where I work was a new one – for management, staff and prisoner's alike. Management were keen to develop the model, aware of the potential for families. If successful the arrangement of a Family Group Conference within the service would break new ground, not just for IWW but for HMP Parc in general.

With a certain level of expectation resting on my shoulders, I knew there was much work to be done. Working closely with the Management Team and the willingness to support the process from the prison side would be crucial to aid its success. Staff training workshops were delivered to promote the model and time was spent with the operational teams to ensure that the practicalities of holding a FGC within the prison, including security, were carefully considered. A protocol was written to ensure clear practice guidelines.

The first FGC referral arrives on my desk - the courts require a Family Group Conference in relation to care proceedings of a young baby. The final court hearing is in three weeks time, so there's no time to delay. I carry on in the usual way, spending time with the family in preparation for the meeting and working with statutory agencies to ensure the focus of the meeting is clearly communicated to everyone involved. Advocacy support is made available for the Father of the child, who is an inmate at the prison and reluctant to attend the meeting alone.

I soon discovered that the practicalities of holding a FGC within a prison, compared to a local community setting, are hugely different. Security clearance for instance has to be given before family members can attend. So it's important that the Co-ordinator can identify all family members from the outset. Room booking times have to be carefully planned, to cause minimal disruption to prison regimes. This can be an issue if the FGC is likely to take some time. Surveillance cameras were to remain present throughout private family time and refreshments prepared in-house.

The meeting itself I'm glad to say, went relatively smoothly. As a team, the operational staff and I worked hard to ensure the FGC felt as informal as possible, despite taking

place in the most formal of settings where sniffer dogs and body searches are a feature. Most importantly of all, the family were able to meet and produce their own plan to be presented for the Court.

The Family Group Conferencing Service has continued to grow since this point, with increasing numbers of referrals to the service being made. For the most part, family ties are being strengthened and whenever possible, children are given the opportunity to have their views heard.

I have learned a great deal in my time with Invisible Walls. Not least about the prison system and the experiences of children and families who live daily with the consequences of having a loved one in prison. But also how flexible the FGC model can be, demonstrating that it can work, within a variety of contexts and settings.

Invisible Walls Wales is a BIG Lottery funded project. If you would like more information please contact Karen Rees, Children's Services Manager, Barnardo's Cymru, karen.rees@barnardos.org.uk

## **FGC SERVICE GOES LOCAL AUTHORITY - POWYS**

From the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014 the Family Group Conference service in Powys transferred from Barnardo's to Powys County Council. The two existing staff members were TUPE 'd across and thanks to excellent liaison between the managers from both services it was a painless process for both workers.

A number of families who were either waiting for an FGC or for a Review were also transferred and this too was a smooth process.

Of course the complete independence which a separate organization can offer is not quite the same, but our manager is running several teams which have a county wide remit across all Children's Services and we feel we have been able to sustain a neutral and independent approach to all.

There have been definite advantages, and communication between our service and the Children's teams and their awareness of the FGC process has been enhanced. This has already resulted in a higher referral rate from a wider range of social workers. There are also opportunities emerging for the development of Family Group Conferencing across other groups of service users including families at an early stage of dealing with problems.

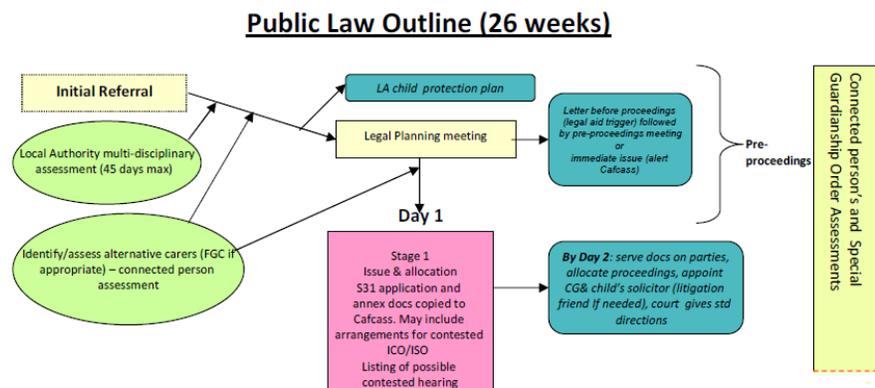
So, Family Group Conferencing is undoubtedly alive and kicking across Powys!

## FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCING AND THE PUBLIC LAW OUTLINE - CEREDIGION

The government commissioned a review of the Family Justice system in response to concern about the length of time care proceedings were taking and the adverse effect this was having on children, as well as the spiralling costs involved. The changes recommended in the review are now being implemented and the newly issued practice direction came into force in Wales in October 2013.

The new guidance once again identifies Family Group Conferences as a way of ensuring that extended families are consulted and given an early opportunity to plan for children who may be subject to care proceedings.

In Ceredigion as in most other local authorities new protocols have been drawn to ensure that the new timescales can be met. It was agreed that by working closely with the Ceredigion FGC Project family members would have sufficient time to consider their response to concerns and the required timescale for identifying possible kinship carers could be met.



One year on the main difficulties experienced are in obtaining consent from parents for information to be shared with their wider family and the need for greater clarity with parents about the possible outcomes of social services interventions. Joint training for social workers and Family Group Conferencing co-ordinators to address these issues is planned. Having Family Group Conferences identified clearly in the agreed protocols is helping to promote the use of Family Group Conferencing for all families where care proceedings are being considered and we are seeing more referrals following initial child protection conferences. While this has been a change of emphasis for our project from earlier preventative work we are enjoying the challenge and Co-ordinators are developing new skills in working with more complex family situations.