Understanding the Family Group Conference Process
External Context

- UN Convention Registration on the Rights of the Child
- Children (NI) Order
  - Consent
  - Children – IN – Need
  - Child Protection
  - LAC System
- Public Law Outline 2009
- Hardiker Model
Policy Drivers

- Regional Guidelines: Empowering Families
- FGCF / Regional Standards in NI 2010
- UNOCINI
- Regional Policy on Permanence May 2007
- PFA Target 2010-2011 DHSPSSNI
- Co-operating to Safeguard Children
- Care Matters – A Bridge to a Better Future 2007
- Children Order Advisory Committee – Best Practice Guidance, 2nd Edition 2010
- Families Matter 2009
- Trust Policies
- Family Group Conferences in Youth Justice Sector
Introducing the Model

- Radical departure from Social Services normal way of working
- Involves thinking differently
- Family led process
- Has to be an empowering process for the family.
The FGC process is an outward sign of a commitment to inclusive, empowering, partnership practice by professionals who work with families. It is the partnership mechanism that enables the formal state and professional systems to interact in an equal and respectful way with informal family and community systems.

The model shifts professional activity from assessment and intervention planning based on a professional view of the best interests of the child, to exchange and action as partnership activities. It recognizes that informal systems have knowledge and strengths that are unavailable to the state and professional systems.”

Mike Doolan – Manchester 2002
Partnership – Research Findings

Highlighted the difficulties for social workers in attempting to operate within two different and at times competing systems – the professional system, with its own organisational, political, and procedural requirements and the family system with its unique aspirations, priorities, and different cultural ways of running their family.

Partnership – Research Findings


Found that families caught up in social work systems have little influence on the nature, quality or quantity of services delivered or on defining their preferred outcomes to interventions.

Kelly G , (1990), Patterns of Care. Department of Social Work. Queens University, Belfast. 
“Partnership with families has remained an idea in search of practice and is often reduced to a parent observing a meeting of professionals.”

“The current model of partnership is in general one of limited family participation. It is concerned predominately with the ways that the family, primarily parents, can help professionals do their job.”

The most important condition for success was found always to be the quality of the relationship between the child’s family and the responsible professional”.

Family Group Conferences
Systems View


Family System:

- To care and nurture their children through the different development stages from birth to young adulthood.
- To provide their children with a sense of identity, culture and values.
Professional System

- To promote the welfare of children
- To support children and families
- To ensure that children are protected
- Family system has responsibility
- Professional system has a duty
- Complementary not competing
Relationships are characterised by:

Professionals
- Suspicious of family
- Sense of hopelessness
- Overwhelming sense of responsibility
- “We are doing all the work”
- Feeling stuck
- De-skilled

- Need to “protect” the family
- Need to control processes and information
- Undervaluing potential of family
- Pre-occupied with detail of family problem history.
Relationships are characterised by:

Family

- Suspicious of professionals
- Sense of hopelessness and being under threat
- Feeling stuck
- Sense of not being listened to or having a say

- Support is often “imposed” and not experienced as supportive
- Supports/resources can be imposed in a rigid or inflexible way
Child Protection Case Conferences

It is a Professional led process:

- Attendance – overwhelmingly Professional
- Venue is usually “Professional”
- Timing is usually to suit Professionals
- Professionals are the “Experts”.

- It is problem orientated.

- It is not a child-friendly process.
Child Protection Case Conferences

- Information is controlled by Professionals.
- Professionals can have “Private Time”.
- Decisions are made by Professionals.
- Plans are made by Professionals.
- It is not a child-friendly service.
Family Group Conference

- It is family led – the attendance is overwhelmingly family
- Family, the venue is neutral and the timing is to suit Family members.
- The family are viewed as their own expert.
- Information is provided by Professionals and considered by the family.
Family Group Conference

- The family have “private time”.
- The family make decisions and plans for the consideration of the Professionals.
- The process is child friendly – many children see it as their conference.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professionally Driven Practice</th>
<th>Professional/Family</th>
<th>Family Led Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professionals investigate</td>
<td>Professionals select family</td>
<td>Family decides on meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals assess</td>
<td>Professionals assess</td>
<td>Family invites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals make decisions</td>
<td>Professionals make decisions</td>
<td>Family gets full access to information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals intervene, e.g. Child Protection, Court, Looked After</td>
<td>Professionals intervene, e.g. Child Protection, Court, Looked After</td>
<td>Family can ask questions of professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professionals control venue, time</td>
<td>Family have private time to think, plan and propose, and make offers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family contribute but power limited</td>
<td>Family implement and monitor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professionals decide</td>
<td>Family decide on review</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family and Social Services work in partnership to take the plan forward</td>
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(Adapted from Mike Doolan)
Principles Underpinning Family Group Conferences

1. Children’s interest and welfare are paramount.

2. Children are best looked after within their families. Services should seek to promote this whenever possible.

3. Working in partnership with families is beneficial for children.
4. The family should “own” their conference.

5. The process of the Family Group Conference should be informed and styled by the family.
Key Elements of a Family Group Conference

1. A Family Group Conference is the primary decision making forum for a child.

2. A Family Group Conference should be made up of as wide a network of family members as possible.

3. An independent co-ordinator should facilitate the involvement of child, family and professionals in the process and help them find their voice in the meeting.
Key Elements of a Family Group Conference

4. The family should have private discussion time to produce their plan.

5. The family plan should be agreed and resourced unless it places the child at risk of significant harm.
Family Group Conference Process

**Referral**
Application form completed by Social Worker with consent of parent(s) gained. Case allocated to Independent FGC Co-ordinator

**Preparation**
Completed usually in 6 weeks – depending on individual family situation and pace of the work – Co-ordinator engages directly with child, family, extended family and professionals. All prepared for FGC. Advocate offered to child/vulnerable adult.
Family Group Conference

**Family Group**

1. Information sharing by professionals, child and inclusion of views of key player unable to attend.

**Meeting**

2. Private Family Time – voices of child and family members, discussions and agreements made.

3. Family Plan – actions and contingency plan agreed.
Family Group Conference Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation of the plan</th>
<th>Family appoint a monitor from within family to be the guardian of the plan and ensure all agreed actions are fulfilled by family and Social Services.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review of the Plan</td>
<td>Plan reviewed with family’s agreement at any time (usually 12 weeks). Support and solutions sought for any actions not fulfilled.</td>
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</table>
Stage 1 – Referral & Preparation

- Need for FGC agreed by family and professionals.
- Other plans implemented.
- Independent co-ordinator appointed.
- Referral meeting.
- Family network identified.
- Arrangements made for FGC.
Stage 2 – Information Sharing

- Introduction/explanation by co-ordinator.
- Introduction of participants.
- Information given by professionals.
- Questions/clarification.
Stage 3 – Private Family Time

- Co-ordinator and professional withdraw.
- Family have three basic tasks:
  - Agree a plan
  - Agree contingency plans
  - Agree how to review plan
- Co-ordinator needs to be available.
Stage 4 – Agreeing & Recording Family Decision

- Co-ordinator and professionals return.
- Family present plan.
- Negotiations for help/resources.
- Plan agreed by professionals unless there is risk of placing person at risk.
- Contingency plan/reviewing arrangements agreed.
Stage 5 – Implementing /Monitoring /Review

- Co-ordinator sends out copies of plan.
- Plan will include:
  - Who in family will do what
  - Who will check that things agreed are being done
  - Which professionals have responsibility for ensuring plan is implemented and for monitoring it
  - Reviewing arrangements
- Another FGC can be requested if plan needs changes, or to discuss progress/concerns.
- FGCs provide parents, relatives, friends and professionals with an opportunity to meet and hear information regarding Trust concerns. Family members are enabled to make a plan of safety and support for the child which if it addresses the concerns should be endorsed by Trust social worker(s) at the meeting.

- The only document to emerge from an FGC is the family plan detailing the decisions family members have made, the supports they have offered and the actions to follow.
There are no minutes taken of the FGC and the Co-ordinators do not keep notes of their involvement, other than basic contact details, copy of the referral, the family plan, and a note of any child protection concerns, should they arise during the course of the FGC process.

Solicitors and Guardians Ad Litem do not normally attend a FGC as the emphasis is on problem solving away from the Court arena. However, if either professional has information to contribute which may assist the family in developing a plan to protect or support the child/young person, attendance would be possible with the agreement of family members. If a Solicitor or Guardian Ad Litem does attend a FGC it would be for the Information Giving and Final parts of the meeting only and not private family time.
Children’s Participation
Children’s Participation

Legal & Policy Context

- Article 12 UNCRC (1989)
- Children’s (NI) Order (1995)
- Care Matters in NI (2007)
- Guide to Case Management in Public Law Proceedings (July 2009)
- Our Children, Our Young People – Our Pledge, OFMDFM (2006-2016)
- Families Matter (DHSS 2009)
- NI Children Services Plan (2008-2011)
Children’s Participation

Legal & Policy Context

- NI Children Services Plan (2008-2011) includes the following Participation Charter
  - Children and young people are best authorities on their own lives

- Participation;
  - Is a right (UNCRC)
  - Is a dialogue to influence change
  - Benefits everyone
  - Is everyone’s responsibility
  - Depends on respect and honesty
  - Must be accessible and inclusive
  - Is built in
Children’s Participation
Messages from Research


- Consent: “In seeking consent organisations should recognise that children and young people can choose to participate or not and when given relevant information, may decide not to get involved.”

- Protection: “Organisations should consider the potential risks in involving children and young people and how this could be reduced. Risk identified at time, inconvenience, embarrassment, intrusion, a sense of failure or coercion, fear of admitting anxiety.”

- Access: “Issues such as venue, transport, disability access, language, access to resources and young people’s individual support needs should be considered.”

- Rewards and Feedback: “Whatever the participatory activity there has to be something in it for the young people. Children and young people should be asked how they would like to receive feedback and any feedback should be produced in a child-friendly format.”
Children’s Participation
Messages from Research

- Dalrymple (2002) – Independent advocacy challenges power relations within family groups, between adults and children, and between families and professionals.
  - Impact of Advocacy – Family members and professionals HEAR what the children have to say and UNDERSTAND their world.

- Sinclair & Franklin (2001) – What Helps?
  - Give information
  - Consult – have continuous dialogue
  - Prepare
  - Take account of child’s agenda
  - Consider child’s needs
  - Facilitate independent support
  - Treat children with respect
  - Give feedback
Children’s Participation – What Services Do

1. Children’s Leaflet
2. Offer choices
3. Explore their hopes and fears
4. Ensure their voice is heard through their message to the FGC
5. Attendance at FGC
6. Support throughout the FGC
7. Translate the plan into child-friendly language
8. Ensure the child’s understanding of the plan
Sample Children’s Wishes & Feelings (9yrs)

- Tell mum to stop drinking.
- Tell mum that I want her to get better.
- Mum cooks me nice food.
- Mum makes me feel happy all the time.
- I feel really upset when Mummy is sick in the toilet.
- When Mummy is sick she still looks after me.
- If Mummy feels sick I talk to my Auntie.
- It upsets me and Mummy and Daddy when Mummy and Daddy are fighting.
- Sometimes when they fight, me and my brother get upset. My brother talks about them.
- For Mum to be okay cause I love her and I don’t want anything to happen to her.
Sample Children’s Plan (9yrs)

- Your Mammy wants to get help to stop drinking. She is going to the doctor this week so that she gets the right help.
- If your Mammy is drinking, your Dad will take you to his house.
- If your Mammy is drinking late at night, your Daddy will stay in your house and look after you.
- If your Daddy is looking after you, Auntie A will help.
- If your Mammy is feeling stressed, she will go for a walk or to visit Auntie A or Uncle B.
- Auntie A will look after you in an emergency.
- In the daytime, your Auntie C will still take your Mum shopping and help her with her appointments.
- If you need to talk to somebody about how you feel when Mummy is drinking, your Social Worker will know the best person to talk to and she can arrange this for you.
- Even if your Mummy drinks again, Daddy will arrange for you to go to your kickboxing.
Children’s Participation
What do Children and Young People say?

“For the first time in my life there was a meeting about me, where I knew everybody.” (Child quoted in Rosen, 1994; Seen But Not Heard? Children and Young People’s Participation in Family Group Decision Making: Concepts and Practice Issues)

“It would help if people talked to me, not about me.” Child quoted in Rosen, 1994; Seen But Not Heard? Children and Young People’s Participation in Family Group Decision Making: Concepts and Practice Issues)

“At meetings in the past at Social Services’ offices, I had to sit outside and went in at the end or was told what had been decided; this was better.” (Harley, B. FGC Evaluation of Pilot Project, Foyle Trust)
Key Roles and Responsibilities
Role of the Co-ordinator

- To ensure their independence in the process
- To meet with referrer to discuss referral
- To explore wider family network.
- To clarify roles/responsibilities of all participants
- To engage all family members in the process and prepare them prior to the meeting.
- To identify if advocates are required
Role of the Co-ordinator

- To organise practicalities of the Family Group Conference.
- To chair “Information Giving” stage.
- To be available to the family throughout their “Private Time”.
- To help clarify the plan and it’s presentation to professionals.
- To write up the plan and distribute to all participants.
- To check in with the Social Worker and Family Monitor to ensure the plan is working.
- To arrange Review should the family feel it is necessary.
- To review any feedback received in relation to the conference.
Role of the Social Worker

- To discuss with the family/those with parental responsibility the possibility of a Family Group Conference.
- To meet the Co-ordinator to discuss referral and attend Family Group Conference.
- To be clear about the agency’s non-negotiable position if change does not occur, and timescales around this.
- To provide clear, good quality information for the “Information Giving” stage, being clear about care and protection issues and potential supports.
- Be prepared to answer questions raised by the family to aid their understanding.
- To provide information about resources available and the likelihood of accessing them.
- To liaise with Family Monitor and to be the Agency ‘driver’ of the plan.
Role of the Social Work Manager

- To agree and support the referral to Family Group Conference
- Use of supervision to promote the use of Family Group Conferencing as appropriate.
- Support their Social Worker through the process by case discussion, agreeing purpose and any conditions or limitations in family decision making.
- Attend the Family Group Conference if necessary or be available for consultation.
- At the Family Group Conference be prepared to give relevant information and answer any questions the family have.
- Agree the plan if it is safe to do so.
- Monitor the progress of the plan through supervision.
The FGC Service Manager:

- Will aim to provide a high quality service which works within the NI FGC Standards.
- Will ensure that the service will be delivered by an independent co-ordinator who will have no other professional role with the family and will have no involvement in any professional decision making for the child/young person/vulnerable adult or family.
- Will ensure that the independent co-ordinator will be trained in the FGC model and in the skills necessary to undertake the role.
- Will provide supervision to the co-ordinator.
- Will oversee and ensure a responsive and accountable delivery of the service.
Role of the Advocate

- Ensure the young person has understood what the meeting is and how it works.
- How does the child want their information given to the meeting.
- Discuss the format of the child’s attendance at the meeting.
- Support the child through the process of the meeting and ensure their voice is heard.
- Agree who checks out the outcome with the child.
- ‘Debrief’ and goodbye – unless involved in a subsequent meeting.
Role of the Information Giver

It is the role of the information giver at the Family Group Conference to:

- Provide specific clear and succinct information focused only on the current situation. Information to those attending.
- Information givers usually include people who work with the family, young person, children or vulnerable adult e.g. Health Visitors, Youth Workers, Teachers, Counselors and Mental Health Social Workers
- Information givers may also include friends or supporters
- Sometimes when families are in court other people such as the Guardian Ad Litem may be invited to attend the Family Group Conference; their role is also to provide information which enables families to make a plan
- Information givers do not stay during private family time and they do not present reports on the family or the meeting to anyone, even the court
- The only document to come out of a Family Group Conference is the Family Plan
My Grandson

“I have a three year old grandson. He is the love of my life. He is a handsome wee man; he has sandy hair and a maori nose. He is naughty, he has been known to throw the odd tantrum and there is no denying he is very spoilt.

My plea to you as a fellow professional is:
Should my Caleb ever come to your attention, should you ever have a professional role to play with him, should you be a social worker, or a lawyer or a co-ordinator or a judge – this is what you must do...

• You must find his Nana
• You must find his aunts and uncles and cousins and friends
• You must find his whanu, hapu, iwi – (kin) – even if he does not know them, they will know him
• You must ensure he is surrounded by those who love him and are connected to him
• You must not send him to strangers without our consent and involvement
• You must move heaven and earth to protect him, remembering he is mine not yours.”

Shannon Pakura
Chief Social Worker
New Zealand 2005