

All Wales Family Group Meeting Network Newsletter

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Issue 6



Private Law FGCs....Funding Dream or Referral Nightmare! By David Flanagan

As we all know the FGC process is adaptable and can be used for any difficulty within a family (with provisions). CAFCASS Cymru have been exploring the viability of using FGCs in private Law contact difficulties especially when there is hostility to the non-resident parent. Experiences from Family Answers in Newport have found that extended family have been both the brokers of the cessation of hostilities between individuals and facilitators of the arrangements. Even in the most fragmented of family's we have had some notable successes and family have been able to move forward with transport arrangements, increased frequency in contact, less animosity and a reduction in stress. This means that CAFCASS cases would be eminently workable, but the deluge of work could swamp many projects as there are potentially 1500 cases of this nature ongoing in Wales annually. We will have to wait and see if this development opportunity comes about.

Children in Wales Complete Mapping Exercise of FGC services in Wales.....

For a copy of the report visit www.fgcwales.org.uk or contact sean.oneill@childreninwales.org.uk for more information

WAG have been keen to capture all FGC activities that are taking place in each of the 22 local authorities in Wales. This will now enable all sectors, agencies and families to have a clear picture of the type of FGC services being delivered in their area. The production of this report is particularly timely given the requirements of the Public Law Outline, the revised Children Act 2004 Court Orders Guidance and the on-going work in the relation to forthcoming Vulnerable Children Strategy.

Young Service-Users from Family Group Meeting projects in Wales take to the stage at the Family Rights Group Conference

In September, four young service-users, two from Cwlm in North Wales and two from the Barnardo's FGM service in Neath, delivered a workshop about their experiences of having a FGM at the FRG Conference. The workshop was very well received by the international delegates and was a thought-provoking and inspiring experience for all. The young people also braved the main stage to be part of the family members panel that were taking questions from the audience. The YP thought it was a brilliant experience and felt admiration for those family members who spoke about the difficulties that they had overcome in their lives. Maureen Japp and Karen Rees who co-facilitated the workshop with the YP, were incredibly proud of the four youngsters and their achievements. Maureen commented "Glad we did it, glad it's over and the disco was a lot more fun because of the young people". Maureen and Karen continue to promote service-users participation in the development of FGC services and the young people from Neath have been invited to London to share their experiences with the FGC service in Camden.

PLO? - What PLO?

The Public Law Outline (PLO) replaced the previous Protocol for Judicial Case Management in Public Law Children Act cases in April of this year. The intention being to reduce unnecessary delay and to promote better cooperation between all the parties involved in care and supervision cases. *Hoorah!! That sounds great - but what does it mean?*

Well on the back of the PLO came a revised version of 'The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations' which says (paraphrased, to minimise brain-strain) Family Group Meetings/Family Group Conferences can be used as a means of engaging the wider family and friends to either support parents or to seek alternative care arrangements for the child both in the short and longer term. The local authority will be required to demonstrate that it has considered family members and friends as potential carers at each stage of its decision making. Parties should be encouraged to use alternative dispute resolution procedures e.g. FGMs/FGCs

So loads of referrals from social services then, is it?

Sadly, Keith from the Vale reports that the Welsh version of the Court orders guidance and regulations waters down the emphasis on using FGCs compared to the English version; so we have some way to go with whoever writes these things at the Welsh Assembly—it's probably a 'he' civil servant, and 'he' isn't as keen on FGCs as his butty up there in London.

Oh! - So what's occurin'?

Well, it's been raining pretty much everyday since the PLO came in, but not necessarily with referrals. Some projects report good use of FGCs prompted by the PLO. David Flanagan—**Family Answers in Newport**, reports a healthy flow of referrals although time scales required are often shorter. David finds shorter time scales are acceptable as Courts will consider further adjournments if they know the family are engaging in the process but more time is needed. Mike Clark, **Family Circle in Cardiff** has met with local judges who are keen for FGCs to be used around care proceedings. Mike was hoping that the courts might refer

directly but there has been no noticeable increase in FGCs being prompted by the PLO, likewise in the Vale of Glamorgan. Natalie Evans, **Families Forward in Llanelli** says 'since the PLO we have had an influx of referrals for CYP at risk of care proceedings. In most cases the families are hard to reach and have disengaged with social services intervention. Because families may be unaware that their children are at risk of care proceedings, we have had to develop new referral procedures where the family has to sign to say that the social worker has shared the bottom line with the family before we will convene a FGC. Maureen Japp, **Cwlwm in North Wales**, reports that there has been no difference in referral rate under PLO but numbers of requests for FGCs in care proceedings cases have increased over the past few years anyway. Barnardo's FGC service in Swansea, set up especially for the care proceedings programme, reports a healthy rate of referrals.

So what's gonna happen then?

It seems that there is patchy evidence that the PLO is making a difference to referral rates for a very few projects in Wales. A survey carried out by the FRG found that it's too early to make any definitive statements about impact but:

- two third of respondents reported an increase in referral rate, the other third thought there was no change in referral rate but this was because they were already doing it
- Over half reported new people referring and that referrals were being more consistently driven by senior managers, legal services and even judges

And the factors that helped projects respond to the introduction of the PLO included: how much preparation was done prior to the implementation; whether there was a well established FGC service in the area; and whether there were good links to legal services. There was also concerns about the impact on principles and practice cause by shorter time scales. For more information contact :

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Student social worker shares his thoughts about his placement with Powys

FGM service. Colin's final 90 day placement with the Barnardo's FGM service in Powys was sponsored by the LA where he works as a Community Support Officer in the Children with Disabilities team.

Q—What did you find was the main difference in working for a voluntary agency rather than the LA?

A—I felt that I was engaged with a more hands on approach to the work as there was less bureaucracy than in statutory work..

Q—What do you feel are the most important things you learnt on placement?

A— To try and empower people rather than encourage dependence. The importance of building good relationships with families and the importance of good preparation work.

Q—How do you think this will influence your work in the future?

A— I will look more at family's strengths and their existing support networks: this would not create dependence and would be a better use of resources.

Q—How did you feel at your first FGM?

A— I was very nervous, when I saw the body language of the family members I thought it was not going to work but I was surprised at how the family was able to respond and focus on the issues.

Q—What do you think is the key to a successful FGM?

A— Good preparation, honesty with families and clear issues to be discussed. Not to be closed but to be open to working in a creative way.

Q—What do you think is the most positive outcomes for families?

A— Empowerment and self-determination of the family and YP. The entire way of working encourages and enables anti-oppressive practice. I feel that bringing families together to focus on the need of the YP can lift a lot of pressure off the family and enable them to move on. Also giving a YP a voice, families can be poor at listening to their YP as can professionals.