Family Group Conferencing

Scotland’s National Standards
**Introduction**

Family Group Conferencing has been employed as an effective way of working with children and families in Scotland since the mid 1990's and with adults since 2012.

Family Group Conferencing is a voluntary process with no statute in legislation yet fits comfortably within the Scottish legal framework. Family Group Conferencing embodies the overarching principles of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Family Group Conferences promote voluntary decision making processes (the No Order Principle). Family Plans are focused on ensuring that children’s safety and other needs are met (the welfare of the child is paramount) and it is standard practice within Family Group Conferencing to take the child's view into account.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states a child has the right to have their views heard. When preparing for a Family Group Conference the coordinator will consider the child's abilities to express their views. If they consider the child is not able to participate in a Family Group Conference or needs support to express their views consideration will be given to the use of an advocate.

Perhaps most relevant to the Family Group Conference process is Section 11 of the Children's (Scotland) Act 1995. This gives a child and anyone claiming an interest in a child, the right to apply to the court for an order in respect of parental rights and responsibilities, including the residency of a child. This is the most common route used in Scotland by kinship carers and a Family Group Conference can be critical in identifying family members, agreeing contact arrangements and how family will support the kinship care placement. Additional duties are also placed on Local Authorities to provide care and assistance to kinship carer families in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) is the Scottish Government’s national approach to improving the wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland. The approach highlights the importance of seeking the views of children and their families as part of the decision making process. Family Group Conferencing is a process that empowers children and families to identify their views, drawing on resources from within the wider family group to meet identified need.
Part One

1. **What is a Family Group Conference?**

   Every family is unique and every family has strengths. Family Group Conferencing is a family led decision making process that recognises the strengths within the family and empowers them to develop a plan to protect and support the child/ren of the family.

2. **Why do we need Standards?**

   The National Standards are intended to assist individuals and agencies in measuring their approach to developing and sustaining effective Family Group Conference Services against a set of principles and practices for Family Group Conferencing.

   Getting it Right for Every Child places duties on agencies to work together to provide support for children, to develop clear plans for those with complex needs and to ensure children and their family’s views are taken into account.

3. **Key Principles**

   - Family Group Conferencing is a decision making model that works well when a decision has to be made about a child or young person's wellbeing that can be clearly articulated.
   - Family Group Conferencing is strength based.
   - Children and young people have the right for their voices to be heard.
   - Support and/or resources should be made available for the child’s voice to be heard.
   - The child’s views should be respected.
   - Family Group Conferences recognise the child’s right to have their family fully involved in the future planning.
   - Family Group Conferences support families to be active decision makers about their members.
   - Family Group Conferences recognise that families are the experts.
   - Family Group Conferences recognise that each family is unique.
   - Partnership, teamwork and multiagency working are in the best interests of families.
• Partnership working with families is beneficial to children and young people.
• Family Group Conferencing is not an assessment or therapy but the process may assist wider assessment or therapeutic processes.
• Family Group Conferencing is safe and feasible for most families. It works alongside investigative child protection systems; it does not replace them.
• Family Group Conferences recognise that children are generally best looked after within their own families, and this should be promoted wherever safe and possible.
• Family Group Conferences respect that in the main, families have the ability to make safe decisions about their future and the future of the child or young person.
• The Family Group Conference coordinator should always be independent of any other professional involvement with the family.
• Private family time is an essential element of Family Group Conferences.
• Family Group Conferencing is child-centred; future focused and blame free.
Part Two

Family Group Conference Process

1. Referral

- Professionals and family members agree there is a need for a Family Group Conference.
- An independent coordinator is appointed to work with the family throughout the Family Group Conference process.
- The model welcomes pre-referral discussion in the manner of informal enquiries about possible referrals.
- The referrer must supply the information required and make a commitment to seeing the process through.
- A referral meeting is desirable.

“It was our choice to go ahead. We listened to the social worker but we made our own decision”, a mum

2. Preparation

- The coordinator makes initial contact with the child or young person and their family. Reasons for an agreement with the Family Group Conference process are discussed. Information to be shared agreed.
- The coordinator, in discussion with the child and their family identifies the family network and makes contact with each member in turn. Issues are raised and strengths and solutions discussed.
- The coordinator makes contact with the professional network involved. Available resources are discussed and any decision that cannot be agreed (because it is unsafe for the child) is identified.
- The coordinator shares all the gathered information with the relevant parties.
- The date, time, food and a venue suitable for the family are agreed for the Family Group Conference.
- Preparation for the child and their family is ongoing. An advocate is identified where required by the child or vulnerable adult.
• On occasion, persons to be excluded are identified and other ways of sharing their opinions are discussed.

“It was the preparation stage that made the difference”, an aunt

3. **Family Group Meeting**

**Information Sharing**

• The coordinator facilitates this part of the meeting. All the family, including the child and professionals, are present and ground rules are set.
• Professionals are able to recap their concerns with the family in order that they can make informed decisions regarding a family plan. The professionals should include identified strengths and the resources the agency can offer.
• The family can ask questions and share any information they wish to discuss (although none of this should be new information; it should have been discussed during the preparation stage).

**Private Family Time**

• The coordinator and professionals withdraw, leaving the family to discuss the plan in private.
• The family agrees a plan that meets the care and protection needs of the child or young person, agree a contingency plan and discuss how to monitor the review plan.
• The coordinator and professionals are available during this time should the family require clarification or additional information.
• The family have as long as they need and can take breaks at any time. The coordinator provides their choice of refreshments.

“I was worried about private family time. Not any more – it does work”, a social worker.
The Family Plan

• Once the family have agreed a plan, the coordinator and professionals rejoin the meeting and the family outlines their plan. This should be accepted unless it is considered unsafe for the child or young person.

• The coordinator records the plan, confirms agency support and availability of resources and establishes who will monitor the plan.

“I laminate the plan and give it to the child. It makes it real”, a coordinator.

4. Monitor and Review

• Primary responsibility for monitoring the plan lies with the family – The family own the plan. Professional monitoring will also be built-in, depending on the reasons for the original referral.

• The family is asked to identify a member who will inform the necessary professionals if the plan is not working.

• A review Family Group Conference can be decided at this stage, and times and dates for a further meeting discussed.

5. Ending

• The coordinator circulates the plan to all family and professional attendees. It becomes the working tool in the period leading up to the review. At this point, the work of the coordinator is over and he or she withdraws from the family network. Work is reconvened if or when a review process is indicated.

6. Family Group Conference Review

• A mechanism whereby the family and referrer/professionals can be satisfied that what was agreed in the family plan is happening, and adjust the level of support or resources as necessary.

• If the family situation has altered dramatically, the review may turn into a re-referral to look at new issues.
• Review timing varies as agreed by the family with the support of professionals.
• In the case of a crisis or breakdown of a family plan, the review can be brought forward at any time.

7. **Significant Work**

• In a number of situations, families go through the referral and preparation stages of the Family Group Conference, and this in itself brings appropriate resolution. Some families will even make a family plan during this time. When this occurs and no meeting is held it is recorded as 'significant work'.

• When coordinators and families spend more than a specified amount of time (usually in excess of three visits with outcomes) or put in a lot of work going through the Family Group Conference process and the family then withdraws or events make continuing inappropriate, this is also logged as 'significant work' to ensure that the time and effort of all parties is recognised and noted.

“Making posters helped me a lot with my children. We sorted it out without a meeting”, a mum.
Part Three

Family Group Conference Standards

1. The Family Group Conference Coordinator is independent

1.1 The Family Group Conferencing service will be delivered by an independent coordinator 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 or their family.

1.2 The Family Group Conferencing service will ensure that the independent coordinator will be trained in the Family Group Conferencing model and in the skills necessary to undertake the role, including accredited training.

1.3 The Family Group Conference manager will provide supervision to the coordinator.

1.4 Managers of Family Group Conference coordinators will oversee and ensure a responsive and accountable delivery of the service.

2. Children and young people are paramount in the Family Group Conference process

2.1 Children and young people are central to the Family Group Conference process and their views must be sought and heard at all stages in the process.

2.2 All children and young people, whatever their age and understanding, have a right to attend their meeting. When they do not attend, alternative arrangements will be made to ensure that their opinions are clearly taken into account.

2.3 All children and young people will have the option of an independent advocate.

2.4 The Family Group Conference process should move at the pace of the family; the average time from referral to meeting is 6 – 8 weeks. However, the complexity of the decisions to be made and the make up of the family will determine timescales. Subsequently this timescale is a guide rather than a standard.
3. **The Family Group Conference should be family led and include ‘private family time’ to enable the family to make decisions and plans**

3.1 Families are encouraged to make decisions based on their knowledge of their situations, culture and identified strengths.

3.2 Families, children and young people need to meet the locally defined referral criteria.

3.3 Families will be supported to be active decision makers about their family members.

3.4 The Family Group Conference process can include significant persons as well as family members, all of whom are identified by the family.

3.5 The family agree the date, time and venue of the Family Group Conference.

3.6 Families must always have private family time within a safe and supportive environment in order to make safe decisions and plans.

4. **Everyone participating in the Family Group Conference process will be prepared and supported throughout the process**

4.1 Families, children and young people must receive clear, appropriate and accessible information about what a Family Group Conference is and why they have the opportunity to call one.

4.2 Families, children and young people have the right to decide who and what constitutes their family.

4.3 The referring agency must obtain agreement from the families, children and young people prior to contacting the coordinator (unless it is a self-referral or independent offer).

4.4 Family Group Conference is a voluntary process; families, children and young people have the right to refuse the service or to withdraw at any time.

5. **Families have the right to have their safe plans agreed and resourced**

5.1 At the Family Group Conference, professionals must ensure that family members have sufficient relevant information to make a safe family plan.

5.2 If all essential concerns are addressed in the plan, and it is safe and realistic, the referrer (and other agencies as appropriate) is expected to accept the plan. If any decisions are not acceptable, the referrer must be clear about why they think this is the case.
5.3 Professional agencies must provide reasonable resources, as discussed in the preparation stage and at the Family Group Conference, to facilitate the plan.

5.4 Every effort should be made to agree the resources at the meeting. Only in exceptional circumstances should agencies delay agreement.

5.5 The agreed plan should become the ongoing working tool for the young person, their family and professionals.

5.6 The child, young person and their family have the right to decide which other agencies and/or social and legal systems, if any, the plan will be shared with.

5.7 All participants at the Family Group Conference will receive a copy of the plan within a stated time.

5.8 With the support of the coordinator, the family will agree how the plan will be monitored and reviewed and who is responsible for ensuring this will happen.

6. The Family Group Conference should be sensitive to the family’s culture, taking account of ethnicity, language and religion

6.1 Where possible the family will be offered the opportunity of holding the Family Group Conference in the first language of the family.

6.2 Attention must be given to any significant social, emotional or cultural needs.
References:

Ask the Family, Children 1st National Standards by Anne Hamilton
Family Group Conference Standards in Northern Ireland
The essentials of Family Group Conferencing (a Legal and Policy context), Anne Begbie and Chris Martin, 2015