

## **Family Group Conferences**

### **Introduction.**

Wherever safe and possible, there is a commitment to ensuring that children stay within their own families wherever possible. The ethos of the services is to work alongside families to assist them in focusing on their strengths and making the necessary changes in order for their children to be well cared for & kept safe from harm.

As services we believe that children should only come into care when family options have been exhausted.

## **Family Group Conferences**

A Family Group Conference (FGC) is a structured decision making meeting made up of 'family' members. 'Family' is determined broadly, to include the child/ren, parents, extended family and even significant friends and neighbours to the family who may not actually be blood related. This group of people are given 'private' time to reach a plan to facilitate the safe care and protection of a child or children in need. The referrer is involved in the 'information giving' stage at the beginning of the process and in the assessment of the plan following a decision. All information givers are excluded from the private time, which is attended by family members only.

Family Group Conferences are offered to any family referred by Tier 2 or 3 services, to help resolve a variety of family issues. The conferences usually focus on the extended family and friends to provide support for families who are struggling to manage the care of their children.

The main benefits of FGC is that the role of the coordinator is independent therefore families often feel more able to be open & therefore be realistic about what they can do to resolve the issues/concerns. The family agree to the process then all receive clear written information about the issues/concerns & are reassured that the emphasis is "no blame" & focusing on the future. Ultimately the process sets out to empower family to make decisions and take back responsibility

The process focuses on the child & the coordinator will meet the child/young person to do direct work & gain their views which are then presented at the FGC either by themselves or the coordinator.

FGC can be used in a wide variety of situations including Family Support (Prevention), Child Protection, Children in Care / Edge of care, Education issues / non attendance, Mental Health, Domestic Violence, Disability, Youth Offending, Foster placement breakdown

Family members/friends stated in their evaluations that they preferred this approach to the more traditional methods of intervention. They stated that they felt part of the

decision-making process and in control of their future. The overriding benefit for some family members was the gathering itself and the fact that extended family members attended and were willing to help or lend support, *'it helped us become a family again'*. The ability to voice concerns and have those concerns heard by others appeared to be very important.

### **Restorative Approaches**

Restorative Mediation is working with parents/carers & children/young people to resolve conflict & prevent children entering the care system. It is a flexible way of dealing with problem, issues or disputes & to talk in a non-judgmental way about how they have been affected. The co-ordinator will meet individuals one at a time, listen to their "story" & then facilitate a mediation session. The model we use is to encourage the "wrong doer" to see the impact of their actions & then for both parties to empathise with the other's position & then make agreements which both agree to. The agreements are then reviewed to check they are working.

This is a very successful way of working & teaches participants to take responsibility. The process is that the social worker makes a referral & the case is allocated as long as it meets the criteria "Child has to be at risk of care".

### **Missing Children**

The Restorative Justice Service also runs a Missing Children project which contacts the police on a daily basis: it ensures that any missing child who does not have an allocated social worker, is seen within 48 hours of their return home. This is to explore the reasons why the child ran away and identify any risk factors or if any services that are required for support. If felt appropriate a Restorative intervention can then be carried out to make agreements between the child/young person & their carer.

A recent analysis of this work concluded that 87% of children seen were not re-referred for further incidents of going missing.

### **Crisis Intervention Team**

Crisis Intervention Team work with families whose children are at risk of coming into care. This involves time limited intensive interventions which can range from practical support & advice in parenting to discussions about budgeting, hygiene, housing, risk management etc. This team also undertake direct work with children when there are concerns & also rehabilitation programmes when children are returned to their parents.

This service is accessed by Tier 3 social care "Edge of Care" where families are in crisis and require a frequent level of intervention to stabilise the situation. These are usually situations where admission into care is a real possibility, in order to prevent family breakdown. Family support workers work with parents and children, together

and separately in and out of the family home. The hours of intervention are flexible so workers can be available early morning to mid evening, if the needs of the family require this.

These teams are linked to our placements service and can be mobilised quickly to a) prevent care episodes and b) prevent placement breakdown . This arrangement has contributed to better gate keeping of placements and placement stability for children.