

Family Group Conference - co-production in child protection

CHANGE! Good practice factsheet

Image/photo of good practice/initiative



Description of the good practice /initiative: history, activities, number of involved people, territorial scope, current scale, future plans, impact and benefits (Max. 400 words)

A Family Group Conference (FGC) is a meeting where a young person who has offended or is in trouble somehow, their family (with as many members as possible), victims and other people like the police, a social worker, the school teacher and youth advocate, talk about how to help the young person to: 1. own up to what they did wrong and learn from their mistakes; 2. find practical ways the young person and family members can put things right and make up for what they did; 3. look at why they offended and find ways to help them turn their life around. This may include programmes that help with life skills, employment or education, or activities like team sports and mentoring.

It is a voluntary process and families cannot be forced to have a family group. In general, a conference takes couple of hours. New Zealand's child protection service reports that after being part of a conference most young people won't go on to offend again.

It is important that there is a facilitator who runs the meeting. The child and the family themselves determine the questions/issues to be discussed, and how the meeting is run but generally the social worker will share information about the concerns they have for the child. The family will talk about why the social worker believes the child is at risk, what has been done already and what has worked so far and what hasn't. The family then gets time alone within the professionals, in which they discuss the concerns and together develop a plan. The professionals then return to discuss the plan and ensure that it is clear and realistic, does what needs to be done to protect the child, and says who will do which tasks and by when. Primary responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the plan remains with the family, with the social worker only stepping in if the process breaks down.

The model shifts responsibility for developing a plan for the child in question from the social worker to the wider family and the child itself, with the social worker retaining an approving and facilitator

function. In this way, it taps into the extended family's own resources and capabilities by allowing them to co-produce the end result, thereby achieving a better outcome for the child, such as a reduction in the likelihood of having to remove the child from the family.

It is an excellent example how social innovation can create new social relationships in a rather difficult field (child protection), how it can lead to new forms of governance, lead to new and better forms of collaborative action, and improve the inclusion and participation of marginalized groups.

Brief description of how the specific local public service has been challenged (with figures, if possible)

The method of Family Group Conference was first developed in New Zealand as a response to Maori and Samoan family structures and their weak integration. Due to its effectiveness the model has since spread to nearly 20 countries.

The issue behind – the youth crisis or with other words: better integration of young people – is more relevant in Europe now than ever. The *Cities of Tomorrow* report (European Commission, DG Regional Policy 2011) underlines the challenges Europe's cities face in integrating their young people. *"The jobs crisis is an important aspect of this, but not the whole story. Significant proportions of Europe's youth were 'NEET' – not in education, employment or training – even before the current financial and economic crisis, while many of the 2011 London rioters were in work. Lying behind the talk of a new 'precariat', who are rootless and economically vulnerable, is the risk of creating an alienated and disconnected section of society which does not share mainstream values.*

An important part of the solution to the youth crisis is the transformation of public services. We argue that local authorities have a vital role to play here for two reasons: first, the crisis has exposed the limits of their power; and second, as the tier of government closest to communities, they can mobilise stakeholders and rebuild trust with citizens" (Supporting urban youth through social innovation: stronger together - Cities of tomorrow action today, URBACT II Capitalisation <http://goo.gl/v9w4kB>).

Role of the municipality within the process (e.g. how the municipality facilitates or coordinates the process to systematise/upscale a civic initiative)

Of course this question largely depends on who, which tier of the government is responsible for child protection. But according to the new role of municipalities, the most local forms of the government, they should reinvent their role to become catalysts and innovation brokers by mobilising all stakeholders and thus able to facilitate the improvement of service design and delivery.

Key attributes (success factors) enabling (municipal) staff to implement the project successfully

The key factors are:

- participative leadership: how leaders can overcome resistance and catalyse behavioural and operational change at the delivery? How city managers can find the right persons for mediation, having the right skills, networks and mind-set to influence the public, the private and social worlds?

- brokerage attitude: can the government work by crossing the silos? Does it have resources for that facilitation?

agility: can the government build up an agile delivery and the right system?

Key internal, organisational, behavioural **weaknesses** the municipality/organisation had to overcome during the process

Weaknesses are the opposite of the success factors. The most challenging issue here is the required 'culture change': encouraging staff to see engaging and mobilising citizens as a central part of their role.

Links to website for further information on the good practice/initiative and recommendation to a specific partner

- <http://www.cyf.govt.nz/youth-justice/family-group-conferences.html>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_Group_Conference
- A very good video explanation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8Zc8QijV7Y>

The methodology has been adapted entirely or partly in many countries. As for CHANGE! partner cities, the method is in use in the Netherlands (Eigen Kracht Conferenties) and Ireland (under the Children's and Families Act) for sure.

Due to the above reasons, it can be a very useful method to be discussed by ULGs in those cities where the theme of youth is relevant, mainly in Nagykanizsa, Amarante and Gdansk (if the method is not already used in these countries).

The above description was prepared based on partly the website text and partly the project summary by Global Centre for Public Service Excellence.