



## **The Wexford Family Welfare Conference Project Evaluation**

### **Report Synopsis**



## INTRODUCTION

The *Wexford Family Welfare Conference (FWC) Project* is a service partnership between Barnardos, Ireland's leading independent children's charity and the HSE South – Wexford Local Health Office Area which commenced in early 2003 as a 3-year pilot. An integral aspect of the project was an agreement that there would be an evaluation at the end of the pilot phase. In 2005 "*Nucleus*" was commissioned on behalf of the Projects Advisory and Liaison Management committees to undertake this evaluation.

## THE FAMILY WELFARE CONFERENCE MODEL

The FWC model, which originated in New Zealand, operates within a wide variety of childcare contexts, from child welfare, child protection, and juvenile justice settings. As a model underpinned by principles of family based decision-making, partnership, collaboration, and strengths based practices, it has generated significant interest and debate. Research to date has identified that there is significant added value to the process of enabling and facilitating families to make informed decisions about their children. The FWC is considered to be more respectful and enabling of families, it enhances family participation, mobilises family support, and has been linked to the increased use of kinship care. On the down side, there are concerns about how best to locate the model with the child welfare systems, the fragility of the buy in from practitioners, and the sense that as a model it remains on the periphery of statutory child care services. There is also a need for more research into the longer terms outcomes for children who have had a FWC.

## THE WEXFORD FAMILY WELFARE CONFERENCE

The Wexford FWC project is based in Gorey, Co. Wexford, and is staffed by three Barnardos personnel. The project covers the Wexford Local Health Office Area, and whilst the primary referrers are the various social work teams throughout Wexford, the project has maintained a wide referral base.

The intervention logic for the Project is that it will provide a structured and child centred forum aimed at facilitating families to develop innovative activities and responses, which will contribute to increasing a child's welfare, decreasing risk and/or the requirement for alternative care to be continued or considered. As a Project it has maintained a high degree of FWC programme integrity, adopting the three specific steps involved in the process:

- Planning the Conference
- Holding the Conference
- Following-up the family's plan

Within the pilot phase (2003-2005) there have been 86 FWC's convened (either first Conferences or Review Conferences). All conferences produced a Plan.

### **THE EVALUATION PROCESS AND REPORT**

This evaluation process adopted a very different approach from previous evaluation report formats, moving away from a statistically based review and seeking to go behind the facts and figures, to unwrap the core ingredients, essence and effectiveness of the Project's work, and to seek to isolate that which it is doing well, and to highlight areas where development and/or improvements could increase the effectiveness of the Project.

Questions that the evaluation sought to address included:

1. *Did the project work: did it promote better outcomes for children?*
2. *How is it working with teenagers and is it bringing them on board?*
3. *How can the benefits for children be measured?*
4. *How does the process of preparing for a Family Welfare Conference have valuable outcomes even if the FWC plan cannot be sustained?*
5. *What are the measurements of success in Wexford that can be transferable and replicated across the Board?*

The feedback received provided a rich and diverse body of information, assessment and observation about the FWC project. In order to construct a report from this feedback, the report was organised into three “categories”

1. **The Project:** *exploring the specific operational and managerial features of the Wexford Project, and also the environment within which the Project operates*
2. **The Practices and Processes:** *related to the practices and processes of the Wexford Project.*
3. **The Project Outcomes:** *explored the themes emerging from an examination of the Project's ‘outcomes’*

In total, the report made 73 observations and recommendations.

## 1. THE PROJECT

This section of the report looked at the issues of the Project's management, independence, value for money and other indicators of the Project's development and operation.

What it identified was that the Project's independence has positively led to improved family and professional engagement and participation, and to very positive reflections from practitioners and families about the worth and value of the project. It was considered that Barnardos operate and manage the service effectively and efficiently, and that overall, the Project (and the Plans it produces) represents good value, is cost effective, and has the potential to actually enable the HSE to save money, (although this is not necessarily a stated outcome).

The project has achieved a significant level of buy in, achieved through a confluence of important factors, including:

- The quality of the preparatory work at the start of the project
- Management support from within social work and community care services
- Trust in those delivering service

- A service environment positively disposed to multi disciplinary working, partnerships with families, service developments and new practice initiatives
- Concentrating the project within one specific area

There was no evidence to suggest that in Wexford social work has been resistant to the FWC model, due significantly to a range of generic and 'area unique' features of practice, context and environment.

## 2. PRACTICES OF THE PROJECT

***"The Process gave me support as I couldn't see my family was actually willing to give me help."***

***(Family)***

This section sought to explore the issue of how the processes that make up the Family Welfare Conference model are being received and perceived, and what influence they might be having on creating an optimum environment for decisions to be made, families to be engaged, and process outcomes to be positive.

The primary finding was that the FWC as a process, was positively regarded, well supported, and held up as a model of good practice in working with families.

***"The Wexford FWC process has obtained significant levels of agreement about it being a hopeful, helpful, and encouraging approach to working with families and children."***

***(Referrer)***

Central to this was the preparatory work undertaken by the Project, which it was identified positively, influenced a number of Conference processes, including:

- assisting families, children and professionals to understand the process
- naming the real issues
- ensuring that the central issues were dealt with

- improving information sharing; and
- attracting a significant number of family members to the Conference (and of note, a high number of father and other male family figures).

Further, the Wexford FWC was seen as a child centred process that:

- appropriately engaged the child throughout
- enhanced family participation
- enabled and facilitated families to be forthcoming, engaged and active within the Conference

*“The FWC compares very favourably as a process that facilitates decision-making. Families took on the responsibilities of decision making, because of how the process enable and supported them in doing so. The families involved were better motivated, and this in turn enabled them to reach decisions that informed the Plan”.*

*(Referrer)*

The co-ordinators role was seen as pivotal to whether the process and the outcome of the Conference is seen as ‘successful’, and that in the Wexford model, the individuals involved have made perhaps the biggest contribution to the Project being seen in such a positive light across the disciplines, services, and families. The unique practice of co-working each Conference equally appears to have a number of processes that enhance the conference.

Other aspects of the process that were positively regarded included the using of quality Information Givers and high level professional motivation within the Conference process. The whole FWC process was very protective of the child’s welfare and it enabled children to be listened to and to influence their conference. The process was considered to make a positive difference to the professional/client working relationship.

In exploring emerging issues and concerns about the FWC process, the evaluation found that there was a clear indication that despite the level of buy in, and the positive regard the process is held in, the

Project is having little impact on child care policy and procedures within Wexford and a disputed level of impact on local childcare practices and attitudes.

***“It appears that the FWC still remains an ‘alternative’ therapy and has remained at the edges of childcare practices within Wexford”***

***(Senior Management)***

The *predominant* school of thought in the feedback was that the FWC was not seen as an applicable response to all the variety of cases that are presented under the welfare and protection umbrella – it was considered that there are *limits* to when the FWC can be effective. The FWC was most certainly not a default option that could be used in all family welfare/child protection cases.

Another significant finding related to the process of naming a ‘Bottom Line’ which is in effect the ‘safety net’ of the process. Whilst benefits to naming exactly what the family needed to deal with for the HSE to approve a Plan was seen as important, the evaluation identified a concern that the bottom line may be influencing the *independence* of the FWC process, and importantly, it appears to have been an unreliable source of identifying whether the process was successful in achieving its goals.

Other areas that required follow up included:

- the need for training for social workers to enhance presentation skills within the FWC process
- an exploration on how to engage families to be more explorative and inquisitive
- to review and clarify the working relationship between the Case Conference and the FWC forums
- improving the available resource based information that families state they need
- to explore the option of holding separate Conferences, or separate parts of the Conference, dedicated to the needs of specific children within a family unit

### 3. PROJECT OUTCOMES

The FWC model is based on the underlying presumption that through involving families in the resolution of difficulties, the outcomes for the children would be that they would be better protected, that their welfare would be improved, and that the sources of risk or concern would be ameliorated. It suggests that it does this in two ways:

- That the child's welfare will be improved through the *family* having improved understanding and awareness of the problems, which would help them identify ways of improving the welfare of the child collectively
- That the *model* itself produces better outcomes for children than other, more traditional, methods of decision making and child welfare interventions

The evaluation identified the problematic nature of assigning or ascribing specific outcomes to the FWC. Issues such as improved protection, increased safety, and improvements in welfare were perceived as important, but not necessarily solely attributed to the presence of the FWC Project. Whilst it was felt that the *FWC contributed* to the increased potential for the child to be safer or better protected, it was considered unreliable to state that having a FWC *increased* the safety of the child in its own right.

It was identified that in terms of outcomes, two 'measurements' existed:

1. Child having improved outcomes *immediately* after the FWC, as a result of the Conference being held
2. Longer-term impact of the FWC on a child's welfare.

***“The predominant thinking was that the FWC did contribute to better outcomes for the child, as perceived by the worker, the family or the child themselves. However, what is being reflected on here were short-term outcomes”***

***(Referrer)***

The evaluation identified that whilst there was consensus that there are clearly positive outcomes that arise from the process of the FWC, there are genuine concerns about the *sustainability* of these. Identifying outcomes from a FWC soon after the Conference was seen as an unreliable indicator of success if in fact, after the FWC process had moved on, there was a reversion to the concerns and issues that prevailed before the Conference.

***“It was considered that the ability of these immediate outcomes and ‘feel good’ features to be sustained over time was deeply problematic.”***

***(Author)***

What strongly emerged was a need to be able to capture and understand activity data relating to child outcomes over an agreed period of time. There currently is an absence of robust, longer term activity data that would enable the debate about outcomes to be taken from strongly held perceptions, to reliable evidence as to the nature and extent of the influences the FWC has on a child's trajectory.

Other outcome findings included:

- The FWC process had limited influence over the social work department's ability to reduce their engagement or close the case.
- There was full consensus that the decisions arising from an FWC are completely different, in all aspects, from those generated by professional only forums, and that the unique features of these decisions, (practical, realistic, specific, simple, direct, focused) contributed to their ability to kick-start the family into making them work
- The outcomes were not influenced in any discernable manner by the child's gender
- In relation to the age of the child, it was considered that the Conference's decisions might be *different*, but not necessarily better or worse
- The evaluation assisted in identifying family based ingredients which practitioners felt contributed to the potential positive outcomes.

## CHILDREN IN CARE

*“Anything that has the potential to improve the outcomes for children in care, given the poor outcomes currently being experienced has to be welcomed.”*

*(Advisory Committee Member)*

One of the primary findings in relation to outcomes was the role the FWC has had in supporting children in care:

- either in improving the chances of a family based placement being secured
- creating a climate for improved relationships and contact arrangements during a placement
- improved stability
- actually assisting in the process of returning a child to his or her family

In as far as the Project seeks to influence the potential for children to return home, there does appear to be an emerging picture that its activities are having an effect on improving the *likelihood* of such returns happening. The evaluation identified that the FWC was a lead player in enabling, facilitating and engaging families to take ownership of a safe care placement when one was required.

Equally important was that the FWC appeared to have favourable outcomes for children even if the decision was that they required care outside the parental home. Lastly, there was an emerging picture that where a placement was developed through, or supported by, a FWC, the placement was more stable.

## THE FUTURE

*“The Wexford FWC Project has made a clear foot print in the child welfare and protection arena within Wexford”*

*(Author)*



The evaluation identified that there was an overwhelming consensus that the Project, in some form, should be maintained as an integral part of the child welfare system in Wexford, but that its services should be more *targeted* at specific welfare and protection situations, (including the option of children in care) where there is an increased potential for it to influence positively the outcomes for the child, and indeed, have a more central role in supporting and influencing social work practice. What did not appear to be favoured at this stage was that all children in care, or all those at risk of care, would be the subject of a FWC – i.e. that having a FWC would become a default option. There was a need, it was felt, to identify those situations where the FWC could have most influence in preventing care, supporting a placement, or returning the child into a family care arrangement.

Whilst there was consensus that the Project be maintained and developed, there was a clear message that there are a number of practices, operational and environmental “threats” to its continuation, which needed to be managed. The report concluded that there was an urgent need for explorative talks between the two partners to develop the discussion around how best the Project can become more central to child welfare services.

### **POST SCRIPT**

Since this research project was completed the HSE and Barnardos have successfully addressed the pertinent issues identified in the research. This has facilitated the renewal of the Service Level Agreement which was signed recently for a further three years to continue the work of the Project in the Wexford Local Health Office Area.