




Family Time/Contact Framework

Dr Mandi MacDonald
Director, Centre for Child Youth and Family Welfare
Queen's University Belfast

Project led by:

Edel Morgan
Assistant Commissioning
Lead LAC SPPG

Maria MacInnes
Service Improvement
Manager, CSW Tusla



Family Time/Contact Framework



Objective - to draft an updated Family Time/Contact Assessment framework.



Cross border project - led jointly by Assistant Commissioning Lead LAC SPPG and the Service Improvement Manager, TUSLA.



Representation from HSC Trusts, Queens University and the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland and TIGALA, an independent Guardian Ad Litem Agency Rol



Project aims

Provide a framework which improves all aspects of the experience that children and adults have in relation to contact/Family time as part of a child's permanency planning journey in both jurisdictions.

- Provide an updated robust assessment tool to support trauma informed decision making around family time/contact for our cared for young people.
- Guiding principles derived from – Research from Queens University, service user feedback from Tusla consultation with children and their families, practice experience from the UK and the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland and VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care) research.
- Underpinned by theoretical influences – trauma, attachment informed framework.
- Aligned to the Signs of Safety Practice approach in both jurisdictions and the FITC (Framework for Integrated Therapeutic Care) model within Northern Ireland

Strategic context

- **NI Trusts “A life deserved”, LAC strategy**

- Section 4: A strategic response “Enabling them to build positive and supportive relationships including with family”;
- Section 5: “children and young people live in safety and stability”
- A proper balance between a parent’s right to contact/family time and the child’s need or desire for contact/family time.
- Where contact/family time with parents is deemed to be in the child’s best interests, arrangements should be facilitated, skilfully managed and conducted in a way which maximises the positivity of the experience for the child.
- Maintaining contact/family time with siblings is an important consideration for the child’s identity
- Commitment to action: Strengthen the powers of a HSC Trust to refuse to allow contact between a child and his parents or relatives, if it is consistent with safeguarding and promoting the child’s welfare.

- **Tusla 2023 Business plan**

- Two key strategic goals
 - Embedding and developing a consistent national approach to practice across all our response pathways.
 - Supporting permanency planning for children and young people in care and support our carers and care providers to provide safe and nurturing homes for children that promote lifelong relationships
- Tusla Pathways to Permanency Handbook published 2022
- “The type of contact a child or young person has with their birth family and naturally connected network should be determined by what is in the best interests of the child. this may change over time and needs to be reviewed regularly.”



Working together

- Jurisdiction specific versions of the guidance will take account of legislative and statutory context, strategic and practice reform context and naming conventions etc
- Each NI Trust is represented within the project team – they are Principal Social Worker/Principal Practitioner's and Team Leaders within Trust Family Time Services/SofS and FITC trust leads.
- Tusla is represented by a Service Improvement Manager from the Chief Social Worker Office, National Policy Manager for Alternative Care, Regional Professional Support Manager from Tusla DML region and Principal Social Worker from Tusla WNW region.
- GAL are represented from both jurisdictions and a research representative from Queens University.
- Once piloting is finished we will also engage with families who have been involved in pilot, and co-existing service user engagement forums for further feedback



Why work together?

- Both jurisdictions are implementing signs of safety as a practice approach and are in the process of aligning their respective policy and guidance to the expected practice
- Families in border areas are mobile and move from one jurisdiction to the other, having consistency of approach supports a seamless experience for the service user
- Collective professional knowledge, experience and practice wisdom across the island
- Share the learning across the two jurisdictions on the island
- We are building strong working relationships and getting to know each other and expanding our joint working into other areas

Domains of framework

- Guidance document for social workers (and social care workers in Tusla)
- Guidance document for young people, family and carers (words and pictures for young people)
- Family time agreement
- Safety plan for family time
- Observational tools for staff observing family time
- Feedback forms to be used with other professionals/carers/school
- Formal assessment
- Educational aspect – to enhance quality of family time and reduce potential for re-traumatisation for all parties.

Progress so far & next steps



In NI

Piloted in all 5 HSC Trusts and
CCGA

Framework and documents
amended based on feedback



In ROI

Tusla pilot commencing September
amendments will be made based
on feedback



Next steps

Documents to be reviewed and
ratified by steering group
Seek feedback from parents and
carers

Plan training
Launch framework