

**The Voice of the Child Conference 2015:
'Effective Participation: Make it Happen - Make it Better.'**

Summary Report

The Voice of the Child Conference 2015: Summary Report

Date: Thursday 23rd July 2015, 10:00am – 4:30pm

Venue: The Radisson Blu, Portman, London

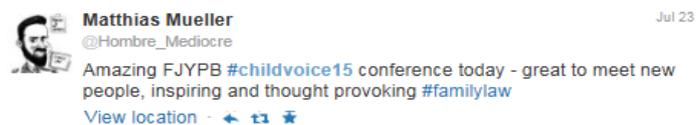
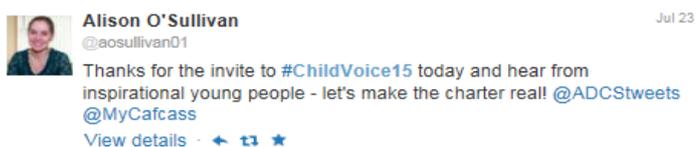
The aim of the conference was to express how the Voice of the Child should be heard in family proceedings. This year's theme was 'Effective Participation: Make it happen - Make it better.' The focus of the conference was to promote the benefits of effective involvement from children and young people in services' development and within their own family proceedings.

The planning for the conference began in October 2014 with members of the Family Justice Young People's Board involved in all stages of its development, concept and facilitation.

MEDIA

Journalists from related media sources, such as the Family Law Journal, were invited to the conference and to report on the key messages delivered.

During the conference the Cafcass Communications Team managed the Twitter account. They posted tweets about key messages from our speakers, including photos. Throughout the day the Twitter link was displayed and attendees were encouraged to tweet.



The MOJ post conference devised a summary of the positive impact that the conference had. This can be viewed by the following link:

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Khadija Lewis – FJYPB Member also submitted a blog for the MOJ, which can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/ministry-of-justice-uk/khadija-lewis-why-the-voice-of-the-child-matters-in-family-justice/861640140594378>

Through the media interest and through tweeting and retweeting key messages through the attendees the profile of the conference and its theme was raised and also the profile of the FJYPB.

Post conference the FJYPB and the VOTC 2015 has been reported on in articles.

For example: http://www.familylaw.co.uk/news_and_comment/voice-of-the-child-conference-2015#.VbH454umDww

AGENDA

The agenda is available as an appendix to this report by using the link below.

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GUEST SPEAKERS

Family Justice Minister Caroline Dinenage MP made the opening address and talked about the important difference between children being heard and actually being listened to and understood. Addressing more than 300 attendees, the Minister said she was, “determined to have a system that puts the needs, thoughts, ideas and futures of children first.” She spoke about the positive progress made by the sector, praising the influence of the FJYPB, but remained clear that more needs to be done.

Cafcass Chief Executive Anthony Douglas described the event as “the best youth-led conference in the world”. He also set out how he saw it as a metaphor for Cafcass’ work as a whole – where the voices and wishes of children are kept central. This child-led approach served as an important reminder of thinking outside of the box to better engage children and young people. This sentiment was echoed by the President of the Family Division, Sir James Munby, who spoke about the importance of looking for more effective ways to improve children’s physical and intellectual participation in court proceedings.

QUESTION TIME PANEL

Panellists:

- Chair – Khadija Lewis, FJYPB Member
- Audience compare – Shysta Manzoor, FJYPB Member
- Cafcass – Anthony Douglas, Chief Executive
- HMCTS – Naomi Hawden
- Mediation – Professor Janet Walker
- Ministry of Justice – Joe Murphy, Policy lead -Private Law
- Association of Directors for Children’s Services – Alison O’Sullivan, Director
- The Hon Ms Justice Russell DBE

Panel members responded to questions regarding budget cuts, effective use of intermediaries and how the voices of children who are disabled or non-verbal are heard. One of the key comments made by the panel was from Professor Janet Walker who said, “Getting the voice of a child is a process not an event”.

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

The FJYPB members planned and delivered four workshops. Each workshop was ran in the morning and then repeated in the afternoon.

Summaries for each of the workshops are detailed below:

A. Child Inclusive Mediation

The challenges, the benefits and how professionals can embed this into practice.

Panellists:

Chair: Tim Bramley – FJYPB Member.

Angela Lake-Carroll – Independent Consultant, Mediator, Trainer and member of the Mediation Task Force.

Sarah Lloyd – Consultant Director, Family Mediation Council.

Aims of the workshop:

- How do we overcome the challenges of child inclusive mediation?
- How do we embed child inclusive mediation in future practice?
- To share ideas and good practice.

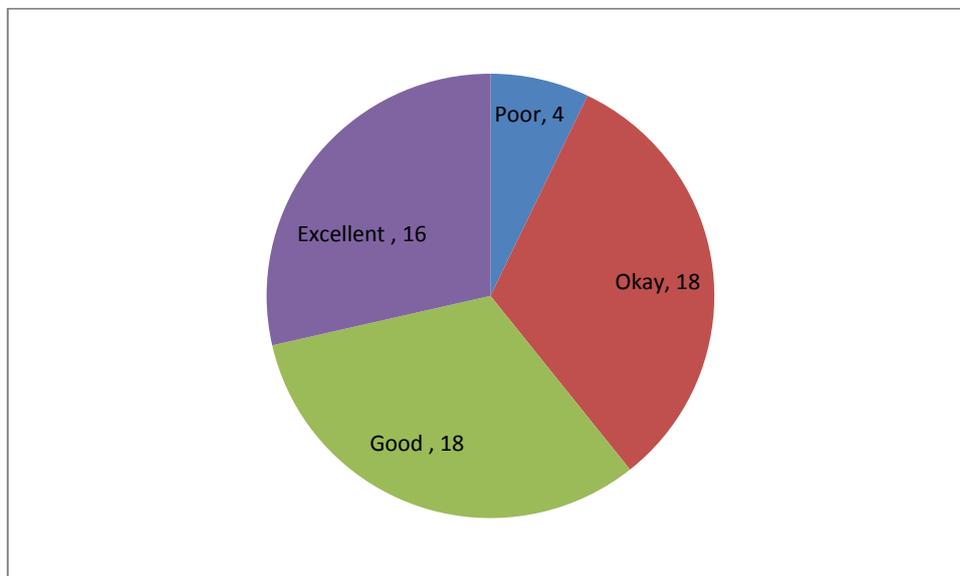
Summary of Discussion:

Tim set out clearly the wishes of the FJYPB, highlighting the menu of options that the board has put forward. This includes the hope that every mediation service will offer direct child consultations, as well as a wish for more child-friendly information about mediation, both through leaflets and online.

Angela Lake-Carroll, speaking first, suggested that child inclusive mediation gives children the chance to be heard as equal members of their family and talked about the need for child inclusive processes to happen across the system, not just in mediation. She also suggested that some mediators don't consider themselves to have the skills to work directly with children and therefore highlighted the importance of working with other professionals who already have these skills – pointing to organisations such as the NSPCC, Childline and NYAS who all provide an amazing opportunity to train and learn together.

Sarah Lloyd then spoke in depth about the framework for mediation standards and training that can assist mediators to work more directly with children. She stressed that mediation has always focused on children, but that the emphasis now was on moving from a child-focused approach to a child-inclusive one.

How would you rate this workshop?



Examples of feedback received:

Some of the verbal feedback received on the day remarked on the initial workshop session being dominated by mediators who discussed the issues of the cost of meeting children and young people. It was felt that because of this that the workshop did lose its initial focus. However discussions were had with

the Chair who took a firmer approach to maintaining the attendees' focus during the second session. This is evident in the comments below:

"Very good at updating professionals on the changes within the profession i.e. Importance / how to include children in procedures and training available in the future".

"This lost the focus of the child's voice and felt a little commercial".

"I expected more information on how this was going to happen rather than the problems with the concept. Veered off into costs which although important didn't take the discussion forward".

"Very well presented and opportunity for discussion".

B. Children Meeting Judges – How to make it happen

The outcome of the Vulnerable Person's Working Group: Learning from the Children Meeting Judges pilots to improve practice for all professionals in family justice.

Panellists:

Chair: Rebecca Musgrove – FJYPB Member

Shanti Sud – FJYPB Member

Farhana Ahmed – FJYPB Member

Her Honour Judge Hillier – Senior Circuit Judge, Designated Family Judge, Leeds Combined Court

Aims of the workshop:

- To identify current practice.
- How do we overcome the challenges?
- How do we embed this in future practice?
- What types of training are needed?
- What support do judges need?
- What is the impact of this across agencies?

Summary of Discussion:

Rebecca highlighted the FJYPB's priority of involving children in the judiciary system, a priority which led to the FJYPB's Children Meeting Judges pilot (1st Oct 2014 – 31st March 2015).

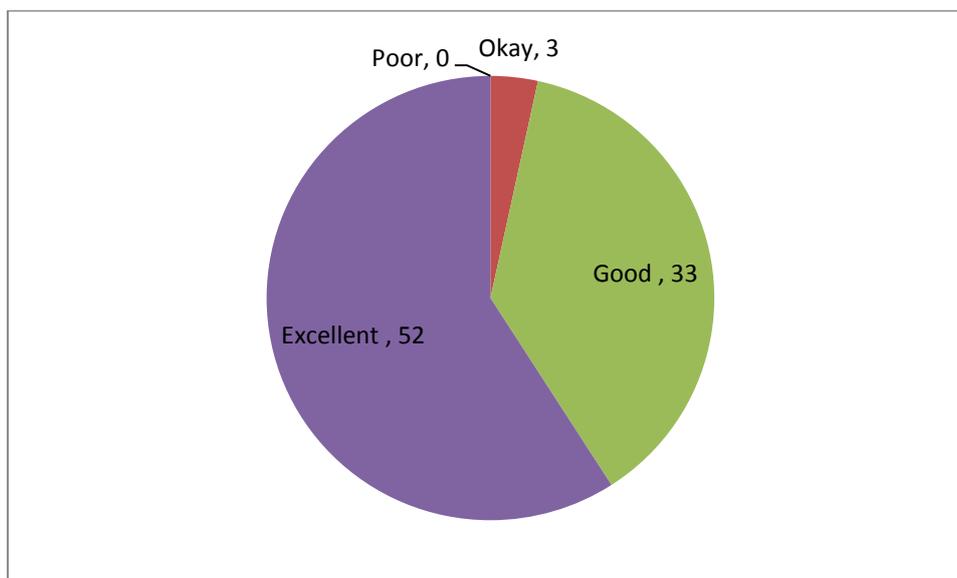
HHJ Hillier felt that the pilot enabled a child's voice to be heard first hand in the judiciary system and reiterated that a child is a real person and not just the object of other people's concerns. Judge Hillier also felt that the pilot helped reassure parents that the court is actively involved in their case and not merely 'rubber stamping'.

HHJ Hillier presented the Vulnerable Witnesses Working Group report published in Feb 2015 which included:

- the need to identify vulnerable witnesses early;
- the usefulness of utilising ground rules hearings, as found in the criminal justice system;
- the usefulness of 'The Advocates Gateway' website.

Shanti and Farhana spoke about their personal experiences and the positive impact they had from meeting directly with their Judge.

How would you rate this workshop?



Examples of feedback received:

"Judge Hillier was excellent and gave me lots of pointers for work we are doing with our local courts. Young people very articulate".

"Balanced presentation from judge and young people which was powerful".

"The debates and information was extremely informative. Very inclusive, 'Nancy' was an excellent presenter. The young people's story very powerful. Thank you so much".

C. Children's Rights in Policy and Practice

The responsibility of professionals to promote the rights of children and to ensure children and young people know their rights in family justice.

Panellists:

Chair: Bethany Shepherd - FJYPB Member
Marie Stephens – Participation Manager, CRAE
Simon Bethel - Chair of Children's Committee, Resolution
Joy Manley – Family Court Advisor, Cafcass

Aims of the workshop:

- All participants to have an understanding of children's rights in family justice.
- An understanding of a child or young person's right to participation.
- Recommendations on how to put participation into practice.
- Agreed methods of effective participation.

Summary of Discussion:

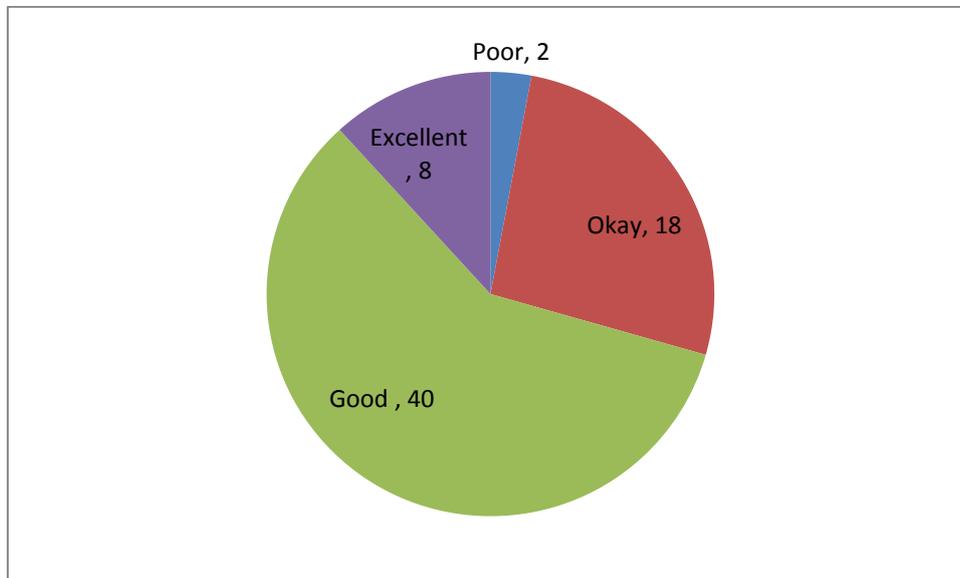
Bethany opened the workshop with the views of the FJYPB on children's rights and gave some practice examples as to how a child's rights can be embedded into practice.

Maria Stephens highlighted some of the key rights for children and young people who are subject to family law proceedings linked to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Simon Bethel argued that embedding the rights of a child into practice can be difficult to do given that the Children Act makes it clear that any decision a Judge makes must be in the best interests of the child, however children's rights are not in the Children Act and are not written into law. In public law children are always spoken to by a Cafcass Officer, however in private law only around 25% of children get the opportunity to express their views to a Cafcass Officer. Things are changing with the President's guidelines on children meeting judges.

Joy Manley gave practice examples as to how her working practice is a balance between welfare issues, a child's wishes and feelings and their rights. Joy provided examples of direct work that she had undertaken with children and young people.

How would you rate this workshop?



Examples of feedback received:

"I wish the actual rights were more thoroughly explained and emphasized rather than general remarks and individual cases discussed."

"Helpful to hear from the Guardian and her experience".

"Very well chaired and good speakers with interesting discussions arising. Very much focussed on the issue of children's rights".

D. The Impact of Family Break-Up on a Child's Wellbeing

To enable professionals to have a good understanding of the emotional, social and physical impacts on a child or young person. To also consider the challenge of how we minimise the impact.

Panellists:

Chair: Alex Lawless – FJYPB Member

Becca Manning – FJYPB Member

Abbie Tottman – FJYPB Member

Molly Baker – FJYPB Member

Masoud – NYAS Young Member

Chris Leaman – Young Minds

Aims of the workshop:

- To provide a greater understanding of the impact of family break-up on children and young people.
- How can professionals do more to minimise the impact on children?
- Is there a role for professionals to signpost children and families to the right support network?

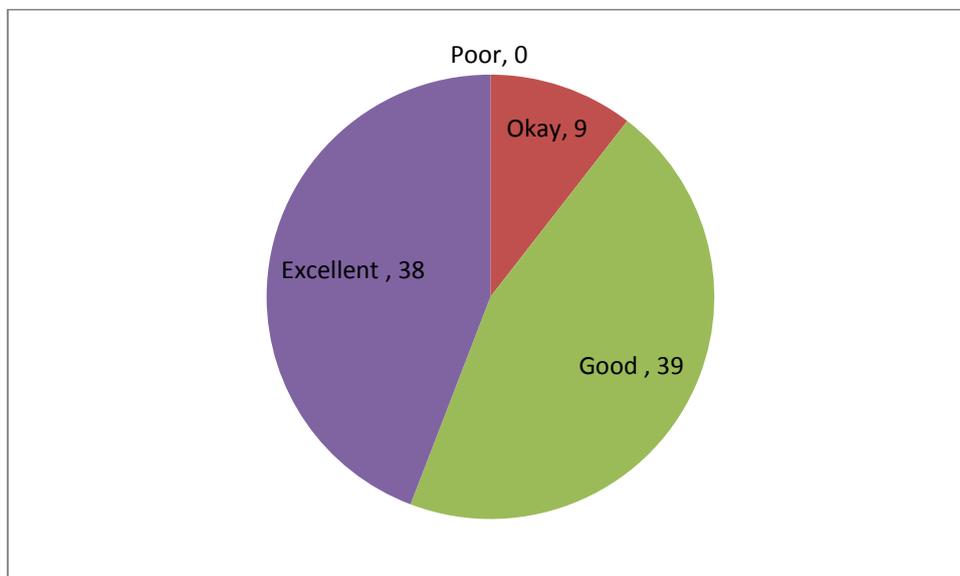
Summary of Discussion:

Alex opened the workshop with key messages from the FJYPB regarding the potential long term effects on children and young people who are subject to proceedings.

Becca, Abbie and Molly from the FJYPB shared their experiences of the impact they had, which included issues with depression, anorexia, self-harm and fluctuations in their education. Masoud from NYAS also shared his experience as a young person in care.

Chris Leaman spoke on the wider issues of mental and emotional health of young people at a national level. He provided some statistical evidence on the numbers of children and young people who suffer with mental and emotional health problems. Chris also highlighted the support services that are available to children and young people.

How would you rate this workshop?



Examples of feedback received:

“Young people’s stories were thoroughly moving and brought home the impact separation has on children. Lack of coherent policy was also pointed out.”

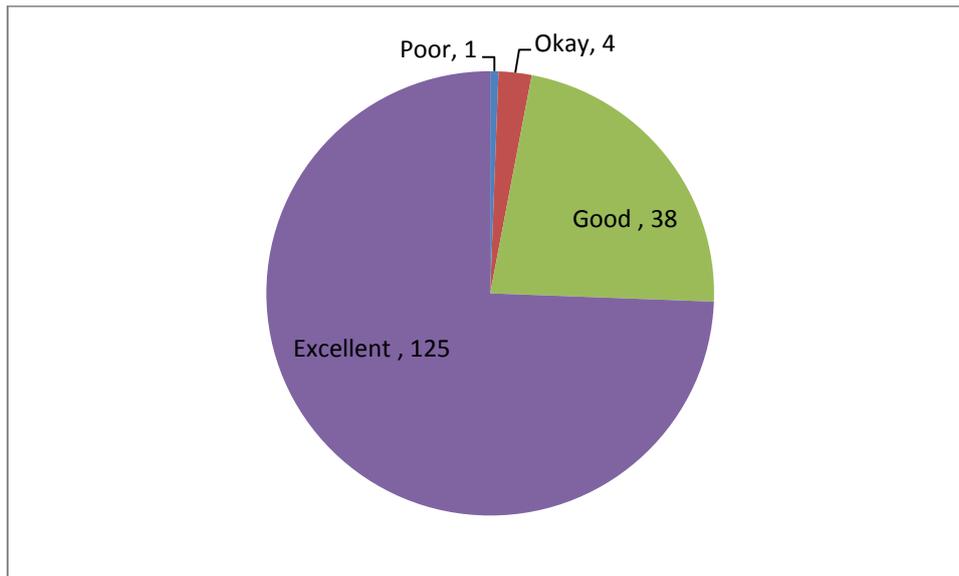
“This workshop was amazing, the young people’s stories made a huge impact”.

“The young people blew me away. They read their very personal stories with confidence. I felt very privileged”.

DELEGATES FEEDBACK FROM THE VOTC 2015

168 delegates of the 300 who attended completed and handed back their feedback forms.

How would you rate the overall conference?



As can be seen an overwhelming positive response was given to the overall conference with 74% rating it as “Excellent”. 61% stated the venue was “Excellent” and 50% rated the food as “Excellent”.

Below are a number of the comments made by the delegates on the feedback forms:

“It was an excellent conference. The young people’s stories were particularly powerful”.

“The standard of the conference organisation and contributions of the young people from the FJYPB was fantastic! Great to see the development of some of the contributions since the first conference. Well Done!”

“One of the best conferences I’ve attended, full of interesting agenda items and I’m not just saying.”

‘The speakers were very brave and inspiring.’

‘My first Voice of the Child Conference and I am very impressed. Excellent programme, extremely well co-ordinated and managed – very impressive.’

ACHEIVEMENTS AND OUTCOMES

- The conference achieved its full capacity of 300 delegates.
- As the conference was held in London in July it was possible to achieve the attendance of the Minister of Justice, many members of the judiciary and key figures within family justice.

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- The conference raised the participation agenda across all stakeholders in family justice and achieved its aims.
- Feedback from the attendees has been overwhelmingly positive and praises the work of the FJYPB members, especially those who shared their stories.
- Feedback indicates that many attendees now intend to consider their practice and ensure that the voice of the child is heard.
- The Blu Radisson Portman was a much better layout of venue, having all the syndicate rooms and the main room all on the same level.
- Making the workshops more child friendly was successful overall.

LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Some of the verbal feedback received and observations made on the day were in relation to the sound volume at the back of the room. This would need to be addressed should the conference be held at the same venue again.
- To build on the positive feedback from the 2015 conference to ensure the 2016 conference is as successful.

LOOKING AHEAD

- To hold the Voice of the Child Conference 2016.