



***Family & Friends Network Meeting  
Practice Guidance***



## **Introduction**

In West Sussex, we want to work with and alongside families, rather than making decisions without them. Family & Friends Network Meetings are a way to work with families and their networks to ensure that all those connected to the child who can be a source of emotional, physical, mental, spiritual or cultural support are able to engage with workers and those caring for the child.

## **Principles**

1. Every child/parent has a family and/or network and they can be found if we try
2. A meaningful connection to their family or network helps a child develop and/or maintain a sense of belonging
3. The single factor most strongly connected with positive outcomes for children is meaningful, lifelong connection to their family and/or network

## **Purpose**

Family & Friends Network Meetings are a key part of safeguarding as they provide the opportunity to explore the family and friends network that already provide safety and support and those who could become part of the safety or care plan for each child. The meetings enable the support network and professionals to develop and agree outcomes that they want to achieve.

## **When to Hold Support Network Meetings**

Family & Friends Network Meetings can be helpful at any point in our involvement with the child and where possible should be convened at the earliest opportunity as part of robust safety planning and throughout our intervention with a child (from the front door through to permanency arrangements). However, some key stages where a Family & Friends Network Meeting should be convened for the first time are:

- During Child and Family Assessment
- Before an Initial Child Protection Conference
- Prior to Public Law Outline
- As part of any reunification plan

## **Management Oversight**

There are several management checkpoints where a Family & Friends Network Meeting should be considered and recorded:

- Supervision Discussions
- Three Way Discussion with SW/PM/GM
- Ad-hoc discussions about a child, perhaps in a crisis

Consideration of the child's support network should be integral to all of these conversations so that we are always thinking about how the network can create safety and offer support for the child.

Please make specific reference to this in oversight and/or supervision so that it is clear on the child's record.

Where a Family & Friends Network Meeting cannot be held as suggested above, this needs to be discussed with the manager and a rationale included on the child's file with a clear plan as to when the Family & Friends Network Meeting will take place.

### **Assessing the network as potential carers when parents refuse**

The ethos of the Family & Friends Network Meetings is to work with parents and carers, empowering them to create safety and solutions. There are instances such as entering into Care proceedings where we may be aware of members of the support network who could potentially offer an alternative to care for the child. However, parents refuse consent for us to approach or assess.

There is no statutory duty as such on the Local Authority to assess wider family members when the parents don't want us to but each case should be considered on its facts and there would need to be cogent and compelling reasons not to explore the extended family. The challenge being the sharing of information so in all matters there would be a recommendation to seek legal advice and in some cases it may be sufficient for the Local Authority to raise an issue of proceedings, the fact that these relatives exist but seek permission of the court to actually assess in the face of parental opposition.

Further reading can be found <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWFC/HCI/2019/10.html>

In the case (RE H (Care and Adoption : Assessment of wider family) 2019) where the issue of notifying wider family was considered ***“What this case has highlighted is the critical importance of a local authority having effective systems in place from an early stage in care proceedings to ensure that the wider maternal/paternal families are considered as possible placement options for the children . Whilst it is recognised that the parents should put forward any names they want to be considered, that does not absolve the local authority of the enquiries they should independently be making . The continued retort by the local authority that the parents had failed to put anyone forward failed to recognise these are parents who failed to provide the basic care for their children or provide basic co-operation within the care proceedings, this local authority should have undertaken their own enquiries”.***

### **Guiding Principles to Family & Friends Network Meetings**

#### **- Establishing a Working Relationship with the Family**

Building plans that are meaningful and sustainable will require a robust working relationship between professionals and the parents/family. The simplest way to create a good working relationship with parents is for the professionals to continually identify and honour the parents for everything that is positive in their everyday care of their children. In this way, parents will be much more likely to be open to identifying and working towards good outcomes for their children and more likely to work through any challenges that are impacting on this, with the aim of using the network to build a lasting plan.

Parents are not always ready to engage in a Family & Friends Network Meeting. It may take longer to help them to see the benefits of holding the meeting and time should be invested to support parents with to understand the benefits. Where this is refuted, we need to think about why this might be and if a change in approach is required, we need to ensure that we revisit this at regular intervals. If only one parent is in agreement, we still need to approach the Family

& Friends network meeting using the support network available.

- **A Straightforward, Understandable Description of the Concerns**

Beginning the process depends on professionals being able to articulate the concerns they see for the children in clear, simple language that the parents (even if they do not agree) can understand and will work on with the professionals. Clear, commonly understood concerns are essential since they define the fundamental issues that the plan must address.

Explain any Bottom Lines to the Support Network; A bottom line is a statement that sets out anything that we cannot agree due to a safety concern. It could also include what the Local Authority will do if nothing changed for the child or things got worse, being clear about why placing the child at the centre. Bottom Lines may not always be needed but it is best to be transparent with the Family & Friends Network from the very beginning.

- **Agreeing Goals**

It's important for families to set goals for themselves. For families, the act of choosing their own direction can contribute greatly to their sense of ownership and motivation for reaching the goal. Professionals may need to help the family in ensuring the goals support addressing the concern identified.

- **Involve an Extensive, Informed Friend and Family Support Network**

Every traditional culture knows the wisdom of the African saying 'It takes a village to raise a child'. A child who is connected to many people who care for him/ her will almost always have a better life experience and be safer than an isolated child. It is important to ask the parents to get as many people as they can involved in helping them create a plan. One of the most important aspects of involving an informed and naturally occurring network around the family is that this breaks the secrecy and shame that typically surrounds situations of child abuse or concerning behaviours.

Genograms and Eco maps should be used to open up conversations with the parents and child/ren about who is important to them and offers safety. These should be kept under review to capture if relationships or the support offered changes. The child's ecomap is fundamental to this as it can often be quite different to that of the parent.

**Convening Family & Friends Network Meetings**

- The meeting should be a safe and inclusive space for people to attend and contribute
- It may be that the family identify a professional they would like to be present, this would be decided upon within the preparation stage prior to any meeting being arranged.
- Agenda should be open and transparent
- Encourage sharing – no blaming
- Don't get stuck on the past issues – think to the future and solutions
- Acknowledge there is no magic meeting – achieving safety takes time and we need to evidence that the child's safety can be sustained over time
- The child's best interests are paramount and we need to help people to keep the child in mind
- Respect people's time i.e. 90-120 mins max

- Think about the setting to make it as inclusive and comfortable as possible.
- **Understanding what difference is wanting to be made for the child/ren and the family needs to be understood and evident at the heart of the meeting; establishing what outcomes are wanted, provides all with a focus on what they are doing and why and are then able to measure if the plan and support they offer is making a difference.**

Please see '*Family & Friends Network Meeting Quick Guide*' for practical suggestions for the running of the Family & Friends Network Meeting. See also *timeline and bottom line* for snapshot guidance to preparation, meeting / planning and review and timeliness of when we should be completing these.

### **Integrating the Family & Friends Network Plan into the CIN/CP/CLA Plan**

The Family & Friends Network Plan is owned by the Family & Friends Network. It is their plan for the child and should detail what they can offer and should be in their language. It needs to be realistic so that they can feel confident in achieving it. They should be encouraged to think about SMART actions (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound). The Family & Friends Network plan will be a valuable addition to the CIN/CP/CLA plan for the child and pertinent points should be incorporated into the relevant plan document.

### **Reviews**

A date, time and place for a review of the Family & Friends Network Plan should be arranged at the end of the initial meeting. It is recommended that a review takes place within 6 weeks and later reviews to feed into Review Child In Need Meetings and Review Child Protection Conferences.

### **Recording**

The record of the meeting should be captured on the network meeting form (add link) and in a case note using the 'Family & Friends Network Meeting' drop down option.

**Implementation Plan**

Document%206%20-%20Family%20and%20Friends%20network%20Implementation%20plan%20draft%20V1.3.xlsx  
<C:\Users\blee1430\OneDrive - West Sussex County Council\Document 6 - Family and Friends network Implementation plan draft V1.3.xlsx>

<b>Review/Contacts/References</b>	
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