

The family are not engaged with the support on offer

It may be that the timing of any offer of support is not what the family currently want and the Family Group Conference Plus team can offer to visit families, or contact them directly to offer a visit. Sometimes having an offer from a visit from an 'independent' person who is not involved in the planning can help people consider the options more readily.

The parent is not in contact with any of their family

This is a common 'reason' given for not exploring extended family and friends. It is important to understand what has led to this breakdown before excluding the Family Group Conference as an option to plan. The Family Group Conference Plus team can be instrumental in repairing some of these fractured relationships for the benefit of the children, and if this is done at the right time it can open the door for the wider family to become involved in supporting the main carer.

The family live a long way away and are not in regular contact

It is for the individual family member to decide whether they wish to be involved and how they can contribute to the overall plan. It is not necessary for all family members to 'do' something in the plan, they can contribute very well by being part of the process in helping to generate ideas about how things may be different going forward. In our experience it is a vital part of the process to approach the extended family, whether they live locally or not, to ask them if they wish to be involved, and they can then decide. If we do not ask them directly we simply do not know if they want to be involved.

I will be closing the case soon

The Family Group Conference can be part of your closure process and formalise a support plan that the family can use to maintain progress and continue to work together to support the needs of the child. It is not the only way to do this but some families want to be in control of what needs to happen next and ensure they have contingency plans in place if the progress made is not maintained.

The risks are too great

We would urge you to discuss your concerns about risk, with the lead co-ordinator in your area. There are a number of ways we manage risk within the meetings that we facilitate. This can include split meetings, shuttle meetings, and sometimes it is necessary to exclude family members if they pose a risk. It is unusual for the risks to be so great that a meeting cannot be held. Occasionally it is clear that it is not safe to proceed, in such cases where there is intergenerational abuse or absolutely no-one in the whole family or friends network sees a need for change.

The family relationships are complex and they don't get on

This is a regular issue for the families that we work with. Our independent co-ordinators are trained to deliver Family Group Conferences and work with the complex dynamics that families have. There are a number of tools and strategies that we use to help focus family members of the child and the purpose of the meeting. We assess whether a meeting can be held safely as part of our process and it would be unusual to not hold a meeting because of the complex dynamics. It is part of our processes to enable the meeting to happen and manage these complexities.

I am concerned that not all of the family members will be given a voice, or be overruled by more assertive or aggressive family members

We would work with family members to put plans in place to address the 'power dynamic' within the Family Group Conference, and especially the Private Planning Time. We would also make contingency plans for the meeting if needed. We regularly use advocates for more vulnerable members of the family group and this is always explored as an option in the process. If there are issues relating to aggression we may need to exclude a person if they have a proven history of violence; we would discuss this with them (unless it was unsafe to include them at all in the process) and seek their views if they were unable to attend. We may need to consider a split meeting or a shuttle conference and occasionally we may need to remain in the room to facilitate a safe meeting.

If you have any questions, queries or concerns about referring a family for a Family Group Conference or the other meetings we can support families with to find their own solutions, then please contact us at fgcplus@devon.gov.uk or visit our website at www.devon.cc/fgcplus

Care Crisis Review 2018 Options for Change 3.31

"That to support a whole family approach, there is a long term goal of ensuring that all families are offered an FGC before a child is moved into the care system (except in an emergency). As the first step, local authorities could introduce this as a local offer to families, with the FGC plan shaping how the local authority works with the child and family."



FGC Project Accreditation

This service has met the requirements of the National Accreditation Framework

Family Group Conference Plus

Why offer?



GUIDANCE AND DISPELLING MYTHS

Family Group Conferences and when to use them

Introduction

Family Group Conferences aim to ensure that the immediate and extended family and friends network are included in the planning for their children and young people. This should be part of the work we routinely do to harness the strengths and support that families can offer. Families should be offered the opportunity to engage with the FGC process so that they can be at the heart of the decision making. The family group, in this process, are the primary decision makers to the questions they are asked (as set by the identified needs from assessment). The process maximises the family's ability to address their own needs and identify what support is needed to sustain change.

When is the best time to make the offer of a FGC?

As soon as you consider 'yes' for any of the following key questions as discussed in each case within supervision:

- Do Children's Social Care need to be involved in the planning for this child in the immediate or long term future?
- Is court action likely?
- Has a pre-proceedings checklist been started in line with the PLO guidance?
- Is there a risk the child will need to be 'accommodated'? Ideally if you think a child may need to become looked after in the next six weeks (although this is not always possible, the 6 weeks will ensure best practice can be followed)
- If you are planning to ask for Resources from Children's Access to Resource Panel (CARP) for proceedings or 'care'.

If the answer is yes to any of the above then you should be using Family Group Conference Plus to explore family and friends networks to ensure that all family strengths have been fully and adequately explored.

South West Pre-proceedings Protocol (extracts from):

"In deciding whether proceedings should be issued, family meetings/Family Group Conferences must be considered as a means of identifying any available potential carers amongst the friends and family of the children and of their existing carers."

"It is a protocol for social workers and their supervisors in the region. It also reflects mutual expectations of the court with the intention of avoiding any unnecessary duplication of pre-proceedings work following the issue of any proceedings"

"Outlines the work that must be completed prior to the initiation of court proceedings"

"Family members will have been identified and alternative family carers are ruled in/out (through viability assessments)."

It is the expectation that this work is done pre-proceedings to ensure all family options have been fully explored.

Family Justice Review Final Report November 2011

"The benefits of Family Group Conferences should be more widely recognised and their use should be considered before proceedings."

Common statements that people make when they don't think a referral will be of benefit

I have already held a family meeting

Even if you have held any type of family meeting before, it is likely to have a very different look and set up than that of a Family Group Conference. The outcome may be similar but the 'ownership' of the plan coming from professionally led meetings is often not the same as when the family have made and 'own' their own plans.

It is not appropriate as there are difficult dynamics in the family

As stated above our independent co-ordinators are trained to deliver the Family Group Conference process and also use a number of other Restorative (High Challenge with High Support) processes aimed at working with the difficult dynamics in the family. It is usual for us to help families manage some very difficult dynamics and find a way through these for the benefit of the children. In our experience the very complex or difficult relationships can be worked with if the family can see a need for change, and focussing them on the children is often the catalyst for this. As part of the preparation these issues are addressed and a plan put in place to ensure the meeting can work. The options for holding a safe meeting are covered above.

There are no family locally to help

It is usual for us to explore wider family that live out of the immediate area. To help understand what this means we might contact those family members that you might see at family events such as weddings and funerals. Although they live away from the family unit they often value being asked to be involved and can offer varied amounts and types of support. This can include visits and calls more regularly as they know this is needed. Some family members have travelled from abroad to attend their Family Group Conference, and some have been enabled to contribute via Skype.

There are no family that can offer alternative care

The Family Group Conference process is not just about seeking alternative permanent care, (although it is essential that this is explored for children if they cannot remain with their current carers), it is about asking the family group what they think is best for a child who needs alternative permanent carers. This can result in family options that have not already been explored as part of the routine planning (and potentially avoid delay at a later stage, or a support plan for an identified family/friends carer - or the family deciding that alternative permanent carers from outside of the family would be best for a child (ie adoption). This can be a very powerful process for the family, and an incredibly difficult decision, but some families have used this to write a letter for 'later life' explaining that they supported this and thought it was best and why.

Children Act Guidance

Family Group Conferences are identified as 'an important opportunity to engage friends and members of the wider family at an early stage of concerns about a child, either to support the parents or to provide care for the child, whether in the short or longer term' (para 3.8).

Before reaching a decision to apply for a care or supervision order, 'the local authority should have taken such steps as are possible, perhaps through a family group conference or other family meeting, to explore whether care for the child can be safely provided by a relative or friend, have assessed the suitability of possible arrangements and have considered the most appropriate legal status of such arrangements' (para 3.24).

I have spoken to the family about this and they don't want this service

Sometimes it is helpful for families to hear about what a Family Group Conference might be able to offer them and their children from an 'Independent' person who is not involved in the case management of their situation. This is why we are able to offer visits directly to families on request. There is a visit request form in the Fdocs file.

My assessment is that the child should be placed for adoption

The Family Group Conference process is part of the pre-proceedings checklist as outlined earlier and Courts generally expect this option to have been explored fully prior to attending Court. We have had experience of cases put before the Court being sent back for the Family Group Conference to be explored, even when the social work assessment has been for adoption. This is something that should be explored well before this stage of the child's planning. If family members request a Family Group Conference via Court a direction may be made for this to happen, the Court will then decide whether to accept the family's plan or that of the Local Authority. In the interests of partnership it is best to explore all the potential family options and support at the earliest opportunity for the child.