Family Group Conference Procedure

July 2021

**This document should be read in conjunction with the core procedures manual**

What is a Family Group Conference?

A Family Group Conference (FGC) is a meeting in which a child's wider family network come together to make a plan about the future arrangements for the child. The plan will ensure that (s)he is safe and his/her wellbeing is promoted.

FGCs are intended as a respectful and empowering process in which parents, children and members of the wider family/family network are given clear information about the agency's concerns and are asked to produce a plan that addresses those concerns and answers specific queries.

The expectation is that the family's plan will be agreed by Children’s Social Care provided it adequately addresses the concerns which they have identified and is safe for the child.

Every family is unique and has its own community values, culture, personalities, dynamics and history. A FGC uses the family's own skills, strengths and personal knowledge to resolve difficulties. Using the family's own expertise and ensuring their involvement in the FGC process can help to redress the power imbalances that are experienced by children/young people and their families. A major strength of the FGC is that the child or young person normally participates in the meeting and can, therefore, influence the plan that is made for him/her.

Referrals to the Family Group Conference Service

Referral for a Family Group Conference will require:

* A child to be open to Children’s Social Care and subject to a Child in Need, Child Protection or Child in Care Plan; or in the case of an unborn child (see referral criteria below) is subject to a Child and Family assessment.
* Someone with [Parental Responsibility](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/parental_respons.html) must agree to the referral and to the sharing of information. Parental responsibility could be held by the birth parents or the local authority (under a court order). The views of a Gillick Competent child will also need to be considered;
* The existence of a family network. (This may include relatives, significant family friends or community members). The network may not be immediately apparent and so this should not prevent a referral being made;
* **The need for a decision or a plan to be made to address specific concerns/risks identified**;
* The commitment of the family to find a solution to the concerns identified.

Referral for a FGC should come from the child’s allocated social worker.

**Referral Criteria** - Situations where a referral for a FGC should be considered include the following:

* There is a real possibility that a child may not be able to remain in the care of their parents or person who holds parental responsibility and consideration is being given to undertaking formal pre-proceedings process (PLO);
* When a decision is made to undertake formal pre-proceedings process (PLO);
* Where [Care Proceedings](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/care_proceedings.html) are being initiated in non-acute situations, a FGC must be automatically explored with the family and discussed at any pre proceedings meetings (PLO);
* Where a child is at risk of care due to family relationship breakdown linked to the young person’s behaviour;
* Where a single unborn child has been identified as at risk of care and their parents either have had children previously removed from their care and/or have their own complex needs.
* To support a safe and timely return home to family or family friends of a child who has been recently accommodated by the Local Authority;
* To support or explore the potential of reunification of a Child in Care to parents or other family members;
* Where there is an application for the discharge of a [Care Order](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/care_order.html) for a child to return home or live with family members.

FGC's can be offered to a family on more than one occasion.

There are some situations where a FGC **may not** be appropriate. These include:

* Where a family has a history of intergenerational [sexual abuse](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/sexual_abuse.html);
* Where there is an on-going [Section 47 Child Protection Enquiry](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/sec_47_enq.html);
* Where there is high risk of violence at the conference.

In these circumstances each case would need to be discussed on its merits and through consultation with the Social Work team manager, Service Manager and the FGC team manager.

**Exclusion Criteria:**

The family group conference service **do not** hold family group conferences in relation to:

* cases which are open to Children’s Services in relation to Private Law matters;
* cases where the primary issue/concern relates to Family Time.

Referral for a FGC does not mean that a FGC will take place if it is agreed that it would not be appropriate following discussion with the FGC team manager. In addition, a referral would not proceed if the family refused consent to share information that is relevant to safeguard the child(ren)/young person.

It is important to appreciate that FGCs are not an emergency response. They are a planned process and the recommendation for a FGC should be made following an assessment of the case. The child’s allocated social worker should be clear about the desired outcomes and what options are not acceptable. Although the timescale for completion of a Family Group Conference will vary depending on the nature of the referral, the size of any support network and availability of family members, it is anticipated that a FGC would be completed within 12 weeks from the receipt of the referral.

The Referral Process

Initial discussions are held between the child’s allocated social worker and their team manager to ensure the appropriateness of the referral.

The child’s allocated social worker must discuss the referral with the child's carer(s) who hold [Parental Responsibility](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/parental_respons.html). Verbal consent to the referral and the sharing of basic information must be obtained to proceed.

The child’s allocated social worker should complete the FGC Referral Form.

The FGC team manager or a FGC co-ordinator will arrange to meet with the referrer (and their team manager where possible) (the Referral Meeting) to discuss the referral in detail and gather further information about the family and their circumstances. This meeting will clarify the issues to be addressed, e.g. specific areas of concern; issues of race /language/ disability; how introductions of the co-ordinator to the family will be made; the means of on-going communication throughout the FGC process; clarification of roles and responsibilities; how the plan will be validated. This discussion will also identify the details of any "bottom line".

The FGC team manager or FGC Co-ordinator will need to ensure:

* that there is a plan or decision to be made at this time and Children’s Social Care is willing for the family to come together to do this;
* that Children’s Social Care is committed to the FGC process and that the child’s allocated social worker is willing to attend and input at the FGC. To maintain momentum the member of staff must be able to stay for the whole of the conference to approve any plan.

It is important that both the professionals and the family are clear about the purpose of the conference and what they are hoping to achieve from it.

Following the Referral Meeting the allocated FGC Co-ordinator will arrange a visit to the family, unless there are any issues that arise from the Referral Meeting which indicate that the case is not suitable for the FGC Service.

The Family Group Conference Co-ordinator

FGCs services will always be co-ordinated independently from the allocated social work service. The FGC co-ordinator is neutral i.e. they have no case holding, statutory or decision-making responsibilities in relation to the child. The FGC co-ordinator should not have had any previous involvement with the family or represent the views of any agency working with the family nor would they attend other meetings connected with the child so as not to compromise their independence.

The role of the FGC co-ordinator is vital in negotiating attendance of the family network at a FGC and in informing all participants about the process involved. This role is separate from other professionals' involvement with the family. This will mean preparatory visits to family members, children and professionals.

Consent to hold the FGC will be obtained by the FCG co-ordinator with the person with parental responsibility. No contact with any other family members can occur until this consent has been obtained. Where relevant, views of a Gillick Competent child will also be considered.

Ensuring the attendance of members of the family network is crucial to the success of the conference. This may mean that family members have to travel some distance and, in special circumstances, from abroad. Other considerations include the choice of the venue, the availability of interpreters and childcare.

The FGC co-ordinator organises the meeting in conjunction with the child/young person and those with parental responsibility and/or immediate carers, identifying who is in the family network for the child, including close friends. Discussion will take place with the family about who needs to be present. Guardians and professionals working with the family are not automatically invited to the FGC as the invitation list is decided by the family.

The FGC co-ordinator discusses with the child/young person how they want to participate in the conference and whether they would like a supporter or advocate in the meeting. The child/young person must be enabled to participate fully within the process and it is the co-ordinator's role to find flexible and imaginative ways of achieving this. If the child/young person requires an advocate then the FGC co-ordinator will arrange for an independent advocate to contact the family. The advocate will engage with the child(ren) concerned and ensure their views are known to the co-ordinator prior to and during the FGC.

Unless there is a good reason not to, the FGC co-ordinator must visit everyone in person to help to prepare them for the meeting, discuss worries or concerns, including how the meeting will be conducted and encourage them to attend. If the FGC co-ordinator feels that it would be inappropriate for a particular family member to attend, then a decision can be taken to exclude them from the FGC.

This will be an exception and if exclusion was to take place it would be based on the child's best interests. Examples could include: a person being a Schedule 1 Offender, risk of harm to the child/young person attending, a history of domestic violence and a severe power imbalance in the family such that the victims would be too intimidated if the perpetrator was present.

Should this be the case, efforts should be made to find an alternative way for the excluded party to have input to the meetings, for example, through letters. The grounds for exclusion must be clear and must be put in writing to the particular family member. The decision to exclude a family member rests with the FGC co-ordinator and may occur immediately prior to the conference if someone is deemed unfit to attend e.g. due to alcohol or drug use.

The FGC co-ordinator liaises with the allocated social worker and other relevant agencies to ensure family members have appropriate information about:

* The child welfare and/or protection issues which need to be considered at the FGC. This includes identifying any "bottom line" about what is and what is not acceptable in terms of a plan for the child from Children’s Social Care's perspective;
* Services that could assist the child or family.

The FGC co-ordinator negotiates the date, time and venue for the FGC with the family. The FGC co-ordinator sends out invitations and makes the necessary practical arrangements.

Stages of the Family Group Conference

The Family Group Conference is held with the following three stages:

**Stage 1: Information giving**

This part of the meeting is chaired by the FGC co-ordinator who makes sure that everyone is introduced, that everyone present understands the purpose and process of the FGC and agrees how the meeting will be conducted, including if considered helpful by those present, explicit ground rules.

The child’s allocated social worker who is invited to the meeting will not need to provide a written report but will be expected to provide a single page summary and give a verbal contribution detailing the strengths of the family, issues of concern, services available and the "bottom line". The child’s allocated social worker must also be prepared to respond to any queries that the conference members may have (This could include questions from family members and advocates).

The type of information that is helpful to present to the family includes the following:

* Current concerns and the reason for the conference rather than a detailed history;
* Experience of the family's strengths and successes as well as concerns;
* Clarity about what needs to change for the child and within what timescales;
* Information about what resources could be available to support the family plan, any limitations on resources (including resources of time), timescales for accessing resources and any procedures that need to be followed to obtain resources;
* Any child welfare concerns that will affect what can be agreed in the plan such as the child not having contact with a particular person or a schedule one offender;
* What the possible actions would be, if any, if the child’s current circumstances don’t change.

The presentation of information is important, the FGC is not a Child Protection Conference and it is helpful that the information that is presented is clear and understandable to the family. General issues include:

* Information must be up to date but not new, there should be no 'surprises' for the family members with whom agencies have been working;
* Statements should be specific such as "Maddison has been absent from school for 13 sessions in the last term" not "Maddison has missed school a lot";
* Avoid jargon, with explanations of any professional terms;
* Keep explanations of concerns centred on the needs of the child rather than on what it is felt the adults should do;
* Focus on the problem rather than anticipating solutions, for example, "How can the family ensure that Craig is taken to school every day" rather than "Dad needs to get Craig to school more often";
* Questions are not intended to be assessment related, but rather focussing on a plan that the family can create in response to concerns.

The child/young person and family members may also provide information via an advocate or other supporter, ask for clarification or ask questions.

**Stage 2: Private Family Time**

The FGC co-ordinator and professionals withdraw from the meeting after the information sharing stage and professionals, apart from the child’s allocated social worker, can leave the meeting at this point. The family members must have time and privacy to talk among themselves and come up with a plan that addresses the concerns raised in the information giving part of the conference, identifying resources and support which are required from agencies, as well as within the family to make it work.

The FGC co-ordinator will join the family for private planning time only if the family ask for them to be present, otherwise the family are left on their own to discuss and plan. If an advocate is present the child/young person will decide whether or not they want their advocate to remain during private family time.

**Stage 3: Plan and Agreement**

The family then produce their plan. The FGC co-ordinator can assist if the family requests this but the plan should be written by the family. If the FGC co-ordinator is asked to write the plan they must write it in the family's own words.

The family plan will be presented to the child’s allocated social worker at the end of the conference. It is expected that the child’s allocated social worker will remain at the FGC until the family have made their plan. Discussion will take place between the FGC co-ordinator and child’s allocated social worker and other agencies that may have been requested by the family to provide services.

The child’s allocated social worker may need to consult with their manager before accepting the family plan but it is hoped that any discussions will have taken place prior to the FGC.

If the child’s allocated social worker is not present at the end of the FGC the family will be contacted by the child’s allocated social worker within three working days to be advised about Children’s Social Care’s view of the family plan.

It is expected that the family plan is accepted by Children’s Social Care unless any issue relating to the child's safety and well-being has not been satisfactorily addressed and the child is deemed to be suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. Some FGC’s may be held to help inform a plan for a child e.g. potential for reunification/pre-birth cases. In these circumstances any proposal/offer of support created in the FGC may be used as part of an assessment process rather than be accepted as a plan following the FGC.

Any reasons for not accepting the plan must be made clear immediately and the family should be given the opportunity to respond to the concerns and change or add to the plan if necessary.

It is important to ensure that any child/young person present has a clear understanding of what is decided and that their views are understood.

**Distribution of the plan**

The FGC co-ordinator types and distributes the family plan to all participating professionals and the family within three working days of the conference. There are no formal minutes of the FGC - The plan is the only record of the FGC. (The child’s allocated social worker is responsible for sharing the family plan with the Care Team/Core Group and, where relevant, the Independent Reviewing Officer, Children’s Guardian, courts and legal representatives).

In addition to the plan agreed by the family, the following information should be included in the document created and distributed by the FGC co-ordinator:

1. Name and date of birth of child(ren) who were the subjects of the FGC;
2. Date and venue of the FGC;
3. List of everyone who attended and who was invited but unable to attend - making clear who each person is and their connection to the child;
4. The questions the family were asked to address;
5. Names and contact details of those who have agreed to monitor the family plan;
6. Date of the Review FGC.

Implementation of the Family Plan

As with any plan, there is an expectation that all those concerned need to implement their parts of the family plan within the agreed timescales and communicate and address any concerns which arise. The family will be asked to nominate a family member/friend, or ideally two people, who will take responsibility for informing the child’s allocated social worker if the plan is not working and/or needs some adjustment.

How does the Family Group Conference Plan (Family Plan) Integrate with any other Plan (Child Protection/Child in Need/Care or Pathway Plan)?

Where a Child Protection Plan is in place or is being considered, it is essential to discuss how the Family Plan will contribute to keeping the child safe and reduce the risks that have been identified in the Child Protection Plan.

The FGC does not remove or replace the need for Child Protection Conferences.

FGC's are family led meetings and not all professionals involved with the family need to or be invited to attend. For this reason, Core Group and Care Team Meetings remain separate to any FGC that is held.

The agreed Family Plan drawn up at the FGC is shared at the next multi-agency meeting / forum (e.g. Care Team/Core Group or Review). The child’s allocated social worker should encourage families to bring their plan to the meetings as part of the empowerment process.

The Family Plan drawn up at the FGC must be sent to the [IRO](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/indep_reviewing_officer.html) (and for CiN cases to the relevant Team Manager) so it can be included in the review of the CiN/Child Protection/ Care or Pathway Plan.

Family members who have agreed to monitor the Family Plan should be invited to Core Group/Care Team meetings and any CiN/CP/CiC review conferences to ensure that there is continuity between the two processes.

Where the FGC process uncovers new information that the child is suffering or likely to suffer [Significant Harm](http://trixresources.proceduresonline.com/nat_key/keywords/significant_harm.html) the co-ordinator must inform the child's social worker immediately.

Review of the Family Plan

A review date will be agreed at the FGC conference and is usually planned to be held no later than six weeks after the initial FGC. The review will be convened by the FGC co-ordinator and the child’s allocated social worker will be expected to attend. The date and time for this will be written into the Family Plan.

The review enables the family and the child’s allocated social worker to check out if the plan is working and to adjust the levels of support or resources necessary.

All families will be offered an opportunity to review the Family Plan but it is the family's decision as to whether a formal review takes place. Families may choose to review the plan themselves informally and will update the child’s allocated social worker on progress.

It is expected that the child’s allocated social worker will arrange to meet with the FGC Co-ordinator prior to the review meeting to give an update of the current situation and to advise whether there have been any significant changes since the initial meeting. If the initial Family Plan has not taken account of any significant changes identified since the last review then it may be that a review meeting is not appropriate and that a new referral to FGC to discuss new worries is required.

The review is arranged on the same principles as the original meeting, see above. It will be the responsibility of the child’s allocated social worker to update the family group at the Review about the current situation in relation to the child/young person or any significant changes which have occurred since the initial FGC.

Any changes to the Family Plan arising from the Review FGC will be agreed and circulated in the same way as the initial Family Plan.

In most circumstances one Review meeting will be offered to the Family, although there may be individual circumstances where further Reviews are appropriate/required. These situations will be discussed and agreed on a case by case basis.

Ending of Involvement

The FGC service’s involvement will end once the initial and any review FGC's have taken place.

Involvement will also end if:

* The referral has been assessed as inappropriate;
* The family withdrew or did not provide consent for the FGC to proceed/share information;
* A decision was made that it was inappropriate to proceed, for example, if safety issues were too great or holding an FGC was not in the best interests of the child.

Recording and Information Sharing

The FGC service's primary function is to facilitate the Family Group Conference and any recordings will be linked to this function. FGC Co-ordinators do NOT minute FGC's or keep detailed records of conversations or meetings with family members.

Any recordings will be held separately to the child’s social care records. A detailed record will only be made when information is given which relates to concerns for a child's or other person's safety. These records will be forwarded to the relevant social work team.

The child’s social worker will be responsible for recording their involvement with the FGC and the outcome of the conference. The child’s allocated social worker will be expected to record information on Carefirst/Totalview including the uploading of the Family Plan. It is the responsibility of the child’s allocated social worker to share all key documentation including relevant sections of the Family Plan, including with Children’s Guardians and the Court where this is relevant.