

What is a Family Group Conference?

A Family Group Conference (FGC) is a decision making 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 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 the referring agency provided it adequately addresses the concerns which the agency has 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 have a major influence on the plans that are made for him / her.

Referrals to the Family Group Conference Service

Referral for a Family Group Conference will require:

- Someone with parental responsibility 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 need to be considered.
- The existence of a network of Connected Persons. (This may include relatives, significant family, friends or community members). The network may not be immediately apparent and this should not prevent a referral being made.
- The need for a decision or a plan to be made to address specific concerns identified.
- The commitment of the family to find a solution to the concerns identified.

Referral for a FGC can come from either Children and Young People's Social Care (CYPSC) for children who are already part of a social worker/assistants caseload or from the Intensive Family Support Service.

Where a crisis or chronic situation has developed that could ultimately result in a referral being made to CYPSC or the child has needs as identified described within the Vulnerability and Risk Windscreen at Level Three.

Situations where a referral for a FGC should be considered include the following:

- Creation of a safe plan to avoid the need for a Child Protection Plan
- Following a Child Protection Conference to include wider family in the plan
- By notice, where Care Proceedings are being initiated in non acute situations, a FGC must be automatically explored with the family and discussed at any pre proceedings meetings (Pre PLO).
- Where there is a request for accommodation or respite care
- Where there is a negative outcome following a pre birth assessment
- Where there is an application for the discharge of a Care Order to bring a child home

There are some situations where A FGC is contra-indicated. These include:

- Where a family has a history of intergenerational Sexual Abuse.
- Where there is an on-going Section 47 Child Protection Enquiry.
- Where there is high risk of violence at the conference.

Each case would need to be discussed on its merits and through consultation with the relevant Social Work team manager, Children's Services Delivery Manager and the FGC team manager.

The Family Group Conference Co-ordinator

FGCs services will always be co-ordinated independently from the service or team which has concerns about the child's safety and wellbeing. The Co-ordinator is neutral i.e. that they have no case holding, statutory or decision making responsibilities in relation to the child. The 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 independent co-ordinator is vital in negotiating attendance 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. Written consent to hold the FGC will be obtained by the co-ordinator with the person with parental responsibility and the young person sufficiently capable of providing consent (Frazer Rule). No contact with any other family members can occur until this consent has been obtained.

The co-ordinator organises the meeting in conjunction with the child / young person and those with parental responsibility and / or immediate carers.. 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 co-ordinator will match them with an independent advocate. If the 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, their input to the meetings must be achieved in alternative ways, for example through letters or tape recordings. The grounds for exclusion must be clear and must be put in writing to the particular family member.

The co-ordinator liaises with the referrer 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 the agency's perspective.
- Services that could assist the child or family.

How does a Family Group Conference Plan Integrate with Child Protection Planning?

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

The Family Plan drawn up at the FGC must be sent to the Safeguarding IRO so it can be included in the review of the child protection plan.

Family members who have agreed to monitor the Family Plan should be invited to the child protection review conference to ensure that there is continuity between the two processes.

Where the FGC process uncovers new information that there is a risk of significant harm to the child, the co-ordinator must inform the child's social worker immediately. If the child does not have or was not referred by a social worker then a Request for Service must be made to CYPSC.

Stages of the Family Group Conference

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

Stage 1: Information giving

Professionals will not need to provide a written report but will be expected to provide a verbal contribution detailing the strengths of the family, issues of concern, services available and the "bottom line". Agencies 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 action will be taken if the family cannot make a plan or the plan is not agreed or agency concerns are not addressed in the plan. This could vary from 'remaining concerned' to evoking statutory powers such as an application for a care order.

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 co-ordinator and professionals withdraw from the meeting after the information sharing stage and professionals, apart from the referrer, 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.

Stage 3: Plan and Agreement

The family then produce their plan. The referrer and the co-ordinator meet with the family to discuss and agree the plan and negotiate resources. It is expected that the family plan is accepted by the

referring agency unless the issue of the child's safety and well-being has not been satisfactorily addressed and the child is deemed to be at risk of significant harm.

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.

Validation/presentation of the Plan

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

Distribution of the plan

The co-ordinator distributes the plan to all relevant agencies and the family within three days of the conference.

Implementation of the Plan

All those concerned need to implement their parts of the plan within 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 referrer if the plan is not working and / or needs adjustments.

Review of the Plan

A review date for the FGC will be agreed and is usually planned to be held no later than six weeks after the initial FGC.

The review enables the family and the referrer to check if the plan is working and to adjust the levels of support or resources necessary.

All families will be offered a review 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 workers on progress.

The FGC services involvement will end once the initial and 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.
- A decision was made that it was inappropriate to proceed i.e. if safety issues were too great.