

Family Group Conference

SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter outlines the purpose of Family Group Conferences, and how the process works.

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1. Introduction

A Family Group Conference is a family decision making and planning process, arranged and facilitated by the family group Conference team, based within Supporting Solutions Team. It is a voluntary process and families must agree to the referral before the referral can proceed.

Family Group Conferences are based on the principles of partnership and are a means of engaging and empowering families. They are designed to promote extended family ownership of problem solving and planning in the

best interests of their children, within a professionally supportive framework.

The process aims to make use of the family's strengths and resources and seeks to respect each family's own culture and values.

Family Group Conference processes actively seek the collaboration and leadership of family groups in devising and implementing plans that support the care, protection and well-being of the child or young person referred.

2.Aims of the Family Group Conference Service

- To try to prevent the need for children and young people to enter Local Authority care;
- To explore support and alternative care arrangements within the family, enabling children to remain in their family network so long as it is safe and in their best interests;
- To encourage and enable fuller and more meaningful participation by families in planning and empower them to take responsibility for the safe care of their children;
- To engage with parents, the wider family and community, including non-resident parents and relatives, with the aim of building long term supportive networks around families to improve their resilience and decrease dependency on public services;
- To ensure the child's views are heard;
- To ensure vulnerable family members are supported;
- To ensure that care proceedings are not initiated without consideration being given to the appropriateness of convening a Family Group Conference;
- To provide a flexible, accessible, cost effective and culturally sensitive service;
- To deliver good quality Family Group Conferences which families and young people tell us make a difference in their lives;
- To seek the child's views in ways appropriate to their age and understanding.

3. Referral criteria for the Family Group Conference Service

The service is targeted towards children, young people (aged 0-18) and their families. The service accepts referrals for:

- Children who are at risk of coming into local authority care;
- Children who have been taken into care on an emergency basis;
- Children who are in care and for whom an exit strategy or rehabilitation plan is needed;
- Children for whom a significant change in the Care Plan is proposed, which includes extended family. This does not include exploring contact.
- Children for whom Public Law Outline Processes have been instigated;
- Children in need including in need of receiving safeguarding support

It is important to appreciate that Family Group Conferences are not an emergency response. They are a planned process and the recommendation for a Family Group Conference should be made following an assessment of the case. The professionals involved should be clear about the desired outcomes and what options are not acceptable. The expected timescale for the process is 6 - 8 weeks from referral to the meeting.

4. Expectations of Participants Within the Family Group Conference Process

The Role of the Family:

- Attend Family Group Conference;
- Develop a workable plan;
- Write up the plan;
- Carry out and monitor the plan.

The Role of the Co-ordinator:

- Explore the wider family network;

- Meet with the young person to plan their participation;
- Convene the meeting;
- Encourage and support attendance at the meeting;
- Chair the information giving stage;
- Help clarify the plan;
- Enable the family to feedback the plan;
- Ensure review arrangements are made;

The Role of the Referrer:

- Refer to Family Group Conference Team;
- Attend the Family Group Conference to endorse the family plan;
- Provide clear information about concerns;
- Provide information about resources;
- Consider the plan developed by the family and monitor/review arrangements;
- Support the family to carry out the plan.

The Role of Other Professionals:

- Attend the initial part of the Family Group Conference;
- Provide information about their services;
- Implement their part of the plan;
- Be part of the monitoring arrangements.

5. Stages of the Family Group Conference Process

Stage One - Referral

Prior to making the referral the family should have been consulted and agreed to the referral being made. However referrals can be made when the family have disagreed and the Family Group Conference Facilitator can assist the Social Worker in attempting to engage the family.

A referral can be made by contacting Team Manager or Team Leaders via telephone or email. A short discussion will take place to establish the

purpose of the proposed referral and whether this would be appropriate for the service.

Once it is agreed the referral is appropriate, names and contact numbers for parents/carers with Parental Responsibility will be requested. Once consent form parent/carer is gained the referral will be progressed and allocated to a Family Group Conference Facilitator.

Contact details

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Stage Two – Referral Meeting

A referral meeting is held with the referring Social Worker and the Family Group Conference Facilitator which allows them the opportunity to clarify:

- The reason for referral – concerns and purpose of Family Group Conference
- Expectations/anxieties
- Roles and responsibilities

Facilitators can use this meeting to establish:

- Other agencies working with the family and their participation with the Family Group Conference if appropriate
- Where the Family Group Conference will occur in relation to other processes for example Child Protection Conferences, legal proceedings
- Any potential risks posed by family members
- Any upcoming unavailability from Social Worker for example leave/court attendance

Stage Three - Family Finding

Once the referral meeting has been completed the family finding process can begin. The Family Group Conference Facilitator will contact the person(s) with Parental Responsibility to discuss the referral. The first contact is important as it shapes perceptions and expectations. The following must be shared with the person(s) with Parental Responsibility and young person(s) identified;

- What is a Family Group Conference/Key stages of Family Group Conference
- The reason for the referral for Family Group Conference and who requested the Family Group Conference
- The importance and value of their involvement and contribution
- That the process will run to suit the needs of the family
- What are the responsibilities of the participants in the process, during and after the Family Group Conference.

The Facilitator will discuss 'Who is family' with the young person(s)/the person(s) with Parental Responsibility.

Every family is different and each family will define its own family in their own way. The role of the Facilitator is to explore and negotiate who is supportive to the process to attend. Once family has been identified the above information is shared with them.

A date and time is discussed with the family, Social Worker and set, the young person(s) will be supported by the Facilitator to arrange venue, invites and refreshments for the Family Group Conference.

Prior to the conference being convened the Social Worker will be expected to attend a preparation meeting with the Family Group Conference Facilitator to prepare for the Family Group Conference including discussion re: expectations and roles and issues raised during the family finding stage.

6. At the Conference

Stage One - Information Sharing

Introductions are made and the Social Worker will give an overview of the case and an update of the current situation. All information is shared with the family and the reason(s) for referral are discussed. This is often the critical stage as the family is given the factual information. It can result in the realisation that the situation is not how they have viewed it, or how members of the family have portrayed it.

This part of the conference is usually conducted in a straightforward approach with direct answers given to any questions that arise from the family. It is critical that the family are given the exact situation including the possible scenarios/consequences should there be no changes made. It is imperative because of the nature of the discussions that Social Worker have a clear understanding of the facts and are able to outline their stance and field any questions. The conference will be less successful if the information is confused or unclear. Therefore preparation is vital.

At times the content of the information shared can be cause for emotions to run high and occasionally people become aggressive. Any persons invited to the conference that are known to become aggressive when upset should be identified by the Social Worker or Family Group Conference Facilitator. While it is always a difficult situation this can be prepared for with seating arrangements etc. and the Facilitator can engage the participant beforehand to try and prevent the situation occurring. This reaction is not uncommon but can be managed effectively especially when planned for prior.

The information shared at the Family Group Conference is for the purpose of the development of a Family Group Conference Plan and it is not to be used for any other reason, unless it becomes evident the Young Person(s) are at immediate risk. It may also be necessary for family members to agree to the plan being presented should there be current court proceedings.

Stage Two - Family Time

The family is given private family time to debate and discuss the information they have heard, and devise a plan to address the concerns. They can ask for clarification from the Family Group Conference Facilitator and Social Worker but need to devise the plan without the inclusion of members from the wider group who could directly or indirectly impact on the plans development.

Stage Three - Agreement of the Plan

Once the family has developed a plan they meet back with the Facilitator and Social Worker and explain their plan. Any specific requests for services are confirmed; for example “the health visitor to visit on Wednesday mornings”, or “the Social Worker to visit weekly”.

It is not a time for making any fundamental changes to the plan. Once the plan is finalised, the Social Worker should agree the plan unless it places the Young Person(s) at risk or harm.

Stage Four - Implementation of the Plan

At this time arrangements are made for reviewing and monitoring. The family nominates the person/s who will monitor and review the plan. The plan monitor and Social Worker exchange contact details and agree when updates will be given. If the plan is authorised a copy is distributed to the participants.

7. Family Group Conference Review

A review of the Family Group Conference Plan will take place 4-8 weeks after the initial Family Group Conference to discuss how the plan is working and any adjustments that may be needed.

The review will be convened by the Facilitator in the same way as the initial Family Group Conference. The Social Worker is expected to attend throughout the Family Group Conference review.

8. Measuring the Outcomes and Benefits of Family Group Conferences

Outcomes for the young person are recorded after all initial and review Family Group Conferences and then further after a 3 and 6 month period after closure to establish the success of the Family Group Conference plans devised.