



Northumberland County Council



Family Group Decision Making Strategy

Introduction

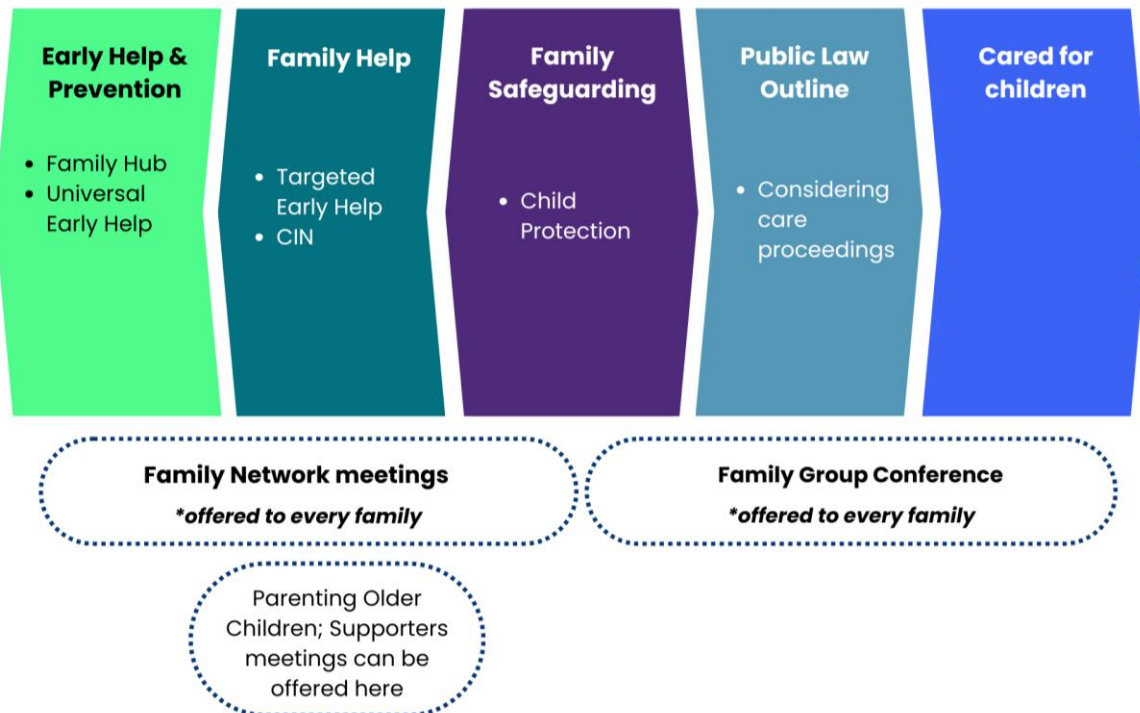
Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is an umbrella term for a range of approaches that place the family at the heart of decision-making for a child's care and safety. It is based on the belief that families are best placed to understand their own strengths, resources, and cultural values, and, with the right support, can create effective plans to safeguard and support their children.

FGDM approaches are increasingly recognised as effective tools for:

- Empowering families and communities.
- Increasing engagement and ownership of plans.
- Achieving better, more sustainable outcomes for children.

Northumberland Model of Practice – A Graduated Approach

Family Group Decision Making should begin at the very early stages of support to families, when professionals are identifying who is in the family and developing the genogram / ecomap. It is crucial that there is an early view of the family and community that is wider than the immediate family makeup.



There could be times when Family Group Decision Making is not appropriate. This could include:

- Where there is a known or suspected history of domestic abuse or intergenerational sexual abuse within the family network, and participation could place individuals at further risk or compromise their wellbeing.
- There is a high or imminent risk of violence, including situations where family dynamics, individual behaviours, or unresolved conflict are likely to escalate.

Decisions to proceed must be informed by:

- The specific context and dynamics of the family
- A robust, multi-agency risk assessment
- Clear measures to ensure physical, emotional, and psychological safety for all participants



Primary Tool: **Family Networks**

Supporting families to identify and use their own networks at the earliest opportunity is vital. Strong family networks create safety, stability, and sustainable outcomes for children and young people. Professionals should ensure family networks are a central part of Early Help and prevention planning.

Key Principles:

- Essential, not optional – Family networks should be embedded throughout the family's journey, not treated as an add-on.
- Empower families – Encourage families to identify and involve safe, trusted adults who can provide consistent support.
- Build resilience – Strong networks reduce reliance on statutory services and help families manage challenges independently.
- Promote stability – Keeping children connected to those who matter most ensures safety and long-term wellbeing.



Primary Tool: **Family Networks**

Family Network Meetings should be offered as standard to every family at every stage of their journey, starting from the earliest point of assessment. This includes situations where there are school concerns, risks outside the home, decisions about kinship care, relationship breakdowns, family time arrangements, and needs relating to disability, mental health, or substance misuse.

Offering Family Network Meetings routinely ensures that families have stable, consistent support throughout their involvement with services and beyond. The purpose is to prevent escalation by:

- Identifying safe adults who can play a role in the child's life.
- Building consistent support around the child and parents.
- Sharing worries and goals transparently so the network can respond.
- Ensuring there is a family network in place to support the child and family when social care is no longer involved with the family.

Secondary Tool: **NVR Supporters' Meeting**

Where the core issue is the behaviour of a child/young person, a Supporters' Meeting can be introduced by a trained practitioner. *(see below for further information)*



Primary Tool: **Family Group Conferencing (FGC)**

Family Group Conferencing is used when concerns have reached a level where families need a structured and independent process to mobilise their widest network and develop a safe, sustainable

plan for their children. FGC strengthens safety by ensuring that those who know the child best - not just professionals, take ownership of the solutions and share responsibility for keeping the child safe.

An FGC should be considered whenever:

- Risks remain despite earlier network-building work.
- Multiple agencies have differing views on the way forward.
- The family feels stuck, overwhelmed, or unable to agree internally.
- Decisions need to be made that will significantly affect a child's life, stability, or living arrangements.

In addition to this, a Family Group Conference (FGC) should be offered to every family prior to any legal planning meeting where a period of Public Law Outline (PLO) is being considered. Once the decision to enter the PLO process has been agreed at Legal Gateway Panel, the offer of an FGC will be revisited and progressed with the family wherever appropriate.

An FGC can reignite a stalled Family Network work by:

- Bringing in relatives or supporters who haven't yet been part of discussions.
- Giving the family "private time" to plan without professionals dominating.
- Resolving disputes between family members about the best way forward.
- Creating safe and robust plans for children to live with relatives, ensuring family-based care is prioritised wherever possible and reducing the need for formal care arrangements.



Primary Tool: **Family Group Conferencing (FGC)**

In addition to the above, an FGC can be held as part of a Cared For or Pathway Plan to:

- Support permanence and belonging by helping young people to identify and connect with important people in their lives.
- Strengthening and support reunification plans, where safe to do so, by identifying what needs to be in place for children to return home or move into the care of wider family members sustainably.
- Supporting care leavers to grow and maintain their networks, helping them build stable lifelong connections and practical support as they move into independence.

Northumberland's Graduated approach

1. Family Networks

Family Networks are the group of people who have a meaningful, positive connection to a child and can play an active role in ensuring their safety, stability, and well-being. This includes immediate family, extended family, friends, neighbours, and any other trusted adults in the child's life.

The core principle is that children are safer when they are surrounded by a strong, informed, and committed network of people who understand the worries, share the responsibility for keeping the child safe, and actively contribute to the solution.

The Family Networks approach aims to:

- Strengthen natural support systems so that children can remain safely within their family and community.
- Build resilience in the family by distributing responsibility and avoiding over-reliance on one or two individuals.
- Provide accountability through a clear plan that the whole network understands and agrees to.
- Prevent escalation of concerns by involving networks early and keeping them engaged throughout the process.

Core Elements of Family Network Practice include:

1. Mapping the Network
 - a. Practitioners work with the child, parents, and other key people to create a visual "network map" that shows who is connected to the child, what their relationship is, and how strong and safe that connection is.
 - b. Mapping is inclusive, aiming to identify all potential helpers, not just the obvious or immediate family members.
2. Building the Network

- a. Where gaps exist, the practitioner and family actively look for ways to reconnect with estranged relatives or identify new safe adults.
 - b. This may involve creative thinking, community connections, or culturally relevant approaches to re-establish relationships.
3. Sharing Worries and Goals
 - a. The family network is given a clear and honest picture of the professional concerns (using plain, non-judgmental language) and the goals for the child's safety and well-being.
 - b. This transparency ensures everyone is working from the same understanding.
4. Developing the Plan
 - a. The network collaborates to create a detailed plan for how they will keep the child safe, meet their needs, and respond if problems arise.
 - b. Plans are specific, practical, and measurable, and they outline who will do what, when, and how.
5. Monitoring and Reviewing
 - a. The network meets to review progress, address challenges, and adjust the plan if necessary.
 - b. The child's voice remains central throughout this process.

Practitioners:

- Facilitate conversations rather than directing decisions.
- Help families think broadly about who could be part of their network.
- Support honest discussions about strengths and worries.

Standard Operating Procedures for Family Networks have been developed to assist practitioners
[DRAFT Family Network SOPs.docx](#)

2. Family Group Conferencing (FGC)

FGC is a structured meeting where family members, extended kin, and other important people in a child's life come together to plan for the child's welfare. The process typically involves three stages:

Stage 1: Information sharing

This stage focusses on introductions, explanation and clarity around the meeting process (including the three stages) and ground rules. The referrer (or agency representative) will explain to everyone in attendance what their worries are for the child(ren)/young person, the family's strengths, what needs to change and within what timescales.

The referrer will also be very clear about what question(s) needs answered and any 'bottom lines or things that cannot be agreed on, as well as what resources could be available to support any developed plan.

It is important that the referrer explains to the family what will happen if the family cannot make a plan, or if the proposed plan is not agreed. All information should be shared with the family in a straight-forward non jargon way.

Principle: Families, children, and young people have a right to clear and relevant information to make informed decisions.

Stage 2: Private family time

The coordinator and referrer (and any other professionals) leave the meeting at this point, and the family are left alone to talk about the worries and come up with a plan. If an advocate is present to support the child/young person or parent, the person they are supporting will decide whether they remain in the meeting during this stage.

Principle: Private Family Time is foundational to family empowerment and builds on the belief that families know best how to solve their issues when supported to do so.

Stage 3: Agreeing and recording the Family Plan

The coordinator can support the family to record their plan if requested to do so by the family; however, this must be written in the family's own words. The family then presents their plan to the referrer including any request for resources and how the plan will be monitored. The referrer will be responsible for agreeing with the family's plan (and may need to consult with their managers before doing so).

There is an expectation that the family plan is agreed unless it does not meet the 'bottom lines', and it places the child at risk of significant harm. If a plan is not agreed this needs to be shared with the family straight away (including the reasons for this decision) so the family have an opportunity to change the plan.

Discussions are held around whether a Family Group Conference Review is needed, and this is ultimately the decision of the family.

Principle: The Family Plan belongs to the family. It must be accepted unless it places the child at risk of significant harm.

Stage 4: After the meeting

Following the Family Group Conference, the Family Plan will be captured in the family's preferred way (i.e photograph / voice recording / typed) and shared with all parties of the Family Group Conference.

Standard Operating Procedures for Family Group Conferencing have been developed to assist practitioners [FGC Standard Operating Procedures .docx](#)

Parenting Older Children; Supporter Meetings

In addition to the main approaches to FGDM, Northumberland's parenting offer for older children is based on the principles of Non-Violent Resistance.

Within this parenting and intervention approach, a Supporters' Meeting is a structured gathering where parents/carers invite trusted individuals from their personal networks to join them in supporting a child or young person who is displaying challenging, harmful, or controlling behaviours.

The purpose is to break the cycle of isolation often experienced by parents in these situations and to create a visible, reliable, and united network of adults who will:

- Offer emotional and practical support to the parents.
- Reinforce the boundaries and expectations set for the child.
- Help ensure the safety and well-being of everyone involved.

A Supporters' Meeting is not about shaming the child or criticising them in front of others. Instead, it aims to:

- Demonstrate solidarity with the parents so the child sees that the adults are united.
- Increase parental presence by ensuring more adults are aware of the difficulties and ready to help.
- Reduce secrecy and isolation, which can fuel controlling or harmful behaviours.
- Mobilise natural supports who can provide practical help, supervision, and encouragement.

The meeting is led by the trained Family Help Worker, together with the parents/carers. Attendees can include:

- Extended family members (grandparents, aunts/uncles, siblings).
- Trusted friends or neighbours.
- Teachers, youth workers, or community leaders who have a relationship with the child.
- Any adult the parents and practitioner agree can contribute positively.

The child or young person does not usually attend the first Supporters' Meeting. The aim is to prepare the adults to act in a coordinated way before the child becomes aware of the network's involvement.

Process of the Supporters' Meeting

1. Preparation

- a. The NVR practitioner helps the parents identify who might be supportive and safe to involve.
- b. Invitations are made personally, explaining the purpose of the meeting.
- c. The practitioner ensures all invitees understand confidentiality, boundaries, and the non-violent ethos.

2. Opening the Meeting

- a. The practitioner explains NVR principles: non-violence, resistance, presence, persistence, and reconciliation.
- b. The focus is on supporting the parents, not "fixing" the child directly in this setting.

3. Sharing the Concerns

- a. Parents describe the behaviours that are worrying them, using clear examples.
- b. The emphasis is on the impact of behaviours, not on labelling or blaming the child.

4. Agreeing Roles and Support

- a. The group agrees practical ways to help the parents, e.g.:
 - i. Being present in the home at key times.
 - ii. Checking in with the parents regularly.
 - iii. Offering respite.
 - iv. Reinforcing agreed messages when they see the child.
- b. The aim is to increase parental presence and to ensure consistent responses from all adults.

5. Solidarity Statement

- a. Often, the meeting concludes with a shared message that the parents will later communicate to the child, for example: *"We care about you, and we won't ignore harmful behaviour. We are all here to help you make positive changes."*

6. Follow-up

- a. The supporters maintain contact with the parents and the practitioner.
- b. Additional meetings can be arranged if needed to adjust the plan or address new challenges.