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CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SERVICES



GUIDANCE FOR USING FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES IN CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SERVICES

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GUIDANCE FOR USING FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES IN CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SERVICES

Using FGC to involve Families in decision-making for their children at risk of becoming Looked After

The Kent Family Group Conference Service is a part of the Kent County Council's (KCC) commitment to inclusive, empowering partnership practice by professionals who work with families. As part of KCC's Permanence Planning for children, it is the formal partnership that enables the professional systems to interact in an equal and respectful way with informal family and community systems. In Kent a Family Group Conference or FGC is offered to all families when the wellbeing of their child(ren) is of such serious concern that an alternative placement to the child(ren)'s current placement is being considered. Further information about the FGC model can be found on the [Kent Family Group Conference website](#).

The philosophy underpinning Family Group Conferencing is that:

- Children and young people are paramount to the FGC process.
- The family network is central to the FGC Process.
- FGC is family led decision making in partnership with formal systems.
- FGC is a safe, respectful and effective environment for all participants.
- Private family time is a vital element to FGC process.
- Families have the right to be involved in decisions that effect their children and that as long as the plan is safe for the child(ren) it should be fully resourced.

WHEN SHOULD I MAKE A REFERRAL?

In Kent, it is mandatory for **ALL** families where a child(ren) has been assessed by their Social Worker as being likely to come into the Public Care System, to be given the chance to plan for that child(ren) by means of a Family Group Conference. It is not obligatory for the family to have a FGC but they must be given the opportunity to consider having one, having first discussed the merits of doing so with a FGC Co-ordinator. It is not appropriate for the Social Worker to make this decision on behalf of the family. The Social Worker must advise the family that at this stage all families are offered the opportunity to have a FGC, that they are not obliged to have one, but tell them that a FGC Coordinator will advise them. A referral to FGC Service must be made, once referral criteria is met, and the minimum attempted contact between the FGC Co-ordinator and family members with parental responsibility is three visits or telephone calls. The role of the Social Worker at this point is to confirm with their supervisor that the family meets FGC criteria for referral and make a referral to Kent FGC Service via the Integrated Children's System (ICS).

You might also consider making a referral to comply with **Public Law Outline (PLO) Guidance**. Mandatory referral criteria for CSS teams remains 'all children assessed as likely to come into the Public Care System'

This could be accommodation on a voluntary basis (sec20) or via an interim or full Care Order (sec 31).

The impact of the PLO has been that referrals for children on the threshold of court proceedings are being referred earlier in the process. However, should a referral be made at LBP stage then consideration needs to be given to allowing sufficient time for a FGC to be convened and the plan to be implemented before application to court.

The PLO flowchart details various points at which referral to FGC can be made. It is important that a family that declines the opportunity of a FGC at an earlier stage in the process is not denied opportunity at later stages.

HOW DO I MAKE A REFERRAL?

The referring social worker, (having had agreement from their supervisor that the referral criteria is met), completes the '**FGC Referral Exemplar**' on ICS. This is the only means of making a referral for Children Social Services referrers. The exemplar is then signed off electronically by the supervisor before a workflow message will alert the FGC Team Leader that a referral has been made. This will need to be backed up by an email message from the referrer into the FGC Referral Inbox.

The referral exemplar on ICS includes the Referrer's Report which will be used at FGC, unless circumstances have changed significantly. It is therefore important that the Social Worker is mindful when writing the information about their concerns for child that the language is accessible to family members that will read it. If the information changes ahead of the FGC, the Social Worker will need to update the information on the Referral Exemplar as this will generate the report for the FGC. It is the Social Worker's responsibility to gain permission from family members with PR to share information with those attending the FGC and record that they have done so.

After the FGC, the FGC Co-ordinator will enter the Family's plan onto ICS which will then pre-populate future plans for the child across ICS.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The referral is allocated to a FGC Co-ordinator who will then contact you for further information, if necessary, and start making contact with family members, starting with those with PR and children and young people depending on age and maturity. The **FGC Co-ordinator will:**

- Inform all participants (family and professional) about the FGC Process and gain informed consent from the young person/family members with PR to go ahead.
- Gain clear understanding from the referrer as to the reasons for the FGC and establish common understanding between the young person, their family and Social Worker.
- Assist the family in identifying all significant people to invite to FGC. Please note that this goes beyond birth family and can include step family, extended family, friends and other significant relationships such as neighbours and church groups.

- Help all participants recognise the strengths and concerns within the family situation and assist the family to be able to vocalise what they might want from FGC.
- Work with the family to identify all potential resources, both within the family network and what might be offered by service providers, to assist their family situation and to be clear what resources are not available or not appropriate in providing a safe plan for the child(ren).
- Provide and prepare, if required, an advocate for a child, young person or vulnerable adult to enable that person to contribute fully to FGC process
- Work with all participants to prepare a safety plan for the FGC. The FGC Co-ordinator is responsible for the safety of all participants at FGC.
- Arrange a Pre-FGC meeting to discuss safety planning, resources and any non-negotiable restrictions on family plan
- Discuss and arrange the FGC meeting, including time, venue, transport, if required, childcare, if required, refreshments, how each participant will contribute to FGC. The FGC Co-ordinator has the final say in any excluding any participants from attending the FGC.

This **Preparation Stage** takes about 30 working days and is vital to the positive outcome of the FGC meeting. Some FGCs will take longer to get to FGC, for e.g. waiting on the availability of a key family member or the completion of an assessment. This can be frustrating but family led decision-making can only succeed if families are given the right information on which to make informed decisions.

WHAT DOES THE SOCIAL WORKER DO DURING THE PREPARATION STAGE?

The Social Worker will:

- Retain case responsibility for the child(ren)
- Continue their existing role with the child(ren) and keep the FGC Co-ordinator posted of any significant developments e.g. child becomes looked after, especially if there are safety implications e.g. violent family member is released from custody
- Be open with the family as to why the referral has been made to FGC, i.e., that concerns are so serious that the family might lose care of their children
- Present openly all of the issues that need to be addressed in the family plan and outline any non-negotiable points of safety
- Gain permission from the family members with PR to share information with other professionals and the wider family network
- Jointly work with the FGC Co-ordinator to secure a safety plan that will protect all participants at FGC.
- Respond in a timely manner to requests from FGC Co-ordinator for information, dates for Pre-FGC meeting and FGC meeting itself.
- Attend Pre-FGC meeting, with supervisor if necessary. Contribute to safety plan for the FGC and agree which of the four referral questions are key to this family making a safe plan (“Who can be the carer(s) for the child/ren or young person”; “Who will make sure this plan will happen”; “What would the back up plan be”: “What needs to happen to support this plan”). Depending on the family situation,

it may be helpful to sub-divide these questions by adding prompts e.g. who is to care for child(ren)? May need to be supplemented at FGC with more detail e.g. how will carer make sure child(ren) gets to school?

WHO DOES WHAT AT FGC?

It is the FGC Co-ordinator's responsibility to oversee a safe and effective meeting consisting of three stages; Information Giving Stage, Private Family Time and Negotiating and Agreeing the Plan.

The FGC Co-ordinator will:

At the Information Giving Stage:

- Set the context of the meeting (why we are here) and establish the format of the meeting, housekeeping and ground rules.
- Facilitate the sharing of all relevant information in a jargon free accessible manner
- Ensure that all participants but especially the child/young person is comfortable and that his/her voice is 'heard' at all times
- Intervenes and re-focuses the meeting where necessary
- Maintains safety at the meeting, even if this requires adjourning or stopping the meeting completely
- Prepares the family for private family time

During Private Family Time:

- Remain available for the family but not within the room
- Only interfere in Private Family Time if the family asks for further information or there is some concern about the safety of one or more participants
- Offer the Social worker/other professionals the opportunity to give feedback on their experience of Information Giving stage.

At the point of negotiating and agreeing the plan:

- Assist the family to present their plan, clarifying any ambiguous points and identifying any unmet needs of the child young person that might compromise their safety
- Confirms consensus within the family for the plan
- Helps provide a conducive environment for Social Worker to consider the plan e.g. provide the opportunity for Social Worker to discuss plan with supervisor
- Check availability of resources
- Identify who will monitor the plan
- Establish follow-up arrangements

WHAT DOES THE SOCIAL WORKER DO AT FGC?

At the information giving stage:

- Provide, clear, jargon free, accessible information that the family will understand
- Be clear about what the family's strengths are as well as the concerns for the child(ren) including any non-negotiable points of safety for the child(ren)
- Answer family members questions in an open and honest manner

During Private Family Time:

- The Social worker does not take part in Private Family Time, unless the family ask for further information so they still need to remain available

At the point of negotiating and agreeing the plan:

- Agree to implement the plan, unless it places the child(ren) at risk. Any decisions not agreed with must be made clear to the family and the reasons for not agreeing the plan must be shared with the family
- Agree to resource the plan and detail any restrictions/time delays
- Agree that family plans informs all other plans that child(ren) are subject to

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE FGC?

The FGC Co-ordinator will:

- Circulate the plan as agreed at FGC
- Record the plan on ICS
- Accept feedback/debrief participants as necessary
- Close referral/ withdraw from working with family until next FGC meeting is required when the process starts again

The Social Worker will:

- Implement the plan as agreed at FGC
- Resource the plan
- Adopt the plan as the agency plan and use it to inform all other planning systems that the child(ren) is subject to e.g. CP.
- Refer family back to FGC should any key element of the plan not be implemented