

Setting Standards in FGC practice - A peer led framework for the accreditation of FGC services in England

There has been a significant increase in the number of local authorities in England using FGCs in child welfare in recent years with 86% of local services now employing them. This growth in the use of FGCs has been supported by the government and FGCs have been identified as a good practice model in various policy documents. However, standards in the delivery of FGCs vary and this variation in practice has become more acute as some local authorities seek ways to make savings by cutting corners and compromising the basic values upon which the approach is predicated.

In 2011 Family Rights Group obtained funding from the Department for Education to develop a framework for the accreditation of family group conference services. The development of the accreditation framework was led by a group with representatives from all FGC regional networks in England and also from the Welsh FGC network. The resulting framework was trialled in 15 local authority settings and evaluated by Dr Louise Brown, Bath University. This work was completed in 2013 and the accreditation framework has subsequently been rolled out to other FGC services. There are now 33 FGC services that are accredited or in the process of becoming accredited. Many of these are now ready to be reaccredited.

The framework is intended to address fundamental and interlinked factors in FGC service delivery:

- to give clear guidance as to how services should operate
- to provide a straightforward framework against which a service can be measured
- and to provide a degree of external scrutiny of practice.

Who is the FGC accreditation framework aimed at?

The accreditation framework is aimed at all those who have a stake in the delivery of effective family group conferences. This includes:

FGC managers - it provides a clear set of measurable minimum standards for FGC services, which if met, will enable services to feel confident that they are providing a good service.

For those commissioning family group conference services - it sets out what the minimum requirements that they can expect from FGC providers to guarantee a high quality FGC service. Currently in England about a third of services are commissioned from independent providers. Accreditation provides reassurance to commissioners, for inspectors such as Ofsted and

other stakeholders, such as judges, that the FGC service is operating to a recognised standard.

For families and young people who are the recipients of FGC services – it provides clarity as to what they can expect from an FGC service. Accreditation provides a benchmark of quality for families and should drive up consistent standards, improving children and families' experiences and outcomes from FGCs.

What does the framework include?

The framework draws together a number of elements, encompassing:

- a) A set of agreed standards;
- b) expectations for the training and ongoing support of FGC co-ordinators;
- c) a peer led framework

How does it work?

FGC services that submit their service to be accredited provide a portfolio of evidence of their practice against a set of agreed standards in addition to information about how their co-ordinators are trained and supported in their practice.

They also provide the names of family members, young people, referrers and co-ordinators who can be contacted to comment on the service.

This portfolio of evidence is assessed and scored by an independent assessor and this assessment is then considered by a panel comprised of two FGC managers from accredited services that meet with the assessor to review the portfolio. The panel may, where necessary require further actions that the FGC service should address before the service is accredited. The process results in a report for the service identifying required actions, recommended actions and any identified good practice.

About the standards

The FGC standards have been developed to assist families as well as professionals to understand what a family group conference is and what to expect if involved in one. They identify the basic requirements that can be expected from those delivering family group conferences.

An FGC service that successfully applies to be accredited is making a clear pledge as to how it will operate and to which it can be held accountable. The standards draw on current practice and learning in the UK and internationally.

THE STANDARDS

STANDARD 1. The FGC co-ordinator is independent

The FGC Co-ordinator is always independent of any agency involvement with the family, for example in terms of family support or child protection case management.

STANDARD 2. The FGC should respect the family's consent to proceed

Participation in an FGC is a voluntary process for the child/ young person/vulnerable adult and all family members involved. How the process is managed needs to respect the rights of family members to consent or not to the process

STANDARD 3. The FGC should be family led and include 'private time' for the family to make a plan in response to concerns.

Private time for the family is an essential part of the family group conference process.

STANDARD 4. The central focus should be the child or adult who is the subject of the FGC and they should be offered support in their involvement including an advocate.

Children, young people and vulnerable adults are at the centre of the decision making process and have the right for their voices to be heard and to be supported in achieving this, including being offered an advocate.

STANDARD 5. The FGC service should ensure that the family has all necessary resources, including adequate preparation, relevant information, and a safe and appropriate environment to make its plan

Families need the right information and resources to be able to effectively use the family group conference process.

STANDARD 6. The FGC should respect the family's privacy and right to confidentiality

The FGC project should respect the privacy of the child and their family through the FGC process (unless there is new disclosure that a child or adult is at significant risk).

STANDARD 7. The FGC should be sensitive to the family's culture taking account of ethnicity, language and religion.

Each family is unique. The process of the FGC should reflect and respect the culture and specific needs and circumstances of the family and be driven by them.

What are the expectations for how co-ordinators are trained?

In order for FGC services to be accredited they will also need to demonstrate that the training their co-ordinators have received is of a satisfactory standard, usually that the training has been independently accredited or approved or if not, that it meets similar standards to those that have been. Information for how FRG can approve training that is to be delivered can be found on the FRG website. This includes that:

- At least one of the trainers delivering the course is able to demonstrate sufficient experience and skills in FGC practice.
- That it incorporates the views of service users;
- that all participants will receive a copy of the FGC toolkit¹; or similarly approved manual
- that it sets a minimum of 18 hours of engagement time with trainees ideally over a period of 3 days;
- there should be a ratio of no more than 15 students to each trainer;
- that training should include a range of teaching methods;
- that it uses consistent evaluation forms,
- That participants receive a certificate in order for them to be able to evidence this at a later date.

Work based assessment of competence

In developing the accreditation framework we reached the view that a participant's engagement in initial training is not sufficient guarantee as to their competence to practice and that there needs to be a more robust practice based measure which includes an informed judgement about a person's direct practice.

FGC services are therefore required to evidence that new co-ordinators undertake work based assessment prior to taking on direct work. The requirements for work based assessment include:

- That the new co-ordinator shadows and works collaboratively with an experienced co-ordinator.

¹ The Family Group Conference Toolkit – a practical guide to setting up and running a Family Group Conference service. Ashley et al FRG 2006

- That their practice isn't observed by the FGC manager or an experienced FGC co-ordinator
- That there is an ongoing annual assessment of practice

Co-ordinators are required to have their line manager 'sign off' this process acknowledging that they have undertaken this induction and have the required skills to practice.

How has the accreditation framework benefitted FGC services?

- ***It has helped to identify areas of practice that require support both for individual services but also across all FGC services.*** Because each individual standard is scored this enables an overview of where the strengths and weaknesses are in FGC practice across the accredited services.

As a result FRG has been able to target training and support through the FGC network to address shortcomings and to celebrate good practice.

- ***It has increased the profile and support for FGC services locally.*** Achieving the accreditation enables the service to promote itself as being of a recognised quality to other stakeholders including those referring to the service and to families receiving the service. This adds confidence to those using FGCs and credibility to the plans that result.
- ***It has established a framework for service improvement.*** When services are re-assessed this enables services to demonstrate whether there have been improvements in areas where the need to improve was identified.
- ***It also provides a benchmark for how the service should operate*** and helps the service to resist pressures to take shortcuts in how FGCs operate. For newly established services the framework sets expectations for how they should plan to develop. For commissioners of FGC services it helps to give a coherent framework for what they should expect of services that they commission.

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