



FAMILY RIGHTS GROUP
Keeping children safe in their families



Heather and Sarah's Lifelong Links story

"It was really, really cool just to know there's a whole other side of my family that I've never met."

Family Group Conference (FGC)

This is a process led by family members to plan and make decisions for and with a child. It is often used to address child welfare concerns.

Lifelong Links

Is for children in care, working with them, to help identify and find relatives or other supportive adults, in order to build a lasting support network for the child or young person.

Heather and Sarah were in the care of their mother until the ages of 11 and nine respectively. Sarah has significant learning difficulties and was (at the time of coming into care) described by the foster carer as functioning at a much younger age than nine years. Their older sister, Natasha remained with their mother, Helen, because Natasha was nearly an adult at the time. Problems began at home when their mother's new partner became domestically abusive and Helen began misusing drugs and alcohol. Heather and Sarah were very close to their mother and maternal family however they became disconnected from them and their sister Natasha when they came into care. Heather and Sarah had minimal contact with their father and paternal family prior to being placed in foster care and no contact at all once in care.

When Heather and Sarah came into care they were placed with carers, Abbie and Tom, who were new to fostering. Although contact with their mother was arranged, Helen often did not attend, leaving

Sarah and Heather disappointed, sad and bereft of family contact.

Sarah and Heather had other family living nearby but didn't have any contact with them, although they saw Natasha in the community once or twice by coincidence. The sisters were upset by the lack of family contact.

When the idea of Lifelong Links was presented to Heather she was eager to give it a go. Due to her additional needs, Sarah had a different social worker and was not initially included in the Lifelong Links referral. Although they were doing well in their foster placement and things were stable, Heather was keen to reconnect with family after more than five years of minimal or no contact.

Whilst supportive, Abbie and Tom were concerned Lifelong Links could be disruptive for Heather and Sarah given how settled they were and they did not want the girls to experience any further disappointment.

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News from around the FGC & Lifelong Links network



Quotes from recent Ofsted inspection reports about family group conferences

"Family group conferences are used effectively and help with very early identification of extended family and friends as part of the safety plan for children."

Hillingdon

Ofsted inspection report (2018)

"There is a strong focus on placement within children's own families. Increasingly, family group conferences are used to identify members of the wider family. This is resulting in children living within their extended family where it is safe to do so... this is improving children's support networks."

Hartlepool

Ofsted inspection report (2018)

Congratulations to Kathy Nuza and the Lifelong Links team at Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea who held their first Lifelong Links FGC only a couple of months after joining the Lifelong Links trial! They were closely followed by Aida Dugandzic and the team at Westminster City Council who held their first Lifelong Links FGC just a few weeks later!

We are pleased to announce that Leeds City Council will be joining the Lifelong Links trial. We are looking forward to working together!

Dates for the diary

FGC network

18th September, Cambridge

Family Group Conferences and domestic violence - learning from the Leeds experience

4th December 2019, London

FGCs and the Legal Framework

FGC training

10th - 12th September 2019

10th - 12th December 2019

To book go online at
www.frg.org.uk/training

Heather and Sarah's story continued

Sarah was later included in the Lifelong Links referral by her social worker who felt she would now benefit from the service. Sarah had made progress in her time in care and her developmental functioning has improved significantly. Jo, their Lifelong Links coordinator, was able to adapt the activities to include both sisters.

In preparation for their Lifelong Links family group conferences (FGCs) Heather and Sarah were supported by Jo to explore their networks, and identify who and what was important to them. Jo helped the sisters make collages of photographs of the two girls so that their family would be able to see the years they had missed. Jo also worked with Heather and Sarah to complete mobility maps and the Social Connections Tool. Jo found a large family network and met with them in preparation for the Lifelong Links FGC. Jo helped the family to understand how things had been for Heather and Sarah and what their hopes were for the future.

With the help of Jo, the coordinator, and the family network, it was decided to have two Lifelong Links FGCs for Heather and Sarah, with the maternal and paternal sides of the family meeting separately. There were 17 people in attendance at the maternal and

21 at the paternal FGC. Heather and Sarah shared their photo collages and had copies so family members could go home with the photos. Heather was particularly pleased that the family network could meet the foster carers and everyone could put faces to names. Jo also provided flipchart paper so that family members could write messages to Heather and Sarah that they were able to keep following the FGCs and have reminders of their family's love and care for them.

Heather said of the paternal family found in the Lifelong Links process: *"it was really, really cool just to know there's a whole other side of my family that I've never met."*

Heather reflected on previously receiving vouchers or generic gifts from family because they did not know enough about her to choose a more personal gift. Heather said, *"even the simple things like that, I think it's important."*

Heather and Sarah now have a lasting plan of support in place that includes visits to family and how they can remain in touch.

Within the first two months since the Lifelong Links process Heather has described an increased sense of identity and belonging with her family. Heather noted *"we are natural here [in foster care]*

but our actual selves are who we are with our family." Through the process, Heather discovered interests and hobbies she has in common with family members that can be shared going forward. Heather and Sarah are also now in contact with their father who visits with the supervision of their foster carers.

Heather's social worker said, *"This process has shown them that there are no great barriers between foster family life and birth family life. Heather specifically feels more heard and supported... It is a huge success story. I found the process seamless and supportive, a lot more than I thought it could be. It was very child centred."* The social worker also noted *"I thought Sarah would be overwhelmed and not understand. It was a success for them both."*

When discussing Lifelong Links going forward, Abbie noted *"Their time in care would be helped and supported by having contact with family"* and said she hoped it would be available early in a child's time in care.

*by Alexandra Ryan
Development Officer
Family Rights Group*



It takes two... *working in partnership*

Kent County Council and Edinburgh City Council are both part of the Lifelong Links trial. They recently worked closely together to ensure that a young person and his father were reunited in a way which was sensitive to both individuals' needs.

Connor* is a child in care in Kent, England. His father lives in Scotland. Lifelong Links coordinators Louise (Kent County Council) and Anne (Edinburgh City Council) explain how they worked together.

Louise: Connor said there was no-one he was interested in seeing but agreed to let me explore his family history. I drew up the maternal family tree with his mother and her father (who had recently reconnected). Connor's dad, Chris*, lives in Scotland and was himself brought up in care. Connor said his dad would start crying if I spoke about his family, so I felt a face-to-face meeting was needed.

I approached Edinburgh's Family Group Decision Making team to explore whether they would be able to help out by meeting with Chris and by exploring Connor's paternal family with him. Fortunately Edinburgh didn't hesitate to say yes!

Anne: There was no hesitation on our part. Louise had been in touch with Chris who consented to sharing relevant information and a meeting was arranged.

When we met I sensed how nervous he was but in true Family Group Decision Making style, coffee and cake settled the nerves. However, whilst fetching refreshments we both got locked in the meeting room as the door had jammed! Always a good ice breaker!

Chris talked about his background and shared his upset about not seeing Connor. Since moving to Edinburgh they had not seen each other and this was something they both really wanted to change.

We completed a timeline of Chris's life and family tree and he also wrote down his thoughts about future contact with Connor. We agreed that I would send what we had written to Louise with a present that Chris had bought for Connor.

Chris was grateful to tell his story and said "*anything that helps Connor and if this helps us see each other, then great.*"

Louise: Connor wanted to see his dad and we brought them together at a Lifelong Links family group conference.

It was important that a direct connection was made before the meeting. Chris had said that the last time he saw Connor he had not wanted to leave him and he hadn't seen Connor in about seven years. This would be emotional for them both.

Chris made the journey by air from Edinburgh to Kent and back in one (long) day. The social work team were great. They knew how important it was and no one wanted this to be a one off. They looked at how they could support Connor to see his father regularly and brought this to the meeting.

Connor had slept very badly the night before as he was excited, nervous and very keen to see his dad – his foster carer said he was "*chomping at the bit*".

The meeting was a powerful experience for them both. Connor and his dad had an emotional reunion, made future plans and spent time together. Regular visits were planned and the foster carers are a huge support with this.

Chris said that he felt over the moon and really emotional – in a good way! Connor said he was pleased to know he would now see his dad.

**names have been changed*

by Anne, Lifelong Links coordinator (Edinburgh) and Louise, Lifelong Links coordinator (Kent)

Lifelong Links have a day out in parliament...



Isabelle Trowler

On the 26th June 2019 Family Rights Group held an event in the Jubilee Room at Westminster. The event was to mark two years of Lifelong Links and to hear about the impact that has already been made.

Family Rights Group is very thankful to all the speakers: Dr Lisa Holmes (Rees Centre), Isabelle Trowler (Chief Social Worker), Nadhim Zahawi MP (Children and Families Minister), Stuart Carlton (Director of Children's Services, North Yorkshire) and Lord Farmer. The stand out speaker, however, was a young woman from Devon. At 16 years old she spoke honestly and eloquently about what it was like to go through Lifelong Links. She now has a stable and extended support network and has the feeling of security that comes with that, something which had been alien to her before *"if I do something wrong now, I know they'll still be there, that I'll still have someone"*.



Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive of Family Rights Group, addresses the audience



Alasdair Smith (London Borough of Southwark), Elaine Allegretti (London Borough of Barking & Dagenham) and Rachael Wardell (London Borough of Merton)



Nadhim Zahawi MP, Children and Families Minister

Accreditation of family group conference services

Since 2011, Family Rights Group (FRG) has accredited more than 30 family group conference (FGC) services across England, Scotland and Wales.

What is accreditation aiming to achieve?

The accreditation framework sets out the minimum requirements for an FGC service to be accredited in order to:

- Give clear guidance as to how services should operate;
- Provide a straightforward means against which a service's quality can be measured;
- Provide a degree of external scrutiny of practice;
- Give recognition to quality services.

The framework draws together a number of elements, encompassing:

- A set of standards and
- Expectations about the training and support of FGC coordinators.

It sets out how FRG shall oversee and administer the accreditation of FGC services.

Requirements of FGC services being accredited

FGC services should provide evidence and information concerning:

1. Standards: how they meet the standards;
2. Coordinator practice and training: how they have assessed coordinators' practice;
3. Stakeholder contacts: information for the assessor to contact those able to comment on the service.

Recently FRG undertook a review of the accreditation reports to date to gain a deeper understanding of where FGC services tend to score well and where there are issues with FGC model fidelity. Of the 27 services examined, 67% were accredited on their first submission and 33% were not. Services that did not gain accreditation were

encouraged to resubmit their accreditation portfolios once they have addressed the practice concerns raised. Of the services that resubmitted their accreditation portfolios, all subsequently passed except one service.

The accreditation review revealed areas of good practice and innovation and those where FGC services tend to struggle.

Five services scored less than 70% for standard one (independence of the FGC coordinator) and did not get accredited on their first submission. Independence is demonstrated not only in policy and procedure but also in leaflets and literature available for service users. Standard two (the FGC should respect the family's consent to proceed) is the area where most services struggle. FGC services tended to lack evidence to demonstrate how consent was obtained and reaffirmed throughout the FGC process. For standard four (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), 63% of FGC services failed to demonstrate the use of advocacy in both practice and policy.

The two areas where there were the lowest scores were 2.1 (the coordinator will ensure that there is informed consent given by an appropriate person with the legal authority to agree to have the FGC and that there is understanding that this consent can be withdrawn) and 5.6 (families have the right to have safe plans agreed and resourced. If there is to be a delay in agreeing the plan, the family need to be informed of the reasons and a timescale agreed). For 2.1 81% of services received feedback for improvement and for 5.6 75% of services received feedback for improvement.

The FGC accreditation process has received positive feedback from participants and is a mark

of quality for FGC services. FRG are currently developing an accreditation process for services offering Lifelong Links. To learn more about FGC accreditation please see the FRG website: <https://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences/fgc-standards-and-accreditation>

To apply for your FGC service to be accredited or reaccredited, or if you have any questions about the process please visit [frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences/fgc-standards-and-accreditation](https://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences/fgc-standards-and-accreditation) or email FRG on office@frg.org.uk.

Accreditation* costs from Nov 2018 - March 2020

Accreditation lasts for 3 years

SIZE OF SERVICE	ONE OFF FEE	
	NON NETWORK MEMBERS	NETWORK MEMBERS
SMALL (under 40 FGCs a year)	£850	£550
MEDIUM (40-99 FGCs a year)	£1050	£700
LARGE (99 plus FGCs a year)	£1300	£875
RE-SUBMISSION FEE	£300	£250

**Costs will be reviewed in April 2020 following consultation with network members*

STANDARD ONE

The FGC coordinator is independent.

STANDARD TWO

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

STANDARD THREE

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

STANDARD FOUR

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.

STANDARD FIVE

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.

STANDARD SIX

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

STANDARD SEVEN

The FGC should be sensitive to the family's culture including their ethnicity, language and religion.

Family group conferences for families affected by prison

The Cwlwm Family Group Conference service in North Wales recently partnered with the North Wales Women's Centre to make a joint bid to the Police and Crime Commissioner's Fund to work with families affected by prison, or those families at risk of being affected by prison.

The bid was successful and the provision was made available in December 2018. The North Wales Women's Centre along with DASU, a local domestic violence charity provide support for managing emotions, confidence building, ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) recovery and counselling.

Although the Cwlwm FGC service is not restricted in which family member it can work with, we decided to start with mothers, due to the high numbers of children who have to move from their family home if their mother receives a custodial sentence, The Howard League for penal reform (2016) reported '*Only five per cent of children remain in their own home once their mother has been sentenced*'¹.

Cwlwm set up a monthly drop in at Styal Prison in Manchester, the nearest women's prison to North Wales and are working closely with the resettlement officer for Wales in order to raise awareness of the service. Cwlwm is currently working with women who are on a 12 week pathway to release. Although this is the main source of referrals, Cwlwm can take referrals from anyone working with a family affected by, or at risk of being affected by prison. We hope later this year to begin a similar pattern of working with fathers about to be released from Berwyn prison in Wrexham.

Since taking the first referral in late December 2018, there have had seven referrals, two of which have resulted in an FGC and one review. Both of these FGCs focused on how the family could support the mother and children to have contact whilst still adhering to conditions set by probation. Three of the referrals are ongoing and two have closed without a meeting but in one of these cases communication between a mother and her teenage son was facilitated.

One of the key factors so far has been a good relationship with the prison resettlement officer, this has allowed Cwlwm access to all eligible women. It has also been very helpful that the local probation service has been supportive and willing partners in the process.

It's too soon to reflect on any success but the feedback so far has been very positive and for some mothers just the chance to talk about their children and be acknowledged as a parent has been beneficial and Cwlwm hope it can contribute to improved mental health.

by Maureen Japp
Project Manager at Y Bont
www.bont.org.uk

¹Mothers in prison: The sentencing of mothers and the rights of the child. Rona Epstein, Coventry University. Howard League What is Justice? 2016.

Family group conferences - a New Zealander's perspective

It has been 30 years since New Zealand (NZ) introduced Family Group Conferences (FGCs). It is “our gift” to the world. I was raised to know who I am and where I come from, it’s what we call “*whakapapa*” (genealogy). I now sit at a desk in England, where I work as a FGC coordinator, my year abroad coming to an end, reflecting on my experience.

To understand FGC practice in NZ requires an understanding of our history, our culture, the process of colonisation and the State’s relationship with Māori. When I look back on the genesis of FGCs it was the 1988 report Puao-te-Ata-tu that influenced a shift in how the State would work “with” Māori by seemingly “sharing” some of its power by including whānau, hapū (sub-tribe) and iwi (wider tribe) in decisions affecting children. Puao-te-Ata-tu highlighted institutional racism and identified that a key issue was a “*profound misunderstanding or ignorance of the place of the child in Māori society and its relationship with whānau, hapū, iwi structures*”. For Māori, knowing our whakapapa gives us strength, it is our connection to the land, our whānau, our tipuna (ancestors), our culture, our spirituality and most importantly, it is our identity. Just 30 years ago, the state had the ability to remove children without even thinking about this.

I come from a country where FGCs are legislated, professionals are compelled at a statutory level to work in partnership with tamariki (children) and whānau (family). At the centre of this, is the issue of power and who holds it. It is the State’s ability to use coercive power to intervene when there are serious concerns about the safety and wellbeing of children within their family. The most invasive “right”, is the ability to remove children from their family. My experience has led me to consider that there are significant differences between countries as to how the power between practitioners, children and families is shared.

FGC model and the principles and values are the same, wherever you go. I like to think that

all coordinators strive to practice in the spirit that gives life to FGCs. What has stuck out for me is the significance of how the social and political environment, in any country, can shape the development and evolution of FGC services. In order to be effective FGCs have to be sufficiently resourced and, the professionals involved, particularly managers and social workers need to believe that families are capable of change. They also need to be willing to work “with” them, rather than “against” them or doing “to” them.

I have had many magical moments in the UK doing advocacy work. I have switched from coordinator and supported people to share their voice at their FGC. I have helped draw pictures, used toy monsters, made dragons out of cardboard, played Mr Wolf and chatted over coffee to explore thoughts, dreams and hopes. I have been privileged to witness people light up and shift consciousness when hearing someone’s voice for the first time. I previously questioned the need for independent advocates, now I leave convinced that this is the way forward for supporting tamariki (children) and whānau back home.

I have always found the concept of “independence” challenging. How can anyone be truly independent? In NZ I sat in an office with social workers and it was normal practice to use social care venues for meetings. Looking back, I cringe at what this picture may have looked like whilst trying to convince someone on the other end that I am “independent”. I appreciate the significance of small things like this and how this can impact on our endeavours to remain independent.

As I prepare to leave my team and return home, I have filled my kete (basket) with knowledge and hopefully I have shared with others here. I will take what I have learnt home to continue to shape and develop FGCs.

by Christine McGhee
FGC coordinator in Devon (via New Zealand)

Family group conferences in Europe

ERASMUS + project



Cathy Ashley discussing Lifelong Links in Bordeaux

Whilst the country is embroiled in endless discussions about our relationship with the rest of Europe, family group conference practitioners have been collaborating across European borders to share knowledge and understanding.

In April, we had the concluding Erasmus FGC event in Bordeaux, south-west France. This followed earlier events in Leeds, Berlin in Germany and Sofia in Bulgaria. The purpose of the work has been to share FGC practice across the four countries but particularly to assist with the establishment of family group conferences in France. This work culminated with this event in Bordeaux which was attended by 300 French social workers.

The project has been hugely successful. We heard about FGCs being set up in different regions of France as well as the establishment of a fledgling French national FGC network. FGCs are now operating in the Gironde region, a vast area with Bordeaux as its municipal centre, in the County

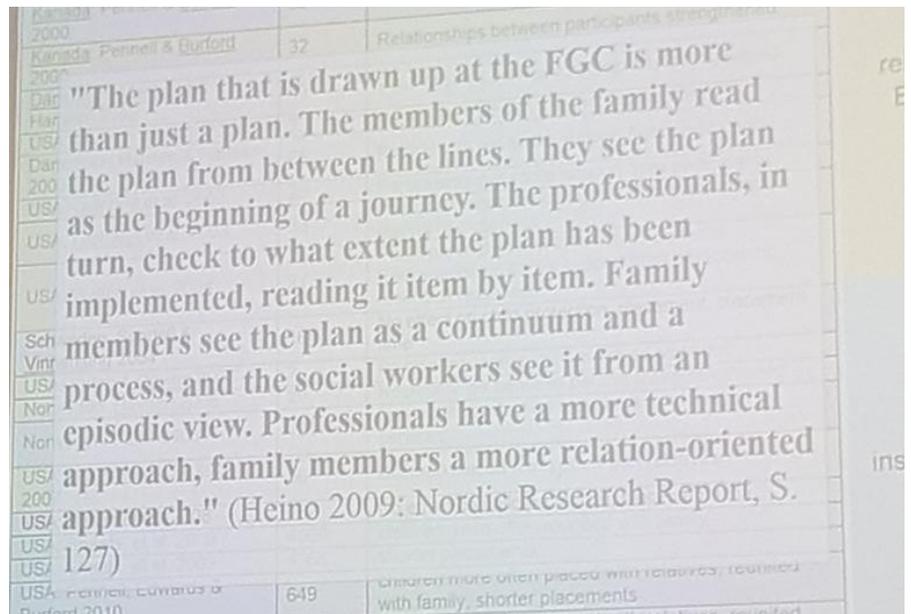
Council of Nord which includes Dunkirk (nearer to Kent than Bordeaux!), and in the County Council of Ardeche.

Participants from the four countries presented at the Bordeaux conference and contributed to discussions concerning practice in their respective jurisdictions. Family Rights Group presented information at the event about Lifelong Links and FGC accreditation. The Tulip foundation based in Sofia presented information about FGC work with the Roma community, and our colleagues from Neukölln in Berlin talked about their 'Personal Future Planning' project which uses very accessible and visual ways of planning with young people with learning difficulties.

We heard research contributions from Dr Mary Mitchell, Edinburgh University, from Marie-Pierre Auger, a doctoral student at the University of Paris, and from Prof. Galina Markova, Director of the Know-How Centre for Alternative Childcare, New Bulgarian University. Also attending in Bordeaux was a colleague from Leeds FGC service.

The French social workers who attended were generally very inspired and enthused with the idea of FGCs and the event overall should serve as a good platform for further developments of FGCs in France. This work continues with the final production of a good practice guide summarising the learning from each of the participating countries.

*by Sean Haresnape
Lifelong Links and FGC Practice lead*



Photographs of the Erasmus journey (clockwise from top left) the attendees in Leeds, some of the materials produced, presents from Berlin, presentation in Berlin, Sofia in the glorious sunshine and discussing and exchanging ideas in Bordeaux.

Edinburgh develops family group conferences (FGC) in adult social care

The City of Edinburgh has had a children and families FGC service for 17 years and currently has a staff team of 18 coordinators.

In 2014 the service, inspired by examples from the Netherlands, Camden Council and Daybreak, decided to scope out the fit for adult FGCs across the Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership. Enthusiasm was built as Health and Social Care (H&SC) recognised the benefits FGCs could bring to their practice. In May 2017, funding was made available for two years to identify what difference FGCs could bring to the delivery of social care services.

In September 2017, the team recruited one part-time team leader and three coordinators. The team leader and one of the coordinators are experienced coordinators for the children's service team. The other two coordinators have considerable experience in H&SC as a sector senior social worker and mental

health/substances misuse worker. All the staff are experienced social workers. This combination of skill sets has allowed the project to demonstrate a knowledge base in both the policy and procedures of H&SC but also philosophy and practice of the FGC model, which has greatly added to the development of the service.

A key challenge has been promoting and developing an understanding of FGCs and its relationship to practice with H&SC staff. We have undertaken over 90 presentations to a variety of professionals including social work teams, occupational therapists and psychologist based within community teams, hospitals and the third sector.

We have established a practitioners' champions group and engaged in discussion with senior managers which has led to an increase in the quality of referrals but there remains scope to improve the timing of when

they are received.

The referral criteria for the service is deliberately wide to enable exploration of where the model fits best and where there may be challenges to implementation. Referrals are taken from across health and social care services along with self-referrals. The response has been positive with a breadth of referrals from a wide range of organisations within health and social care.

Edinburgh Health and Social Care partnership is at the point of introducing the Three Conversations model. This will be transformative in moving the partnership towards a strength based approach to practice which seeks to build on existing community resource and move away from reliance on formal services. The Edinburgh FGC service is being considered as part of this transformation and ongoing funding will be decided in September 2019.

Initial findings suggest the following areas where FGC can be most effective;

- Decreasing carer stress with plans produced to make them feel more supported and less isolated.
- To support measures contained within the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 including the duty for local authorities to provide information and advice to carers and to support emergency and future planning.
- Emergency support planning for carers.
- Plans that tap into the strengths of the network resulting in the need for less formal care.
- The whole network being involved in end of life planning.
- Family and networks involved in supporting recovery from mental health and or substance use problems.
- Cost saving associated with reduced service delivery or hospital/care admissions.
- An FGC can reconnect socially isolated people with their social networks.
- As an established decision-making model, FGC has the potential to deliver on broader contemporary legal imperatives to develop forms of support-decision making, consistent with The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) article (12(2)), the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act: proposals for reform and the review of the Mental Health Act (Scottish Government 2019).

President of the Family Division launches public law consultation - we encourage your response!

The number of children in the care system is now at the highest level since the Children Act 1989 was introduced. One of the factors that has contributed to this rise has been a high volume of care order applications, which reached record levels in 2017. In 2018, Family Rights Group facilitated the Care Crisis Review (CCR) in order to examine the reasons for the rise in care proceedings and numbers of children in care and to identify specific changes to local authority and court systems to help safely reduce the numbers of children who needed to enter the care system. The full report, including Options for Change, can be read here: <http://bit.ly/2M4gcQr>

Following publication of the CCR, the President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, convened a working group to consider what might be done to reduce the volume of care applications being made and to enhance the ability of the courts to deal with these cases justly and efficiently. Specifically, the working group was asked to consider how children and young people may:

- 1) Be safely diverted from becoming the subject of public law proceedings; and
- 2) Once they are subject to court proceedings, best have a fully informed decision about their future lives fairly and swiftly made.

The interim report of the Public Law Working Group was published on 3rd July 2019 and is open for consultation until 30th September 2019. Family Rights Group sat on the working group, influenced the report and support some, but not all, of the recommendations. We invite FGC managers and co-ordinators to consider the interim report and encourage you to respond to the consultation.

One of the elements that we strongly welcome is the interim report making reference (in paragraphs 90-92 of the report, paragraph 138 and paragraph 297) to how FGCs can be used to enable the family network to create a plan to address the local authority's identified concerns. It would be very helpful if you responded to the consultation supporting this step.

We are, however, concerned that within the interim report repeated references are made to FGC "or equivalent" services being offered to families. We feel that this fails to recognise that FGCs are unique in enabling families to take the lead in making a plan for

the child and why it is specifically effective including preparation, the independence of the coordinator and private family time. We would encourage you to provide the working group with your experience of the specific benefits of FGCs and the strengths of the model and highlight what else your local authority does to ensure best practice in facilitating FGCs. We hope that practitioners' input can help to illustrate the important differences between the independent FGC model and other family meetings; to demonstrate both the necessary resources which should be dedicated to FGCs and why it should be a right for families to be offered an FGC prior to the state taking steps to remove their child.

Within the report, the focus of use of FGC services is during the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline and whilst it is right that FGCs can often be very helpful at this stage of local authority involvement by diverting cases from court, this is not the only time at which they should be offered. We think that you can provide valuable input as to how FGC services should be offered to families at all stages of local authority decision making. If you are able to provide evidence and evaluation of your own service, then this would be enormously helpful to the working group, as it will help to shape the final recommendations and ensure that minimum standards for FGC services are maintained.

A link to the full report of the Public Law Working Group can be found here: <http://bit.ly/2XNxPuW>. Your responses to the Public Law Interim Report can be submitted via this link: <http://bit.ly/2GgJMhN>. Alternatively you can send your response by email to the office of the President of the Family Division at pdf.office@judiciary.uk with the Subject Header of "PUBLIC LAW: Consultation Response". It would be very helpful if you sent a copy of your response to the consultation to FRG to help inform our own response. Contact details can be found below.

Should you have any questions in relation to the recommendations and draft guidance contained in the interim report or would like to discuss points relating to FGC services or any other aspect of the report, then please contact our legal adviser Jessica Johnston on 020 7923 2628 or jjohnston@frg.org.uk



Research Corner

Family Group Conferences (FGCs) were introduced in the UK from New Zealand in the early 1990s as a response to the expectations of the Children Act 1989, in particular, the aspiration that professionals work in partnership with families¹. The FGC approach is a key component of some of the Innovation Programme-funded local authorities showing success in reducing the number of children in care or on child protection plans. FGCs enable family members to hear together the safety concerns of practitioners about their child. It is then the task of the family network to take the lead in drawing up a plan, for and with the child if old enough, that harnesses their strengths and resources and identifies any extra help from agencies to make their plan work well. Yet most families in contact with children's social care in England and Wales are not offered an FGC before a decision is made for a child to come into care².

This article is a summary of the findings about FGCs from the independent evaluations of three Department for Education Innovation Programme projects. Whilst each of these projects are unique in scope, all have FGCs as one of or as the central element of their approach. The three are North East Lincolnshire Council's Creating Stronger Communities, Daybreak's FGC project when children are on the edge of care and Leeds City Council's Family Valued.

Leeds: Family Valued³

Family Valued Leeds is a whole-systems change programme to spread restorative practice across children's social care and the wider workforce for children, families and communities. A key element was the expansion of the FGC service to a scale not previously seen in the UK, giving more families the opportunity to address their difficulties through family-led decision making. A programme of training and

development in restorative practice and behaviour extended across all agencies working with children and families. Family Valued gives Leeds the opportunity to explore restorative approaches in innovative new arenas, for example, developing the capacity to offer FGCs as an alternative to an Initial Child Protection Conference where it was safe and appropriate to do so. It also involved employing appropriate safety strategies to use FGCs in families where domestic abuse is a significant concern. The evaluation of Family Valued found evidence of the effectiveness of FGCs in providing improved outcomes through improved coordination of support, a restorative approach, and effective perpetrator work while maintaining a focus on the needs of abused women and children to be kept safe. Family plans developed through FGCs were accepted by social workers as safe in 98% of cases in Leeds.

1. Morris and Tunnard (1998) Book review: *Family Group Conferences: Messages from UK research and practice*. *Child Abuse Review* vol.6 issue 3

2. *Care Crisis Review: options for change* (2018) London: Family Rights Group, p. 28

3. Mason P et al (2017) *Leeds Family Valued Evaluation Report*. DfE

North East Lincolnshire: Creating Strong Communities⁴

This model was designed to change fundamentally the way local practitioners and partners in North East Lincolnshire work together to safeguard vulnerable children. The aim was to support a culture change and system shift necessary to dramatically reduce the number of individuals and families requiring intensive support. The model combines Signs of Safety, Restorative Practice, Family Group Conferencing and Outcome Based Accountability which is now referred to as NE Lincolnshire's Framework for Practice. Within this design is a strong belief that the whole programme is greater than the sum of the component parts. Relational practice is at the heart of the model, promoting the firm belief that whoever you are in the system – leader, manager, practitioner, parent or child – all actions sit within the context of a relationship. Things work well when the relationship context is being prioritised and respected. Outcome Based Accountability is key in that it provides the outcomes focus. The programme has seen impressive results in reducing the number of referrals to children's services, children in need and children on child protection plans, and in preventing children from becoming looked after.

"It is important to note that whilst we will always continue to learn, this model of practice will remain, regardless of what shifts in services or structures we may see in the months and years to come. We retain our collective commitment to having this coherent framework for practice, which when applied effectively is strength based, common sense, family and outcome focused⁵".

Daybreak: family group conferencing when children are on the edge of care⁶

Daybreak is a charity specialising in the provision of FGCs. Their approach is underpinned by a commitment to the active participation of children, young people and their families to support the resolution of family problems. For this Children's Innovation Fund project, Daybreak, in collaboration with Southwark and Wiltshire children's services, offered an FGC to all families to whom a letter of intent to initiate care proceedings (Public Law Outline Letter) was issued between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016⁷.

The impact of FGCs

During the study timeframe, the Daybreak evaluation found proceedings were initiated for 29% of families who had an FGC compared to 50% of families where no FGC was convened⁸. Similarly in Leeds, 16 months into the Family Valued

programme they had statistically significant reductions in:

- numbers of looked after children (children looked after)
- rate of children looked after per 10,000 population
- numbers of Child Protection Plans
- numbers of children in need (CIN)⁹

North East Lincolnshire estimate the FGC service avoids 15 children per year from coming into care¹⁰. Daybreak also found the proportion of family placements were higher where an FGC had taken place¹¹. In each report family satisfaction with the FGC service was high. The evaluation of Daybreak's project found that three months after the FGC, 97% of survey respondents considered that the plan made constituted the best outcome for the child¹². In North East Lincolnshire over 90% of respondents scored a nine or ten for 'did the FGC achieve what you hoped it would for you and your family?', whilst 84% scored a nine or ten for 'has the conference made a positive difference to you and your family?' and over 90% scored a nine or ten for 'would you recommend a FGC to other families who are trying to sort out their problems?'¹³. In Leeds the Outcomes Based Accountability framework developed as part of Family Valued shows that, of families

4. Rodger J et al (2017) *Creating Strong Communities in North East Lincolnshire DfE*

5. Steve Kaye, Director of Children's services <http://innovationcsc.co.uk/blog/creating-stronger-communities-steve-kay-north-east-lincolnshire/>

6. Munro E et al (2017) *Daybreak Family Group Conferencing: children on the edge of care. DfE*

7. Munro E et al (2017) *Daybreak Family Group Conferencing: children on the edge of care. DfE, p. 7*

8. *Evaluation of the Daybreak Family Group Conferencing when children are on the edge of care, p. 1*

9. Mason P et al (2017) *Leeds Family Valued Evaluation Report. DfE, p. 9*

10. Rodger J et al (2017) *Creating Strong Communities in North East Lincolnshire DfE, p. 28*

11. Munro E et al (2017) *Daybreak Family Group Conferencing: children on the edge of care. DfE, p. 1*

12. Munro E et al (2017) *Daybreak Family Group Conferencing: children on the edge of care. DfE, p. 1*

13. York Consulting. (2016). *Family Group Conferencing Initial Family Survey. Unpublished Report.*

that participated in an FGC:

- 100% felt involved in the process
- 100% felt their values had been respected
- 99% felt their FGC had helped address their problems
- 91% felt the services they were offered were appropriate to their needs¹⁴.

Cost savings

In the FGC strand of the Family Valued programme in Leeds the evaluation found savings as a consequence of less time spent in the social care system are estimated at £755 per family¹⁵. This does not include savings associated with potentially beneficial outcomes. The Daybreak study demonstrated that weekly cost of care per child amongst the FGC cohort were lower (compared to those not receiving FGC service), reflecting the fact that more of this group were living with their birth families¹⁶. In North East Lincolnshire a cost benefit assessment based on 20 FGC cases revealed a return on investment of 18.2. This represents a saving of £18.20 for every £1 spent on support¹⁷. The analysis implies a strong investment decision in favour of FGCs. The North East Lincolnshire report went on to say “*The average benefit for FGC cases was £22,463. The total estimated benefit over one year is £1,729,651. The total annual running cost (including all staff and overheads) of the FGC service is £252,585*”¹⁸.

Conclusions

Each evaluation demonstrated that FGCs provide a positive mechanism for professionals to work with families congruent with the expectations of the Children Act 1989. All of the evaluations reviewed demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction with the FGC services and a positive impact on the reduction of children in care, on children with child protection plans or child in need plans. “*FGCs had virtually all resulted in agreed care plans; families felt they had been involved in the process and that their views had been recognised and respected. Furthermore, data shows that families felt that the support services they had accessed had been appropriate to their needs.*”¹⁹ Additionally there is a demonstrated cost savings in each evaluation when compared to social work business as usual. Whilst each of these evaluations provide compelling evidence in favour of FGC, together their messages are amplified. Not only is FGC a positive approach for children and their families, it appears to save local authorities and communities valuable resources of time and money.

14. Mason P et al (2017) Leeds Family Valued Evaluation Report. DfE, p. 11

15. Mason P et al (2017) Leeds Family Valued Evaluation Report. DfE, p. 9

16. Munro E et al (2017) Daybreak Family Group Conferencing: children on the edge of care. DfE

17. Rodger J et al (2017) Creating Strong Communities in North East Lincolnshire DfE, p. 8

18. Rodger J et al (2017) Creating Strong Communities in North East Lincolnshire DfE, p33

19. Mason P et al (2017) Leeds Family Valued Evaluation Report. DfE, p. 62.

Supporting Families: Investing in Practice Programme

In May 2019, the Government announced a new two year £15 million funding stream called “[Supporting Families: Investing in Practice Programme](#)”. The Government invited local authorities to apply to the fund to enable the “expansion and testing of” FGCs pre-proceedings and Family Drug and Alcohol Courts. The charity Daybreak is being funded by the Department for Education to support local authorities (which are successful in securing the grant) to develop their FGC service with families prior to proceedings. The impact of the programme will be evaluated by the What Works Centre who intend to use a randomised control trial (RCT) methodology.

The deadline for applications was 19th June 2019. More about the programme can be found here: <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/blog/announcing-the-supporting-families-invest-in-practice-programme/>.

Whilst welcoming investment in FGCs, there was no discussion with Family Rights Group before the DfE made its announcement. Unfortunately we have a number of questions and concerns about the approach. Our Chief Executive, Cathy Ashley, set these out on twitter: <https://twitter.com/CathyAshley/status/1136711848391270401>

However, subsequently, a productive meeting between Cathy Ashley and the Chief Executive of What Works Centre took place in late July and further discussions are scheduled. The What Works Centre will also be holding a roundtable event in September 2019 to find out from experts and families about the impact of FGCs.

We will keep you posted on further developments.



BEYOND THE TRIAL

LEEDS LONDON

19.09.19 09.10.19

12.30pm - 4.30pm 12.30pm - 4.30pm

An opportunity to hear about Lifelong Links, its impact to date and how your local authority can offer this approach to children in care.

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“ Absolutely wonderful.
Every family should get the
opportunity to have this
chance.

Aunt of young person

I don't feel invisible anymore.

young person after Lifelong Links

“ We talk and talk about
the voice of the child but
nothing reached her the way
Lifelong Links did.

Social worker of young person



Keeping Safe

Top tips for working with
families affected by domestic
abuse

For children and family social workers



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FRG has published a new leaflet containing top tips for social workers working with families affected by domestic abuse (click on the image to the left to download). There are also lots of advice resources on our website for families and practitioners.

Advice Sheets

Family Rights Group have produced a range of advice sheets on family support, child protection, looked after children, family and friends care, adoption or challenging decisions. They are free and available to access now at:

<http://bit.ly/FRGAdvice>

