



## You are never too old to be a Lifelong Link!

### 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. Also known as FGDM (family group decision making) in Scotland.

### 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.

The young man I was working with, Tommy, was 10 years old and had ended up in care after his parents had been unable to care for him. He had suffered a lot of rejection but when I started Lifelong Links with Tommy he was beginning to feel settled and managing well with support in school.

Tommy had many memories, good and bad, of his life at home and he was able to clearly express his sense of loss and frustration that he didn't see various people he loved and missed. This included a brother two years younger who had been adopted, various family members, his friends and significant people from his former school. Tommy talked about his gran and his great gran but he did not know if she was alive. I made enquiries through family members and we found out his great grandmother was

the grand old age of 100!! I wrote to her about Lifelong Links and Tommy's request to get in touch. Her response was immediate and we arranged a date for me to visit her in her home. Tommy wrote a message, in his very best handwriting, and off I went across the Moors.

I felt a level of anxiety as I parked up as I did not want to cause any upset or distress. I had agreed beforehand with her companion that I would only be an hour and look to her for prompts if a break was needed or a subject was difficult.

My visit was an absolute delight! Grace invited me to sit at the table and show her Tommy's journal with all the photos of Tommy and the

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# News from the network



the group in Bratislava

This year's European Family Group Conference network meeting was hosted by the Slovak Republic in the beautiful city of Bratislava. We were all welcomed on the Wednesday evening with a drinks reception at the fabulous Palfy Palace and we were entertained by some very talented local musicians. This was followed up by an impressive group of care experienced young people who treated us to a very entertaining dance show.

On the Thursday morning we all met up at another beautiful building in the historic old town, an old monastery where we all shared our country reports. It was great to see some new countries there for the first time, e.g. Estonia, and to hear about the great FGC work happening all over Europe. This was followed by a number of workshops discussing the achievements and challenges of our FGC work.

On the Friday morning we were treated to a presentation from our hosts about their exciting work in Slovakia. It was then time to decide where next year's network will be - Vic, just outside Barcelona, Spain, on the 7th-9th October 2020.

Many thanks to Monika and Jana for the warm welcome to their city.

by Stuart Graham  
Lifelong Links Project Director (Scotland), FRG

## Postgraduate certificate in FGCs



Last year we announced that Family Rights Group would be delivering a postgraduate certificate in family group conferencing with the University of Salford. The first intake of students was in September 2019 and enrolment has opened again for start dates this year in February, September and June. For further details and information on how to apply, visit the University of Salford website: <https://beta.salford.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/family-group-conferences>

## Dates for the diary

### FRG three day FGC training

10th-12th March 2020

9th-11th June 2020

8th-10th September 2020

1st-3rd December 2020

Book online at  
[www.frg.org.uk/training](http://www.frg.org.uk/training)

# Big congratulations!!



Val Yeo, FGC lead for North (left) with Debbie Marks, FGC Manager, Devon County Council

The Family Group Conference Plus team from Devon County council (which includes Lifelong Links) won the gold award for Team of the Year, Children's Services at this year's Social Work Awards!!

One of the judges, Liz Hewitt, Head of Children's Services at Skylakes said:

*"Very impressive service that clearly has the family at the heart of their work. It is evident that the families have a voice and are part of the decision making which clearly empowers them."*

The team is managed by Debbie Marks and has approximately 20 FGC coordinators plus the Lifelong Links team of five, led by Nicole Berry.

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family I had found. She chuckled and stroked the photo of his face. She was so relieved he was okay. She asked about his foster carers and I was able to give her an idea of Tommy's life now and the way family were going to all come to his meeting and show him he is not forgotten but still loved and remembered. Grace was so relieved and said how worried she had been as she had seen for herself how things weren't right in his childhood. She said she had always given him hugs and held her arms open wide to him as she knew he needed warm loving arms around him.

We then moved on to Tommy's maternal family tree where Grace was able to fill in the gaps and give us details and stories going back to the 1850s!! She enjoyed seeing the names of her siblings being recorded for Tommy and the family and spoke movingly about them all. This was quite profound and I recorded details for other family who were interested. Then Grace asked for a pen and wrote a message to Tommy saying how glad she was he had found her and asking him to visit her before Christmas, or on her 101st birthday which was coming up in a month. I felt moved as I saw this message and reflected Tommy would be able to hold those words in his heart forever now.

We had a cup of tea and talked about Tommy's visit and how he could sit at the table and maybe play Scrabble with Grace while they chatted. Grace's scores in Scrabble are exceptional - Tommy will need to get some practice in first if he doesn't want to hear his great-grandmother gloating over yet another victory!

I left with a photo of Grace holding her card from the Queen that she asked me to give Tommy and I walked back to the car reflecting what a joy the last hour had been and that this wonderful lady, was still strong in mind and spirit with a lot of love and warmth to give her great grandson Tommy. I was so glad Lifelong Links had made this time of hope and reconciliation possible.

*by Jo, Lifelong Links coordinator*

# Recognition: a useful theory to help understand FGC?

*Dr Mary Mitchell, Lecturer in social work. University of Edinburgh.*

I was delighted to attend the FGC Network in Newcastle in June 2019. It was a great opportunity to meet expert practitioners from across England and Scotland and to begin to consider and debate recognition in FGC practice. So, what do I mean by recognition?

I undertook a research study (2014-2018) at the University of Edinburgh to investigate what contribution FGCs made to children and family longer-term outcomes, where the child was at risk of being accommodated by the state. As part of this research I was keen to hear from children and adult family members of their experiences of the process. What emerged from the qualitative study was evidence about how family members felt supported, seen and heard because of being involved in the process; the experience of being seen (or not) by family members and professionals helped improve individuals' confidence and self-esteem.

There has been much written about relationships being essential for ethical social work practice. Critical to developing effective relationships within this context has been the need for individuals to feel respected and recognised by another. There is less discussion about how being involved in the FGC process might impact on family members' relationships with each other and with the

professionals they are working with. I found Recognition Theory a useful framework to help me understand some of the intra and inter- relational changes that occur for both family members and professionals involved in the FGC process. Recognition Theory is beginning to be discussed as a useful lens to consider ethical relationship-based social work practice. Particularly Honneth's model of intersubjective recognition which centres on three forms of recognition: love' (primary relationships of emotional attachment), 'rights' (equality of respect for persons) and 'solidarity' (relations of symmetrical esteem). For Honneth this understanding of recognition offered a model of understanding the development of individuals, and of whole societies, as the experiences of love, respect and solidarity can impact on an individual's identity formation, one's self-identity. Applying recognition theory in this manner draws attention to the activities which aid and facilitate relationships in the FGC process and suggests these may be as important as the achievement of certain outcomes for the family despite being less obvious or tangible.

If you're interested to find out more about Recognition Theory or being involved in studying recognition in FGC, please get in touch with me:  
[mary.mitchell@ed.ac.uk](mailto:mary.mitchell@ed.ac.uk)

## Accreditation of FGC services

Family Rights Group, with local authorities from the FGC and Lifelong Links network, developed a standards framework for accrediting FGC services in 2011.

So far 33 services have been accredited or are in the process of becoming accredited. If you are an accredited FGC service, it might be time to seek reaccreditation as accreditation status lasts for three years.

The process for the reaccreditation of services is the same as for the initial accreditation of the service i.e. services will have to demonstrate their practice against the seven practice standards. However, services should also address any practice issues raised in the feedback report to services made at the point of their initial 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](http://frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences/fgc-standards-and-accreditation) or email Jordene on [jsewell@frg.org.uk](mailto:jsewell@frg.org.uk)



# FGC Network meetings 2020

Wednesday 18th March, Manchester  
12.00pm to 4.00pm

*Measuring Outcomes in FGCs*

**Dr Tony Munton**

Managing Director || the RTK

This seminar will explore how we measure outcomes in FGC work and focus on the innovative work being led by Tony and Jane Towey in Tower Hamlets. The seminar will examine how an outcome based framework may be taken on by other services in a coordinated and systematic way.

Wednesday 10th June, London  
11.00am to 4.00pm

*FGCs and child protection; exploring examples of innovative practice*

**Tendai Murowe**

Service Manager, || Herts County Council

This network meeting will examine examples of how FGCs fit alongside child protection procedures. In particular we will hear about the innovative work that Hertfordshire have been doing in changing their systems to give a stronger representation to families involved in child protection decision making.

Wednesday 16th September, Birmingham  
12.00 to 4.00pm

*The child welfare legal framework and changes in data protection regulation: implications for FGC practice*

**Jessica Johnston, Legal Adviser || FRG**

This network meeting will provide an opportunity for FGC services to update their knowledge about the legal framework and its implications for FGC practice.

Wednesday 9th December, Bristol

Seminar content to be determined

To book to attend any of the above events please contact Jordene at [jsewell@frg.org.uk](mailto:jsewell@frg.org.uk)

Please indicate at time of booking any dietary or accessibility requirements.



We would like to draw your attention to a 2019 article by Devaney, McGregor and Moran.

The article highlights a transformative qualitative study designed to inform social work practice in Ireland, with the main goal of improving “stability and permanence for children and young people” (Devaney et al, 2018, pp. 637). The conclusion of the study will resonate well with FGC coordinators and managers.

“Amongst a complex array of findings, three themes most linked to affect permanence and stability were found to be Relationships, Communication and Social Support. Underpinning these, the importance of Continuity was significant.” Devaney et al (2019, pp 633)

#### Full details:

Devaney, C. McGregor, C. Moran, L (2019) *Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Care in Ireland: Implications for Practice*. The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 49, Issue 3, April 2019, Pages 633–652. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy078>

## Perspectives: the foster carer



Trevor is the foster carer of a young person who took part in Lifelong Links. Trevor has been a foster carer for years and is also in the process of opening a residential children's home...

"I initially found out about Lifelong Links through the social worker who recommended the process for my young person. I was a bit wary, because I understood that for this young person to rekindle relationships with his family, it could be quite daunting.

At the start he admitted to me that he was scared that his family might not remember him, or they might not accept him anymore, so he was quite nervous. There was an initial 'wall' that the young person put up, but what I found great about Lifelong Links is the coordinator was aware of these signs.

What I love most about Lifelong Links is that the young people are in control and it's done their way. How they want to rebuild bridges as opposed to how social workers or carers or family members tell them it has to be done. They decide which family members they want to build a relationship with and which family members they don't want to build a relationship with. It was a slow process and an understanding process.

I have found that children and young people in care are searching for their identity. This should be done through understanding their previous family life; redressing past negative circumstances; and rebuilding relationships with current and new family members as well.

The young person was very nervous about starting Lifelong Links and meeting his family members, but he now knows that he has more of an extended family who genuinely have his best interests at heart and really do care.

The relationships he's built are part of his day-to-day life. He's always talking about how he wants to go and see them and how he wants to invite them round for dinner. It's had a huge impact for him and his confidence and his self-esteem.

I now feel confident that one day when he leaves my care, and he's an adult, and he's ready for independence, he will be well looked after by all of these family members who, before Lifelong Links, he didn't have contact with.

I believe every young person deserves the chance to build new relationships with family, friends and professionals and also redress previous relationships.

However, I would say as a carer, you need to be there for them and understand it can be an emotional journey.

Just know that Lifelong Links is not a process that ends one day, it lasts forever. It's creating a life beyond care so young people can build relationships with these friends, family members, teachers or social workers.

# Lifelong Links family group conference feedback

Here are the results of a survey completed by 80 family members, foster carers and friends, who have attended a Lifelong Links FGC.

Andrew Rist, Lifelong Links Development Officer, spent some time in November analysing the feedback forms that have been completed following a Lifelong Links family group conference by those who attended. These are some of the key findings.

  
**100%**

thought the child will have a greater sense of love and belonging

  
**77**

people thought the child will have more support now and in the future.

*"I want to put in writing how much I appreciate the care you have put in to the Lifelong Links work ... I am determined that this work will be integrated into their 'Child in Care Plans'. Thank you." - social worker*

  
**4.5**

77 people said they strongly agreed (average 4.5 out of 5) that the plan will be fully implemented.

  
**100%**

said Lifelong Links will give the child a better understanding of their family.

*"He will now KNOW that there are many people, past and present, who care very deeply about him and wish to sustain meaningful relationships with him" - family member*



The first Lifelong Links family group conference of 2020 took place on the 3rd January! It was for a young person who the local authority thought had no-one apart from their mother. However, many, many excited family members were found in Wales. This is the effort they went to, to welcome the young person back in to the family!

# Perspectives: the local authority

**Perth & Kinross council and Falkirk council both recently joined the Lifelong Links trial in Scotland. Below they detail their first impressions and experiences so far.**

## Falkirk

The Barnardo's Falkirk Pathways Family Group Decision Making coordinators completed their FGDM and Lifelong Links training in February 2019. Our Family Group Decision Making service is established in partnership with Falkirk Council, and we are now establishing Lifelong Links.

The first Lifelong Links case is currently working through the process and the experience of doing the work is reassuring us, with Family Rights Group's support. The Lifelong Links tools are in place and integrated within the Barnardo's policies and procedures.

During the Lifelong Links discovery stage a range of tools have been used to help the young person understand her life and to look at who might be important connections from her past that could become part of her support network going forward. Developing a genogram, timeline and mobility map have helped the young person to talk through memories and events and also to identify connections from the past that have played an important role in her life.

Deep file searches have highlighted positive school reports and activities that the young person had forgotten, including times when her mother, with whom she had little recall of anything positive, had attended meetings and worked with services to help her. Having previously been unaware of this, the young person stated she would like to write to her mum, in the hope of reconnecting with her.

Being one of the newer Lifelong Links services we have appreciated the wealth of knowledge and resources we inherited from across the UK network and the generosity in sharing resources. The Family Rights Group workers based in Scotland have been inspiring guides along our pathway.

*Norman Philip, Team Manager  
Barnardo's Falkirk Pathways Service*

“I can't believe you've found stuff that I was good at in school! I can only remember being told about the bad stuff!”

“This is so amazing! Seeing where I used to live, places and things I'd forgotten about.”

**some comments from the first young person in Falkirk to take part in Lifelong Links**



## Perth & Kinross

I'm Lesley and I am a Family Group Decision Making and Lifelong Links coordinator for Perth and Kinross Council. We are delighted to be part of the Lifelong Links trial & as a local authority it is an exciting opportunity to develop this unique service. We have just appointed another worker to come along on this journey with us and together we will develop our service within the REACH team. Our passion is to work with children and young people in care who cannot return to their families and help them identify who are the most important people to them. Find the child or young person any extended family, then bring everyone together for a Family Group Meeting (FGM). At the meeting a plan is made so the young person can have lasting meaningful connections in terms of emotional and practical support as they progress through care and beyond.

Through experience we know some young people in care often return to their families and local area, but other young people do not. Having Lifelong Links will be extremely beneficial to help young people know about their history and extended family who can help them to feel a stronger sense of identity.

My first experience with a young person has been thrilling and exciting. Learning new skills and seeing how the Lifelong Links process evolves, with the young person at the centre and being in control of what they wish from this process. This young person thought she only had eight family members and asked me to find more of her family. I was able to find over forty additional members! The look on her face when I showed her what I had found made all the hours searching worth it. She became quite teary "with happy tears" she said, and could not believe the fact she had so many relatives she did not know existed. It was lovely to see and know I had a part in what had been achieved in such a short time for her. She became so excited and was asking about the work they did, did they know about her and what were the next steps? When telling her carer she said she was "totally excited as Lesley had helped me find my family". I cannot wait to complete the next stages with this young person and hold a Lifelong Links FGM.

*by Lesley-Ann Spark, Lifelong Links coordinator*



**The Lifelong Links team in Perth & Kinross council**

# Going Live: The Social Connections Tool

In September 2019 the online version of the Social Connections Tool (SCT) was launched. Doncaster council were the first Lifelong Links trial authority to test the tool. Despite planning for multiple worst case scenarios, that seem to occur with anything technical, it all went without a hitch! Within 30 minutes their administrator was set up and familiarising themselves with the system.

The online Social Connections Tool is now being used by Doncaster, Edinburgh, Leeds, North Yorkshire and Stockport, with more local authorities due to launch it in the next few months.



## What is the SCT?

In response to the absence of any tool that could measure the quality and number of children's relationships, FRG, in collaboration with the Rees Centre, Oxford University and Celcis, University of Strathclyde, designed the Social Connections Tool (SCT). The tool helps to prompt a discussion between the social worker and young person about the quality and number of their relationships (e.g. who they can turn to for financial, emotional and practical support, who is proud of them etc). It is also an evaluation tool for Lifelong Links.

## Why is it online?

The online version reduces the amount of time taken to complete the SCT (compared to the paper version), freeing up time for social workers and coordinators. Having historical data readily at hand for social workers should also prove to be a powerful practice tool, enabling better care of the children and young people. The online tool is also a more attractive format for children and young people to engage with, so in response to the view of young people, we have worked with Atto, a digital company to develop the SCT into an online platform, which is now being launched in sites participating in the trial of Lifelong Links.

The online version provides each participating local authority with high level metrics of the data collected. This enables them to monitor any changes in children's relationships during their time in care.

# Lifelong Links: Regional Practice Learning Sets

Family Rights Group host Lifelong Links practice learning sets that create opportunities for practitioners from many local authorities to share their experiences, problems and successes together – with tea & cake of course, this is family group conferencing!

People delivering Lifelong Links have to overcome many challenges to help connect children with networks of support. From searching and discovery; to restoring family relationships; to inclusive work with all children and young people; and to facilitating large meetings with people (and pets) that may have never met before. And all of these challenges are unique and require their own creative solutions.

In October, three separate Regional Practice Learning Sets were held - Edinburgh, Leeds and London. The different groups generated thought provoking and informative discussions, particularly in relation to how resistance from social workers and foster carers is challenged. It seems that everyone thinks Lifelong Links is a great idea, but anxieties increase when it's 'your child'.

Thankfully, Lifelong Links family group conference coordinators are experts in considering the worries of professionals and lowering anxieties with thorough discussion and planning, so children and young people can safely find positive networks of support.

We have all come such a long way and learned so much since the introduction of Lifelong Links, and our collective knowledge continues to flourish with events such as these.

On 12th February 2020 we will celebrate this learning, and reflect upon our Lifelong Links journey, with a practice learning meeting that brings together Lifelong Links coordinators from all of the English trial sites together.

This will be the last opportunity during the English trial of Lifelong Links to share practice collectively. We would love as many Lifelong Links coordinators as possible to join together and celebrate your achievements and the difference that Lifelong Links has made to the lives of children and young people.

**Reserve your place at the Regional Practice Learning Set by clicking here: <http://bit.ly/FRG-RPLS>**

**12th February 2019, London**

***Open to all Lifelong Links coordinators in England - free to attend but booking is essential.***



**photos from the last two Regional Practice Learning Sets in October 2019**

# Lifelong Links: beyond the trial

With the trial of Lifelong Links in England coming to an end in March 2020, Family Rights Group have now developed a training and consultancy package for interested local authorities wishing to implement Lifelong Links.

Each package is bespoke to the individual needs and wants of the local authority but we are able to offer:

- two day commissioned course to train FGC coordinators in Lifelong Links.
- consultancy days during the year to support the introduction and implementation of Lifelong Links.
- access to Lifelong Links resources including the Lifelong Links Toolkit, films and practice

guidance (including any and all updates).

- access to the online (and hard copy) Social Connections Tool for all children in care.

If you are interested the first step is get in touch with Lucy Hutchinson (Lifelong Links Project Coordinator) at [lhutchinson@frg.org.uk](mailto:lhutchinson@frg.org.uk)

From there we can set up a meeting with Pam Ledward (Lifelong Links Project Director), Cathy Ashley (FRG, Chief Executive) and the senior leadership of your local authority to discuss your priorities and needs.



## INTRODUCING FAMILIES' VOICES A NEW WEB PAGE FEATURING BLOGS, VLOGS AND PODCASTS

<http://bit.ly/frg-blogs>

### Advice Sheets



#### Special Guardianship

Top tips for social workers

A free, downloadable guide to assist social workers working with special guardians or with relatives or friends who are considering becoming a special guardian for a child.



[www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

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>.

To download the Special Guardianship guide, then click the image (left).