



**Signs of Safety**

**Family Group Conferences**

**Referral Pathways**

**What is a Family Group Conference (FGC)?**

An FGC gives families experiencing difficulties the opportunity to get together to make decisions and plan for a child or young person’s future well-being and safety. It supports families to use their strengths, skills, family knowledge and resources to offer their own solutions to the concerns identified. FGCs are a family led, decision making and planning process that gives children a voice and puts the family in control taking into account any child welfare concerns identified.

**Why hold a network meeting?**

Families identifying a network is a ‘bottom line’ in Signs and Safety, and this is a key focus when beginning work with any family. If the working relationship between professionals and parents is grounded in a shared understanding of the child protection concerns, the safety goals and the bottom line requirements, the next step is for the professionals to ask the parents to get as many people as they can to be involved in helping them create a safety plan. One of the most important aspects of involving an informed naturally occurring network around the family, is that this breaks the secrecy and shame that typically surrounds situations of child protection.

**Why hold a Family Group Conference?**

FGCs can prevent children becoming looked after by the Local Authority, and can help to support children looked after to return to their family unit. FGCs place families at the centre of the decision making process by facilitating family led meetings that include private family time and child involvement to ensure that children/young people have a voice and that their feelings and wishes are listened to. FGCs can reduce dependency on specialist services, by increasing family resilience. FGCs were recognised in Working Together to Safeguard Children (2010) and also in a review of Care Proceedings 2006, FGCs were recommended as an effective process for exploring safe placements for children within their wider family and friends’ network.

**How do Family Group Conferences and Signs of Safety network meetings interrelate?**

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| **Family Group Conference** | **Signs of Safety network meetings** |
| * Voluntary intervention * Purpose: to keep the child safe within family by finding extended family networks who can support families to develop their own solutions via a family led meeting * Measured response for the longer term, looks at wider issues and initial FGC meeting is followed up with review FGCs * Time taken to establish working relationship through a series of planning meetings with the family * Begins when social worker has had chance to fully assess the family’s needs. * Time allowed to work towards resolving issues/support achievement * Held in a neutral venue and at a time that suits the family, in a relaxed atmosphere, with no time constraints and food/refreshments are provided * Family develop their own plan using their own words * FGCs offer a neutral approach - coordinators are not case holders, do not make decisions about the child, have limited historical information * Child/YP encouraged to participate/make decisions at all stages; who to invite, create invitations and can attend the meeting * Intervention can be longer-term beyond child protection intervention, with family’s agreement until stability and sustainability is evidenced | * Part of statutory intervention * Purpose: to develop meaningful family led safety plans to manage immediate risk and to plan future safety * Rapid response from point of contact to ensure child’s immediate safety & protection * Begins at the start of any social work assessment, particularly where immediate safety is required * Focuses on immediate and ongoing danger & safety for the child * Safety to be achieved immediately, then futre safety to be planned with the network * Professionals co-ordinate the venue and time * Plan is produced in collaboration with social worker and network * Social worker facilitates the whole meeting * Social workers are case holders and endorse network decisions about the childs safety and are aware of all history * Shorter, time limited intervention dealing with risk then overtime the network meetings are “handed over” to the network to manage their own safety plan. |

**When to refer for a Family Group Conference**

A referral for a family group conference should be considered when:

* A child is at risk of becoming looked after by the Local Authority **or** to avoid care proceedings
* A child is looked after and there is a plan for reunification home to the family unit
* Children are subject to a Child in Need or Child Protection plan **or** threshold is changing
* A Child Arrangement Order or Special Guardianship Order is being considered   
  and options for permanency need to be identified
* There is a negative outcome following a pre-birth assessment and concerns need to be addressed
* Support is required for 16/17 year olds who are at risk of homelessness **or** returning from custody.
* Following social work intervention the family may have wider issues and complicating factors that they wish to be supported to work through.

In these situations, consideration needs to be given to family group conference to facilitate this. Within child protection with particularly complex cases that require significant time and planning, consideration also needs to be given to referring for a family group conference to support safety planning.

Family Group Conference can be offered at any stage e.g.:

**Family Group Conference working model**

* Participation in FGCs is voluntary
* The preparation stage between FGC coordinator and family members is key to the success of the family meeting, as such the FGC process, whilst flexible, usually takes between 4-6 weeks.
* Once the referral has been allocated an initial discussion must take place between the   
  coordinator and the referrer; without this the referral cannot progress.
* The referrer is required to attend the FGC and any subsequent review.

**Further information**

The Family Group Conference referral form is located in the ‘forms’ tab on LCS

Please feel free to contact the Signs of Safety Practice Development Officers or Family Group Conference team for further information or support:

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**Visit the Signs of Safety SharePoint site for more information and practice guidance:**

<https://intranet.cumbria.gov.uk/Childrens/cf/sos/SitePages/Home.aspx>

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