



Pre-ICPC pathway to Family Group Conference: Guidance April 2016

Please read in conjunction with practice flowchart

Context

All agencies in Leeds, through the Children and Young People's Plan, have a clear commitment to restorative practice. As part of this commitment, Children's Services invested in expanding the Family Group Conferencing service to enable a conference to be offered in all cases where there was the possibility of a child have to be removed from the care of their birth parents. As a result of this approach more children and young people have been supported to remain within their families and communities and the number of children becoming looked after has reduced significantly to the most recent figures of 1227, its lowest in over ten years. The restorative approach taken by partners in Leeds was endorsed by Ofsted in their inspection of Children's Services and the LSCB in 2015.

In January 2015 Leeds was successful in bidding for £4.85m funding from the Department for Education Innovations Fund. Leeds is the largest of 53 programmes nationally and our ambitious programme aims to embed wide-scale culture and practice change, creating a much more family support oriented model. We have called the programme in Leeds 'Family Valued'.

A key strand of the programme is expanding our Family Group Conference Service to put families at the heart of decision making in a greater number of cases at an earlier opportunity. Our long term ambition is to make the offer of a Family Group Conference (FGC) an entitlement for all families experiencing difficulties.

In order to develop our practice and move toward this, it is planned to trial the use of FGC as an alternative to an Initial Child Protection Conference in some cases. It is anticipated that this approach will increase the involvement of family members and enable family resolutions to issues, the implementation of which will be supported by professionals. The merits of this approach have been discussed with officials from the Department of Education who have arranged ministerial approval relaxing the statutory timescales for ICPC to enable Leeds to trail this approach.

Children's Services are seeking support and challenge from a small reference group of LSCB members to support the development and implementation of this new model.

Over the past few months, some initial work to consider how the FGC process can best fit the Child Protection process has been undertaken. This has involved the CP team, a manager from the FGC service, nationally recognised experts in the use of FGC and the Head of Service for Practice Improvement.

Proposed implementation

It is important to recognise that existing LSCB procedures will remain in place where there are concerns about whether a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. An initial strategy discussion will be held to decide whether or not to undertake enquiries under s47 of the Children Act 1989. If the conclusion of these initial enquiries is that the child is at risk of continuing significant harm but there is potential for the risk to be managed through a Family Group Conference, then the team manager and social worker will initiate the FGC process.

Primarily we are focusing on cases of neglect and emotional harm. Many but not all of the cases will be known to services. The selection of appropriate cases will be guided by the principles set out below.

It is acknowledged that:

'The assessment of neglect cases can be difficult. Neglect can fluctuate both in level and duration. The child's welfare, for example, can improve following input from services or a change in circumstances and review, but then deteriorate once support is removed. Professionals should be wary of being too optimistic. Timely and decisive action is critical to ensure that children are not left in neglectful homes' (ref: Working Together 2015, p26 para 62).

This means that:

1. We will follow the Leeds LSCB policy and procedures regarding response to a referral and action to be taken. Children needing immediate protection will be managed as per existing procedures. In all cases, where there are concerns about actual or likely significant harm then a strategy discussion will be held to enable a decision to be made with other agencies whether to initiate enquiries under s47 of the Children Act.
2. Where there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, there should be a strategy discussion, involving CSWS, police, health, and any other bodies such as the referring agency. The strategy discussion will consider the child's welfare and safety and identify the level of risk faced by the child, decide what information should be shared with the child and family, agree further actions, record decisions and actions to make sure what was agreed gets done.
3. Following the s47 enquiry, if the guiding principles for suitability for the FGC process are met and it is decided by Children's Social Work Service not to proceed with an ICPC at that stage, the social worker will submit a request to the FGC service for contact to be made with the family. The FGC service will allocate the visit to a co-ordinator who will visit the family to explain the FGC offer and establish whether the family are in agreement. The FGC service will report the outcomes of the meeting back to the social worker via email within 15 working days of the request being made.
4. To ensure the child remains safe during the process of convening an FGC, a further strategy meeting, chaired by the social work team manager, will be convened within 15 working days to oversee the child's safety. The lead professional during this time will be the social worker who undertook the initial enquiries. The strategy meeting will enable information from key partners (social work service, police, health, education and referring agency) to be pulled together regarding known risks and reasons for involvement to confirm that the threshold for ICPC has been met, and

establish what needs to change to ensure the safety of the child. This will form the 'bottom line' which will be presented at the Family Group Conference. The meeting will also identify what support each agency could offer to the family as part of the family plan. Any areas of disagreement will be noted and addressed as required through the Concerns Resolution Process.

5. The formal referral to the FGC service will be made once the strategy meeting confirms that it is safe to continue with the FGC process. The FGC service will work alongside the other professionals involved through the strategy discussion/meeting to ensure a timely conference and safe plan.

Circumstances in which the risk *may* be safely managed via the Family Group Conference process and family plan – guiding principles.

- If the family demonstrate that they are willing to work with agencies
- S47 enquiries to identify the circumstances surrounding the concerns, including previous history have been completed, and there is an understanding of the risks;
- Identified risks can be managed in the short term
- Ensuring a lead professional is in place (this will normally be the social worker) to oversee the child's safety prior to the FGC being convened
- The family should feel comfortable with the FGC approach, but not at risk of the child's safety being compromised

Family Group Conference

- It can take up to 6 weeks for the FGC to be convened. A minimum level of contact to take place (CIN visits) will be agreed with the child/family and the lead professional during that time, this will be at least weekly
- The FGC co-ordinator will work alongside the social worker to achieve a timely meeting and a safe plan
- Reasons for the concerns will be clearly outlined to the family
- The 'bottom line' position will be clearly communicated (what is needed to keep the children safe and meet their needs)
- The family will go away and have time to put a plan together.
- Once the plan is agreed then it will be shared with the relevant professionals involved with the family
- If agreed by the family and professionals then decisions are made on the frequency of reviewing progress
- The lead professional (social worker) will ensure a phone/other verbal check in with other agencies takes place 8 weeks after the FGC and record. The purpose of this

contact will be to obtain the views of involved professionals on progress, including whether there have been any issues in delivering agreed support to the family.

- There should be a formal review of the plan held within 3 months of the plan being agreed at the Family Group Conference. This will involve the family, lead professional, social work team manager and/or Advanced Practitioner - information and the views of other agencies on progress will be sought in advance of the review.
- If the plan cannot be agreed because it compromises the safety of the child, an initial child protection case conference will be called.
- Throughout this process, the social work service team manager and lead professional can seek advice and guidance from the CP team (conference chairs). This may include advice on defining the 'bottom line' to be shared with the family.
- If it is felt at any stage that the plan is not being implemented then the case will revert to the child protection process.
- The plan will end when the FGC review establishes that all needs are being met

Key responsibilities within the new approach

Children's Social Work Service/social worker

- Consider guiding principles for FGC process as part of s47 enquiry
- Make initial referral to FGC service
- Convene 15 day strategy meeting
- Follow up FGC referral and work alongside FGC co-ordinator in advance of FGC to ensure a timely meeting and safe plan
- Meet with the parents in advance of FGC to discuss available support services and to confirm the 'bottom line'
- Attend Family Group Conference
- Complete verbal check-in with other involved agencies 8 weeks after initial FGC
- Consult with CP chairs as appropriate to ensure the 'bottom line' is addressed as part of the FGC process and family plan

Family Group Conference Co-ordinators

- Ensure direct contact is made with the family within 15 working days of the initial strategy discussion, to outline the FGC process and establish whether the family are in agreement
- Report outcome of initial contact with family to social worker to inform the strategy meeting

- Work alongside social worker in advance of the FGC, to ensure a timely conference and safe plan
- Book Family Group Conference and attendees
- Ensure that key risks to the child or children are made clear in the wording of questions to be put in the Family Group Conference, in a way that ensures that the child's safety is paramount and the family understand professional concerns
- Access consultation/QA from CP Chair team managers as appropriate throughout the process

Police/health/other professionals involved with the family

- Attend/provide information to the strategy meeting within 15 working days of the initial strategy discussion
- Ensure services/support are delivered as agreed in the strategy meeting and family plan
- In some cases the family may ask for other professionals to attend the Family Group Conference as well as the social worker and this should be prioritised where possible
- Provide a verbal update on family progress and services delivered within 8 weeks of the FGC taking place (sooner should the need arise)

Child Protection Chair Team Managers

- Be available for consultation throughout the FGC process, in particular in relation to ensuring that the 'bottom line' relating to risks to the child has been clearly established and outlined to the family
- Be available for consultation and QA of the family plan

Date of this document: April 2016 – to be kept under review by LSCB reference group