



**FAMILIES FIRST**  
Professional Handbook

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## Background

Family Group Conferences (FGC) are a family-led decision-making process where the family and service providers come together to discuss and develop a plan that aims to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child or young person. The process draws upon Maori culture and their development was a response to the large number of Maori children being removed into state institutions.

Family Group Conferences are now used, mainly in child welfare, in over 20 countries including Austria, Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, South Africa, the USA, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Family Group Conferences can be used whenever a vulnerable child or adult's situation is sufficiently serious, and there are special circumstances where the use FGC may be appropriate.

FGC's are currently used in the UK in all areas of child welfare including:

- Preventative service
- Safeguarding work
- Court proceedings, both private and public law
- Looked after children and planning for leaving care
- Education (truancy and exclusions)
- Anti-social behaviour and youth justice including restorative justice.
- Domestic violence

In small-scale (42 cases) trials in North East Lincolnshire there has been positive results, demonstrating a reduction in need for statutory involvement and overall cost-effectiveness. In Leeds, use of FGC has already demonstrated significant impact in reducing child protection cases, with reported figures contributing to a 40 per cent reduction in child protection plans.

FGC is a restorative approach and is one element of NEL Creating Stronger Communities model. This will change how organisations work together to safeguard vulnerable children, how staff work, how we interact with service users and how we deliver the change we need.

### Family Group Conferencing

A facilitation tool where families are supported to address their issues via dialogue and manage their own situations

### Signs of safety

A tool to communicate effectively with children and families in relation to identifying and managing risk.

### Creating Strong Communities

#### Restorative practice

An approach focusing on resolving conflicts via challenge and support at the earliest stage.

#### Outcome based accountability

A thinking process which focuses the whole organisation on outcomes, as opposed to process.



## Our Vision

**“Family members know more about their own family than any professional can possibly know, they have a unique knowledge & understanding”**

(Circles Resource 2015 FGC Training)

We want to transform how North East Lincolnshire conducts its children’s social care practice, moving away from a ‘doing to’ approach to a model that collectively works with parents, professionals and families to resolve the challenges they face and empower people to change their own lives.

A child’s best interests are generally served in a safe home environment with their family. Immediate and extended family should be given every opportunity to provide this for all children. We believe that families should be at the heart of the decision making process, enabling them to develop their own solutions to the difficulties they are facing. Our processes create a supportive environment that allows children, young people and their families to make informed decisions regarding their future care and safety.

## Key Outcomes

The North East Lincolnshire Family Group Conference service aims to support families by;

- **Putting service users and carers first** – ensuring that children and their families are at the centre of planning and decision making that affects them.
- **Protecting children from abuse and neglect** – sharing information with the extended family about the safety risks for the children, and working in partnership to plan and make decisions for the safety of that child leads to plans that can more effectively protect the children.
- **Keeping families together** – wherever possible helping the children remain with their extended family and where this is not possible ensuring they are not alienated from their families.
- **Promoting social independence** – keeping planning and decision making with extended families, assisting them to be independent of statutory involvement wherever it is safe to do so.
- **Promoting social inclusion** – ensuring families are not excluded from lines of support and strength available to them in their families and community networks when they need it most. Opening up access to resources within families that are usually unavailable to professionals.

## Key Principles

The Family Group Conference (FGC) process is a strengths based, solution focused way of working, which acknowledges the positives as well as addressing the needs and challenges in a family.

The Guiding Principles of the Family Group Conference Process in NEL are:

- The child's welfare is paramount.
- Families should be empowered to be centrally involved in planning for children's futures.
- Respecting the principle that wherever possible, children are best looked after in their own families.
- Gaining understanding of each families unique and individual needs and practice in a way that meets these needs.
- A child's need for permanence is critical to ensure their ongoing development. The family should be centrally involved in decision-making around permanency planning for a child.
- Children and young people are at the centre of the decision making process and have the right for their voices to be heard.
- The FGC Practitioner is always independent of any professional involvement with the family. The independence of the practitioner is a crucial factor in the process and this must be preserved.
- Children and young people have the right to have their families and other significant people fully involved in planning their future. As long as they do not compromise the safety of the children.
- Families have the right and responsibility to be active decision makers about their family members. Given the relevant information, families can make informed, safe decisions about how the needs of a child/young person can be met.
- Participation in a FGC is a voluntary process for the child/young person and family members involved.
- The process of the FGC should be informed and styled by the family and the pacing of the process will depend on the specific needs and circumstances of the family.
- Private time for the family is an essential component of the Family Group Conference process.
- The FGC plan should be accepted and resourced by the referring agency unless it places a child, young person or vulnerable adult at risk of significant harm.

## Family Group Conference Standards

### Why do we need to have standards?

These standards have been developed to assist children, young people, adults and families as well as professionals to understand what to expect when participating in a FGC.

### Who has developed the standards?

These standards have been developed collaboratively by the North East Lincolnshire Family Group Conferencing Team following extensive review of the available literature, such as existing policies and procedures where FGC has been successfully implemented, published research and recommended guidelines from lead groups both nationally and internationally. These include Family Group Conference Forum – Northern Ireland, Family Rights Group (UK), American Humane Society, Eigen Kracht (FGC) – Netherlands, Kent and Leeds Family Group Conferencing Services and Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children's Board.

The standards are a reflection of current good practice within the Family Group Conferencing process and evidence based research and as such will evolve over time. They will be regularly evaluated and updated to ensure best practice is integral to everything we do.

### Standard One:

- The FGC Service will provide a high quality service which works within the North East Lincolnshire Council FGC Standards and reflects national and international guidance and good practice.
- The FGC service will be delivered by an independent practitioner who will have no other professional role with the family and will have no involvement in any professional decision making for the child/young person or family.
- The FGC Service will ensure that the independent co-ordinator will be trained in the FGC model and in the skills necessary to undertake the role.
- The FGC manager will provide supervision to the co-ordinator.
- FGC managers will oversee and ensure a responsive and accountable delivery of the service.

### Standard Two:

- The voice of the child/young person will be central to the FGC process and must be sought and heard at all stages of the process.
- The FGC Practitioner will ensure that the wishes and feelings of the child/young person/vulnerable adult will be sought and represented in the conferencing process.
- The FGC Practitioner will ensure that advocacy is available for those who require it.
- The FGC Practitioner will ensure that the views of those unable to attend are shared at the meeting.
- Where the child/young person chooses not to be or is unable to be present at the FGC, the FGC Practitioner will share the family plan with them and ensure their understanding of the content.

### Standard Three:

- Everyone participating in the FGC will be prepared and supported throughout the process.
- The FGC Practitioner will confirm the reasons for the referral with the person(s) central to the process and with their agreement share the information with the wider family network and professionals.
- The FGC Practitioner, with the child/young person and carers will explore those they wish to invite to the conference.
- The FGC Practitioner will use a range of creative methods to ensure that all contributions are sought and shared, and will ensure that the views of those unable to attend are shared at the meeting.
- The FGC will be held in the first language of the child/young person/vulnerable adult, and attention will be given to any significant cultural issues.
- The FGC Practitioner will ensure that all children/young people and families will be prepared and supported to participate fully in the FGC process.
- The FGC Practitioner will assist the professionals in preparation for their role in the FGC process.
- The FGC Practitioner, at the end of the process, will ensure that all participants have understood what has been decided.

### Standard Four:

- Families have a right to private family time within a safe and supportive environment in order to make decisions and plans.
- The Family Group Conference will be agreed at a date, time and venue that suits the family.
- The FGC Practitioner will ensure that there is a neutral venue which is suitable for the family to discuss issues in private and that there is sufficient time made available for the family to do so.
- The FGC Practitioner has the responsibility to outline the expectations of behaviour in the meeting. The FGC Practitioner will ensure that "ground rules" are established and adhered to so that all participants can feel safe and respected and their views heard.
- The FGC Practitioner and other relevant professionals will be available to the family for clarification or to provide information if required during private family time.
- Only exceptionally if requested by a family member will a FGC Practitioner / other professional be present during private family time for a prolonged period. This will only occur with the agreement of the family.
- It is important to include all those identified by the family – however the FGC Practitioner will assess any safety issues before the meeting and plan how these can be managed. In exceptional cases this may result in a family member not being invited to attend the meeting and their views represented in another way at the meeting.

### Standard Five:

- Families have the right to have safe plans agreed and resourced.
- The family plan is the only written document to be produced by the FGC. The FGC Practitioner will ensure that all participants receive a copy of the plan as soon as possible after the meeting.
- The referrer will agree the plan as long as it does not place the child/young person/vulnerable adult at risk of harm and will consider any resources identified by the family.
- If there is to be a delay in agreeing the plan the family need to be informed of the reasons and a timescale agreed.
- The referrer will support the family to carry out their plan and ensure that any resources agreed are provided to the family in a timely way.
- The family may choose a monitor/link-person who, along with the referrer, ensures that the family plan is being followed.

### Standard Six:

- Families have the right to be involved in the evaluation and development of FGC services.
- Services will routinely seek feedback from all participants and these views will be used to inform and develop practice.
- The FGC service will use creative methods to ensure the views of the child/young person are sought and heard.
- Participants can raise concerns or provide feedback about their involvement with the FGC process and this will be dealt with in a constructive way.



# Family Group Conference Process

The FGC process can be broken down into 5 stages. These are shown below:

## Stage One: Referral

- Referral form completed with families consent.
- Referral sent to dedicated FGC team inbox for consideration.
- Referral assessed against our access criteria and if accepted the family is matched with an FGC Practitioner.

## Stage Two: Preparation

- Co-ordinator engages directly with child/young person/family, extended family, friends and professionals and prepares them for FGC.
- Advocate offered to child/young person if appropriate.
- A neutral venue is agreed.

## Stage Three: The conference

- Information sharing - by professionals.
- Private family time – voice of child/young person and family members, discussion and agreement made, actions and contingency plan developed by family.
- Safety plan shared – plan shared with referrer to seek agreement.
- A review of the family plan will be offered.

## Stage Four: Implementation of the plan

- Family may choose to appoint a monitor or link-person from within the family to ensure all agreed actions in the plan are fulfilled by family and referring agency.

## Stage Five: Review of the plan

- A review of the plan provides an opportunity to acknowledge what has worked and make changes where necessary.

# Stage One: Referral

## Referral Criteria

The specific criteria sits mainly in Statutory Services, the criteria for referral is:

- Cases where the CIN plan is not having the desired impact and a step up to CP is being considered.
- Potential second time entrants into CP, where a decision has been made at a strategy meeting to give the family the opportunity to work with the FGC team rather than go to child protection.
- CAF/CASS referral for Section 7 reports which family breakdown is having a detrimental impact on the children's well-being.

## Use of FGC in special circumstances

In addition to the situations already described where FGC should be used FGC can be considered when the following key needs are identified for a child or young person:

- A young person is leaving care.
- A child is being looked after and the maintenance of a family relationship is critical.
- Contact between the child and their family members needs to be improved.
- Family relationships need to be improved.
- When there is a need from alternative care.

The role of FGC in exploring placement within the kinship network is important. Evidence that children benefit from remaining with their family network is widely accepted. FGCs play a critical role in being able to assist the process of enabling children to remain within their family network by identifying family members that are able to fulfil this role.

## FGCs can assist in developing, identity and belonging by:

- Helping the child understand their family background.
- Connecting the child, as far as possible, in positive ways to their extended family.
- Connecting the child with their cultural background.

The FGC brings these components together to reinforce the child's identity and their sense of belonging to a broader family unit.

## Referral Routes:

Contact the FGC team for information advice and guidance on (01472) 325901 or send a completed FGC referral form to [FGCReferrals@nelincs.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:FGCReferrals@nelincs.gcsx.gov.uk)



## Stage Two: Preparation

The FGC Practitioner is responsible for finding and making contact with as many family network members as reasonably possible which includes sending a Family Group Conference leaflet to all family members participating in the conference.

The referrer should provide as much information as they have that will assist the FGC Practitioner with this. The FGC Practitioner will contact the family and explain what an FGC is, and clarify that they understand why the FGC has been suggested. They will assess the level of willingness to co-operate with the process and assess any risk factors for future visits with the family network and for the FGC itself.

Once a date for the FGC has been agreed, the referrer will be asked to make a one hour slot available so the FGC Practitioner can discuss any risk assessments, safety warnings, or child protection issues arising.

Contact with the child/young person must be made unless it would be inappropriate because of the child's age or it would be detrimental to their welfare. This is to;

- Explain the reason for the FGC.
- Explain what the FGC hope to achieve.
- Explain what the questions and bottom-line for the meeting and what resources would be available.
- Gain consent for the FGC.
- Ask whether they would like to participate.
- Identify how they would like to participate and what supports they will need.
- Discuss alternative means of participating where the child/young person does not want to attend the meeting but would like to participate. This may be through the use of an advocate, recording or letter.
- Identify who they would like to have at the meeting to support them. For example a friend, relative or advocate.
- Address any concerns they may have about the FGC including family relationship issues.
- Discuss who they consider 'family' or as significant to them that they would like to attend.

### Consent to hold an FGC

- Consent to hold an FGC must be obtained from the person with parental rights and all young persons considered sufficiently capable to provide consent (Frazer Competency). No contact with any other family members can occur until this consent has been obtained. If a person who has parental rights is deemed incapable of providing consent (due to mental illness, unable to locate) consultation with legal services needs to occur.
- A young person considered by the Frazer Competency as competent may wish for an

FGC to be held with or without their parent/guardian present. If there are difficulties in obtaining consent of an adult with parental responsibility to proceed with the FGC in their absence, legal advice needs to be sought.

- The Children Act, 2004 gives particular decision-making rights to people with parental responsibility for a child. The forum of an FGC aims to take account of these while working with a family's decision making process so that a family can jointly come to an agreement on a plan they can work with and commit to.

### Disclosure

- Personal information needs to be shared in the conference; this should only usually be disclosed with the consent of the subject of the information. Only in exceptional cases, such as where a child is at immediate risk, or to prevent or following commission of a crime, will this be overridden.
- Access to personal information is governed by the Data Protection Act 1998 and accompanying guidance which should be complied with.
- Legal advice should be sought if there is concern about disclosure issues.

### Guardians/ solicitors attendance at the FGC

- FGCs are not legal processes, they are family processes designed to facilitate family communications and decision-making. As such, it is not consistent with this model to involve legal personnel in these processes.
- If a family member wishes to include a solicitor in an FGC, the FGC coordinator will discuss with the solicitor the reasons why their attendance has been sought and alternatives to this. The FGC service will not facilitate a meeting with solicitors present as it is inconsistent with the principles of an FGC.
- The FGC coordinator must ensure guardians are informed of the referral and ensure they are provided with a copy of the questions and the bottom-lines for an FGC. If the guardian disagrees with any of the questions or the 'bottom-lines' for the conference, the guardian should attempt to resolve these issues with the referrer. The FGC service can only accept changes to the bottom-line or questions from the referrer.
- Bottom lines: Danger statements and safety goals should be clearly outlined by the referrer with key questions they would like the family to address. The referrer should be very clear and concise what the 'bottom line' is. For example what do they expect the family to do or put in place to make the necessary changes required.

### Exclusions

There may be occasions when it is appropriate to exclude people from attending the FGC. The FGC coordinator in consultation with line management would make this decision. The decision to exclude a person from attending should only be taken if:

- It is in the child's best interests; or
- Their attendance would be contrary to the purposes of the FGC.

The coordinator cannot exclude the child/young person or referrer from the FGC. The decision to exclude a person should be exercised rarely and only after strategies to avoid excluding have been considered in consultation with their line manager. Reasons to exclude a person may include;

- A person being a schedule one offender.
- Risk of physical or emotional harm to the child or another person attending the FGC.
- A history of domestic violence and severe power imbalance in the family or where the victims of the violence have indicated that they may be too intimidated and afraid to express their ideas if the perpetrator is present.
- Evidence that the person has a mental illness and is likely to become distressed to such a degree that the FGC may be unable to function.
- The child has been a victim of abuse or neglect, and the coordinator (in consultation with other professionals) believe that the perpetrator's presence is likely to pose a psychological or emotional risk to the child's wellbeing and ability to participate in the meeting.

### Deciding not to proceed

The FGC Practitioner will not proceed with the FGC if;

- The child concerned is old enough and is clear that they do not wish to proceed.
- There is not someone with parental responsibility who is willing for the FGC to proceed.

Where there is not someone with parental responsibility who is willing to proceed the FGC can proceed if;

- It is the social worker's assessment that the parent who is not willing for the FGC to proceed is unlikely to continue to have care of the child and
- The local authority has a legal order that gives them parental responsibility.

In such cases the right of the child to have their family network involved in the planning for their future overrides a parent's right to obstruct the FGC process.

## Stage Three: The Conference

### Rights to information

A family should be given all the information necessary for them to be able to make a plan for their children. This includes;

- Full information about the concerns held by the referrer about the child/young person involved in the FGC.
- Information on relevant support, services, activities and resources that could be used as part of a plan including any financial support and benefits available.

Parent /carers may not agree about information being disclosed to the rest of the family, for example if there were concerns about their parenting capacity for reasons such as substance misuse, the FGC Practitioner's role is to encourage the parent/carer to allow the disclosure of this information. Without the full information regarding any concerns family members will be unable to develop plans to address those concerns. If the parent/carer declines to allow the release of relevant information, the FGC would not be able to proceed as the family will not be given sufficient information to enable them to make a full plan for the child's future.

### Recording

The primary role of the FGC service is to facilitate the FGC. Practitioners are not information gatherers. As such, all recordings will reflect information relating to the FGC. A detailed record will only be made where there is information given relating to concerns for the child's or another person's safety, or an observation has been made relating to concerns for a child's or another person's safety. These records will be forwarded immediately to the relevant safeguarding team.

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## Stage Four: Implementation of the plan

### Evaluations

At the initial stage, mid-term stage and completion of each Family Group Conference, the FGC Practitioner will send each family member, child and referrer an evaluation form to be completed. This is regarded as a critical aspect of the FGC service development. If the family member will have difficulty in completing this due to literacy issues or other reasons, the FGC Practitioner will offer to assist them with the form and/or request another worker to assist them in this.

### Closure

Closure is an important process that the FGC Practitioners must undertake with the families. Throughout the FGC intervention with families the FGC Practitioners primary function is to empower the family to take responsibility for planning for children. It is a key outcome of FGC



that the families are able to autonomously continue to exercise such planning and decision making after the FGC is closed. Ensuring that the families have the confidence and resources to continue this process is a key objective of the closure role of the FGC Practitioner.

Discussing when to close a case is a decision made jointly between the referrer and the FGC Practitioner as part of a supervision process. When the decision has been made the FGC Practitioner will cease involvement once the following has occurred:

- The referral has been assessed and inappropriate.
- The family withdrew or did not provide consent for the FGC to proceed.
- A decision has been made that it would be inappropriate to proceed. For example safety issues too significant.
- The FGC has been complete and there is no review needed.
- The FGC and review has been completed.

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## Stage Five: Review of the Plan Reviews

The purpose of the FGC review is to ensure that the family plan is responsive to the child's needs and in their best interest, and is a critical component of the planning process, providing a formal opportunity for the family to review progress together with the referrer and ensure the plans ongoing relevance. It is the family's decision as to whether a formal review will go ahead.

All reviews need to consider the following:

- Have the key actions in the plan been completed? (if not are they still relevant, what is needed to complete the actions?)
- Are there any outstanding issues for the child's welfare?
- Are there any new issues that have emerged that need to be considered?
- Are there any new actions required to meet the needs of the child? What are these and who will complete them?

Reviews are facilitated by the FGC Practitioner and will generally be 8 – 12 weeks after the initial FGC. However, the timescale for review could be up to six months if all members are in agreement that this would be preferable. If a further review is required the case will return to the allocation meeting for further discussion.

Stages of an FGC review are similar to that of an FGC

1. Informal sharing – structured facilitation by the FGC Practitioner.
2. Compiling and agreeing the plan.
3. Planning further informal reviews – FGC Practitioner assists families to identify how they will continue to review and update the plan themselves.

## Practice Guidance (Roles & Responsibilities)

### Role of the FGC Practitioner:

- Meet with the referrer to discuss referral.
- Ensure the referrer is kept up to date with any changes, new information, or safeguarding issues arising.
- Meet with the parents/carers with parental rights and the child/young person to gain agreement to hold the FGC.
- Gain consent to share information.
- Work with the family to explore family networks and identify any issues for the family to meet together, and find ways in which these can be overcome or managed within the FGC.
- Meet with the child/young person to discuss their involvement in the FGC and whether they will need an advocate.
- Ensure the family have all the information needed including the complaints procedure.
- Arrange the meeting including refreshments, and any additional requirements such as transport and interpreters.
- Meet with the extended family and invite them to the FGC, ensuring they understand the process and have all the information they need including the complaints procedure.
- Where a family member cannot attend assist them in making an alternative contribution, for example by video/audio tape or letter.
- In rare circumstances and in consultation with their line manager and referrer make a decision to exclude family members.
- Chair the FGC & remain onsite throughout the FGC.
- Provide assistance during private family time if the family requests it.
- Ensure the plan made includes details about who is responsible for what and who is monitoring.
- Invite the referrer to agree the plan and enable the family to feedback to the referrer.
- Distribute copies of the plan to all family members and the referrer.
- Distribute feedback forms to the family and referrer.

### Role of the Referrer

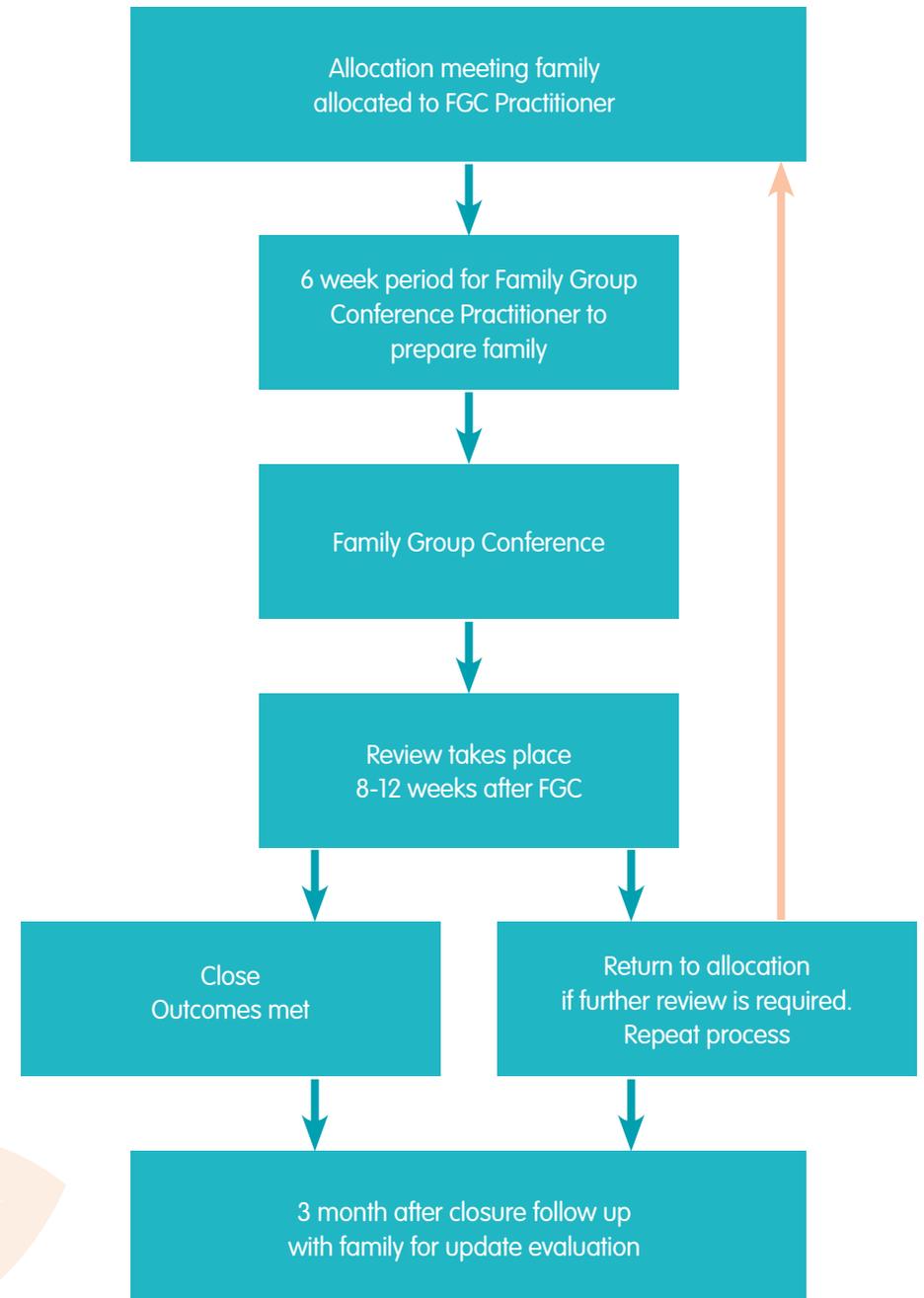
- Ensure the referral is made in a timely manner and that the FGC criteria is met.
- Attend a baseline meeting with the coordinator to fill in (discuss) the referral form.
- Continue to maintain casework responsibility and working with the family and inform the FGC coordinator of any changes.
- Ensure you have been clear and honest with the family about the concerns you have for the child/young person.
- Obtain information and possible resources for the family plan, clarify issues such as funding and availability, and seeking agreements from service providers (See FGC CO role).
- Provide the coordinator with full information such as risks identified.

- Prepare a background report for the FGC in language that will be easily understood by all at the FGC. This must not hold any new information and consent to share given by the family taking part in the FGC.
- Attend the pre-FGC meeting with the coordinator to make any final arrangements.
- Attend the FGC and present the report answering any questions the family may have, and explaining what the consequences will be for the family if they cannot agree to a plan.
- Remain onsite for the duration of the FGC. Review and agree the plan so long as it does not put the child/young person at risk of significant harm and covers the issues raised.
- Visit the family after the FGC to discuss implementing the plan.
- Monitor the implementation of the plan.
- Ensure any resources and support your agency has agreed is being provided. If the plan recommends a kinship placement ensure a referral for assessment is made within one week.
- Fill out FGC feedback forms.
- Contact the coordinator to arrange a follow up FGC if needed.

#### Role of the family:

- To participate in and attend the FGC
- To develop a plan with their family
- To write up the plan
- To monitor the plan
- To review the plan

## Family Group Conference Timescales



**Family Group Conference**

**North East Lincolnshire**

Civic Offices, Knoll Street  
Cleethorpes, DN35 8LN

**Tel: (01472) 324987**

**Email: [FGCReferrals@nelincs.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:FGCReferrals@nelincs.gcsx.gov.uk)**