

Family Group Conferences and Safeguarding

Introduction

It is considered that some families who have been through the Safeguarding process will be suitable for a referral for a Family Group Conference. Referrals will be made by social workers and practice decisions will influence this, although the reasons for not referring should be made clear and all families who could plan should be considered to a Family Group Conference.

This may mean children who have been assessed or investigated under s.47 of the Children Act 1989, i.e. where there is a reasonable cause to suspect actual or likely significant harm. This document is written for all those involved with children and families involved in the Safeguarding process who may be being considered for a Family Group Conference (FGC).

Research across the country has shown Local Authorities who have introduced FGCs have suggested that the proper use of the process can empower and enable families to protect their children where previously statutory interventions would have been required to achieve this end. For the future protection of children in Devon it is important that appropriate data is collected and reviewed to confirm or dispute this hypothesis.

Safeguarding Process

When a referral is received or a concern shared, enquiries are undertaken to determine what action is required to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. Decisions are then made about the appropriate course of action. In some cases a Child Protection Conference will be held, and a recommendation from this could be that a Family Group Conference be convened to provide the family with an opportunity to work with any Child Protection Plan. The Child

Protection Plan should be included in the agenda for the family to consider. In all cases the agreed planning should adhere to procedures.

Following the initial assessment a decision will be made whether to refer a family for a FGC. The decision to refer will lie with the practice manager and social worker. All the information which has been made available from other agencies will have been considered in this decision making process. In ideal circumstances consideration will be given to offer an FGC to all families as standard. As a matter of good practice, consideration should be given to explaining the process to all families and allowing them to be more actively involved in deciding whether or not to make a referral, families should be afforded the opportunity to contribute to this decision.

Decisions will also be made as to where any plan will be ratified; it may be agreed that a plan should be presented to a Review Child Protection Conference (CPC) or to the Core Group, this will need to be agreed at the CPC. If a forum other than the CPC is to consider the plan a copy of the Family Plan should be sent to the Child Protection Chair.

Principles in relation to Safeguarding

- The child must be safe
- The family must be in agreement for the Family Group Conference referral to be made. Initially the social worker will explain the process to the family.
- The police must be consulted where appropriate (i.e. where criminal proceedings may be pending)
- All other involved agencies must be informed about the proposed referral for a FGC
- Family plans should be accepted if they address the safeguarding issues presented to the family and the proposed plan does not place the child at risk. If it is deemed to be unsafe clear explanation should be given to the family so they can have the opportunity to make alternative plans.
- All cases should be viewed on an individual basis and decisions made about the way forward that are in the best interests of the child.
- As in all situations where social workers are intervening in the lives of children the wishes and feelings of the child should be ascertained. All those involved should remain child centred and be clear that the welfare of the child, not the family remains paramount.
- The level of risk will be made clear throughout the process and the family will need to accept the risk and the need to plan in order to make a plan that offers adequate safeguards.

- There should be a consensus on the 'bottom line' (minimum requirements for the family to meet in any plan) this can be agreed by the social worker and practice manager if prior to initial CPC or by the professionals at the initial CPC that recommends a FGC be explored.
- The professionals will set the agenda and clarify any non negotiable aspects of the planning prior to the family being asked to plan for the child/ren.

Practice Issues

If a Child Protection Conference is required this should be held and not postponed in order to wait for the FGC to convene.

Where a referral needs to be made for a Child Protection Case Conference this should not prevent a referral for a Family Group Conference. In this case the family could be asked to meet to plan how the Safeguarding Plan will be implemented and any plan from the family could be presented to the Core Group or the review Child Protection Conference for ratification.

There will be occasions where a family plan clearly eradicates the potential risks and a Child Protection Plan is no longer deemed necessary. In these circumstances a review child protection conference should be called, is the child is already subject to a CP plan. In cases where there are assessed risks but the child is not the subject of a CP plan the practice manager and social worker should record the risk and the means by which the family have addressed this so that it is clear why a Child Protection Conference is not being called. All agencies must be informed of this decision and invited to comment. Recording of these decisions should be clearly marked on the child file.

There must be a record of how the family plan will be monitored and who has accepted responsibility to re-refer should the plan not be adhered to.

All those involved should be clear about the need to re-refer should this become necessary and a record kept of this for research into the effectiveness of the process.

Any practice issues should be raised directly with the FGC manager.

Exclusions

Decisions about any exclusions will be made on a case by case basis with the welfare of the child being paramount. It will be necessary to discuss possible exclusions if there are possible criminal proceedings pending. This discussion will be held with the FGC manager and the relevant person who is expressing concern.

It will not be usual for exclusions to be made and any excluded person should be given the opportunity to contribute via an alternative route, their views should be focused on the issues the FGC will be considering. This should be agreed with the co-ordinator and FGC manager.

In cases where there are drug/alcohol misuse is prevalent, or there are complex mental health issues, there should be careful consideration to referring for a FGC if there is denial and collusion as a feature of the extended family dynamics.

Managing potential risk will be a factor in considering any exclusions, and discussion held with the FGC manager.

Further Planning

In the majority of cases, any family plan should be presented to the Child Protection Conference for consideration and ideally this should be very soon after the FGC i.e. within two days. The initial Child Protection Conference will set the agenda for the family to consider and decide together whether the Core Group should be able to ratify any family plan.

If the plan does not place the child at risk it should be accepted. If it is considered that the plan cannot be accepted the family should be given clear reasons for this and have the opportunity to address any additional concerns.

It should be made to clear families from the outset that even their child may still need to have a formal Child Protection Plan which will incorporate the family plan if the concerns warrant this. If the family plan has addressed all the concerns this will become the Child Protection Plan for the child and should be recorded as such.

If a family group conference is not held as recommended by the Child Protection Conference the reasons for this should be made clear and recorded for research.

If the family do address the concerns they may ask for an early Review Child Protection Conference to be convened the responsibility for this will be with the social worker in consultation with the Core Group and the CP Chair. Families should be informed of these decisions and the basis for them.

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