

Family Group Conference Service in Bedford Borough - Internal Procedure:

Introduction:

The Family Group Conference Service in Bedford Borough has been developed in line with the principles underpinning the Family Group Conference model, developed in New Zealand in the 1980's. This model was developed in line with Maori traditions and culture and in doing so developed a unique way of working with families, which was unprecedented. A process then evolved that sought to hand power back to the families and work in a more culturally sensitive way.

In Bedford Borough, in line with the above principles, a Family Group Conference is a decision – making meeting which is arranged and run by an Independent Coordinator. It is a way to bring a child's "family" together to make decisions and come up with a plan which will create a way forward.

It is a practical tool for building partnership among parents, family and community to keep children safe and promote their well-being and enables children and young people to have a true voice in the planning for their future.

In a Family Group Conference family members are seen as the "experts on themselves", with their strengths being supported and reinforced. Family is determined broadly to include the child, parents, extended family members and close friends who may not be blood related but who are concerned and care about the child.

The Family Group Conference model is underpinned by the belief that:

If family members are sought out, included and provided with adequate information, they are in the best position to create an effective plan and deal with family problems.

In short, in a Family Group Conference it is the family who is in charge of the process. They are tasked to consider information presented by agencies and to plan to meet the needs of their children.

The family's plan should be accepted if it is safe and resourced by the agencies involved.

Referral Criteria:

The Family Group Conference Service sits within Support Services.

Children's Social Care and referrals can currently only be made by social workers/early help workers.

The main criteria for a referral are whether there is a "significant issue / question that the family need to resolve" but should be considered in the following circumstances:

- Where children are being considered as in need of accommodation or are at risk of becoming Looked After (Edge of Care);
- Prior to applications being made to Court;
- At an Initial Child Protection Conferences or at any time when a child is subject to a child protection plan;

- At a Looked After Review or Planning Meeting when considering the needs of children already Looked After/ reunification;
- During Assessments;

Other situations can be considered on a case by case including contact arrangements, children subject to Interim Care Orders where ongoing family support has been assessed as being needed, or where the care plan indicates that neither parent would be a suitable carer and alternative carers are being sought. A Family Group Conference should be considered alongside adoption and, in appropriate cases, long term fostering as alternatives.

Process:

The social worker should discuss the Family Group Conference with the family and gain the family's approval for the referral to be made and for an Independent Coordinator to make contact with them. (Leaflets are available on the Family Group Conference Service intranet page - <http://spintranet/departments/children/csc/Pages/default.aspx> About Children's Social Care – click on link Family Group Conference Service.

When approval is obtained the social worker completes the referral form – available to download from the intranet page <http://spintranet/departments/children/csc/Pages/default.aspx> or by contacting the Family Group Conference Service by email to familygroupconferenceservice@bedford.gov.uk or by telephone on 01234 276643/ 01234 276586

The referral is returned to the dedicated email address: familygroupconferenceservice@bedford.gov.uk The Family Group Conference Service Manager will assess the suitability of the completed referral – may contact the referrer for clarification or could offer the support of an Independent Coordinator to assist in completing the referral form. It is important that the issues, questions anticipated outcomes and “bottom lines” are clarified at this point.

Once the referral has been accepted by the service an Independent Coordinator will be allocated within 3 working days of acceptance of the referral.

On allocation the Independent Coordinator will arrange to meet with the referrer to clarify the referral and outline expectations of them – including the need to prepare a brief report that will need to be shared before the meeting, the need for the referrer to attend the meeting, and the means of ongoing communication throughout Family Group Conference process.

The Independent Coordinator will then meet with the parents who have parental responsibility, - (someone with parental responsibility (preferably a parent) will need to consent to the Family Group Conference taking place) – the child and any other people listed as part of the referral or subsequently identified by the family.

The Independent Coordinator will meet with the child/ren in order to obtain their views/wishes and feelings in age and developmentally appropriate ways. This will generally

apply to all children aged 4 years and above but consideration should be given to how to include the wishes and feeling of younger children.

The Independent Coordinator will then make a judgement about whether the Family Group Conference is viable. If the meeting is not viable the Independent Coordinator will complete a brief Closing Statement outlining the work carried out and the reason why the meeting did not take place. This form is returned to the Family Group Conference Service, who will forward this to the referrer and Business Support for information.

If the meeting is to take place the referrer will need to complete an information sharing report for the family – using the guidance and template available on the Family Group Conference Service -<http://spintranet/departments/children/csc/Pages/default.aspx> This report must be shared with the person with Parental Responsibility at least 5 days before the meeting, research indicates that brief and clear reports are the most useful for families and good practice suggests that there should be “no new news” shared at the meeting.

The Independent Coordinator will negotiate the date, time and venue for the meeting that is accessible to the family. This will take into consideration any security / risk issues. The Family Group Conference should take place in the family’s first language if that is their preference, with interpreters for others as needed. Interpreters will be funded and arranged by the referrer. The Coordinator will advise Family Group Conference Service Business Support of the date, time and venue of the meeting.

When the meeting takes place the Independent Coordinator will pay attention to welcoming, introductions and physical comfort (food, drinks, comfortable chairs, toilets etc.); promoting equality and respect and empowering the family to have the meeting their way.

Clarify the 3 stage process

1. Information sharing and asking questions
2. Private family time
3. Agreeing and recording family decisions

The family will produce their plan, the Coordinator can assist with this if the family request this, but the plan should be written by the family. If the Coordinator is asked to write the plan they must write it in the family’s own words. The referrer and Coordinator meet with the family to discuss and agree the plan and negotiate any resources. The plan summary must also be completed, (with the help of the co-ordinator if required).

The family’s plan will be presented to the referrer at the end of the Family Group Conference and it is expected that the plan will be accepted by the referrer unless the issue of the child’s safety and wellbeing has not been satisfactorily addressed. Any reasons for not accepting the plan must be made clear immediately and the family should be given the opportunity to respond to the concerns and change or add to the plan if necessary.

The handwritten plan is then signed by all present including the referrer. Good practice suggests that a review date should be agreed with the family at the conference to review how the plan is working and make new plans if necessary. The signed hand written plan is delivered to the Family Group Conference Service by the Independent Coordinator and scanned and stored on the system by Business Support.

The Independent Coordinator will distribute the family and friends evaluation forms and collect the completed forms.

The Coordinator will type the Family Plan and send to the Family Group Conference Service Manager for approval within 5 working days of the meeting.

The Manager will clarify any points and agree the plan, return to the Coordinator for distribution with a copy to Business Support, within 3 working days.

The Coordinator will distribute the plan to all parties within 10 working days and will include any family and friends evaluation forms that were not distributed at the meeting.

The Independent Coordinator will make contact with the family to discuss and arrange the review – it is the family's decision whether the formal review takes place. If the review is to go ahead this will be arranged in line with the same principles as the original meeting. It will be the referrer's responsibility to update the family group of the current situation and therefore the referrer must undertake to remain involved during the Family Group Conference process. Any changes to the family plan arising from the Review Meeting will be agreed and circulated in the same way as the initial plan. If the review meeting does not go ahead as planned the Independent Co-ordinator must complete a Closing Statement.

Ending Involvement:

The Family Group Conference Service involvement will end once the initial and review meetings have taken place.

Involvement will also end if:

- The referral has been assessed as inappropriate
- The family withdrew or did not provide consent for the meeting to proceed
- A decision was made that it was inappropriate to proceed i.e. if safety issues were too great.

Recording and Information Sharing:

Family Group Conferences do not sit easily with standard recording policies in Local Authorities because a general principle of the model is that no minutes are taken during a Family Group Conference and the only record of the Meeting should be the family's plan.

The Family Group Conference Service will create an electronic file for each family and this file will contain:

- The referral form;
- The handwritten and signed family plan
- The typed version of the plan
- The report the referrer provides for the family
- Any child protection or health and safety concerns highlighted through the Family Group Conference process and action taken.
- Names and contact details of participants.

Business Support will upload the typed Family Plan to AzeusCare but the Social Worker will be responsible for recording all other Family Group Conference related documents and involvement with the Family Group Conference Service on AzeusCare. It is the social worker's responsibility to share all key documentation with Guardians and the Court.

A database will be held by the Family Group Conference Service for performance management purposes.