



FGC & Lifelong Links Network Newsletter

Summer 2021

Family Group Conference (FGC)

This is a process led by family members to plan and make decisions for and with a child. It is often used to address child welfare concerns. Also known as FGDM (family group decision making) in Scotland.

Lifelong Links

Is for children in care, working with them, to help identify and find relatives and other supportive adults, in order to build a lasting support network for the child or young person.



TROY'S STORY

Troy (11) had been living with his foster carer for 10 months when Lifelong Links was suggested. This was Troy's first foster care placement, and it was in the process of being approved as permanent.

Troy's foster carer previously only fostered children under 3 years old and had never fostered any child or young person long term before. She was anxious about Lifelong Links and its potential impact on the stability of the placement. The social worker and the social worker's manager were also anxious about this. They wondered what would happen. Would it destabilise the placement? Would it upset Troy? What if no one wanted to be involved?

BACKGROUND

Before entering foster care, Troy lived with his mother. His father would visit the UK from the Caribbean and seek contact sporadically every few years. Troy's parents were not in contact with the rest of the family network or each other and there was a lot of animosity between them.

Troy and his mother had been part of a large community where they used to live and it had been concerned for Troy's welfare. It wasn't unusual for him to attend a playdate and not be picked up for several days. When Troy was taken into care no one in the community was told what had happened to him. There was also some guilt that they could not stop Troy from going into local authority care. Troy only knew the first names of his school friends and

*Turn to page 2 to
continue reading.*

What did Troy want from Lifelong Links?

- **To find out about two uncles and cousins he hadn't seen for a long time**
- **To reconnect with his friends from school**
- **To see the adults who had cared for him**
- **To find his little sister**
- **To know more about where his father's family came from (Caribbean)**
- **To know that people still thought and cared about him.**

their parents and lost contact with them as well, when he was taken into care.

Troy was still in touch with his paternal grandmother and his two half-brothers, whom he was seeing once every few months. One of his half-brothers was cared for by their paternal aunt under a Special Guardianship Order and his other half-brother was in local authority care. All three boys got on very well. Troy had an interest in ensuring that his brothers were well cared for.

Troy knew that he had a younger half-sister living in Europe on his dad's side of the family but he had never met her and her full name was not known to the local authority.

What did the Lifelong Links coordinator discover?

Troy's Lifelong Links coordinator found and contacted over 30 people who Troy was interested in getting in touch with.

The coordinator also spoke with people in Troy's old community who, in turn, talked to others. She also approached Troy's old school and the local youth clubs. Soon word got out and people came forward who had been concerned about Troy and wanted to continue to support him.

Parents of Troy's school friends said they had been left out when child protection procedures started, and they always wondered what had happened to him. They still cared about him and came forward to be a part of his network.

The international family group conference community helped to identify and locate Troy's younger half-sister in Europe. Troy's coordinator and a social worker were able to talk to the local authorities and find out more about her. She is in the process of being adopted herself and it remains to be seen if he will be able to have any kind of communication with her.

The Lifelong Links family group conference

The family group conference was attended by 14 friends and family members including uncles, friends and their parents. Troy could see first-hand that people not only remembered him but still cared about him. A wealth of stories and Caribbean food were also shared.

Plans were made with Troy for his future, which included:

- Positive connections with paternal family and his Caribbean heritage.
- A holiday to visit overseas relatives planned with his grandmother.
- His uncles have committed to involve Troy in their work and community.
- Male family and friends taking Troy to the barbers, to community events to continue to share food and Caribbean stories.
- Troy now has positive black male role models, which is particularly important as Troy is placed with a white carer and has a predominantly white professional network.

Foster carer's view

Troy's foster carer was reassured by the support from paternal family. The contribution of friends in addition to family is really strong and they all have a lot to offer. The support includes things that she simply cannot offer Troy. She sees the support they have offered Troy as hugely positive, especially regarding his future as a young black man. Their support has not negatively impacted the stability of the placement in any way.

**** BRAND NEW ****

Family Rights Group has recently developed a short animation explaining the impact that Lifelong Links has proven to have on children and young people. To watch, click the image below.



**Lifelong Links has been shown
to increase a child's connections from 7 to 26**

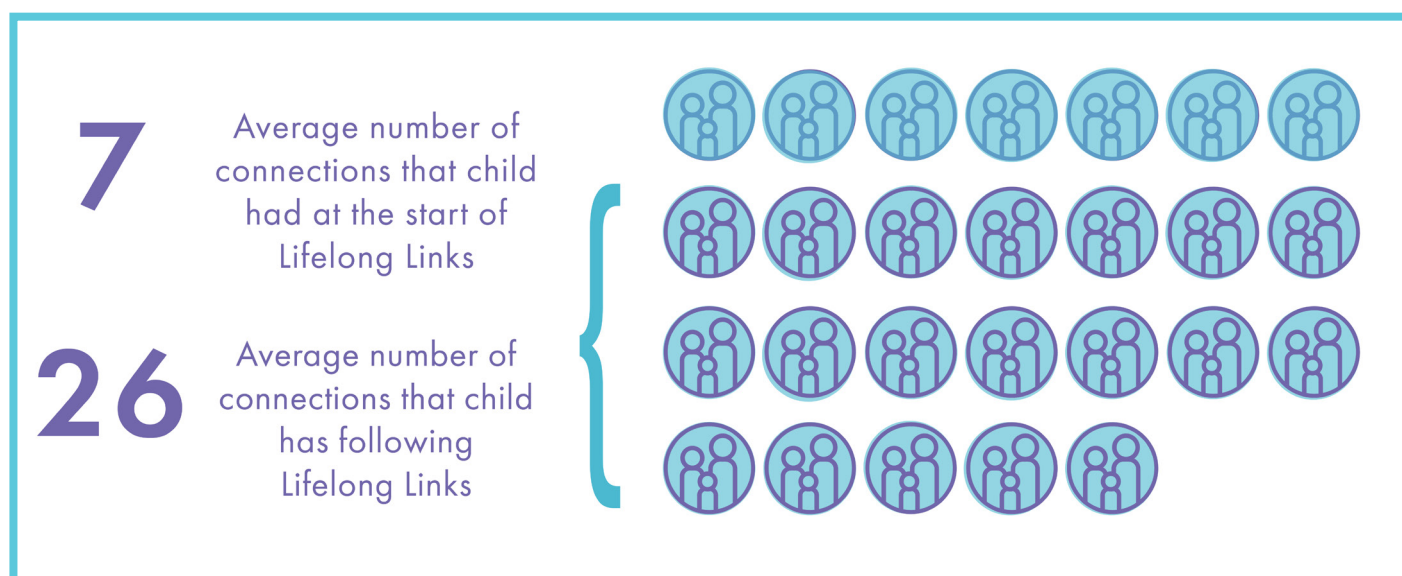


The impact of Lifelong Links

In January 2021 the report of the independent evaluation into Lifelong Links was published. The evaluation covered the three years of the trial, 2017-20, which involved 12 local authorities in England. The evaluation was carried out by Dr Lisa Holmes at the Rees Centre, University of Oxford. **The evaluation report can be read in full [here](#).**

Some of the key findings of the independent evaluation and Family Rights Groups own analysis include:

- **Increase in family and friends connections.** On average children and young people increased their social networks from seven to 26 people.
- 78% felt an **improved sense of identity** after finding out more about their family and where they came from. One Lifelong Links coordinator managed to trace one young person's family tree back to the 1850s and one young person discovered their "funny feet" were the same as their Dad's.
- Statistically significant **positive impact on placement stability**: 74% children and young people were in the same home a year after Lifelong Links compared with 41% of comparator group.
- The benefits of Lifelong Links to children and young people such as improved relationships are not really monetizable, however, a cost benefit analysis of Lifelong Links did show a **return on investment of £1.02 for every £1 spent.**



Increase in family and friend connections

How to get involved with Lifelong Links

Family Rights Group is the leading authority on Lifelong Links and local authorities who would like to introduce Lifelong Links are able to commission a bespoke training and consultancy package from us.

The initial package includes the following with additional services also available:

- Access to Lifelong Links resources including the up to date Lifelong Links toolkit, practice guidance and films
- Lifelong Links coordinator training
- Access to the online Social Connections Tool
- Five days consultancy per year
- Practice learning sets for Lifelong Links coordinators
- Lifelong Links managers' meetings
- FGC service accreditation
- Bespoke impact report.

*It's really made us think about the wider family and **having Family Rights Group, sharing the practice with other local authorities has been really helpful** for us. We have really enjoyed it and **it has made a big difference to our practice.** Feedback from young people, parents, friends and relatives has been really positive.*

Jenny Coles
Director of Children's Services
Hertfordshire County Council



Visit www.frg.org.uk
to find out more



News from the network

Lifelong Links and care experienced young people. Can you help?

Paul Reddiex, formerly of Leeds and North Yorkshire Councils has joined Family Rights Group as a consultant for a few months. He has been tasked with leading development work to produce practice guidance and training materials around utilising Lifelong Links with care leavers and care experienced young people who have their own children.

Paul has already held a number of consultation events but is keen to hear from any young people or involved professionals who might want to make a contribution to developing practice.

Paul is happy to attend meetings or arrange one to one conversations. He can be contacted at paulreddiex@icloud.com or 07534568021.

Postgraduate certificate in FGCs

Congratulations to those who completed their first stage of the combined FRG and University of Salford PG cert and celebrated virtually with a glass of something sparkling before Christmas. 24 people have now enrolled on the course. The next entry is September 2021. For further information see the Family Rights Group [website](#).



'The PG Cert has given me confidence in my job role and promoting the FGCs unique way of working with families'

'The FGC course has supported me in my practical work as I am now able to critically reflect on my practice'

'I have enjoyed this course and I can see how this has impacted positively on my career'

Four nations event

On 16th June 2021 Family Rights Group hosted a Four Nations family group conference event. This was an opportunity for the four family group conference networks of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to come together virtually to share their family group conference experiences.

Family group conferences have been practiced throughout the four nations for more than two decades and practitioners have been pivotal in both developing and sustaining its growth over this time. We are interested in using our new found skills in meeting virtually to enable sharing in a way that has not happened before.

Look out for the full report of the event in the next edition of the newsletter. Presentations will also be made available to members of the FGC & Lifelong Links network.

Lifelong Links is coming to Wales!

"We feel that it is vitally important that we provide young people with the best opportunities we can. To enable them to thrive during their time in care and have an enriched and developed support network around these young people is central to this. Lifelong Links is a fantastic project and we can't wait to get started."

Chris Cahill

Partnership Manager for Newport Family Support Service, which is a strategic Partnership between Barnardos and Newport Children Services.



Join our team and help more families in need of support and advice.

Sunday 12th September 2021

Registration fee: £80

Fundraising target: £220



Find out more about taking part in the Great North Run [here!](#)

“Reducing infant separation at birth: what role can FGCs play?”



On the 31st March 2021 we held a network meeting with the focus on ‘Reducing infant separation at birth: what role can FGCs play?’ and heard from: Claire Mason, Lancaster University; Julie Falconer, Team Manager, Edinburgh Family Group Decision-making Service; Natalie Saunders, Newport FGC Service; and Clare Barton, FGC Team Manager Kent FGC Service. The meeting was attended virtually by over 90 network members and small group discussion followed the presentations.

Amid growing concerns about an increase in the number of babies being removed from vulnerable parents this was an important opportunity to look at how family group conference services can help to ensure that parents have the opportunity through an FGC to keep their children within their families.

Claire Mason summarised some key messages from a series of studies considering the experiences and outcomes for women and infants involved in care proceedings. She drew in particular from *‘Vulnerable Birth Mothers and Recurrent Care Proceedings in England: a Mixed Methods Study’* (2014 -2018) and from *‘Born into Care: Towards inclusive guidelines when the State intervenes at birth’*.

The first of these reports highlighted the scale and pattern of mothers’ involvement in recurrent care proceedings, with 25% of mothers being involved in repeat proceedings within seven years of their first proceedings. She also detailed the age profile of children involved in repeat proceedings with 70% of children of mothers subject to repeat proceedings being under one year of age.

Claire also outlined the significant regional variation in the number of infants at birth that are subject to proceedings with some regions recording twice the rate as others. Claire described a range of variables influencing these regional differences such as levels of poverty, availability of mother and baby placements and quality of legal advocacy available to parents amongst other factors.

Claire interviewed 72 birth mothers and described the traumatic nature of how these court mandated decisions are enacted with some mothers having their baby removed in hospital often in the hours shortly after giving birth. The emotional consequences for parents of this experience are long standing and traumatic in terms of the complicated and unresolved grief they experience in addition to significant other informal social losses. (To hear parents describing their experiences visit lancaster.ac.uk.)

These emotional consequences will often add to the traumatic childhood histories that many parents have experienced and can lead to them pursuing further pregnancies leading to subsequent removals compounding their grief and loss.

Claire is, along with other academics, developing guidelines for courts and services to help them engage with parents. The aim of the guidelines is improve outcomes for the parents and the child and will explore how FGCs could be used.

**More information
available at lancaster.ac.uk**
(click on links below)

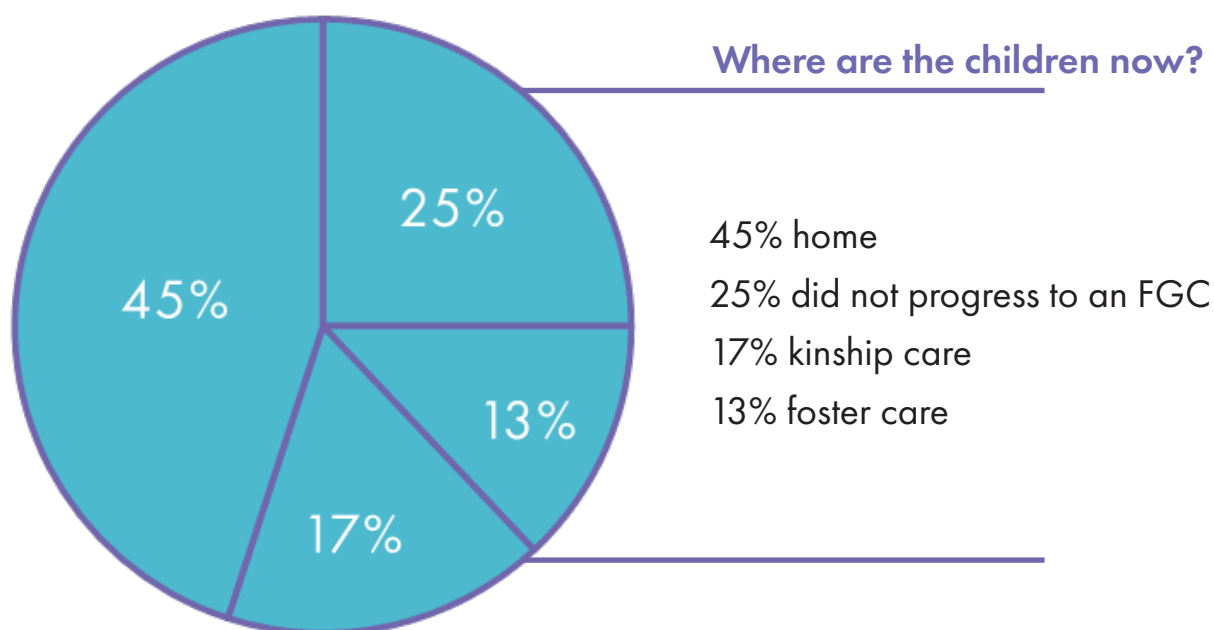
- [Recurrent care proceedings](#)
- [Born into Care: Towards inclusive guidelines when the State intervenes at birth](#)

Edinburgh's experience

The 'vulnerable babies' service was developed following growing concerns about the number of babies being taken into care at birth. Reflecting experiences similar to those described by Claire, Julie explained that in 2014 when the service was developed, pre-birth referrals of vulnerable mothers to children's services would often happen only days before the birth and frequently without any effective exploration of wider family support. When they explored the issues in more detail informal feedback indicated that social workers were reluctant to make referrals because they either felt there was no appropriate or safe family support or that the FGDM process would delay the search for an alternative placements for the child.

In response to these concerns the FGDM service initiated a pilot project whereby referrals across the city could be made as early as possible in the pregnancy. It was often by health professionals directly referring thereby allowing sufficient time to explore family support and test out plans prior to the birth. The FGDM service reached out to other support services to collaborate and agree pathways to refer, including an automatic offer to all families subject to social work assessment. Julie described the significant and immediate impact of this work. Between 2017 and 2021 there have been 467 referrals to the service.

The table below (adapted from Julie's presentation) shows the outcomes for families referred with the majority of referrals leading to family placement.



For information check out the two short films on YouTube. Just click the images below.

Recognition Matters



Azaria's Story





Newport’s experience

Natalie Saunders (Newport family group conference service) described the close working relationship they have with the ‘Baby and Me’ service. They work under the umbrella of the Newport Strategic Partnership Family Support service combining local authority and Barnardos services. The ‘Baby and Me’ service works intensively with parents who have already lost a child to the care system. Strong relationships and consistent support in helping parents engage seems key to their success. Referrals to the FGC service are made 13 or 14 weeks into the pregnancy allowing sufficient time for an FGC to be convened and for the subsequent family plan to be seen to be working. Since October 2019 they have worked with 37 families resulting in 11 FGCs. Of these nine babies have returned home and the other two babies are yet to be born.

Kent’s experience

The East Kent FGC team has been running a service for vulnerable mothers since 2019 which started following a conversation between the local service manager and a senior FGC coordinator regarding the increasing numbers of under 5-year-olds being referred into the local authority for social care support. The project was extended to the rest of the authority in 2020.

The senior coordinator scans open cases, on a monthly basis, for pre-birth cases. They then email the relevant team managers to ask if an FGC may be helpful for the family to plan around the birth of the baby and provide support for parent(s) post birth.

The FGC coordinator then works to involve relevant professionals, for example children centre workers and health visitors, to provide information to the parents and their families,. A review FGC post birth is always offered although this is not always needed and cases remain open until after the birth.

The FGC service records data on the numbers and who from the family/professional network are involved. They follow up with families after the FGC at three, six and 12 months. After hearing Claire Mason’s presentation they will now be adding information to their data collection about parents who have had previous children removed.



Snapshot of outcomes of Kent's service for vulnerable mothers

	North	South	East	West	Total
Number of referrals	31	36	64	16	147
Completed FGCs (includes reviews)	10	28	47	8	93
No further action taken	7	3	11	3	24
Work in progress / awaiting allocation	14	5	6	5	30
Child remained with family	14	23	49	8	98
Child entered local authority care	1	7	8	3	19
Deceased	2	0	0	0	2

Out of 117 pre-birth cases where work was completed or the case closed, 98 children remained with family whilst 19 entered the care of the local authority. 12 of those that entered care went to mother and baby placements.

In summing up the key messages from the presentations are:

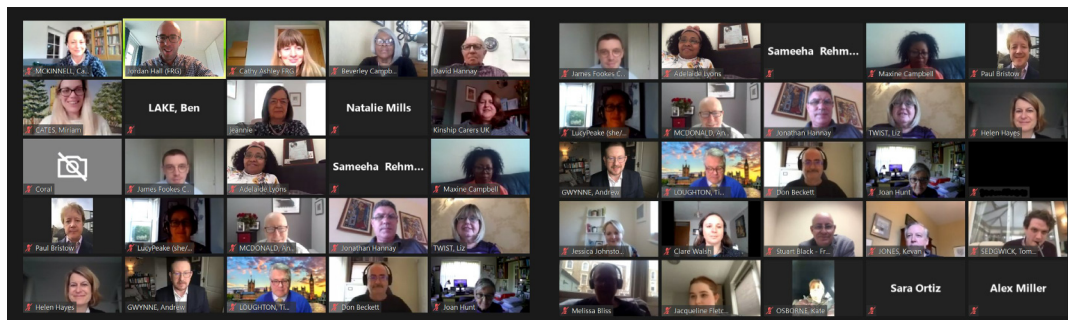
- The importance of expectant parents being referred early in order that there is sufficient time for a support plan to be made and for it to be tested
- The value of relationship based practice to support and encourage parental engagement with services
- Recognition of the impact of child removal on parents and how this can be addressed in order to prevent a cycle of removal of children being repeated
- The value of FGC services working collaboratively with other support services to agree pathways of referral and support, in particular working with health professionals
- The value of pro active work by the FGC service in identifying referrals of vulnerable parents pre birth and in engaging with referrers to promote early referrals
- The value of following up outcomes of such work and using the evidence to promote the work.

Report written up by Sean Haresnape

Family group conference and Lifelong Links Practice Lead at Family Rights Group

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care

In March, a new All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care was launched, bringing together cross party MPs and Peers with a common interest



in championing kinship care. Andrew Gwynne, Labour Member of Parliament for Denton and Reddish in Greater Manchester and himself a kinship carer, was elected as the Group's chair. He is supported by a strong team of Vice Chairs, including former Children's Minister, Tim Loughton MP (Conservative); Taskforce Chair Catherine McKinnell MP (Labour); Miriam Cates MP (Conservative); Helen Hayes MP (Labour); Baroness Armstrong (Labour); Ian Byrne MP (Labour); and Steven Bonnar MP (SNP).

At the virtual launch of the Group held via Zoom, members of our kinship carers panel spoke passionately to MPs and other guests about their experience of kinship care and the change they would like to see. Family Rights Group instigated the formation of the APPG and are pleased to be serving as the group's secretariat, providing policy and legal expertise to support the work of parliamentarians.

The group builds on the work of the Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care and will continue to campaign for greater recognition of kinship care and improved support for kinship carers and the children they are raising. Members of the Group have agreed three key priorities for 2021/22 which are:

1. pandemic support for kinship carers;
2. influencing the Care Review, and;
3. campaigning on the proposals put forward by the Parliamentary Taskforce.

In the coming months the Group will be meeting with the Chair of the Care Review, Josh MacAlister, and will be engaging with other key decisionmakers including the Children's Minister.

Follow updates on the group's work on Twitter: [@APPGKinshipCare](https://twitter.com/APPGKinshipCare) and on the Family Rights Group website.

"Our families, our voices"



In March 2021 Family Rights Group hosted an evening of talks, performance and conversation curated and led by young people, parents and kinship carers to showcase lived experiences, through creative storytelling, in order to effect changes to benefit the lives of children, young people and families.

This work highlights the importance of all of us listening to and learning from those whose lives are directly affected by our child welfare system.

You can watch March's event in full on our website, just click the image above to take you there. We are also planning similar events in the future so watch this space!

"It is around six years ago that Family Rights Group set up the parents' and kinship care panels. They have been transformative to our organisation in ways we never envisaged.

... (they) have experienced significant adversities but are the most restorative and creative people I've ever met... We wouldn't now do it any other way"

Cathy Ashley
 chief executive, Family Rights Group



Family Rights Group

Helping Families Helping Children

We know the value of accurate and reliable advice for families involved with children's services and the consequence of not getting the right help when it is needed. That's why we have upgraded www.frg.org.uk to provide families and practitioners with comprehensive and easy to follow content.

Getting the right advice

We have organised the advice for families so they can search under:

- **Who?** for example, for a father, mother, kinship carer?
- **What?** for example, if the child is subject to child protection enquiries or care proceedings?
- **Why?** for example, are children's services involved with the family due to domestic abuse or do the family need support to care for the child due to physical or mental ill-health?

The features on our new website include:

- Our legal advice sheets provide more in-depth advice on topics that families involved with children's services or the Family Court might need guidance about.
- Resources for local authority decision makers and social workers working with families affected by domestic abuse .
- A series of new 'Working with...' guides which provide tips and guidance for parents and families on working with a solicitor, social worker, or child advocate.



“

Bridget and FRG have championed the wider family in other ways, through **family group conferences** to try and find a family solution when parents are struggling; through a variety of ways of arranging **kinship care**; through fighting for better recognition and **support for the family as a resource rather than a problem.**

Baroness Hale

Baroness Hale

Family Justice Council, 2021 Bridget Lindley Memorial Lecture

Bridget Lindley was Family Rights Group's deputy chief executive and principal legal adviser who tragically died in March 2016. This year's memorial lecture, given by Baroness Hale, can be read in full [here](#).