



Delivering family group conferences during the Coronavirus crisis

How we can use remote technology to support the involvement of families in decision making about their children during the Coronavirus outbreak

This guide is written to help local authorities, during the crisis, to work in partnership with families in their localities to make workable plans for vulnerable children and adults who are struggling or are at risk. It is more important than ever, when local authority and court resources are so overstretched, that we are able to draw upon the knowledge and capacity of the family and community network, to safeguard and support children and adults.

This guide has been written for family group conference practitioners and managers and local authority decision makers. Families involved with the child welfare or family justice system may find it helpful in considering whether they wish to ask their local authority for a family group conference or go ahead with a family group conference to help address a serious concern or challenge.

This guidance was published on 19th May 2020.

We have drawn on the experiences of family group conference services across the UK in their response to the evolving Coronavirus crisis. The guide presumes that for now family group conferences will not be able to take place physically. This guide may be updated, as we gather more evidence of families' experiences or to reflect new government guidance. We will always publish the latest version on our:

website: www.frg.org.uk

twitter: [@FamilyRightsGp](https://twitter.com/FamilyRightsGp)

facebook: [Family Rights Group](https://www.facebook.com/FamilyRightsGroup)

www.frg.org.uk

Introduction

During the Coronavirus outbreak, all of us will be practicing social distancing or will have to self-isolate. This guide has been written to specifically address how to support family-led decision making during this crisis when face to face physical meetings are the exception not the rule. This guidance is focused on child welfare related situations, but many of the points are applicable to when plans have to be made with, and for, very vulnerable adults. Indeed, a family group conference can be used to support a vulnerable adult who is unable, due to Covid 19 to leave their home to manage their day to day needs.

Many parents and carers will be dealing with the extra stresses that the crisis is placing on us, including home schooling, self-isolation, loss of income, loneliness, anxiety etc. At the same time many of the support services that we may have normally turned to have had to close, significantly restructure or redeploy staff during the crisis.

For some families the additional pressures are such that they may feel that they are seriously struggling to cope. Family group conferences can provide a structure to help ensure that even during the crisis, parents get sufficient help from family, community and public services, to be able to manage. However, in some situations, the local authority will need to use their statutory powers to investigate concerns about a child at risk of significant harm or even to initiate care proceedings. The actions and decisions that the local authority take during the crisis may therefore have long lasting and profound consequences on a child and their family. It is therefore critical that the families have as full an opportunity as possible to devise safe plans and inform decisions affecting their child.

Family Rights Group, which leads the national family group conference network, has consulted with family group conference services to see how they are operating under these difficult circumstances. We have heard evidence from across the UK about the creative practice of family group conference coordinators in continuing to engage families in decisions about their children. We have also unfortunately heard of situations where parents, for example, with learning disabilities, have not been offered a family group conference but have been expected to participate in child protection conferences by phone, with no preparation or advocate or explanation of who was present at the conference or its purpose. In a few areas, local family group conference services have been suspended or closed during the crisis.

This guide considers how families can be engaged and family group conferences can be offered remotely during the crisis. It also considers the barriers and limitations and ways that some of these can be overcome. Thought is also given to the potential longer-term implications.

About Coronavirus

Up to date information can be found on the [NHS website](#) and [GOV.UK website](#).

What is a family group conference?

A family group conference is a voluntary process led by family members to plan and make decisions for a child at risk (Note: although this is how family group conferences are most commonly used, they can be used for a range of situations e.g. if a child is in need or to plan for a vulnerable adult).

“Families, including extended family members and the child (subject to their age and understanding and usually supported by an advocate) are assisted by an independent family group conference coordinator to prepare for the meeting.

Key features of a successful family group conference include:

- Having an independent coordinator to facilitate

the involvement of the child, family network and professionals in the family group conference process;

- Allowing the family private time at the family group conference to produce their plans for the child or young person; and
- Agreeing and resourcing the family’s plan unless it places the child at risk of significant harm.

The use of family group conferences ensures that wider family members understand at an early stage the seriousness of the situation and have the opportunity to make contingency plans for alternative care within the family if the parents do not satisfactorily resolve their problems within the child’s timescale.¹

¹ Taken from Department for Education (DfE) (2014) Statutory Guidance on Court Orders and Pre-Proceedings for local authorities

Points for local authorities and family group conference services to consider from the outset

A. This is a new way of working for everyone: families, coordinators and social workers.

Family group conference coordinators may not have used the technology before, may not have suitable IT equipment at home and may be very anxious. Similarly, with social workers and families.

It is important from the outset that the service considers what telephone and IT equipment and online training coordinators need in order to be able to support families in this situation and how the service plans to meet this need. During the crisis, there will be savings for the family group conference service budget, in terms of salary costs of staff spent travelling, travel costs, venue hire. Some of this needs to be redirected in to enabling the service to work effectively remotely.



B. Responding in an emergency

Some situations will be about responding to an emergency and holding crisis conferences at short notice. In such situations, it is important for the service to consider what it is reasonable and feasible for the family to be able to address at short notice.

In an emergency situation the coordinator may have contact with many more family members in a short time than they would normally. The aim will be to draw up a safety plan around the child or young person to address the immediate risk and what is feasible to ask the family to plan for given that their support network may be limited by the current restrictions. The coordinator will contact family members and professionals in a very short space of time (1-2 days) and the 'emergency conference' will take place within days rather than weeks. Consideration needs to be given to how to make sure the family's voice remains central to the process. Where possible a follow up family group conference should be offered following the crisis conference to look at both reviewing the safety plan and the longer term needs of the child or young person.



C. Inclusion rather than exclusion through technology

Some family members may have access to a smart phone, iPad or laptop. They may have wifi at home or have data on their phones. Others may not. They may have neither equipment nor wifi and may be in severe financial hardship, worrying about the cost of any telephone call they make. It is worth noting that remote video calls can use a lot of data. Some family members may be very familiar with different apps and platforms and be regularly communicating with school mates, work colleagues or other family members by Whatsapp, Zoom, Skype or other apps. Other family members may be unfamiliar with remote technology.



It is therefore important during the preparation stage of the family group conference to understand the situation of each family member and what support the local authority or family group conference service can provide. Some family group conference services are managing to lend laptops or tablets or phones to family members and are paying for calls or data to enable them to participate in such decision making, as they normally would towards travel costs to enable a family member to attend a family group conference. It is important that local authorities and local family group conference services work to maximise the inclusion of families. Nevertheless some families may decide not to proceed with the family group conference and defer as they are not comfortable meeting 'virtually'.

A family group conference is a voluntary process. The family can choose to decline the offer of a virtual family group conference or ask for it to be deferred. The social worker needs to be clear from the outset as to whether the local authority will go ahead in making plans and decisions for the child, even if the family do not agree to a family group conference during the crisis or whether they would agree that all or some of the decisions can be deferred, if that is the family's wish.

D. Respecting confidentiality

Some family members may feel very uncomfortable with the idea of using remote technology to discuss very private matters. Family members need clear information how remote family group conferences will operate and how confidentiality will be respected. General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) require consent for personal information to be processed for the purposes of the family group conference. Consent forms may need to be adapted to take account of remote working, such as how information will be stored, who will have access to the information and for what purpose. Some family group conference services are being creative in how they gain and record consent, such as asking family members to take and send photographs of signed consent forms.



Many family group conference services will already have 'secure home-working' or 'remote working' policies. It is important that coordinators are advised how to maintain client confidentiality when working from home, especially in the current circumstances when others in the household may also be working remotely and possibly sharing equipment, such as laptops. It is essential that files (electronic or paper) are stored securely without others having access to them and digital information is shared only with those that need it for the purpose of the family group conference.

E. Safety planning

For some family members, being restricted in the house brings additional risk to their safety. There has been a significant increase in calls to domestic abuse helplines since the current restrictions were put in place. Risk assessment is always a key feature in the preparation for any family group conference but safety planning is more difficult when the coordinator is not able to meet with someone in person, read their 'body language' or even know who else may be in the room. Consideration needs to be given to the safety of family members within the household before, during and after holding a remote family group conference.



Using remote technology to convene a family group conference

Many family group conference services have continued to operate during the Coronavirus pandemic. A family group conference plan in normal circumstances would be drawn up at a face to face meeting of the child and their wider family and friends network. The fundamentals and principles of a family group conference have not changed. Family group conferences can and have been carried out virtually using one of the many video conferencing services available.

Using these platforms present challenges but with careful planning, practice and agreed ground rules, they can, in many circumstances, be used safely whilst maintaining the integrity of the family group conference process.

A survey of the English law courts has found that remote hearings have taken place in courts on all circuits: *“Partly because of the advanced features, video hearings were more commonly cited as good practice than phone hearings. Zoom was commonly identified to be preferable to other platforms, including Skype. The necessary specifications that were identified included having low download requirements, multi-screen view, muting facilities, a waiting room function, breakout rooms, recording facilities and password security.”* (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (April 2020) Remote hearings in the family justice system: a rapid consultation)

With respect to GDPR and data protection, information supplied by the Family Law Bar Association clarifies that the Information Commissioner’s Office is content that Skype for Business, LifeSize and Zoom are GDPR compliant.

Family Rights Group has held a number of calls with family group conference services in the UK. A rudimentary survey shows that out of 38 local authorities, approximately 25 are continuing to run family group conferences remotely. A variety of methods are being used by them and some are using more than one method but the most commonly used are: Zoom (used by 14 local authorities), Microsoft teams (used by 10 local authorities), Skype/Skype for business (used by nine local authorities).

What technology does each participant have available to them?

A phone, a tablet, a laptop or desktop computer? A desktop computer is unlikely to come with an inbuilt microphone or webcam. Will two or more family members be joining via the same device? Similarly a smartphone would not be appropriate for more than one person to be able to follow or participate fully. Depending on the length of the meeting a smartphone is also not ideal. A couple of hours is a long time to be holding it up and for it to remain charged.

As discussed above, if participants do have access to the appropriate technology, then consideration needs to be given to purchasing or lending them equipment in order that their voice and contribution is heard.



“It was a really good process to help us support D and A. It was great that we could still do it virtually. This COVID-19 has been a pain with stopping things but we’ve still managed to come together to support D.”

(family friend)

Software

To reiterate, **Family Rights Group are not technology experts.** We have merely gathered together the key features of some of the video conferencing platforms available.

	GoToMeeting	Zoom	Google Hangout	Microsoft Teams
Screen sharing	Basic screen sharing to meet most needs. Useful for sharing social worker's report.	Advanced options, which allow multiple people to share the screen at the same time. Social worker's report can be shared, family can share their views or photographs etc.	Screen share functionality and easy file sharing. Only one person can share the screen at any one time.	Easily share social worker's report or other documents etc. on your screen during a call with integrated screen sharing.
Annotation and whiteboard	Basic annotation tools for screen sharing; no whiteboard.	Robust annotation tools and whiteboard feature. This can be used to compile the family plan.	Available with additional apps.	Annotation tools and whiteboard.
Web audio dial-in and calling	Yes. However, the phone number will be visible to those connected by video.	Yes. The phone number will be visible but this can be changed by the host to the participant's name.	Yes. However, the phone number will be visible to those connected by video.	Yes. However, the phone number will be visible to those connected by video.
Instant messaging	Yes	Yes Host can turn this feature off.	Yes	Yes
Number of participants	26 (including host).	Up to 100 (can display up to 49 participants on screen at one time if gallery view selected).	Video Hangout calls can be shared by up to 25 people, while as many as 150 participants can come together for a text-based meeting (not recommended for a family group conference).	250 but only four visible on screen.

Security

- Make sure you are using the most up to date version of your chosen application as bug fixes and security patches are being regularly updated.
- Use a unique ID and password, where possible, for each meeting. Do not use your personal ID if at all possible.
- Circulate the invitation / log in details in a secure way and only to those invited to participate. You will need to also emphasise the importance of this not being shared with others.
- Where available use a 'waiting room' facility as this allows the host to identify everyone before they join the conference.
- Lock a meeting once it starts so no uninvited guests can join.
- If anyone joins the meeting who you don't recognise ask them to identify themselves, if not satisfied remove.
- The entire family group conference should not be recorded but it may be helpful to record the agreed plan or professional's report, if everyone is in agreement. The host should disengage the record function to ensure noone can secretly record without the agreement of others.

	GoToMeeting	Zoom	Google Hangout	Microsoft Teams
Additional features	Browser-based so no need for software install.	<p>Gallery mode so all participants can be seen at once.</p> <p>Breakout rooms: can be used for private family time</p> <p>Waiting room: allows host to control who enters the meeting and when. The family can join the meeting and be prepared before the social worker joins..</p>	Quick and easy access- immediately available via a web browser	
Recording <i>(ensure everyone participating consents to a recording. Also note if only the host or any participant cant record – you may want to adjust settings to only the host).</i>	Multiple recording formats and unlimited cloud recording and storage at Pro plan level and above	<p>Numerous recording features but cloud storage above 1 GB costs extra. Recommended recordings are saved to a computer hard drive and not to the cloud. Function can be disabled by the host.</p>	Available with GSuite paid for version	Call recording and live subtitles
Pricing	<p>No free plan; paid plans cost more but provide greater cloud storage and attendee limits.</p> <p>Price ranges from £9.50 per month</p>	<p>Free version available however, Pro plan would be recommended for a family group conference.</p> <p>Pro plan is £11.99 per host per month. No cost for participants other than to the host.</p>	<p>Free with Gmail account. Non-Gmail account users can receive invites to take part in Google Hangouts</p> <p>GSuite Basic starts at £4.60 a month</p>	Included with Office 365

Limitations of some platforms

- There may be limits on the number of participants that can engage at any one time with particular platforms. Careful thought needs to be given to which platform is best suited to the purpose of the engagement.
- A phone call doesn't allow you to see facial expressions or who else is in the room. Even face to face technology does not give full information regarding where a person is situated or who else they are living with. People may feel they cannot be open because they are living or in the presence of other family members.
- It may be difficult to ensure the full and active participation of all family members, particularly children and young people.

Experience of using remote technology

It is important that coordinators and family members are not so overwhelmed by trying to manage the technology that they are unable to focus upon the reason for the family group conference. Some coordinators will need support to learn how to manage the practicalities of the technology for each stage of the family group conference. Coordinators need to be able to reflect on this as part of their practice, especially if remote technology is new to them. Buddying with a more tech-savvy member of the team can lead to shared learning. Some family group conference services are using different platforms to facilitate practice forums, or role play remote family group conferences or to think through some of the other practice challenges and how these can be addressed.

Similarly it is important to work through how to support family members to download or test out a platform that they are unfamiliar with before holding a remote family group conference. It may be helpful to do this as part of the preparation, indeed using the same technology to meet remotely with family members prior to the family group conference can assist with this.

The family group conference process

Preparation for a family group conference

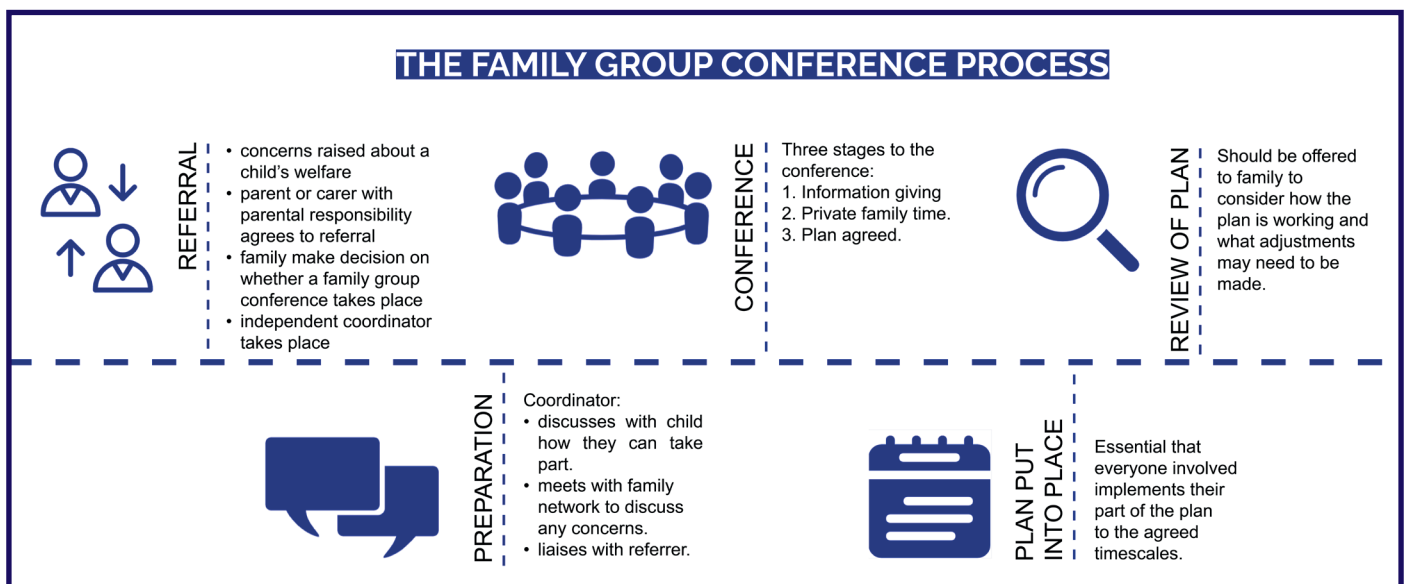
We know from research that fully preparing families for their family group conference is key to success. The preparation stage for a remote family group conference is equally, if not more, important.

The referral and consent

Local authorities should have clear referral criteria and processes as to which children can be referred for a family group conference. Normally it is the social worker or another practitioner who makes the referrals but some localities do take direct referrals from families.

Referrals to the family group conference service should ideally be taken over the telephone, and a video conferencing call can be arranged with the referrer to prepare them for the family group conference.

- As with any family group conference, it is essential that those with parental responsibility for the child are consenting in an informed way to the referral and that consent to proceed is formally recorded. Most family group conference services will obtain signed consent on the referral form which might be more difficult to achieve in the current circumstances. When first contacting those with parental responsibility the coordinator should check and record that consent has been given before progressing further. Where possible this should be done by email or text message so there is a record.
- It is important that the reason for the referral is clear. The family will need to understand if the purpose of the family group conference is to plan for an immediate concern due to Coronavirus, such as support for an ill or disabled child that needs to be shielded or if the outcome may have longer term implications, such as where



a child can or cannot live. The coordinator or family group conference manager should support the referrer to provide as much clarity as possible so that the family fully understands the implications of what they are being asked to plan for. The referrer's questions may include:

1. How the family can address social work concerns that may arise from the current Coronavirus crisis, such as management of contact, support for vulnerable individuals, practical family supports, or review of an existing family plan that can no longer be put into action due to current restrictions on movement.
2. Other concerns that may be more specific to the care and protection of children. Consideration will need to be given to how any decisions made in managing the current crisis may impact on longer term decisions. For example, if the decision is for a child to live with another family member or foster carer, will the child be able to return once current restrictions have been lifted?

Engaging the family

Preparation of family members will start with telephone or written contact to introduce the coordinator to the family and explain how the family group conference process will work. During the crisis, some family group conference services are using only telephone contact for preparation for the family group conference, capturing family views as they progress before moving to a virtual conference for the family to come together for the family group conference meeting. Other services are using 'virtual visits' to family members as part of the preparation phase as well as for the family group conference itself. Some are using a mixture. 'Virtual visits' may assist in helping the family to become familiar with the technology but it is important that it is their choice to engage in this way and options are fully explored. Not all family members will have access to or feel comfortable in using remote technology and they must be able to choose which method of preparation suits them best.



When making 'virtual visits', the coordinator should consider the safety, security and appropriateness of their own workspace environment taking account of:

Client confidentiality

Check that your conversation cannot be overheard by others in your household. Reassure those you are 'meeting' with that the 'visit' is confidential by a 360-degree demonstration of the room you are in.

Neutral setting

Remove any photographs or other personal items before doing this and ensure the wall behind you is an appropriate backdrop. Alternatively some platforms, such as Zoom, allow you to choose a 'blank' or customized background for any virtual meeting. Some family members may also wish to use this facility if they do not want someone else in their network to be able to identify where they live.

Recording and storing information

Inform the family how you intend to record and store the information from the virtual visit. Be explicit as to how the information will be used for the purpose of the family group conference, for example, who you will share it with and who will have access to it. In order for the information to be recorded any family member who is having their information recorded and shared needs to give written confirmation that they agree to this. Check your service's secure or remote home working policies so you are aware of how to store the information confidentially.

Technology

Test your connections. Check that you have sufficient wifi and power for the 'visit'. Will you be typing while talking with the family members or taking written notes? Either way tell the family member what you are doing so they understand when you lose eye contact with them.

As with all family group conferences it is important that family members understand the nature of the local authority concerns, the purpose of the family group conference or crisis meeting and what they think would help. Explore who else should be invited and also understanding their limitations, for example, if they have young children, they may not be able to participate at certain times of the day. Talk through with them what they can offer. Family members may have more responsibilities or additional people in their household at the moment which might limit their involvement in a remote family group conference.

Young people's involvement

- Many young people will be comfortable with the use of remote media and use it every day. Some young people may have had a negative experience with remote technology or social media and choose not to use it. The coordinator should ask if the young person is willing to engage with video conferencing and which platform they feel most comfortable with. However, depending on the views of your organisation, some platforms may not be available.
- As with any other family group conferences, some young people will not want to attend their meeting. Explore how they might want to contribute to their family group conference, such as a voice note, letter or to be videoed, and for this to be presented at the meeting. They may want another family member to represent their views.
- Thought needs to be given as to how their wishes and feelings can be gathered remotely. Who can help the child do this and what influence, intentionally or unintentionally might they have? The well-being of children and young people is paramount at a family group conference. The wishes and feeling of children and young people should always be sought, and wherever possible children and young people should be included in their family group conference in whatever way they feel most comfortable. Younger children may wish to draw and share their wishes and feelings in this way. Consider how this may be done safely with appropriate consideration as to who will see their contribution and that the child is happy with this.



Advocacy

As with any family group conference, children and vulnerable adults should be offered the option of an advocate. The advocate could be someone they trust within their family or from the family group conference service or from an external advocacy agency. The advocate should discuss with the young person or vulnerable adult how they can be supportive and available to them during the virtual meeting and best assist them to participate and get their views heard. This will include the need for breaks away from the meeting for a private conversation. Zoom has a 'breakout room' feature which might be useful during the family group conference to allow the advocate to talk with the young person or vulnerable adult in 'private'. Instant messaging text or Whatsapp messages or agreed signs may also be helpful to communicate during the meeting.



Managing risk and domestic abuse considerations

As with any family group conference, the coordinator needs to ensure that any safety concerns have been properly identified and addressed as part of the planning process and prior to convening a family meeting. The referral process and discussions with the referrer should highlight risks that are known and that need to be planned for. As stated above, risk assessment is always a key feature in the preparation for any family group conference but safety planning is more difficult when the coordinator is not able to meet with someone in person, read their 'body language' or even know who else may be in the room. Consider and agree beforehand how you might alert professionals to increased risk, such as the use of 'safe words', toys or gestures.

In conversation with the referrer, consideration will need to be given to whether the current Coronavirus crisis has heightened their concerns and how this will impact on the focus of the family group conference and on the management of any risks. For example, is it likely that an abusive partner, who was living outside the home, has returned to live with the family?

There needs to be an explicit and open recognition of identified risk and opportunities for family members to raise concerns safely.

In conversations with family members about their safety, consideration should be given as to whether the circumstances that this conversation is happening are safe. For example, can the coordinator be confident that the perpetrator is not standing in the background unseen or otherwise able to hear the conversation? Is the family member able to leave the home and talk without the perpetrator, such as when taking permitted daily exercise or will this add to the risk they face?

Similar considerations will be needed as to whether the virtual family group conference environment is safe. For example, will comments made put the person at great risk from a violent partner? The risk assessment and safety plan should include the preparation phase, during the family group conference and afterwards. As with any family group conference safety planning is ongoing throughout the process and should be shared with both social work and family group conference managers. It may also be helpful to ask the wider network for information about who may be in more regular contact with the family. You can access local domestic abuse services for specialist advice about how to maintain virtual safety.

Similar concerns have been expressed in relation to the use of remote technology in the court arena:

“Despite explaining that no one other than the party must be present or listening to the hearing and that no one can record the hearing, and then seeking assurances, I have on several hearings had to stop as it has become clear that the party has someone else listening on the line. The hearings are not therefore secure”

Judge

“My husband has a history of recording and circulating photos and audio of court proceedings and I am concerned he will record and circulate this hearing. He is a professional video editor and I am worried that he will edit the hearing to misrepresent what was said, and perhaps even show the proceedings to our children when they are older”.

Mother¹

¹ Both quotes above taken from: <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/remote-hearings-rapid-consultation>

Mapping the family network

- The coordinator will start with those with parental responsibility to map out who is in the wider family network. Some coordinators have been able to use a 'share screen' function to develop genograms, ecomaps and family trees. There are various software programmes, such as 'Genopro' that can help in doing this (www.genopro.com). A genogram produced through Genopro can be shared using the screen sharing function available on some video conferencing applications. This would allow the family to be mapped in real-time and enable a more dynamic process of constructing this with the family.
- Many applications have a whiteboard function which allows for information to be directly typed onto this whilst a remote meeting is happening. This may be helpful in exploring the family tree with family members.
- Alternatively, the coordinator or a family member could draw or record the family network on a piece of paper, take a photo and share by email.



Inviting the family to the family group conference

- Family members should receive a letter or email invitation to the family group conference. This should provide details on how to join the online conference. It would be advisable to follow this up with a phone call to check if the family think they can contribute remotely and to identify any concerns or problems at this stage.
- It may be useful to consider who the family can contact for technical support before the family group conference and include this in the invitation. Similarly, it may be helpful to test out the ability of all to engage in this way prior to the start of the meeting. This will avoid delays at the beginning in order to solve technical difficulties.
- In all circumstances be clear if any personal details, for example phone numbers can be seen by others.
- It may be helpful to set out in the invitation how the meeting will progress including any agreed ground rules, agenda, break schedule and timings etc.



The remote family group conference

A virtual or remote family group conference is not the ideal scenario and it will not feel as natural as a face to face meeting. However, there are a number of measures that the coordinator can take to ensure it is smooth running and allow the virtual meeting to be the best it can be.



- Schedule the meeting at a convenient time for participants. This may mean planning around home schooling schedules or the working from home commitments of participants.
- With the increased use of remote working and video conferencing, broadband networks have recorded a spike in usage on the hour and half hour mark. It may be helpful to schedule meetings for just before or after these times e.g. 10:10am, 10:20am, 10:40am, 10:50am. This may help with connectivity issues and improve the quality of connection.
- Attention spans are shorter on a video call than in person. Schedule in comfort breaks and tea breaks to keep people fresh and engaged. It may be appropriate to set an agreed timeframe for the meeting, with the option of reconvening if necessary. Make participants aware of the timetable beforehand.
- Issue clear joining instructions and, as host, be signed in 10-15 minutes in advance of the start time to allow people to join in an orderly way and deal with any issues.
- Zoom has a waiting room which means that you can let different family members into the meeting in a particular sequence, for example, the child may want to be at the meeting first, similarly the parents.
- Highlight any key features of the video conferencing platform that you will be using. For example: breakout rooms, screen sharing, and instant messaging. Go over this at the beginning of the conference and allow time for questions.
- Most video conferencing platforms have a messaging facility which participants can use to communicate directly with the coordinator. This messaging may not be private and may be visible to all on the call. Everyone should be given clear instructions about how to use this facility and told who can view their messages and if it can be made private.
- Make sure everyone has your mobile number so that they can text you if they need to during the meeting. This is important if there is no messaging system or if they have trouble using it or if they lose connection during the meeting.
- As with any meeting, face to face or virtual, there is a risk of people talking over one another and/or accidentally interrupting or of other people not speaking at all. Agree ground rules at the start e.g. raising a hand to indicate you wish to speak and check in regularly with quieter participants. Agreement should be made prior to the start of the meeting about how conflict is to be managed.
- As the coordinator it is particularly important that you are easily seen and well lit. You want participants to be able to see you and feel engaged with you, not a shadow on the screen. Natural light is best so try and position yourself in front of a window (i.e. so you are looking out it, you don't want it behind you as you will then be in shadow). Check your own presentation on the screen beforehand.
- Make sure that your webcam is at eye level so you are looking at participants in the eye and not looking down on them. Make sure that any personal items such as photographs and paperwork with your name and address on it are not in view.
- If any participants have hearing issues or there is likely to be a lot of background noise where they are, suggest that they may want to use headphones.
- Remind people that they are on a video call and they can be seen at all times.
- Background noise is the worst enemy of the video conference call. If you feel it appropriate to do so, suggest to participants to mute themselves and only unmute when they wish to speak.
- All mobile phones should be on silent to avoid noise and disruption. This includes yours, although keep it visible in case a participant needs to ring you with any issues they are experiencing.
- Make sure all the devices you need for the meeting are fully charged or connected to power from the start of the call. Remind participants to check this at the beginning of the call.
- Many of the video conference platforms allow for screen sharing. The family may wish to use this function during private family time to construct their plan. If so it may be helpful to give some guidance on how to use this prior to the meeting. Screen sharing is a useful tool for the coordinator to be able to display any documents on screen and allow all participants to view, for example the social worker's report. This can also be used to show the family plan and make sure everyone is in agreement.

Preparing people at the start of the meeting

The coordinator needs to:

- Be ready to support participants who may have technical difficulties. It may be useful to have a second coordinator available to provide support particularly early in the meeting.
- Ask the family to join before professionals who can be left in the virtual waiting room until the family are ready for them to join.
- Think about breaks and timetable them in. Acknowledge that the duration of the remote meeting will probably not be as long as a physical FGC. Agree likely timeframes beforehand.
- Similarly think about food breaks. It may be helpful to have food available at the end of the information giving stage as often happens in a face to face meeting.
- Check everyone is okay and where necessary agree a signal for people to let you know if they are not okay.
- Remind people of agreed protocols, roles and responsibilities.

Adede¹ believes that food is integral to the family group conference process, as it can be used as a tool to aid difficult conversations. She arranged a food delivery during one meeting and the pizza they agreed upon was delivered during the video call meeting. She believes that these thoughtful measures provide the 'human touch' to a virtual meeting.

¹ Experienced family group conference coordinator

Information giving stage

Many of the video conferencing platforms allow screen sharing and this can be used to share the social worker or other professionals' reports and can also be used, where agreed, to share information gathered from the family.

- Consider and agree in advance which practitioners or service managers should be at the information giving stage of the meeting.
- Information from the social worker should be provided in advance - there should be no 'surprises' on the day. If the report refers to an individual, such as personal information about a parent, they would need to have given their consent to it being shared and have the opportunity to respond to it prior to the meeting. The social worker's report can be circulated with the invite to the meeting.
- Other professionals' reports should be presented in the same way – and should be shared in advance.
- Consider who should respond first to the social worker's report. Should it be the young person or the parent? If someone has been particularly referred to make sure they have an early opportunity to respond or comment especially if the information is sensitive.
- Consider how the child or young person's views are shared and how this is managed.
- Agree how family members will indicate that they wish to respond, for example, they may wish to put their hand up to ask questions.



Private family time

- At the point the meeting is moving into private family time, the coordinator and social worker should move to the virtual waiting room if the platform allows for this. If not, you need to consider how to create a private space. For example, the social worker and coordinator may just leave the video conference and they can be rung when the family is ready with their plan or if the family have any queries.
- The coordinator does not participate in private family time and this should not differ just because the meeting is virtual. It is not uncommon however in a face to face family group conference for the coordinator to 'check in' on how the family is progressing during private family time. The coordinator will need to agree how this might occur in a virtual meeting. Ensure that the family know how to reconnect with the coordinator if they need to. If the family require additional information from the social worker, the social worker should not reconnect with the family without the coordinator reconnecting as well.
- Advocates can participate in the early part of private family time to share views and then leave.
- The coordinator should ensure that the family have a way throughout the conference to access the report the social worker has produced for the family group conference.
- The coordinator needs to ensure that the family have a way to write or record their plan. Some family group conference services have found it helpful if a member of the family agrees to be designated as a scribe. Alternatively, some families prefer if the plan is written down by the coordinator after private time as part of the 'agreeing the plan' stage. If the coordinator is writing down the plan in this way, they must ensure it is written in the family's words by checking back with the family at each point to ensure that they are recording the plan accurately.
- The coordinator should go over key information before leaving the meeting prior to private time, ensuring that all understand what they are tasked with doing. They also need to ensure that all attendees can keep themselves safe during this period of the meeting.



Recording the family plan

- Family group conferences are not minuted meetings. The record of the meeting is essentially an action plan as agreed by the family. In recording the plan it should not be taken over and 'professionalised' by the coordinator or the social worker- it and should reflect the style, vocabulary and decisions of the family. However, it is essential that it is easily understood by anyone who may need to work with it, for example, an out of hours social worker, a teacher who was not present at the family group conference, or court.
- The plan is the only record from the family group conference. Where additional wording has been added to the plan to clarify intention, for example a sentence explaining the response of the referrer or an agreed resource, this may be added in italics to show that it was included after private family time.
- The family can type their decisions into the chat function of the video conference platform for everyone to see and they can then be copied and pasted into the final plan in the third stage.
- The family can similarly type into a Word or document on a computer or phone/tablet and use the share function to produce the plan together in the private family time.
- Alternatively, they can write it on paper and take photographs of it to send to the coordinator.



Agreeing the plan

As with any family group conference, when the coordinator reconnects at the end of private family time, some families may have fully written up their plan, others may have made decisions but not fully formulated their plan and have a list of bullet points and wishes.

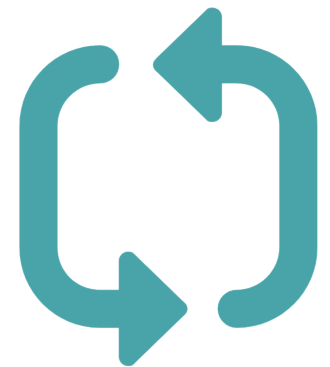
It is the role of the coordinator to:

- Help the family 'flesh out' their plan, if needed, without changing the essence of language of the family plan.
- Check that the family are in agreement with any additions made after private family time (and added in italics).
- Invite the social worker to respond to the family's decisions and, if they cannot agree to action them, give clear reasons why not and if appropriate give the family the opportunity to address the gaps.
- Once the plan is agreed, identify how it will be monitored and reviewed.
- Agree who will get a copy of the plan.
- Thank everyone for their contributions and commitment to the family group conference.



Feedback and review meeting

- It is critical to review any important plan that is made for a child and virtual family group conferences are no exception to this. Indeed, it may be more necessary to review plans more regularly during the current crisis, especially if the decisions made have longer term implications for the child. As with a normal family group conference, the plan should be incorporated into any other planning pathway in place for the child.
- At the end of the virtual family group conference the coordinator should ask the family how the video conference went, and if they want to set a date to review the plan and when they would like this to take place.
- As with any family group conference, the family may wish to hold the family group conference over a number of days –whilst virtual family group conferences may be quicker, some family members may find the intensity of an hour and a half online tiring. Explore options with the family as to how the virtual review meeting could be held.



It is always advisable to get feedback from families and this could be done at the end of the meeting or by a feedback form sent out with the family plan. Getting feedback from all involved is more important now because of the limitations arising from remote working. Indeed the crisis may significantly affect the contribution of individual family members to participating in the family group conference and indeed may adversely affect what plan can be made. It is therefore key that the child, family members, the social worker and coordinator are encouraged to comment on the family group conference process. Their views should be sought on the whole process including what has worked well at the referral, preparation stage, the conference (including the development of the plan) and its approval, and what have been the limitations. This is particularly important if the child's plan may be considered now or in the future by local authority decision makers or the courts. Moreover, feedback provides important learning for local family group conference services.

Maintaining the integrity of the family group conference process

As outlined some family group conference services have described how family group conferences can be delivered more quickly by using technology and this is clearly of benefit in the current crisis. It will also build on existing IT skills to support convening family group conferences going forward.

However, this could also be viewed as a threat to the future delivery of family group conferences and adherence to the key principles that ensure the process is effective and in accordance with national standards. There may be a temptation for those wishing to save money to argue that if family group conferences can be delivered effectively remotely then why not continue to deliver in this way. We need to guard against this.

In this respect this guide is intended as a response to the current crisis. The family group conference standards have been developed over many years. Face to face contact continues to be the best way to build the relationships that make family group conferences a success. It may be helpful for family group conference services to be clear in articulating the limitations as well as the benefits of remote engagement with families. Similarly, it may help in preserving the integrity of FGCs for services to be as explicit as they can be about the menu of what they are offering and what can realistically be achieved.

However, remote family group conferences are allowing families to be empowered and involved in decision making in what are exceptional circumstances, and some of the comments received from families involved in these meetings attest to this.

"I'm glad that we have managed to talk things through and reach this decision; things definitely feel better already and hopefully will continue to improve. I can't wait so see M at the weekend although virtually, as it's my birthday so it'll be a special one for me."

(Dad)

Family Rights Group works with parents whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with members of the wider family who are raising children unable to remain at home.

We champion policies and practices that keep children safe within their family and strengthen the family and community support networks of children in the care system.

Telephone Advice Line

If you are a parent, family member or friend of a child, in England or Wales, who has social workers involved in your child's life, or if you need extra support from children's services, and would like to speak to an adviser, please call our free and confidential helpline.

0808 801 0366

(Monday to Friday 9.30am to 3pm)