

Could 2021 be the year of FGC?

The giant leap in technology to facilitate meetings during Covid-19 may also have given an unexpected boost to shared decision-making meetings such as Family Group Conferencing

If there's one thing that has become ubiquitous with the last year, it's the virtual meeting. According to some, the pandemic is credited with fast-forwarding the use of technology for holding professional meetings by at least five years.

That leap forward has been no less dramatic within social services. While there are undeniable pros and cons to this, an incontestable pro is one of logistics – the ability to meet without having to spend time travelling.

Could this 'new normal' pave the way for a major boost to programmes such as Family Group Conferencing, reliant on bringing a group of people together?

Imported from a New Zealand, where it was developed to ensure social workers worked with Maori values in child protection, FGC has gained considerable traction in western countries.

Its focus is to shift power away from professionals through empowering adults, children and families to make decisions for themselves when safeguarding concerns are raised.

Some three quarters of local authorities in England and Wales claim to offer FGC in children's services.

While considerably less prevalent within adult services, recent years have seen the model used with adults in Camden, London, parts of Scotland, Northern Ireland, Essex, Kent and elsewhere.

Being able to hold such meetings virtually has the potential to have a significant impact on the use of FGC with adults. For example, it could enable adult offspring who live in different parts of the country to attend a FGC meeting online in order to support of another family member where a face-to-face meeting would have been impossible to organise.

"That may enable more effective working," says Andrew Broome, chair of BASW's FGC special interest group.

"I also think from the point of view of carrying out FGC work including preparation there is an issue around timing and when we hold the meetings. If you operate in a traditional 9-5 you are going to have a problem.

"Some people only have space to talk after work. Holding such meetings virtually could give people the flexibility to attend a conference they wouldn't otherwise be able to."

One reason why FGC has not been so widely rolled out with adults' services is highlighted in a recent review by the School for Social Care Research.

It points to other research indicating that issues involving adults are seen as 'softer' or 'smaller' - not as far-reaching as a child potentially being removed from a home.

The return of investing in FGC is therefore much greater in children's services than in adults. But as the review, called *Researching Family Group Conferencing in Adult Services* points out, key adult legislation such as the Care Act 2014, the Mental Health Act 2007 and the Mental Capacity Act 2005, backs up FGC's person-centred approach.

Andrew also believes it sits far more comfortably with social work's values and ethics, whatever group practitioners are working with.

"I started in social work, in the 1980's, when families were seen as families. I was doing practice then that was very family-centred.

"The focus changed when the narrative of risk was created and the care figures grew and grew. That has been traumatising for social workers as well as family members."

FGC – and other shared decision-making models – are seen by advocates to represent a shift back to 'working with' rather 'doing to' families and individuals.

"I think it is around conversations and relationships rather than hierarchical monologues from professionals," says Andrew.

"I was a child protection chair and independent review officer for 13 years and have seen the harm caused to children by both parents and by local authorities.

"I have been in situations where a local authority was able to deny the harm it was causing because that was the way the system was – it was able to construct a dominant and persistent narrative that retraumatised family members who may have had previous involvement with social workers."

The way FGC devolves decision-making to families to tell their own stories reduces such harm, believes Andrew. The perspective shift is from 'managing risks' to one of empowerment focused on strengths and finding solutions within families and networks facilitated by social workers .

Andrew questions whether local authorities are the best places to promote such a way of working.

"They don't understand the nature of changing risk and aren't prepared to take risks because they are spending other people's money to make sure they don't appear on the front page of the Daily Mail or the Sun."

He advocates further investigation of the social work practice models piloted between 2009 and 2011 to devolve social work from local authorities.

"I don't know how seriously it was tried," says Andrew of the programme which ultimately failed to gain traction, partially due to a change in government, partly due to its implementation.

It is possible to envisage a future in which greater use of technology becomes the great enabler of a more community-focused, strength-based social work. And online meetings of virtual networks could well aid further rollout of models such as FGC?

Andrew is, however, also cautious about an over-reliance on screen-based social work.

"We have seen this with lockdown. While we can pressure people to appear on Zoom and carry out child protection conferences, that isn't a human experience and not what parents want as evidenced by the recent Nuffield Foundation research.

"It is much easier to be cruel to someone online than when you are sitting face-to-face to them because you are then forced to confront your own prejudices.

"Nothing beats a home visit – going to someone's home and sitting on their sofa in an environment they feel comfortable in, accepting a cup of tea and a biscuit.

"That seems old school but it is about relationship and rapport-building."

The danger of depersonalisation is arguably minimised in the context of FGC with the presence of a network of family or friends who already know the individual.

"That is the benefit of FGC – being challenged by family members that act as advocates within families" says Andrew.

Proponents of FGC are passionate about its value. But the model had a setback recently when the government's What Works Centre for Children's Social Care questioned its merits.

It called for more research, stating “parents and children deserve stronger evidence about the difference that these meetings can make”.

To Andrew and others who have seen the programme in action, such doubts are literally academic. “I know from practice it works. I know the feelings and unexpected results you get when you do it with this focus and the problems you get when you do it in other forms that retraumatise.

“I am aware of the nature of academic research, the need for funding and the revisiting of questions, with underlying assumptions, that may already have been answered and do not need to continue to be asked. But my established position is from over 30 years of practice experience.

“A good comparison is that effective FGC and restorative practice draws on coaching techniques where it is all about asking the right question at the right time to promote sustainable change.”

The FGC special interest group is seeking new members - anyone interested in both FGC's and other forms of Restorative Practice should contact Andrew

Fact box

- A definition of FGC from the Family Rights Group, which provides training in its use: “A family group conference is a process led by family members to plan and make decisions for a child who is at risk. Children and young people are normally involved in their own family group conference, although often with support from an advocate. It is a voluntary process and families cannot be forced to have a family group conference.”
- FGC originated in New Zealand to help social workers to work in a culturally sensitive way with Maori people in the child protection system rather than against them
- Its principles come from Maori culture where the whole ‘whanau’ (immediate and extended family) are involved in making decisions to best support a family and take care of a child
- There are four stages to the FGC model – the referral, preparation, the conference, implementation of the plan, review of the plan
- Professionals work in a facilitatory role