



Department  
for Education

# **Family Group Conferences in pre-proceedings**

**Evaluation report**

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## Key messages

This evaluation followed up on the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme Round 1 project in which Daybreak, a charity, provided Family Group Conferencing (FGC) at pre-proceedings stage in two contrasting English local authorities, Southwark and Wiltshire. It illustrates the value, but also the difficulty of following up the longer-term outcomes of promising areas of practice. The previous mixed methods evaluation (Munro et al, 2017) found high satisfaction with FGCs among families, and some promising, but not definitive findings on outcomes. Overall, this is also what we found. Our findings support the continued use of FGCs by local authorities, while more evidence on their effectiveness is generated.

The evaluation aimed to evaluate an evolving project, as the ways FGCs are used have evolved over the last few years in Southwark and Wiltshire. Both local authorities offer FGCs earlier and more widely than in Round 1 within the child protection system (such as at Early Help stage). However, this could have resource implications at a time when local authorities have had to make savings. While Southwark and Wiltshire remained committed to delivering FGCs, both delivered them to a smaller number of families in 2018-19 (14 and 36 respectively), compared to during the Innovation Programme funding in 2015-16 (33 and 50).

Both our quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews were inconclusive on which families take up the offer of an FGC and why. Larger-scale future research should investigate this, as it could help practitioners to improve take-up of the FGC offer and thus improve practice. This would also improve sample sizes for future research. Improving take-up should be a priority for the future.

We found FGCs can fulfil a useful role in allowing information sharing within the extended family network, and offer an opportunity to build relationships, both within the family and also between the family and social services. They can also offer families a certain level of control over the situation, and a space in which families can voice their opinions. However, these findings come from our interviews with family members who took up their FGC offer: we do not know the views of family members who declined.

Our quantitative data analysis produced some promising findings for FGC advocates. We found that FGC children compared to non-FGC children were more likely to live with birth families, and had more potential carers identified during pre-proceedings. However, more FGC children than non-FGC children were re-referred to children's services after the end of pre-proceedings, and some other outcomes were worse for FGC children than non-FGC children. However, our evaluation design means that all these findings may be explained by any number of unknown pre-existing differences in the families, not the FGC itself. More robust and larger-scale evaluation is needed to draw firm conclusions on the impact of FGCs on child outcomes.

## Executive summary

Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are meetings attended by family members to plan and make decisions for a child who is at risk. In England, 70% of local authorities were reported to be running an in-house or commissioned FGCs service for children in their area or were planning to do so (Family Rights Group, 2009). However, many councils including those in Taylor et al (2020) do not routinely offer families an FGC before a child is taken into care.

## The project

As part of Department for Education's (DfE) Children's Social Care Innovation Programme Round 1, the charity Daybreak, in collaboration with the children's services departments of the London Borough of Southwark and Wiltshire County Council, offered an FGC to all families who entered pre-proceedings in 2015-16.<sup>1</sup> The project was evaluated, and the findings published in 2017 (Munro et al, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

## The research

This research builds on the findings of the Round 1 evaluation (Munro et al, 2017) by assessing the longer-term impact of the project, focusing on children's diversion from care and placement stability. Using a mixed method approach, we interrogated data received from Southwark and Wiltshire relating to 191 children who entered pre-proceedings in 2015-16 and 2018-19, and who were followed-up in 2019, 134 of whose families took part in an FGC, and 55 of whose families did not.

## Key findings

In 2018 Southwark changed its FGC provision, moving away from Daybreak, while Wiltshire continued to commission Daybreak as its FGC provider. The change in Southwark increased the contrast between 2 already very different local authorities and makes generalising our findings to other local authorities more challenging. However, it also enabled us to compare a local authority that has consistently commissioned an external specialist provider with a local authority that has recently diversified provision.

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<sup>1</sup> A local authority uses pre-proceedings, and then care proceedings in court, to escalate a child's status from (usually) a child protection plan, to being a looked-after child.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/daybreak-family-group-conferencing>

Both local authorities were committed to the FGC model and continued to offer FGCs to families in pre-proceedings after the Innovation Programme funding ended, but in smaller numbers. We were told by staff that most families take up the offer of an FGC.

Our findings largely align with the findings of the earlier evaluation, in that some of our quantitative analysis found that FGCs benefit families and children, while other findings pointed to FGCs making little difference to certain outcomes.

The number of children for whom data were available was limited. Where we found differences between children whose families attended FGCs ('FGC children') and those who were offered an FGC but did not attend ('non-FGC children'), this may be explained by any number of unknown pre-existing differences in the families, not the FGC itself.

Nonetheless, for families entering pre-proceedings in Wiltshire and Southwark:

- more FGC children (77%) lived with their family at the end of pre-proceedings than non-FGC children (69%). This was also the case for the 2015-16 cohort in the follow-up in September 2019, where 71% of FGC children lived with their family, compared to 43% of non-FGC children.
- for FGC children the mean number of family members identified as potential carers during pre-proceedings was 2.4, compared to 0.8 for non-FGC children.
- a similar proportion of FGC (68%) and non-FGC (63%) children had had no placement changes by the time we followed them up in 2019 (2015-16 cohort).
- adoption seemed to be identified as a likely outcome early on and accounted for a higher proportion of outcomes in Wiltshire by 2019 in the non-FGC group (23%, 7 out of 31) than the FGC group (10%, 5 out of 50).<sup>3</sup>
- in the period between the end of their pre-proceedings and September 2019, a higher proportion of the FGC children (52%) were referred back into children's services than the non-FGC children (32%) (2015-16 cohort).
- in terms of children's status when the 2015-16 children in Southwark and Wiltshire were followed up in 2019, we identified a larger proportion of FGC children with no recorded legal order or plan (59%) than the non-FGC children (24%). However, the findings for the 2018-19 cohort, with a shorter follow-up period, were in the other direction, with 44% of FGC and 86% of non-FGC children having no status.

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<sup>3</sup> This finding should be interpreted with caution due to data quality concerns that meant we could not clearly distinguish whether children had been adopted, or whether there had been a decision for adoption.

- families showed a high level of satisfaction with their FGC in 2018-19, with 90% of respondents in Southwark saying they found it a useful process and 91% in Wiltshire believing that the child or young person would be safer as a result of the plan made.
- families report high levels of satisfaction with both in-house and externally provided FGCs.

## Implications and recommendations

The key implications of this follow-up evaluation for practice were:

- our positive findings on families' satisfaction with FGCs favour their continued use by local authorities, while more evidence on their effectiveness is generated.
- our findings support the use of both in-house and externally commissioned models of FGC, insofar as both were well-received by families.
- the earlier use of FGCs (such as at Early Help stage<sup>4</sup>) suggests local authorities should consider how families may experience FGCs at different stages and keep track of the use of FGCs in a child's journey through the system.

However, this small-scale and limited follow-up evaluation has not overcome the lack of robust evidence on the effectiveness of FGCs (Nurmatov et al, 2020), which is needed urgently. The key implications of this evaluation for future research were:

- adoption outcomes should be examined in more depth in future research, including gaining access to 'restricted' data on children who become adopted.<sup>5</sup>
- as is already planned (Taylor et al, 2020) more robust and larger scale evaluation design is the next step for the evidence base, to isolate the impact of FGCs as opposed to other factors influencing child outcomes.
- funding to support evaluation, and funding and support for improvements to data systems in local authorities are needed, to enable future studies to more easily and completely follow up children in the years after the interventions they experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Early help services are non-statutory services such as casework and programmes that aim to help families at an early stage of problems arising.

<sup>5</sup> Adoption agencies are required to retain information about a child's adoption (s56, Adoption & Children Act 2002). Disclosure of this information is restricted (s57).



# 1. Overview of the project

## 1.1 Project context

In England, 70% of local authorities were reported to run or commission Family Group Conferences for children in their area or to be planning to do so (Family Rights Group, 2009). However, many councils including those in Taylor et al (2020) do not routinely offer families an FGC before a child is taken into care.

As part of Round 1 of the Department for Education's (DfE) Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, Daybreak (see box below), in collaboration with Southwark and Wiltshire children's services, offered an FGC to all families issued with a pre-proceedings letter in 2015-16.

### ***What is a Family Group Conference (FGC)?***

A Family Group Conference is a family-led decision-making process, where extended family and friends come together to make plans and decisions for a child who needs to be kept safe. Chaired by an independent FGC coordinator, the local authority social worker sets out their key concerns at the start of the meeting, which must be addressed by the family. At the end of the meeting the social worker is also involved in agreeing the family plan for the child (provided it is safe) including any support children's services will provide. The active participation of children and young people is encouraged as part of the FGC model.

### ***Daybreak***

Daybreak is a charity specialising in the provision of Family Group Conferences and associated training to local authorities across southern England. Daybreak's approach is underpinned by a commitment to the active participation of children, young people, and their families to support the resolution of family problems. Through its training and accreditation process, Daybreak also aims to improve the quality of FGCs across the sector, and improve support for families across the UK.

## 1.2 Project aims and intended outcomes

The Round 1 Daybreak Innovation Programme aimed to:

- demonstrate and evaluate a standardised FGC model and approach, aiming to raise quality, promote consistently good outcomes, and improve value for money
- reduce court costs and delays, fully integrate the voice of the children in decision making, and divert children from care when safe to do so

- strengthen adherence to existing policy, in particular the requirements of the Public Law Outline (PLO) and the Children and Families Act 2014.<sup>6</sup>

The programme also worked towards the following 2 objectives:

- an increase in safe placements made with the agreement of family members
- timely decisions and reduction in the duration of care proceedings (where initiated), thus reducing social care and court costs.

### **1.3 Project activities**

As part of the Innovation Programme, every family in Southwark and Wiltshire who were issued a letter of intent to initiate care proceedings between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016 were offered an FGC by Daybreak. The pre-proceedings letter explained that a representative from Daybreak would be in contact. It was agreed between Daybreak and the 2 local authorities that families would be referred to Daybreak within 20 days, and that the FGC would be convened within 15 days of receipt of referral.

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<sup>6</sup> The pre-proceedings stage is sometimes described as 'PLO' or Public Law Outline stage.

## 2. Overview of the evaluation

This research builds on the findings of the Round 1 evaluation (Munro et al, 2017) by assessing the longer-term impact of the project.

### 2.1 Summary of Round 1 evaluation methodology

The aim of the Round 1 evaluation was to assess the short-term outcomes of offering and delivering FGCs during pre-proceedings within 2 local authorities. The objectives were to:

- examine children and families' views on the strengths and limitations of Daybreak's model of FGCs.
- explore professional perspectives on the use of FGCs.
- evaluate costs and outcomes of delivering the Daybreak FGC model to children and families on the edge of care in two local authorities.

The evaluation applied a mixed methods approach, which included:

- a survey of family members and children at 3 time points: at the FGC; 3 months following FGC and 6 months following FGC.
- qualitative interviews with 15 family members, 4 children, 12 social workers and 2 FGC innovation coordinators.
- an analysis of data supplied by the 2 local authorities on 213 children.
- an analysis of data on children who started, and ceased, to be looked after in Southwark and Wiltshire.

### 2.2 Research questions

Following up key findings from the Round 1 evaluation, this evaluation addressed the following questions:

- have the initial placements for children who were diverted from proceedings been sustained (either with birth parents or alternative carers)?
- has the legal basis of these placements changed?
- how stable are the placements that have been sustained?
- how many children have had subsequent contact with child protection services?

- has the improved pace of pre-proceedings processes identified in Round 1 research been maintained?
- has the level of diversion from court proceedings identified in Round 1 been sustained?
- has families' level of satisfaction with the FGC offer remained consistent?
- have there been systemic issues or challenges with maintaining the process and initial benefits and (how) have these been overcome?

The research ran from June 2018 to March 2020. The data we analysed relate to families entering pre-proceedings in the period April 2015 to March 2016 and April 2018 to March 2019. Children in both cohorts were followed-up in September 2019.

## 2.3 Research methods

This evaluation's mixed method approach comprised the following activities:

- analysis of 4 datasets, 2 received from Wiltshire (124 children) and 2 from Southwark (67 children) – a total of 191 from 2015-16 and 2018-19 (table 1);
- repeat interviews with FGC leads or managers in Wiltshire and Southwark in 2019 and 2020 (3);
- interviews with social workers in Wiltshire and Southwark in 2019 (4);
- interview with Daybreak manager in 2018;
- 6 interviews with 5 FGC leads or managers and 1 children's services leader in 5 statistical neighbour local authorities in 2019-20 (for Southwark: Haringey and Lambeth; and for Wiltshire: Shropshire, Devon and Oxfordshire<sup>7</sup>);
- interviews with 5 families who had an FGC in Wiltshire in 2019-20; and
- analysis of feedback questionnaires from FGC participants in Southwark (203 forms, completed April 2018 – September 2019) and Wiltshire (109 forms, completed in 2019).

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<sup>7</sup> These differ from the Round 1 evaluation, as some of the original statistical neighbours were not interviewed.

**Table 1: Summary of data received from Southwark and Wiltshire**

Children	Southwark			Wiltshire			Total		
	FGC	Non-FGC	Total	FGC	Non-FGC	Total	FGC	Non-FGC	Total
2015-16	33	4	39 <sup>8</sup>	50	31	81	84	34	120 <sup>7</sup>
2018-19	14	14	28	36	7	43	50	21	71
Total	53	20	67	86	38	124	134	55	191

## 2.4 Limitations to evaluation methods

### *Observational design*

Our evaluation design has not overcome the general lack of robustness Nurmatov et al (2020) found in the existing international evidence base on the effectiveness of FGCs. We use an observational, rather than experimental design, so many uncontrolled factors could explain our findings, other than some of the families in the analysis having being offered or accepted an FGC. A forthcoming randomised controlled trial (Taylor et al, 2020) builds on this evaluation and on Munro et al (2017) to address this limitation in the evidence.

### *Data records*

Our data do not follow up on the original 2015-16 cohort of 213 children included in the Round 1 evaluation from Daybreak's records, as the local authorities were unable to share the original data from the 2017 study. Instead they agreed to re-collate data on the 2015-16 cohort. However, we only received data on 120 children (56% of 213). To boost the sample local authorities provided additional data on a new cohort of children whose families had entered pre-proceedings in 2018-19.

Southwark had changed its management information system since the Round 1 evaluation, and was therefore unable to clearly identify families who had been offered an FGC and those who had not. The 2015-16 Southwark dataset consequently only includes 6 cases where families declined FGCs, meaning we cannot draw conclusions on any differences between FGC and non-FGC children in the 2015-16 Southwark cohort.

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<sup>8</sup> Includes two children (Southwark, 2015-16) whose status as FGC or non-FGC was unknown.

### *Family interviews*

We planned to interview some of the families who had experienced an FGC in 2015-16 to learn about its longer-term impact. However, this proved a challenge, as local authorities did not have the current contact details of many family members. Staff in both local authorities also told us in interviews that they considered it unlikely that families would want to revisit this potentially emotional and painful period of their lives. We contacted family members who had taken part in 2015-16 FGCs but none of the family members contacted responded to the written invitation to be interviewed.

With the help of Daybreak coordinators in Wiltshire and local authority coordinators in Southwark we then instead invited for interview families who had recently taken part in an FGC. No family members in Southwark agreed from among the 65 letters sent, but we interviewed 5 members from 5 different Wiltshire families so only represent a small proportion of Wiltshire families who had recently taken part in an FGC. They had attended FGCs in late 2019 or early 2020.

### *Comparison local authorities*

Three of the original (Munro et al, 2017) six statistical neighbours declined to be interviewed or did not respond to our request. This was understandable given that local authorities were not compensated for their time and we relied on goodwill. Consequentially we approached another three close statistical neighbours for Wiltshire; we interviewed two but one did not respond. Southwark do not have any other close statistical neighbours, hence none were contacted.

## 3. Key findings

### 3.1 Local authority contexts and statistical neighbours

Southwark and Wiltshire are two contrasting local authorities, 1 urban and 1 rural, with different family demographics (appendix 3). Since the Round 1 Innovation Programme, Southwark and Wiltshire have continued to offer FGCs to families at pre-proceedings stage. Both local authorities were committed to delivering FGCs in pre-proceedings, but were also faced with challenging conditions, especially regarding the resourcing of FGCs following the end of the Innovation Programme funding.

However, the premise for delivering FGCs has evolved in Southwark, as in 2018 the local authority moved its FGC provision from Daybreak to internal commissioning and oversight of provision by a range of providers, with the overall aim to embed, extend and promote the council's 'relational practice' which includes FGCs. We were told that Southwark's FGC model remained the same apart from this change to move to both in-house and external provision.

Interviews with FGC leads and managers in other local authorities highlighted that most of Wiltshire and Southwark's statistical neighbours have already moved their FGC provision in-house or were exploring this. The provision was brought in-house with the aim of embedding FGC practices within local authority structures and gaining oversight.

The FGC provision has continued to develop in other ways since the Round 1 Innovation Programme. An early ambition to divert children from proceedings has evolved into a broader agenda for FGCs. Wiltshire, Southwark, and 4 out of 5 statistical neighbours interviewed, highlighted how they were extending and increasing their FGC offer beyond Round 1 provision. This included offering FGCs to families earlier, for example during Early Help, and to specific groups of vulnerable children, like young people going missing or at risk of child sexual exploitation, or to the families of children excluded from school.

While local authorities aimed to provide FGCs more widely, the 2018-19 data we received showed that both Wiltshire and Southwark held fewer FGCs in pre-proceedings in 2018-19, than in 2015-16 during the Round 1 Innovation Programme.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In Southwark the difference was small and may be seasonal. The 2018-19 data on 28 children covered 9 months, April to December, with an estimated whole-year equivalent of 37, compared to 39 children in the 2015-16 data.

## 3.2. Background demographics and timelines

This section looks at the data provided by Wiltshire and Southwark in response to our request for data on all children whose parents received a pre-proceedings letter and were offered an FGC in 2015-16 and in 2018-19.<sup>10</sup> We cannot be sure that our data are complete, meaning they represent the whole population of such families. We explored their demographic characteristics and the timing of children's involvement with children's services and the FGC process.

### 2015-16 cases

From Wiltshire we received data on 81 children whose families entered pre-proceedings in 2015-16, of which 50 families had accepted the FGC offer ('FGC children') and 31 children where the FGC offer had been declined ('non-FGC children').

Southwark provided data on 33 children whose families had accepted the FGC in 2015-16. Southwark was not able to ascertain whether other children had received the FGC offer, so there were only 4 non-FGC children in the comparison group, and 2 children where FGC or non-FGC status was unknown. These cases were used in overall analysis of FGC and non-FGC cases.

Wiltshire's FGCs took place between March 2015 and April 2016; Southwark's took place between February 2015 and July 2016.

### 2018-19 cases

The 2018-19 data provided by Wiltshire included 7 children where the family had declined the FGC offer and 36 children where the FGC took place. Again due to the small number of families who declined, these cases were not included as a local authority comparison group, but were used in overall analysis of FGC and non-FGC cases.

From Southwark we received information about 28 children: 14 where the FGC offer had been accepted and 14 where it had been declined. The Southwark data included some large sibling groups consisting of 3, 4 or 5 children each (the sibling group mean was 1.9). The composition of sibling groups in Wiltshire was smaller. Across the 2 cohorts, the 191 children were from 163 families.<sup>11</sup>

Wiltshire's families entered pre-proceedings in the financial year 2018-19; Southwark's in the period April to December 2018 only. Wiltshire's FGCs took place between July 2016

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<sup>10</sup> The 'parents' are the person or persons with parental responsibility: usually birth parents.

<sup>11</sup> Our data does not link siblings directly; these are estimates based on date of referral.



and December 2018; Southwark's took place between August 2018 and February 2019, illustrating that some FGCs took place earlier than would be expected, before families entered pre-proceedings. This may be genuine or due to inaccurate record-keeping.

### 3.2.1 Comparison of families who accepted and declined an FGC offer

We explored which families take-up the offer of an FGC, and which do not, and why, using demographic data provided by Wiltshire and Southwark, and our interview data.

#### 3.2.1.1. Demographic analysis of which families decline an FGC

By interrogating the demographic data provided we hoped to identify key characteristics that could differentiate the families who accepted the FGC offer from those who declined. We cannot assess the coverage or representativeness of our data, as we do not have information on the proportion of all families who entered pre-proceedings that these families represent.

There were similar proportions of boys and girls among the FGC children in both Southwark and Wiltshire in 2015-16 and 2018-19 (tables 2 and 3). While the non-FGC children appears to have slightly more boys than girls in Wiltshire in 2015-16, no conclusions can be drawn due to the number of unborn children and restricted data.

**Table 2: Children's demographic profile, 2015-16 cohort**

2015-16	Southwark	Wiltshire	
	<i>FGC accepted (n=33)</i>	<i>FGC accepted (n=50)</i>	<i>FGC declined (n=31)</i>
Gender	Female: 17 (51%) Male: 16 (49%)	Female: 25 (50%) Male: 21 (42%) Unborn: 4 (8%)	Female: 12 (39%) Male: 16 (56%) Unborn: 1 (3%) Unknown: 2 (6%)
Mean age at pre-proceedings letter	7.0 years (n=33)	5.1 years (n=48) <sup>12</sup>	5.2 years (n=22) <sup>13</sup>
Age groups at pre-proceedings letter	Unborn or under 1: 7 (21%) 1-4 years: 7 (21%) 5-10 years: 12 (36%) 11-15 years: 7 (21%)	Unborn or under 1: 15 (30%) 1-4 years: 11 (22%) 5-10 years: 11 (22%) 11-15 years: 9 (18%) 16 and over: 1 (2%) Unknown: 3 (6%)	Unborn or under 1: 8 (26%) 1-4 years: 4 (13%) 5-10 years: 5 (16%) 11-15 years: 5 (16%) Unknown: 9 (29%)

<sup>12</sup> Date of birth or date of pre-proceedings letter is missing for 2 children.

<sup>13</sup> Date of birth or date of pre-proceedings letter is missing for 9 children.

Ethnicity	White: 10 (30%) Black: 15 (45%) Mixed: 8 (24%)	White: 43 (86%) Black: 1 (2%) Mixed: 6 (12%)	White: 23 (74%) Mixed: 1 (3%) Unknown: 7 (23%)
Disabilities	Yes: 1 (3%) None: 32 (97%)	Yes: 5 (10%) None: 45 (90%)	None: 31 (100%)
Household type	Single parent: 18 (55%) Two parents: 14 (42%) Other: 1 (3%)	Separated parents: 22 (44%) Single parent: 17 (34%) Two parents: 6 (12%) Unknown: 5 (10%)	Separated parents: 12 (39%) Single parent: 8 (26%) Two parents: 3 (10%) Unknown: 8 (26%)
Reasons for referral (multiple answers possible)	Neglect: 20 (43%) Emotional abuse: 10 (22%) Domestic abuse: 10 (22%) Sexual abuse: 6 (13%)	Neglect: 30 (59%) Emotional abuse: 8 (16%) Physical abuse: 4 (8%) Sexual abuse: 2 (4%) Other: 2 (4%) Unknown: 5 (10%)	Neglect: 15 (48%) Emotional abuse: 4 (13%) Physical abuse: 4 (13%) Sexual abuse: 1 (3%) Unknown: 7 (23%)

Source: 2015-16 cohort

**Table 3: Children's demographic profile, 2018-19 cohort**

2018-19	Southwark		Wiltshire
	<i>FGC accepted (n=14)</i>	<i>FGC declined (n=14)</i>	<i>FGC accepted (n=36)</i>
Gender	Female: 6 (43%) Male: 8 (57%)	Female: 7 (50%) Male: 7 (50%)	Female: 21 (58%) Male: 15 (42%)
Mean age at pre-proceedings letter	5 years (n=14)	7.4 years (n=14)	6 years (n=34)
Age groups at pre-proceedings letter	Unborn or under 1: 2 (14%) 1-4 years: 6 (43%) 5-10 years: 5 (36%) 16 and over: 1 (7%)	Unborn or under 1: 4 (29%) 1-4 years: 1 (7%) 5-10 years: 5 (36%) 11-15 years: 4 (29%)	Unborn or under 1: 8 (22%) 1-4 years: 10 (28%) 5-10 years: 6 (17%) 11-15 years: 8 (6%) 16 and over: 2 (6%) Unknown: 2 (6%)
Ethnicity	White: 6 (43%) Black: 1 (7%) Mixed: 5 (36%) Asian: 2 (14%)	White: 5 (36%) Black: 8 (57%) Mixed: 1 (7%)	White: 33 (92%) Mixed: 1 (3%) Other: 1 (3%) Unknown: 1 (3%)
Disabilities	Yes: 3 (21%) None: 11 (93%)	Yes: 0 (0%) None: 14 (100%)	Yes: 2 (6%) None: 34 (94%)

Household type	Single parent: 1 (7%) Two parents: 13 (93%)	Single parent: 6 (43%) Two parents: 7 (50%) Other: 1 (7%)	Separated parents: 18 (50%) Single parent: 8 (22%) Two parents: 10 (28%)
Reasons for referral (multiple answers possible)	Neglect: 8 (29%) Emotional abuse: 8 (29%) Physical abuse: 2 (7%) Domestic abuse: 6 (21%) Sexual abuse: 2 (7%) Substance misuse: 2 (7%)	Neglect: 11 (69%) Emotional abuse: 3 (19%) Physical abuse: 1 (6%) Sexual abuse: 1 (6%)	Neglect: 24 (46%) Emotional abuse: 9 (17%) Physical abuse: 4 (8%) Sexual abuse: 3 (6%) Substance misuse: 10 (19%) Family dysfunction: 2 (4%)

Source: 2018-19 cohort

The mean age was 5 years in Wiltshire when the pre-proceedings letter was issued in 2015-16. This is 2 years younger than the FGC group in Southwark, who on average were 7 years old when the letter was issued in 2015-16. This decreased to 5 years in 2018-19 for the FGC group in Southwark, but remained 7 years for the non-FGC group.

Across the sample only 1 child was 16 years or older at the time the pre-proceedings letter was issued (in Southwark in 2018-19). This young person had a younger sibling who was also part of the sample.

Few of the children had an identified disability, but again there was no clear pattern in terms of who accepted and who declined the FGC offer.

Predictably, given the ethnic composition of the two local authorities, the proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children was higher in Southwark. The majority of children in Wiltshire were White British.

In 2018-19 there was a high proportion of Black children in the group that declined the FGC (8 children) in Southwark, compared to those who accepted (1 child). However, this contradicts the earlier data from 2015-16 where the parents or carers of 15 Black children accepted the FGC offer.

In Wiltshire, single parent and separated parent households, formed the largest proportion of households across both cohorts, and both groups. Southwark, on the other hand, had a larger proportion of two-parent households. In 2018-19, although numbers were small in Southwark, parents or carers who accepted the FGC were predominately two-parent households (13 out of 14) compared to the non-FGC group (7 out of 14).

The most common primary reason for the referral to children’s services across both local authorities was neglect. This corresponds with national statistics.<sup>14</sup> Only Southwark identified domestic abuse as a primary reason for referral, but none of the non-FGC cases referenced domestic violence as a referral reason in 2018-19.

In summary, we found no clear patterns in the demographics of those who accepted an FGC and those who declined, among the data available for analysis. This finding was backed up by local authority staff interviewed for the research, in that they identified no clear pattern in who accepted or declined, in their experience. A combination of restricted data and a low sample size makes it difficult to draw any conclusions on the key characteristics of these groups. However, as discussed below, other factors may influence families’ decision-making on whether to accept an FGC offer.

### **3.2.1.1 Findings from interviews on why families decline an FGC**

Some of our local authority interviews highlighted that families are more likely to turn down the FGC offer early in their engagement with children’s services, for example during Early Help. However, by the time of pre-proceedings we were told most families will accept an FGC offer. We were told this was in part because the social worker and the family advocate or legal representative will emphasise the importance of showing the courts that one has taken place.

Local authority interviewees also told us that for families in pre-proceedings they often felt unable to predict which families will accept and which will decline the FGC offer. Two groups of families were highlighted through our interviews and document review as more likely to decline than others. These were families who were already less engaged with children’s services, for example due to mental health issues; and parents with learning difficulties.

We analysed the 8 FGC referrals in 2018-19, provided by Wiltshire, where the family had declined the FGC offer<sup>15</sup>. In 6 cases it was either the parents or the extended family who declined the FGC. In some cases, one parent was open to an FGC, but the other parent or the extended family were not engaged – as this example illustrates:

“Coordinator met with mum, the main caregiver. The only people put forward for the FGC were her parents (maternal grandparents). However, they refused to see the coordinator and did not want anything to do with the FGC or the social worker. The mother tried to persuade them to engage, but with no luck.” (FGC coordinator)

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<sup>14</sup> Children looked after in England (including adoption) year ending 31 March 2019, DfE

<sup>15</sup> Seven children did not have an FGC in 2018-19. However, 8 referrals declined – one of these was a split referral where the paternal family declined, but the maternal family had an FGC.

The role of social workers in promoting the advantages of having an FGC was also highlighted by local authority interviewees as crucial in whether families would accept or not. Consequently, even when an FGC is consistently offered, for example by including information about the FGC process within the pre-proceedings letter, families may only accept the offer if social workers actively encourage families to speak to the FGC coordinator. As the FGCs were focused on the pre-proceedings stage, when families should have access to legal aid, solicitors may also have played a role.

In addition, social workers mentioned making decisions about the appropriateness of referring a family to the FGC coordinator based on the case and its context. For example, in cases of significant domestic violence the FGC was described by social workers as potentially detrimental to the child. Social worker interviewees highlighted the need to work around such factors, for example by making referrals for split conferences.

In conclusion, a range of contextual factors could influence a family's decision to either accept or decline the FGC offer. However, as our quantitative analysis of demographic characteristics was inconclusive this highlights the need for future research to examine the reasons families accept or decline FGC offers, including research with families who decline FGC offers.

### **3.3 Diversion from proceedings**

The Round 1 evaluation (Munro et al, 2017) showed that across Southwark and Wiltshire in 2015-16, 72% of FGC cases were diverted from proceedings, compared with only half of non-FGC families (although some of these outcomes were classed 'provisional').

In our evaluation we have data on 120 children who were offered an FGC in 2015-16 in Southwark and Wiltshire (83 FGC children and 37 non-FGC children). At the end of their pre-proceedings, the local authorities planned to begin proceedings for 65% of the FGC children (54 out of 83) and 84% of the non-FGC children (31 out of 37). This suggests that for 35% of FGC children the plan was to divert them from care proceedings, compared to only 16% of non-FGC children. This suggests that overall FGC children were still more likely to be diverted from care proceedings than non-FGC children.

However, when we look at outcomes from the two local authorities separately (Wiltshire 2015-16 and Southwark 2018-19) our analysis shows strikingly different findings.

In Wiltshire in 2015-16, there was a similar proportion of FGC and non-FGC children for whom the local authority planned to begin proceedings at the end of pre-proceedings (78% vs. 81%). Thus a similar proportion of children in the two groups were diverted from proceedings (22% vs. 19%).

Yet when followed up in September 2019, fewer FGC children were known to have entered proceedings (34%, 17 out of 50) in the period after pre-proceedings began in 2015-16, compared to non-FGC children (65%, 20 out of 31). This suggests that over this longer time period the FGC group was more likely to avoid care proceedings, than the non-FGC group.

However, in Southwark (2018-19) the analysis shows that FGC children were more likely to have a plan to begin proceedings at the end of their FGC process (64%, 9 out of 14 children) compared to non-FGC children (7%, 1 child out of 14). They were also more likely to enter care proceedings than the non-FGC children (9 children vs. 1 child). This contradicts the earlier finding from the 2015-16 cohort in Wiltshire.

However, as the sample size for this cohort is small this may not reflect the full picture of the FGC process in Southwark.

It is unclear why FGC children in Southwark (2018-19) were more likely to enter care proceedings than in Wiltshire (2015-16). Local differences in practice could explain this; research involving a larger number of local authorities is needed to draw out any overall patterns.

## **3.4 Residential status and family placements**

### **3.4.1 Carers identified during pre-proceedings**

One significant advantage of Family Group Conferencing frequently mentioned by local authority interviewees was that the FGC process allowed local authorities to identify (and hence assess) potential carers within the family network earlier in the pre-proceedings process, rather than in care proceedings. The analysis below confirms this finding.

Across the sample, where information was provided (122 children), the mean number of potential carers identified was 2.1 (range 0-12). This figure was 2.9 among the majority of cases where at least one was identified.

Southwark identified a noticeably higher proportion of 3+ carers (41% in 2015-16 and 32% in 2018-19) compared to Wiltshire (13% in 2015-16 and 12% in 2018-19) (table 4). Interview data suggests that FGCs in Southwark often include fewer family members, but more people from the family's friendship and community networks.

**Table 4: Potential carers identified during pre-proceedings**

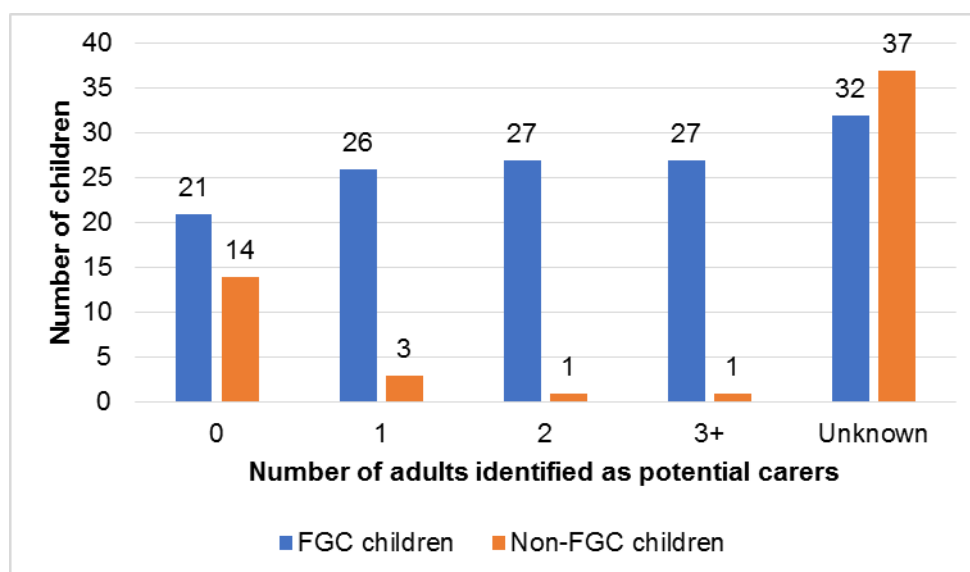
Southwark		Wiltshire		Total
2015-16	2018-19	2015-16	2018-19	Both years
N=39 (100%)	N=28 (100%)	N=81 (100%)	N=43 (100%)	N=191 (100%)
Zero: 8% 1: 15% 2: 26% 3+: 33% Unknown: 18%	Zero: 50% 1: 7% 2: 4% 3+: 29% Unknown: 11%	Zero: 14% 1: 7% 2: 12% 3+: 5% Unknown: 62%	Zero: 19% 1: 35% 2: 16% 3+: 21% Unknown: 21%	Zero: 19% (36) 1: 15% (29) 2: 15% (28) 3+: 15% (29) Unknown: 36% (69)

Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts

Across both local authorities (figure 1), for FGC children the mean number of adults identified as potential carers during pre-proceedings was 2.4 (median: 2, range 0-12). For non-FGC children the mean number was 0.8 (median 0, range 0-4).

Based on the available data, this confirms that potential carers from within a family's network were more likely to be identified when families were part of the FGC process than without.

**Figure 1: Adults identified as potential carers during pre-proceedings**



Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts. N=133 (FGC children); n=56 (non-FGC children)

### 3.4.2 Placement at the end of pre-proceedings

For the 2015-16 cohort across Southwark and Wiltshire,

- the majority of children (77%, 64 out of 83 children) whose parents had accepted the FGC were living with their family (for example with their parents, grandparents, other relatives) at the end of their pre-proceedings. Around 1 in 5 (22%, 18 out of 37 children) lived in a non-family placement (such as foster care or residential care).
- by contrast, at the end of pre-proceedings just over half of children (54%, 20 out of 37 children) whose parents had declined an FGC lived with their family, while 46% of non-FGC children were in non-family placements at the end of pre-proceedings – a considerably higher proportion than that of FGC children.<sup>16</sup>

Thus more FGC children (77%) resided with their family at the end of pre-proceedings than non-FGC children (54%) in 2015-16 (table 5).

**Table 5: Placement status at the end of pre-proceedings (2015-16 cohort)**

	<b>Family placement</b>	<b>Non-family placement</b>	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>Total</b>
FGC children (n=83)	77%	22%	1%	100%
Non-FGC children (n=37)	54%	32%	14%	100%
Total (n=120)	70%	25%	5%	100%

Source: 2015-16 cohort

Looking at both cohorts, the difference between the proportions of children who lived in family and non-family placements at the end of pre-proceedings narrowed slightly, but FGC children (82%, 109 out of 133 children) continued to be more likely to live in family placements than non-FGC children (69%, 40 out of 58 children) (table 6).

**Table 6: Placement status at the end of pre-proceedings (both cohorts)**

	<b>Family placement</b>	<b>Non-family placement</b>	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>Total</b>
FGC children (n=133)	82%	17%	1%	100%
Non-FGC children (n=58)	69%	22%	9%	100%
Total (n=191)	78%	19%	3%	100%

Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts

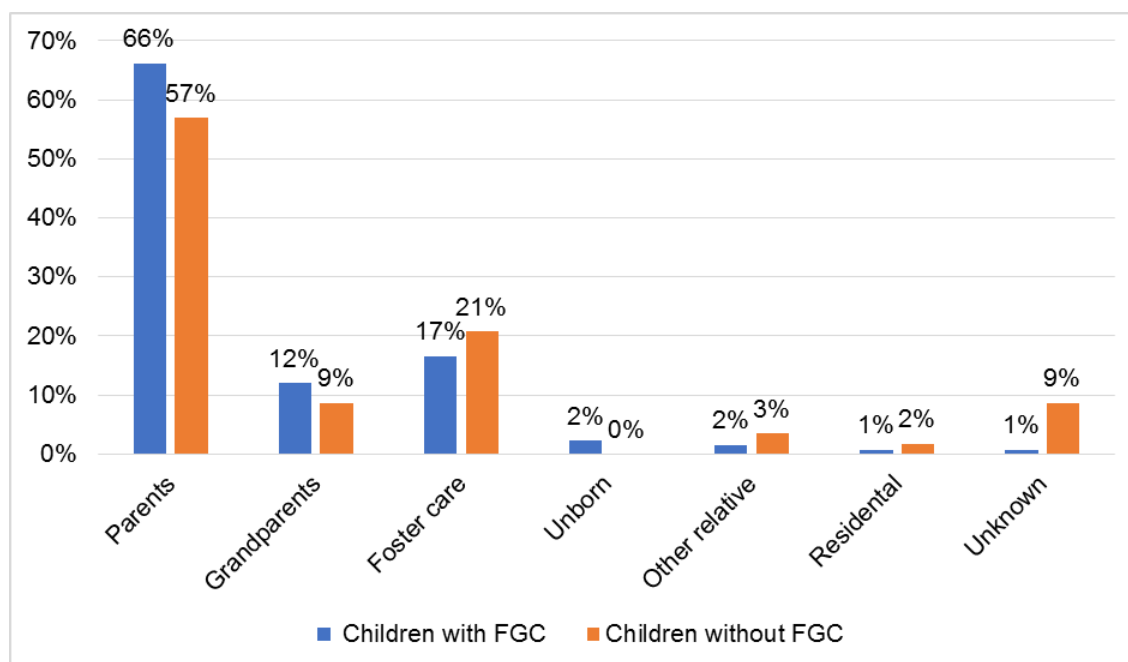
Across both cohorts, a larger proportion of FGC children (66%) than non-FGC children (57%) lived with their parents at the end of pre-proceedings (figure 2).

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<sup>16</sup> The placement for 5 children (14%) was unknown because the information on their case file was restricted. This usually happens when a child is adopted.



**Figure 2: Placement status at end of pre-proceedings**



Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts. N=133 (FGC children); n=58 (non-FGC children)

### 3.4.3 Residential status at follow-up in September 2019

Munro et al's (2017) study found when they followed up their 2015-16 cohort in Wiltshire and Southwark, that between 3 and 12 months after families received the pre-proceedings letter, 76% of FGC children and 61% of non-FGC children lived with their family (parents and relatives).

In September 2019, we followed up the 2015-16 cohort of children in Wiltshire and Southwark (120 children) to find out where they were living 3.5 years after their pre-proceedings were initiated. Most FGC children (71%, 59 out of 83 children) lived with their families (with their parents, grandparents, or other relatives) (table 7). One-quarter of FGC children (27%, 22 out of 83 children) lived in a non-family placement (such as foster care, residential care or an adoptive placement), while 2 children lived independently. Less than half (43%, 16 out of 37 children) of the non-FGC children lived with their families in September 2019. This is a noticeable difference in placement outcome between the 2 groups of children.

**Table 7: Placement status in September 2019**

	Family placement	Non-family placement	Independent living	Total
FGC children (n=83)	71%	27%	2%	100%
Non-FGC children (n=37)	43%	51%	5%	100%
Total (n=120)	63%	34%	3%	100%

Source: 2015-16 cohort

In summary, for the 2015-16 cohort a higher proportion of FGC children were living with their families at the end of pre-proceedings compared to non-FGC children (77% vs. 53%), and this was still the case for the cohort when followed up in 2019 (71% vs. 43%). The size of the difference is broadly similar at the two time points, but small numbers mean this finding should not be over-interpreted as demonstrating a lasting benefit.

### 3.5 Placement change and stability

It is well known that placement stability is important to children’s longer-term outcomes (Hannon et al, 2010). When looking at the number of changes to children’s placement plans by local authority and cohort, the findings demonstrate some variation.

The mean number of placement changes across both cohorts was 0.7 changes per child (range 0-6) (table 8). This mean figure increased to 1.9 changes when considering only cases where children had experienced at least one placement change.

When considering children with one or more placement changes in each of the 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts, children in Southwark on average experienced a higher number of changes (2.4 and 2.3) compared to Wiltshire (1.6 and 1.0).

**Table 8: Average number of placement changes by local authority**

	Southwark		Wiltshire		Total
	2015-2016	2018-2019	2015-2016	2018-2019	Both years
Overall mean	1.0	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.7
Mean of cases with 1+ change only	2.4	2.3	1.6	1.0	1.9

Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts

In the September 2019 follow-up, the majority of children in the 2015-16 cohort had experienced no change to their placement plan between the end of pre-proceedings and September 2019 (64%, 77 out of 120) (table 9).

A similar proportion of FGC and non-FGC children had had at least one placement change within the same period (34%, 28 out of 83 vs. 32%, 12 out of 37).

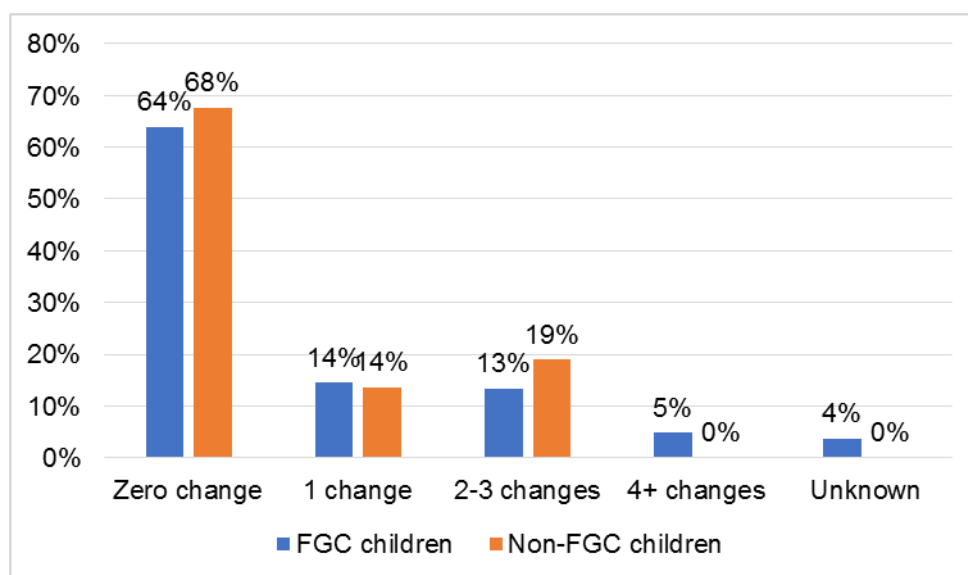
**Table 9: Changes to placement plans, end of pre-proceedings to 2019**

	<b>Change to plan</b>	<b>No change to plan</b>	<b>Unknown</b>
FGC children (n=83)	34%	63%	4%
Non-FGC children (n=37)	32%	68%	0%
Total (n=120)	33%	64%	3%

Source: 2015-16 cohort

When these figures are broken down further by the number of changes children experienced, similar proportions of FGC and non-FGC children had both zero and 1 placement change (figure 3). Only FGC children had 4 or more placement changes between the end of pre-proceedings and September 2019.

**Figure 3: Changes to children's placement plan, end of pre-proceedings to 2019**



Source: 2015-16 cohort. N=83 (FGC children), n=37 (non-FGC children)

In addition to placement stability, we also considered where children moved when they experienced placement changes. Looking at the flow of children's placements between 2015-16 and 2019 focusing on the Wiltshire 2015-16 cohort (83 children), it becomes clear that most of the children (FGC and non-FGC children) who lived with a parent in 2015-16 continued to live with a parent (almost always the same one) in 2019.

For FGC children the most common placement change was 5 children who moved from their parents to grandparents (appendix 1, figure 4). Much of this appears to have happened in proceedings stage, following the FGC. Some children also moved out of foster care to various destinations, including adoption or back to their parents.

For non-FGC children, a few children moved from living with parents to foster care (appendix 1, figure 5). However, children were also seen to move from foster care to

grandparents and other relatives. Adoption seemed to be identified as a likely outcome early on and accounted for a higher proportion of outcomes in the non-FGC group (23%, 7 out of 31) compared to the FGC group (10%, 5 out of 50).

### 3.6 Legal status and re-referral

Across the sample, most of the FGC and non-FGC children were, unsurprisingly, part of an open child protection case when the pre-proceedings letter was issued (table 10). A slightly higher proportion of children in Southwark were on a child protection plan at the point of entering pre-proceedings, compared to Wiltshire. In 2015-16 in Wiltshire there was a split between child in need plans (43%) and child protection plans (44%), which was not found two years later (2018-19) or in Southwark.

**Table 10: Type of plan when pre-proceedings letter was issued**

Southwark		Wiltshire		Total		
2015-2016	2018-2019	2015-2016	2018-2019	2015-2016	2018-2019	Both years
N=39	N=28	N=81	N=43	N=120	N=71	N=191
Child protection plan (72%)	Child protection plan (89%)	Child in need (43%) Child protection plan (44%)	Child protection plan (65%)	Child protection plan (57%)	Child protection plan (76%)	Child protection plan (61%)

Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts

At the end of children’s pre-proceedings, the legal status was unknown for a quarter of the sample (24%, 46 out of 191 children).

The same proportion of children with and without the FGC had no legal status (56%, 74 out of 133 children vs. 54%, 30 out of 56 children) at the end of pre-proceedings. The only noticeable difference identified between the two groups was that only FGC children had a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) (7 children) and a Child Arrangement Order (CAO) (1 child).

#### 3.6.1 Legal status at follow-up

When we followed-up the 2015-16 cohort (Wiltshire and Southwark) in September 2019, the data show that for three-quarters of FGC children (75%, 62 out of 83 children) their case was closed with the local authority, compared to two-thirds of non-FGC children

(65%, 24 out of 37 children) (table 11). The cases of 3 FGC children (4%) were unknown, as their families had moved out of the local authority.

**Table 11: Children's open and closed cases in 2019**

	<b>Closed (including adoption)</b>	<b>Open (including care leavers)</b>	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>Total</b>
FGC children (n=83)	75%	22%	4%	100%
Non-FGC children (n=37)	65%	35%	0%	100%
Total (n=120)	72%	26%	3%	100%

Source: 2015-16 cohort

However, when looking at the legal status recorded for both open and closed cases, it becomes clear that FGC-children were more likely to have no recorded status.

Only two-in-five FGC children (39%, 32 out of 83) had a recorded status (either legal order or plan). This is a significantly lower proportion than the three-quarters of FGC children (76%, or 28 out of 37 children) who had a recorded status in 2019.

FGC children were less likely to be subject to a Full Care Order and to have been placed for adoption, relative to non-FGC children. FGC children, on the other hand, were more likely to have a Special Guardianship Order, compared to the non-FGC children.

We also followed up the children whose families received a pre-proceedings letter in 2018-19. However, unlike the 2015-16 cohort, FGC children (56%) were considerably more likely to have a recorded status than non-FGC children (14%) in September 2019.

Further research involving more qualitative research is required in order to see whether these results are replicated in other local authorities and fully understand the reasons for the differences.

### **3.6.2 Re-referral into children's services**

The data allowed us to look at whether children had had further contact with children's services following the end of their pre-proceedings.

Focusing on the 2015-16 cohort, half of the FGC children (52%, 43 out 83 children) had been referred back into children's services between the end of their pre-proceedings and 2019 (table 12). This is a larger proportion of re-referrals than the non-FGC children (32%, 12 out of 37 children).

Information was restricted on 7 children in the non-FGC group and 4 children in the FGC group, which as mentioned earlier happens following an adoption order.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely, but not impossible that these children were referred back into children’s services.

**Table 12: Proportion of children referred back into children's services by 2019**

	Frequency			Percentage		
	FGC children	Non-FGC children	All children	FGC children	Non-FGC children	All children
Re-referred	43	12	55	52%	32%	46%
Not re-referred	36	18	54	43%	49%	45%
Unknown	4	7	11	5%	19%	9%
Total	83	37	120	100%	100%	100%

Source: 2015-16 cohort

For all children referred back into children’s services by September 2019, it was clear from the contextual data provided that family difficulties often continued beyond pre-proceedings resulting in on-going contact with children’s services.

## 3.7 Family feedback – what families say about their FGC

### 3.7.1 Questionnaire feedback

We analysed feedback questionnaires from 312 family members who had attended an FGC in Southwark or Wiltshire in 2018-19. In Southwark we received feedback forms completed between April 2018 and September 2019 (203 people), while in Wiltshire we analysed 109 feedback forms collected over a 6 month period in 2019. Not enough information was available on dates to allow us to calculate what proportion of all FGCs these feedback forms represent. The 2 feedback questionnaires differed between the two local authorities and so were analysed separately. The questionnaires were administered by the local authority or contracted provider. We do not have full details of how soon after FGCs they were filled out, but understand this would usually be immediately or soon after.

#### Southwark

In Southwark there were very high levels of satisfaction with FGCs in 2018-19. Among the 203 family members and friends who completed the feedback questionnaire following

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<sup>17</sup> Adoption agencies are required to retain information about a child's adoption (s56, Adoption & Children Act 2002). Disclosure of this information is restricted (s57).

the FGC, the vast majority (83%) thought the FGC was a good idea when they first heard about it and 90% said after the FGC meeting that they had found it a useful process.

“Very useful having a social worker present to explain her current involvement and provide feedback on the plan.” (Family member)

“Hopefully this will make a change to our situation.” (Parent or carer)

Almost all the participants (98%) were happy with the family plan made during their FGC and the vast majority (88%) also said they felt more able to make difficult decisions together as a family in the future.

“It helped to talk about our issues and create a plan for the future.” (Family member)

## **Wiltshire**

In Wiltshire there was also a high level of satisfaction with the FGC process among the 109 family members who completed feedback questionnaires in 2019.

Family members said that the information they were given about the FGC was clear (93%) and that they had felt able to discuss and ask sensitive or difficult questions at the meeting (92%). The majority of participants also agreed that the right people had attended the FGC (88%).

In terms of outcomes for the child or young person about whom the meeting was held, the vast majority of family members (91%) felt that they would be safer as a result of the plan made.

“At the end of the meeting it was felt by us all that [name of child] will benefit from our plan for a safer family environment.” (Family member)

“I feel that [name of parent] now realises they have more support than they thought.” (Family member)

A small number of participants (6 people) would not recommend the FGC process to others, but the vast majority would (94%, 97 out of 103).

### **3.7.2 Family interviews**

We interviewed by telephone 5 members of 5 families in Wiltshire who had recently been part of an FGC about a child in their family (2 mothers, 2 fathers and 1 maternal aunt). These interviews give us a valuable insight to what FGCs are like for families, as well as some interesting contextual findings that are useful to consider in relation to the

quantitative findings. Interviewees received an information sheet in advance and gave verbal consent to take part.

### Information sharing

FGCs were frequently the first time an extended family or family network heard directly from children's services about their concerns regarding the safety of the child. The FGC gave families an opportunity to ask questions and for social workers to share information with third parties. The family interviewees emphasised the importance of information being shared directly, rather than having to rely on hearsay.

"It gave us an opportunity to ask questions as a group of social services... It does help, because then there is no Chinese whispers or anything like that – you all hear the same straight from the horse's mouth." (Relative)

### Building relationships

By bringing families together, within a structure that encourages cooperation and support, FGCs seem to create a space where family members with potentially different interests were able to put these aside and focus on the child's safety and needs. With the safety of the child in mind, family interviewees described their FGC as an opportunity to build better relationships within the family, but also between families and children's services.

"I think even if you don't get the outcome you want, it does help with the relationship between the interested parties because you don't always get them in a room together. It might have built some bridges with social services. When we were there [the social worker] took the opportunity to sort out some untruths that had been going around. She just made sure that we all knew what was going on, where before we all had different information." (Relative)

### Control and a voice

Involvement with children's services, especially in pre-proceedings, can be very stressful for families, but for those interviewed the FGC process offered them a certain level of control over the situation and a space to voice their opinions, which was valued by all.

"It wasn't a meeting that was arranged *for* me – I had a say in it, who was invited, how I wanted it to be, did I want the children there – it was all my choice. Often social workers arrange a meeting, which you don't want to be at and there are people there that you don't want to discuss your business with, so it's good that you get a choice." (Mother)

"It was a good meeting, I came out of there feeling positive." (Mother)



Overall, while family interviewees were positive about their FGC experiences, their accounts also highlight some of the more difficult aspects of the FGC process, such as having to share details about their private life with others and the emotional context that surrounds the FGC. For one father, who felt very let down by the child protection system over a number of years, the FGC was an emotional event for him and his family, and while the FGC in itself was not enough to restore confidence in the system, it did appear to go some way to open up conversations, for example about contact and support.

“... It is good to be put in a situation where you can actually talk about these things... You can sit down with the people who are involved in your home and talk, get certain things off your chest. Talk about it like adults. So yes I do kind of think it has helped.” (Father)

## 4. Summary of key findings

The Innovation Programme Round 1 Final Evaluation Report (2017) set out 7 features of practice and 7 outcomes to be explored further in subsequent rounds.<sup>18</sup> The findings in this report relate to 1 practice feature and 3 outcome features, summarised below.

### Undertaking group case discussion

Our evaluation found no clear pattern in the demographics of those who accepted or declined FGCs. A combination of restricted data and a small sample size made it difficult to draw any conclusions. Other contextual factors may influence decision-making.

Those who participated in an FGC reported high satisfaction with their FGC in 2018-19, with 90% of respondents in Southwark saying they found it useful and 91% in Wiltshire believing that the child or young person would be safer as a result of the plan made.

### Create greater stability for children

**Numbers were small and the research design meant we were not able to establish causality. But for children in pre-proceedings in 2015-16 a similar proportion of FGC (63%) and non-FGC (66%) children had no placement change from the end of pre-proceedings to 2019. Reduce risk for children**

At the end of pre-proceedings, FGC children (77%) were more likely to live with a family member than non-FGC children (53%). In 2019, 3.5 years later, a higher proportion of FGC children (71%) continued to live with their families, than non-FGC children (43%). A number of factors, other than the FGC itself, may explain this.

### Reduce days spent in state care

In the Round 1 evaluation, FGC children were more likely to be diverted from care proceedings compared to non-FGC children. While our findings from the same 2015-16 cohort suggest FGCs may play a role in diverting some children (35% vs. 16%), the Southwark and Wiltshire findings were contradictory. We are therefore unable to state conclusively whether or not FGCs divert children from care proceedings.

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<sup>18</sup> Sebba, J., Luke, N., McNeish, D., and Rees, A. (2017) *Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: Final evaluation report*, Department for Education, available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-innovation-programme-final-evaluation-report>

## 6. Implications and recommendations

The key implications of this follow-up evaluation for practice were:

- our positive findings on families' satisfaction with FGCs favour their continued use by local authorities, while more evidence on their effectiveness in England is generated.
- our findings support the use of both in-house and externally commissioned models of FGC, insofar as both were well-received by families,.
- the earlier use of FGCs (such as at Early Help stage) suggests local authorities should consider how families may experience FGCs at different stages and keep track of the use of FGCs in a child's journey through the system.

However, this small-scale and limited follow-up evaluation has not overcome the lack of robust evidence on the effectiveness of FGCs (Nurmatov et al, 2020), which is needed urgently. The key implications of this follow-up evaluation for future research were:

- adoption outcomes should be examined in more depth in future research, including gaining access to 'restricted' data on children who become adopted.
- as is already planned (Taylor et al, 2020) more robust and larger scale evaluation design is the next step for the evidence base, to increase generalisability by covering more local authorities, and to isolate the impact of FGCs as opposed to other factors influencing child outcomes.
- funding to support evaluation, and improvements to data systems in local authorities are needed, to enable future studies to more easily and completely follow up children in the years after the interventions they experience.

# Appendix 1: Placement flows

Figure 4: Placement change 2015-16 to 2019 (FGC families in Wiltshire 2015-16)

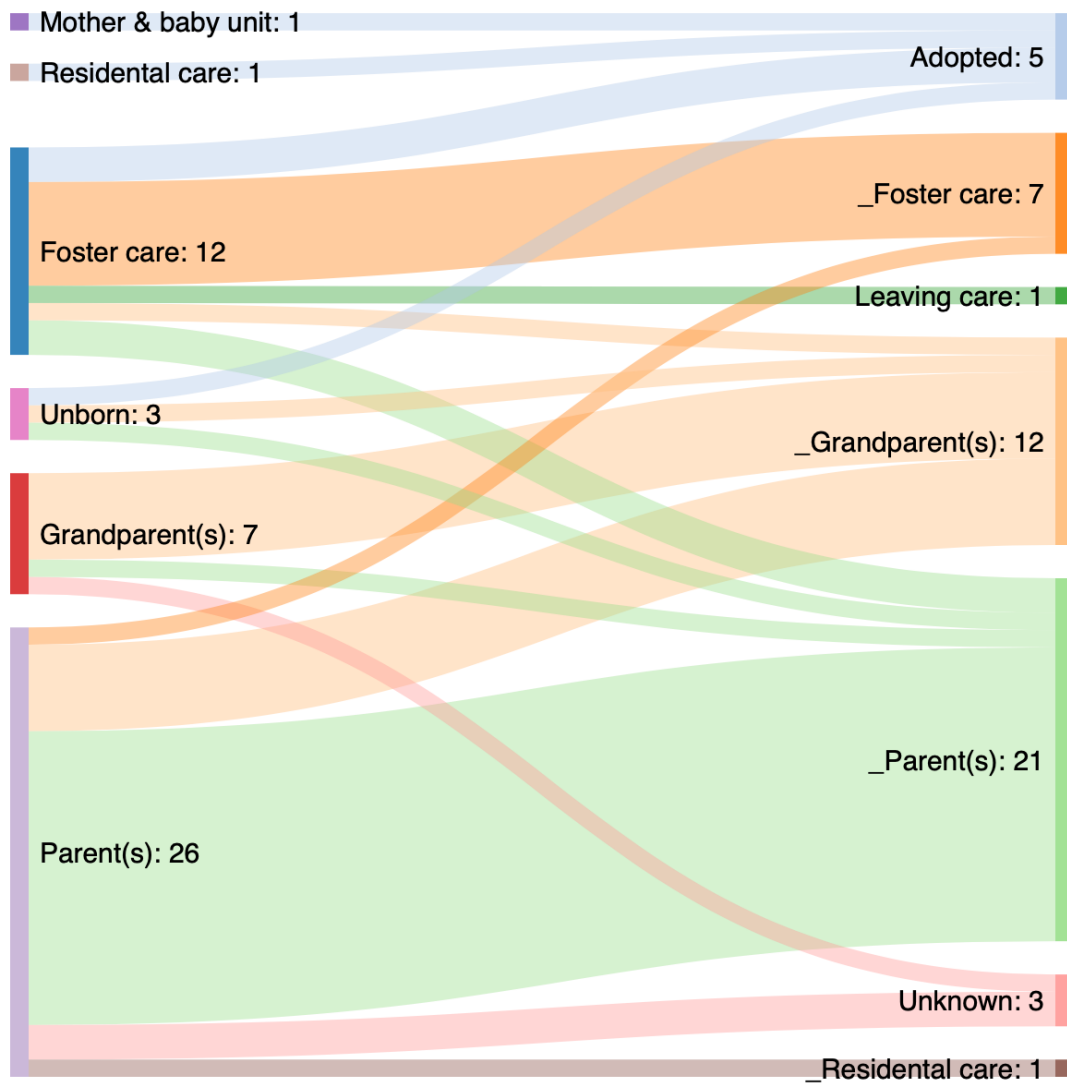
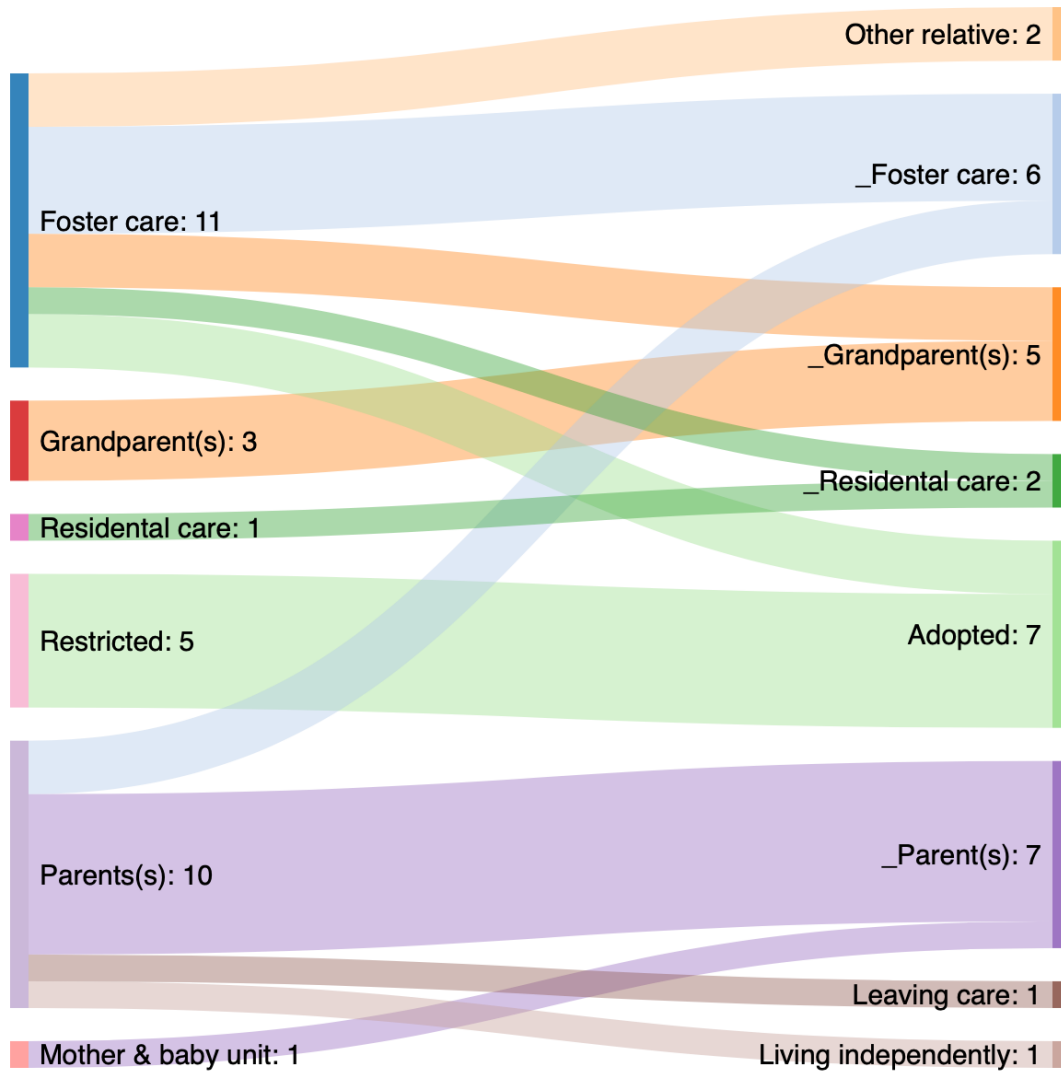


Figure 5: Placement change 2015-16 to 2019 (non-FGC families in Wiltshire 2015-16)



## Appendix 2: Children’s timelines

We looked at the timelines between significant events in the children’s journeys. While many dates were missing from the data provided, both the referral and pre-proceedings letter dates were known for 129 children (out of 191) in Wiltshire and Southwark.

The mean time between the initial referral and the pre-proceedings letter was shortest in Wiltshire (table 13). In 2015-16 the mean was 1 year, increasing to 1.5 years in 2018-19. In Southwark it took on average 4.8 years from the initial referral until pre-proceedings began. The mean time shortened to 3.7 years in 2018-19.

**Table 13: Mean time from referral to pre-proceedings letter in years**

Wiltshire		Southwark		Total
2015-16	2018-19	2015-16	2018-19	Both years
1.0 years (n=41)	1.5 years (n=21)	4.8 year (n=39)	3.7 year (n=28)	2.8 years (n=129)

Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts

Focusing on two datasets, Wiltshire 2015-16 and Southwark 2018-19 data, we were able to compare the timeliness for children where the FGC was accepted and those where it was declined.

In Wiltshire (2015-16) the mean time between referral and pre-proceedings letter was 50 weeks for those who accepted the FGC and 56 weeks for those who declined. Looking at the median time, FGC children did tend to move more quickly through the process, taking 32 weeks, compared to 59 weeks for non-FGC children (table 14).

However, the opposite was found in Southwark. The mean time from referral to pre-proceedings letter took much longer for the children where the FGC was accepted (average 5.3 years) compared to those who declined (2.5 years). Looking at the median, the difference between the two groups was even more distinct (4.7 years vs. 1.4 years). Unlike in Wiltshire (2015-16), this suggests that cases in Southwark (2018-19) where the family accepted the FGC took longer than cases where the family declined the offer. This finding should be treated with caution due to the small sample size in Southwark (14 children in each group).

**Table 14: Time between referral and pre-proceedings letter**

	Wiltshire 2015-16				Southwark 2018-19			
	Mean	Median	Range	N=	Mean	Median	Range	N=
FGC children	1.0 years (50 weeks)	0.6 years (32 weeks)	Up to 3.6 years (2-189 weeks)	24	5.3 years (277 weeks)	4.7 years (244 weeks)	0.4 to 10.9 years (21-564 weeks)	13
Non-FGC children	1.1 years (56 weeks)	1.1 years (59 weeks)	Up to 2.6 years (0-135 weeks)	17	2.4 years (132 weeks)	1.4 years (73 weeks)	0.25 to 8.1 years (13-421 weeks)	14

Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts

For children where the FGC was accepted, the mean time between the pre-proceedings letter and the date of the FGC decreased in Southwark between 2015-16 and 2018-19 from 19 weeks to 8 weeks (table 15). The target in Southwark is currently 4-6 weeks from consent to FGC.

In Wiltshire the mean time it took between the pre-proceedings letter and the FGC was 11 weeks in 2015-16 and 16 weeks in 2018-19. However, excluding an outlier case that took 88 weeks, the mean and median were both 11 weeks in 2018-19. Wiltshire currently operates a target of 6 weeks from the pre-proceedings letter to FGC. For children in Wiltshire where both dates were known this target was met for 32% of cases in 2015-16 and 29% in 2018-19.

**Table 15: Time between pre-proceedings letter and FGC**

	Mean	Median	Range	N=
Southwark 2015-16	19 weeks	17 weeks	6-40 weeks	32
Southwark 2018-19	8 weeks	2 weeks	1-22 weeks	13
Wiltshire 2015-16	11 weeks	11 weeks	0.5-35 weeks	19
Wiltshire 2018-19	16 weeks	12 weeks	1-88 weeks	17

Source: 2015-16 and 2018-19 cohorts

Overall, the analysis identified no clear patterns between the FGC and non-FGC groups.

## Appendix 3: Profiles of Southwark and Wiltshire

### **Southwark**

The London borough of Southwark is a densely populated inner-city local authority, with an ethnically diverse, young and growing population. Currently 76% of reception-age children are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup> As a council it has one of the highest population turnover rates in England.<sup>20</sup>

In 2019 Southwark was ranked in the bottom quartile of local authorities in England on the Indices of Deprivation.<sup>21</sup> Referrals to children's services are below the national rate, but the rate of looked after children per 10,000 of the child population is higher.<sup>22</sup>

### **Wiltshire**

Wiltshire is a rural county in the South West of England with a population of almost 500,000. Over 93% of the population is white British with a large retired population.<sup>23</sup> While Wiltshire is among the 100 least deprived areas in England, the council is economically diverse with great wealth alongside areas of deprivation. Rates of referral to children's services and number of looked after children per 10,000 of the child population is below national rates.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> DfE, 2016

<sup>20</sup> Southwark's JSNA, 2018

<sup>21</sup> Southwark's JSNA, 2019

<sup>22</sup> DfE 2019

<sup>23</sup> ONS, 2017

<sup>24</sup> DfE 2019



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