

Involving Family Networks & Friends and Family Meetings (Family Network Meetings)

Practice Guidance for Partners

Introduction

This guidance is for all partners across City of York Safeguarding Children Partnership (CYSCP) who are working with families to improve children's outcomes.

It is based upon the premise that the 'lead worker' is the person who is currently working with the child and/or family, with whom there is a relationship and who is best placed to have conversations with a family to address worries. Hereafter referred to as the 'lead worker' there is a recognition that the person in this role may change as early help progresses.

The guidance covers the inclusion of the family network as integral to the support for a family and the facilitation of a family network meeting. This inclusion of the family's network is a part of York's continuum of Family Led Decision-Making (appendix one).

Why we involve the family's network

"It takes a Village to Raise a Child"

This African proverb originated from the Nigerian Igbo Community meaning that it takes a group of people or community to raise a child not just a parent. Being a parent is a really challenging full-time job and at times can be tough and requires the support of others.

There are a whole range of people in a child's life who play, or have the potential to play, an important role in supporting their development including aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbours, friends, siblings, doctors, health visitors and teachers etc. A whole group of individuals who enable the child to benefit from a wide range of knowledge, insights and experiences that support their safety, growth, development and sense of belonging. It enables the child to learn not just about themselves, but the world they live in; how to interact, communicate and build relationships.

Our vision for children and young people in York is to:

- **Stay Home** – More children remaining at home or in their naturally connected network and community.

- **Come Home** – More children returning to their family or network where it is safe to do so or at the very least returning to York when this is in line with their wishes.
- **Safe and Connected** – Children are safe and Children are connected to their network, community and supported to learn.

York's practice model seeks always to involve everybody that has natural connections to the children to most effectively build lasting well-being and safety. As such we put the parents, children and everyone naturally connected to the children at the centre of support, intervention, assessments and decision-making, giving them every opportunity to work out and try their solutions before professionals offer theirs.

The benefits to the child and family

Getting together the people who care about the family and working out how to get the support they need can be a big relief:

- their family and friends know them and their child/ren
- it will help their child/ren feel safe and cared for. They will know the family network they can depend on;
- they understand their family background, their beliefs, what works best for the family;
- they know the strengths, knowledge and skills that each family members brings;
- family, friends and members of their community may well already support the parent/carer and their child/ren. They probably have people they call on in emergencies or just enjoy being with;
- their network is around them and their child/ren 24/7,
- the family can plan with their network, how they will deal with problems and manage the challenges they face with their help. This will help the family feel better and more positive about the future and help them to sustain changes made.
- families that design their own plan, will design what will work for them

When and how we involve the family's network

Right from the start and as soon as possible. Involving the family's network is an integral part of York's Early Help Framework

<https://www.saferchildrenyork.org.uk/safeguarding-information/early-help/2>

and their inclusion in any type of conversation and/or meeting, at any time is promoted (see appendix two for examples).

Ask the parents/carers who they would like to involve, encourage them to bring along friends and family members. Agree what information can be shared. If the parents/carers say it is helpful for you to make contact with their family and friends gain their consent first.

There are lots of questions you can ask to help the family identify who they would want to involve. There are also specific questions to ask when the family say they have nobody (see appendix three) to help them think about the people in their lives that may be able to help them.

There are also a range of tools that you can use to help the family identify who is in their network including Family Safety Circles, designed by Susie Essex. These can be adapted to any context (appendix four).

The Family Network Meeting

One of the ways of involving friends and family is a network meeting; otherwise referred to as a **'Friends and Family' meeting**.

A key part of the early help graduated approach, a network meeting can prevent the need for an early help assessment.

The lead worker arranges a network meeting in a planned way. Ideally this is 'in person'. The venue for the meeting is likely to depend on the role of the lead worker and as such may be in a school, children centre, community setting or a family home.

Family network meetings can include family, friends, neighbours or people in the community who are important to the family e.g. a football coach or brownies team leader. There is no rule about how many people attend; it is led by the family and who they want in their lives to help them. It is important to create time and space within this meeting for the family to explore solutions, making their own decisions to create a plan that works best for them. Workers are expected to step away from the space for a short while to enable this to happen unless the family want them to stay present.

As a guide the following agenda (see appendix five) is suggested:

- 1) Meeting purpose and ground rules (appendix six)
- 2) Friends and Family make a plan together to address the worries and difficulties
- 3) Discuss and agree the plan and a plan B – in case of an emergency
- 4) Next Steps

Recording

Remember the plan belongs to the family. The lead worker is the facilitator. Whilst there is no standard template an example workers may wish to use can be found in the appendix (appendix seven). Store the plan on your organisation's systems in line with your organisation's recording policy.

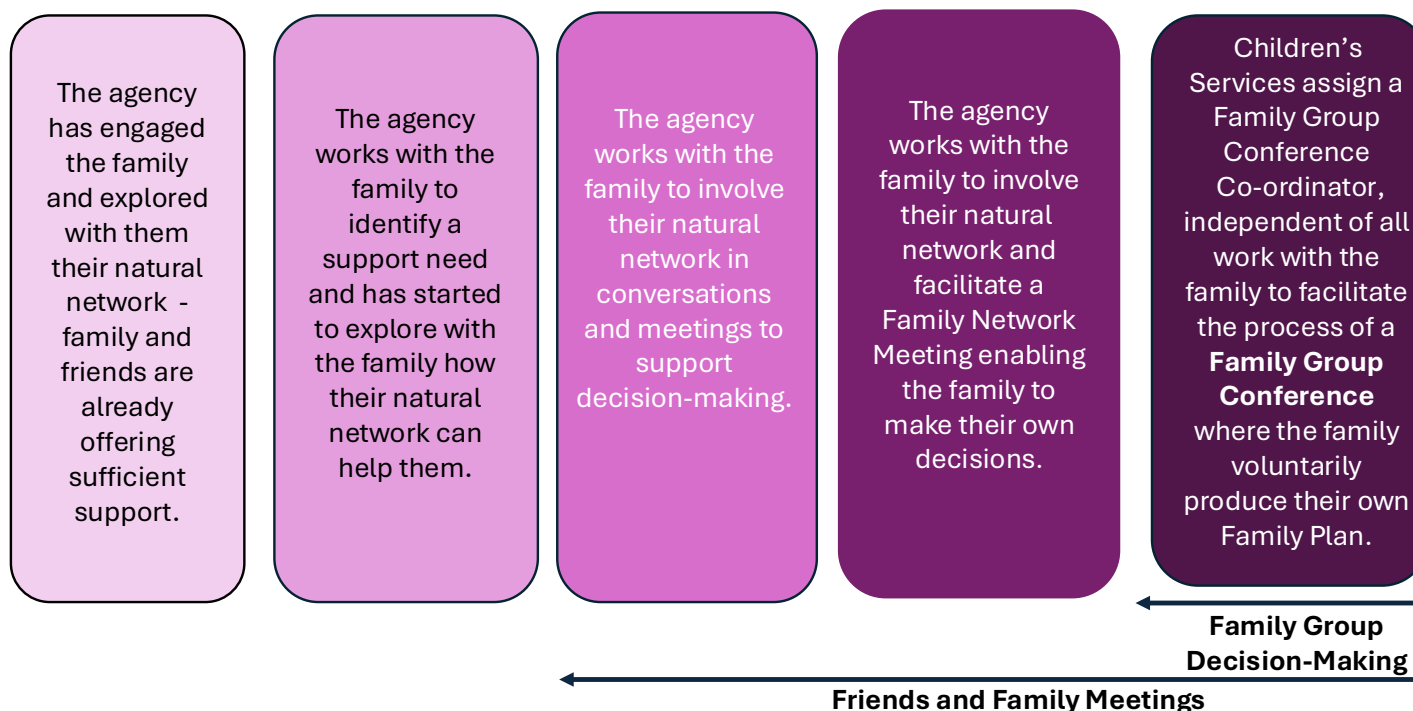
Further Guidance and Support

For further support and guidance about any aspect of involving family networks and arranging Family Network Meetings please contact City of York Council's earlyhelpconsultants@york.gov.uk

See also frequently asked questions (appendix eight).

APPENDIX 1

A Continuum of Family-Group Decision-Making



Please access the image here: [https://i.postimg.cc/KjRk30Dy/image-\(4\).png](https://i.postimg.cc/KjRk30Dy/image-(4).png)

APPENDIX 2 Examples of involving the family's network or holding a 'friends and family meeting' meeting

"In almost **every parent meeting**, I **explore the wider family network and how these identified people help** and on occasions they have also attended further meetings. The first Family Network Meeting meant we did not have to initiate an Early Help Assessment Plan and by using the approach we have not had to initiate any Early Help Assessment Plans for 9 months."

Designated Safeguarding Lead

"A **young person's aunt identified** that he liked to grow plants. As part of the plan to encourage regular attendance the school arranged for the young person to bring his plants in to school and to care for them there. This has resulted in regular attendance from the young person".

Designated Safeguarding Lead

"It's so helpful when **patients bring a friend or family member to their appointment**, as a lot of information can often be discussed. They can be such a support, allowing the patient to listen, reminding them to ask certain questions and writing down answers and helping to ..."

GP

"The Family's Plan has been working well for the past 6 months. We have just **had a blip** in the road with it, but it has all been **sorted now** and the family are back to being on board with each other...they had been asked to attend a meeting in school and when they all came in they were all very much **together in their approach**. So refreshing to see."

Pastoral Lead

"working with a young Mum who was feeling really isolated, we **drew a family tree together** that included everyone she had in her life and from there we worked together on who she could reach out to for **support to access local groups**"

Health Visitor

"Following on from an initial conversation with the young person and their network around attendance the young person was in school every day since the conversation with no need for any escalation from school."

Designated Safeguarding Lead

Please access the image here: [https://i.postimg.cc/2ys6br5M/image-\(5\).png](https://i.postimg.cc/2ys6br5M/image-(5).png)

APPENDIX 3 Questions to ask to help identify who is in the family's network

- *Who is someone in your life that you would tell exciting/good news to?*
- *Who would you call to come to your children's birthday party?*
- *Who would you call first today if you had wonderful news? News that you were the most excited you have ever been.*
- *Who do you call on a bad day? Who do you call on a good day?*
- *Who is the person you trust the most to take care of your children, no matter what?*
- *How many contacts do you have on your phone? Who could we call right now to come over?*
- *Who did you send a text message (phone call) to first today?*
- *Who is the one person you wish were with you to support you right now?*
- *Who has been there for you when you had troubles in the past?*
- *Who have you relied on when things got crazy in life? What were the most important things they did for you?*
- *Who knows about what's happening about this/that situation?*

Turnell. A. and Brandt. S. (2019) 'Past, Present and Future',
Questions to Assist in Finding Networks (Extract)

It is not uncommon to hear that parents or children say **they don't have anyone in their network**. Sometimes, parents may feel reluctant to involve people from their network. It is important to approach parents through a trauma-informed lens with compassion and appreciate how difficult it might be for them to share their worries about their struggles and the real or potential impact this is having on their children. Questions to those who say they don't have anyone include:

- *Okay so you don't have anyone to talk to help you with your life and raising the kids does it make any sense to you that we would want people alongside you and the kids?*
- *If you did have people to support you with your kids what would you want them to do?*
- *What would be most helpful for you?*
- *What would be most helpful for your kids about having some people to support you?*
- *Who (or what sort of person) would your kids say they would want you to get to help you raise them?*
- *Have you heard that expression 'it takes a village to raise a child'? On a scale of 0 to 10 where ten is I completely agree that that is right and 0 is that's just bull**** where would you rate that saying?*

Turnell. A. and Brandt. S. (2019)
'Ideas and questions for people who say they don't have anyone',
Questions to Assist in Finding Networks

APPENDIX 4 Family Safety Circle templates

Access image here: [https://i.postimg.cc/RZVFWsC5/image-\(6\).png](https://i.postimg.cc/RZVFWsC5/image-(6).png)

Family Safety Circles® Tool

Susie Essex created the family safety circles as a visual tool to think through in detail with the family, people parents can involve in a naturally occurring safety network. They are designed to be adapted to be used with a family in any context i.e. when there are worries about well-being (early help) or concerns about safety (child protection).



APPENDIX 5 Friends and Family Meeting Agenda

1) Purpose of the meeting (*led by the worker facilitating the meeting*):

Welcomes everyone

Discuss and agree ground rules (see below)

Confirms the difficulties and worries for the children

Supports everyone to identify the strengths and skills available in your network of family and friends

Confirms who is going to take notes and write up the plan

2) Making a plan together to address the worries and difficulties (*led by the family and friends*):

Who will do what?

How will they do it?

How often will they do it?

Where will they do it?

When will they start to do it?

3) Discuss and agree the plan and a plan B – in case of an emergency (*family and friends with the worker*)

What if... what will we do ...?

Our emergency actions if the main plan doesn't work for some reason or something unplanned happens for the child.

4) Next steps (*family and friends with the worker*)

-

Everyone will have a copy of the plan made

Agree a date for a follow-up family meeting to see how things are going

If new difficulties emerge, hold another family meeting as soon as possible and update the family plan

APPENDIX 6 - Ground rules (example) for Our Friends and Family Meeting

We will

- ✓ Keep focused on the children and what they need us to do in the future to help them be safe/well and happy
- ✓ Turn off all phones [except an emergency phone]
- ✓ Take turns to speak and be helped to do this by the person leading the meeting
- ✓ Respect each other's views, even if we don't agree with them
- ✓ Take a break if someone gets upset
- ✓
- ✓
- ✓

We won't

- × Shout at each other
- × Use swear words or insult anyone
- × Keep talking about old history or upsets
- ×
- ×
- ×

These are some ideas for ground rules, you can decide what rules are important for your family meeting and change these as fits for your family network

APPENDIX 7 Family Plan template (example only)

Our Family Plan – Who is going to do what to help move things forward?			
What do you want to see happening	Who will help with this?	What will they do?	By When?

APPENDIX 8 Frequently Asked Questions

I don't know who all these people are; what if they are unsafe? You won't know who is safe and able to offer a meaningful commitment to the child until you involve them. The likelihood is that families are far more aware of people who could present a risk than workers and will not agree plans that could place the child in any danger.

Am I doing this already? Yes, in some services this already happens. We need to make sure the inclusion of the family's network and/or holding network meetings is a consistent approach across our partnership in York.

Can family network meetings have an informal approach? Yes, absolutely. We will all need to think about the timing of meetings, venues, and refreshments to ensure the meetings are child, young person and family friendly. If a child is attending the meeting, this will need to be carefully planned so they are not overwhelmed, perhaps by arranging for the child to attend just part of it.

Must the family have time on their own to come up with a plan? Yes. The network meeting is a part of York's Family Group Decision-Making approach and therefore creating space for the family to have a discussion without the input of professionals empowers the family to create their own solutions and fosters ownership of the plan. It provides independent time for open, honest, and sometimes difficult conversations to address worries, strengthening family autonomy and collaboration. Ensuring families are offered this opportunity is key and can be as simple as stepping outside of a room for a short period whilst the family talk through what's happening and what they could do.

What will happen if the Family Network Meeting doesn't work out? E.g. the family network member did not attend? The network, including the workers, will need to understand why a person didn't turn up. Sometimes parents and other important people in the child's life have their own vulnerabilities that need additional support. The meeting facilitator and network members will need to agree how they will explore this in the best interests of the child. It is important that issues of commitment are not confused with genuine

difficulties around timing/transport etc. Offering opportunities to share feedback about the meeting is also very helpful to ensure that everyone feels comfortable to attend.

How does the family network meeting fit with the Early Help Assessment and Plan? A Family Network Meeting is a crucial, family-led, and strength-based forum that brings together a supportive network of relatives, friends and community members. When used as a first step to address worries when they emerge, it can prevent the need for an early help assessment and plan being progressed, reducing or mitigating reliance on professionals. If support needs start to escalate, deeming an early help assessment appropriate, a family network meeting can take place alongside or be integral to Early Help Team Around the Family meetings. Any actions from the family network meeting are incorporated within the Early Help Plan so there is one single unified plan for the family.



