

Practice Briefing

Cross-border solutions for Family Group Decision-Making (England and Wales)

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Introduction

[The Children's Social Care National Framework](#) and [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026](#) both highlight the expectation for family networks to be engaged and empowered from an early point in a referral. The voices of family networks should be prioritised using family group decision-making meetings (FGDM), wherever possible, and children's services should consider offering these from the earliest point and throughout a child's journey.

A family network is defined in Working Together to Safeguard Children as a group of people close to a child made up of relatives and non-related connected people (where connected people has the same definition used in the [Care Planning, Placement and Case Review \(England\) Regulations 2010](#) in addition to close family friends who have a connection with the child). A family network could include step-parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, godparents, or close family friends.

Working Together to Safeguard Children and [Championing Kinship Care: National Kinship Care Strategy](#) define family group decision-making as an umbrella term for family-led decision-making, where a family network has all the resources, adequate preparation, relevant information, a safe and appropriate environment, and private family time to make a plan to respond to concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing. This includes offering practical support to parents, whilst prioritising the wellbeing of the child. These meetings help to ensure a family network is empowered throughout the decision-making process of a child's journey through social care.

Successful family group decision-making also includes having a facilitator or co-ordinator. We use the term facilitator throughout this briefing for ease of reference. Family group decision-making can take different forms, including Family Group Conferences, though the Department for Education does not prescribe a specific model. [The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026](#) made it mandatory for all local authorities to offer a FGDM to family members unless it is not in the child's best interests to do so. The FGDM process is a part of wider social care reforms, and can be used alongside family network support packages:

[Families First Partnership programme | Department for Education](#)



There is currently no dataset in England and Wales that enables comprehensive disaggregated analysis of children who are looked after, or on the edge of care, for whom the possibility of placement with family members across borders has been, or could be, explored. Evidence from Freedom of Information requests suggests that this is a UK-wide issue. Cross-border exploration may occur less frequently than it could, and awareness of the relevant services and processes that can support this area of practice is inconsistent.

[Statistics for children looked after in England](#)

CFAB (2022) *Freedom of Information Request Report: Overseas placements for Looked After Children in the UK*. Available at: <https://www.cfab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/FOI-analysis-2023-Final.pdf>

This practice briefing demonstrates how facilitators and social workers can involve overseas family members in the FGDM process. It is not intended as a general factsheet on FGDM, nor does it provide detailed guidance on its delivery. Practitioners are encouraged to refer to publications from the Department for Education, Foundations and Family Rights Group for further guidance on good practice.

The DfE commissioned Mutual Ventures to create 'Family Group Decision-Making – a best practice guide' published in March 2026. This can be found by signing into the Knowledge Hub and joining the Families First Partnership Group. It contains many useful resources for the implementation of child-centred, culturally sensitive and safe FGDM processes, including a tool for cultural mapping.

Key messages

This practice briefing is intended for FGDM facilitators and children's social workers. Its main aim is to ensure that family and friends living overseas are considered when deciding who to invite to a meeting, and are subsequently supported to attend.

It incorporates messages from the Coram/Foundations research that has emerged on Family Group Conferences:

[Coram review supports understanding of families experiences of being offered a family group conference](#)

The social worker will gain the family's consent to the meeting, explaining its purpose, and as part of the preparation for the meeting, the family and the children's social worker will ideally work together to identify who to invite. The facilitator will check the family's understanding of the meeting's purpose and build on identification of key people, ensuring all are invited, including those living abroad.

The research includes the need for the FGDM facilitator to have the time to build relationships with family members and to prepare for the meeting. It identifies a significant gap in knowing why some marginalised families do or do not take up the offer of a FGDM. We hope that this practice briefing also therefore encourages social workers and facilitators to persist with their efforts to engage with and support different families to participate.

[What is a Family Group Conference: How do Family Group Conferences Work?](#)

Regulations and statutory guidance for England:

- [Care Planning, Placement and Case Review \(England\) Regulations 2010](#)
- [Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations 2011](#)
- [Working Together to Safeguard Children \(DfE statutory guidance 2026\)](#).
- [Children's Social Care National Framework \(DfE statutory guidance 2023\)](#).
- [Kinship Care \(DfE statutory guidance for local authorities 2024\)](#).
- Section 1 of the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026](#) introduces a requirement for FGDM in many cases before care proceedings are issued, and does not appear to contemplate any new regulations in relation to FGDM. The section defines 'FGDM' and 'family network'.

Children's rights and cross-border practice

[Children and Families Act 2014](#) reinforces the importance of family relationships, while still prioritising the child's safety and welfare.

[Human Rights Act 1998 \(Article 8 of the ECHR\)](#) guarantees the right to respect for private and family life.

[Department for Education, Child Protection: Working with Foreign Authorities.](#)

[Hague Convention 1996](#), acting through national Central Authorities, aims to improve the protection of children in international situations, reinforce the importance of international co-operation practices for the protection of children and avoid conflicts between legal systems.

Top tips for including family abroad in FGDM

Early identification

- To consistently and proactively check whether there are any family or friends living abroad who may wish to participate in FGDM.
- To explore family trees (genograms or chronologies) and mapping tools to identify all key family members, including those living overseas.
- Consideration should be given to the cultural norms that may facilitate or hinder inclusion of family members, such as gender roles or loss of privacy/face, stigmas around asking for help, or generational divides accentuated by conflicting values of different countries. The referrer should provide some of this information to the facilitator.
- Family may be hesitant to share personal details with family members overseas. Social workers and facilitators should use their skills to identify where support is needed, who can provide that support, and to clarify that the exclusion of family overseas may diminish their suitability to care for the child in the future if needed.
- Seek the views of children on their links with family and friends overseas, as well as how they would like them to be included. Identifying an appropriate advocate for children who wish to attend the FGDM process or provide a written contribution will help keep the child's needs central to the process.

Initial engagement

- Reach out to overseas family members as early as possible, as connectivity/ time zones/ need for interpreters may delay engagement.
- Ideally, the invited family members and child should be consulted about whether to have a facilitator who is a cultural and linguistic match where available, acknowledging that some families prefer a facilitator from a different heritage due to concerns regarding confidentiality. In any case, the facilitator should be experienced in navigating various cultural backgrounds.
- If interpreters are used, consider the dialect required and be mindful of gender, age, and any cultural nuances. Use the same interpreter through preparation and meetings. Where possible, use interpreters based within the UK to avoid sharing personal data across international borders.

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- Communicate clearly about FGDM: explain the purpose, process, and how they can participate remotely. Translated materials should use plain English, avoiding jargon where possible. A verbal discussion with overseas families should also be offered, as literacy may be a barrier and they are likely to have questions. Preparation time with the interpreter will be needed so they are fully able to explain the concept of FGDM to the overseas family, where this process may be completely new.
 - Use culturally appropriate and sensitive approaches, considering time zones, languages and accessibility needs. Overseas families may need support in accessing internet or video-conferencing tools. In some countries, reliable internet may only be available in public internet cafes, although most people can now access video conferencing on their mobile phone and should be encouraged to do so where possible.

Preparation stage

- Provide overseas relatives with preparatory support just as local participants receive - through calls, video meetings, written materials, and interpreters if needed.
- Consider whether it will be helpful to appoint a local co-ordinator to maintain regular contact and build trust across distances. Local support agencies, such as International Social Service, may be helpful.
- Ensure the use of multiple lenses, including clinical, medical, social, and cultural when examining values, practices and priorities within families. This includes housing, education, healthcare practices, and family support networks.

Planning the meeting

- Arrange flexible meeting times that accommodate different time zones. Be mindful that working hours vary in different countries due to weather conditions (heat), travel or cultural norms.
- Offer remote participation options: video calls (e.g. Zoom, Teams), phone-ins, or recorded messages and written contributions if live participation is not possible. WhatsApp is often used across a variety of countries.
- Make sure all participants have the necessary technology support.
- Family members overseas may wish to travel to attend FGDM meetings. This is an opportunity to observe the strength of the relationships within the family.
- Ensure the family is supported to have private family time.



During the family meeting

- Ensure overseas members have a voice during the meeting – whether they attend live or contribute beforehand. Many may be willing to travel to the family to assist with care if they understand what is required.
- Assign someone in the meeting to represent any family members unable to join in real time.

Follow-up and support

- After the meeting, update all overseas family members promptly.
- Include them in ongoing plans, reviews, and follow-ups via regular, accessible communication.
- Ensure that the child's key worker, lead professional or social worker also has contact details for social services in the country of the overseas family member in case mapping of further support services is needed. Organisations such as Children and Families Across Borders, International Social Service and CoramBAAF Outbound Permanence Service can help.

Examples of situations which may trigger cross-border exploration

- A child is at risk of becoming looked after and accommodated, and the social worker or facilitator becomes aware that the family overseas may be able to offer support to the parents and child, either by staying in the UK for a period of time or by temporarily supporting the child overseas whilst parents receive required support.
- A child is at risk of becoming looked after and accommodated, and the social worker or facilitator becomes aware that parents have connections overseas who cannot provide immediate, practical support for the family but who can provide cultural insight and consistency of contact with the child in the future (Life Long Links).



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- A child is at risk of becoming looked after and accommodated, and the social worker or facilitator becomes aware that an option may be for the UK-based family to return to a country of origin where wider family support is available. The role of the facilitator will complement separate checks and assessments being undertaken by the local authority social worker to inform whether relocating to be closer to extended family members would be the right solution.
 - A local authority is made aware that a child in a permanent alternative care arrangement has overseas kin or potentially significant kinship connections who might contribute to the child's development, understanding, cultural and family identity, and potentially contribute to the resilience, support and stability of ongoing care in the UK.

Case study: family group meeting supporting cross-border placement

Context

A local authority in the UK facilitated a FGDM process to support planning for a baby girl whose family had origins in Southern Africa. Some family members lived in the UK while others remained overseas. The primary language spoken was Shona, although a few family members also spoke English. For consistency and inclusivity, Shona was used as the main language throughout the process, with interpreters engaged from start to finish — even for English-speaking relatives — to ensure cultural nuance and clarity.

Family circumstances

The child's mother had a learning disability and a history of significant trauma, including sexual violence, which led to uncertainty around paternity. It was later confirmed that the child's father was based in the family's country of origin. Due to concerns around the mother's capacity, legal proceedings were initiated. While the father received a negative assessment (conducted via videocall) from a UK-based social worker, a further assessment by a qualified, local practitioner indicated that he could provide suitable care.

Key challenges and professional reflections

Although the local authority supported reunification with the father overseas, the court raised concerns about the adequacy of the local assessment. The baby's guardian also questioned the plan. The father felt that his cultural context and support network had not been fully represented. As a result, the court ordered a more culturally informed process, leading to the convening of a FGDM meeting.

The local authority arranged for the father to travel to the UK for further assessment and to participate fully in the FGDM process. This proved to be a pivotal moment. Social workers acknowledged their unconscious biases - such as prioritising Western standards of housing and education - and recognised the need to understand the family's cultural framework more deeply.

Some key insights that emerged through the FGDM process included:

- The father's extended family and support network had been overlooked in earlier assessments.
- Local cultural values, such as shared caregiving and the role of family elders, had not been properly understood.
- There were incorrect assumptions about working hours, financial resources, and access to digital communication in the overseas context.
- The UK team had not anticipated practical barriers like the cost of mobile data and the use of internet cafés for remote participation.

The role of technology and communication

WhatsApp was used extensively for communication, proving to be the most effective platform. The family also created a visual map showing where each family member lived, detailing proximity to schools, healthcare and transport. Photos of the home environment were shared, and relatives openly acknowledged the challenges of raising a child in their local context - while offering concrete plans to overcome them.

Cultural interpretation and safeguarding

The family's view of the mother's strengths, such as her contributions to household tasks, initially raised concerns with UK professionals about potential exploitation. However, during the FGDM process, the family explained how these roles were shared and culturally normative, helping professionals understand these responsibilities differently.

Outcome

The FGDM process created space for honest dialogue, mutual understanding, and a culturally sensitive exploration of parenting capacity and extended family involvement. It provided the depth of knowledge and context that the formal assessments alone had not captured, whilst being clear about the distinct role of the facilitator versus the role of the local authority and courts. Ultimately, the meeting strengthened the local authority's recommendation and informed the court's decision on the child's placement, ensuring that the process respected both safeguarding standards and cultural integrity.



How Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB) can help

Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB) plays a pivotal role in supporting links to families overseas during permanency planning for children. As the UK member of the International Social Service (ISS) network, CFAB collaborates with partners in over 130 countries to facilitate safe and appropriate contact with families overseas. We offer the following services:

[Children and Families Across Borders. Vision, Mission and Values. CFAB | What We Do](#)

[International Social Service \(ISS\) \(2023\) Definition and Principles of Equity in Permanency. Equity in Permanency](#)

How CoramBAAF can help

[CoramBAAF](#) is the UK's leading membership organisation for professionals dedicated to improving outcomes for children and young people in care. Our corporate members in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland represent 94% of all local authorities as well as regional adoption agencies, health and social care trusts, independent fostering providers and voluntary adoption agencies, and cover 88% of all children and family social workers.

CoramBAAF Outbound Permanence Service and Advice Line

The [Outbound Permanence Service](#) provides specialist advice by email, supported by legal research, country-specific written guidance, and individual consultations where necessary, to local authority social workers and lawyers considering the placement of children in care proceedings with overseas family and friends on all legal orders. The service also delivers regular training and events. Members have access to Country Guides, practice notes and blogs regarding overseas placements.

CoramBAAF members' [Advice Line](#) offers telephone and email advice, prioritising speed and quality of service. It covers queries about all aspects of adoption, fostering, kinship, and related areas in the UK/Channel Islands. It is busy and highly popular with professionals, primarily social workers, who use the service.

References

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