

Protocol for a randomised controlled trial of Family Group Conferencing at pre-proceedings stage

Intervention developer	Daybreak and 24 local authorities in England
Delivery organisations	<p>24 local authorities in England: Bath and North East Somerset, Birmingham, Blackpool, Bromley, Derbyshire, Knowsley, Lancashire, Lambeth, Leicestershire, Lewisham, Merton, Middlesbrough, North East Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottingham City, Plymouth, Redcar and Cleveland, Rotherham, Salford, Sheffield, Shropshire, Southampton, Staffordshire, Sunderland</p> <p>Family Group Conferencing providers: Daybreak, the 24 local authorities listed above, other providers</p>
Evaluator	Coram
Principal investigator	Dr Sarah Taylor, Head of Impact and Evaluation, Coram
Protocol author(s)	Dr Sarah Taylor (Coram), Claire Harding (Coram), Olivia Michelmore (Coram), Professor Richard Dorsett (University of Westminster), Hannah Lawrence (Coram), Kevin Yong (Coram)
Type of trial	Non-blinded parallel trial with rolling 1:1 randomisation of families to two arms, plus a process evaluation
Age or status of participants	Families with children of any age who enter pre-proceedings
Number of participating local authorities	24
Number of children and families	Expected final analytical sample size: 6,000 children in 3,300 families
Primary outcome(s)	Care status: point-in-time legal status at 12 months after date on pre-proceedings letter: in care (looked-after child) or not in care (all other statuses).
Secondary outcome(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Perceived inclusiveness of how local authority worked with parent(s), at around 8 weeks post randomisation 2. Sustainment of outcome: whether child's living arrangement remains the same or changes, between court judgement (or equivalent) and a date six months later 3. Time spent in care: number of days between date on pre-proceedings letter and date 12 months later spent as a looked-after child or not. 4. Court diversion: likelihood that court proceedings are issued, by a date 12 months after the pre-proceedings letter. <p>We will also report results for 2., 3. and 4. at six, 12 and 18 months.</p>
Contextual factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authority's existing provision of FGC, if any, and level of buy-in to the FGC approach • Family court propensity to request families take part in FGCs

Table of contents

Table of contents.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Acronyms.....	3
Background and problem statement.....	3
Intervention and theory of change.....	7
Impact evaluation.....	12
Research questions.....	12
Design.....	12
Randomisation.....	14
Participants.....	16
Exclusion criteria.....	17
Sample size / Minimum Detectable Effect Size calculations.....	18
Robustness checks.....	27
Procedure for dealing with missing data and outliers.....	27
Cost evaluation.....	30
Funding.....	31
Ethics & participation.....	31
Ethics risks.....	32
Ethical mitigations.....	33
Registration.....	37
Data protection.....	37
Adherence to legislation and policy.....	37
Source data.....	38
Access to data.....	38
Personnel.....	39
Timeline.....	41
Annexes.....	42
Annex 1: Local authorities in the sample.....	42
Annex 2: Data fields we will request from local authorities.....	46
Annex 3: Information sheet for those with parental responsibility.....	53
More information sheet to be supplied on request.....	54
References.....	56
Annex: table to record any protocol deviations.....	59

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Acronyms

CAU	Care-as-usual
CPP	Child protection plan
DfE	Department for Education
FGC	Family Group Conference/Conferencing
LA	Local authority
LAC	Looked-after child
RCT	Randomised controlled trial
WWCSC	What Works for Children's Social Care

Background and problem statement

This protocol describes a planned evaluation of a type of decision making used in children's social care in England and internationally.

Randomised control trials (RCTs) of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) have been carried out internationally, in the United States (Hollinshead et al., 2017; Cosner Berzin et al., 2008) and the Netherlands (Dijkstra et al., 2019). These have found a lack of impact of FGC relative to usual care on child outcomes including referrals, re-referrals, out-of-home placements, reports of child abuse and neglect, removal from the home, time to permanency, and placement stability.

However, the model of FGC used in each country and each trial is somewhat different. A previous evaluation of FGC at pre-proceedings in England showed promising results but used less robust methods (Munro et al., 2017). Previous evaluations have not been able to establish causality, due to the lack of a robust comparison group.

Background on the project

The Department for Education (DfE)'s *Children's Social Care Innovation Programme* (2014-2020) funded projects with promising emerging evidence of impact, including FGC. DfE's *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice* programme aims to help safely keep children with their parents, by seeking to work with local authorities to adopt and adapt FGC and two other projects (Family Drug and Alcohol Courts, and the Mockingbird model of foster care).

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) is overseeing the evaluations of the projects.

Daybreak, a charity specialising in the provision of FGC, will provide support to ensure effective delivery and implementation of the new models. This will entail: providing briefing, training and materials to local authority staff; help with implementation, including ongoing advice and consultancy, including some on-site support; on-site audit of delivery and process

at 3-6 months and 12-15 months into implementation; meeting regularly with local authorities in order to identify, discuss and resolve implementation and data collection issues; and facilitating regional learning events, to enable the sharing of experience and good practice, and problem solving.

What is a Family Group Conference?

Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are **meetings led by family members to plan and make decisions for a child who is at risk** (Family Rights Group, n.d). Family group conferences can also be used for adults who are at risk.

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) coordinators convene a meeting with family members to plan and make decisions for a child or children. They explain the process and seek to motivate people to attend. As well as the immediate family, others may also attend, including extended family, friends, neighbours, advocates, carers, interpreters and professionals. During the conference, a plan to keep the children safe is agreed by all involved. This may or may not be adopted by social workers as the plan for the child or children.

What are the principles and philosophical underpinnings of FGCs?

FGCs are a **rights-based, strengths-based** approach that bring family members together where there are concerns about the child. A principle of FGCs is that families are asked to help develop their own solutions (Mitchell, Tisdall and Riddell, 2018). The DfE statutory guidance describes FGCs as a **voluntary** process. Marcynyszyn et al.'s (2012) study of FGCs for American native families in South Dakota describes FGC's (FGDM) as a **family engagement** process. One of the underlying philosophies of the FGC approach is that families are the experts on their own situation and should be actively involved in and **share decision-making** about children in the family, drawing upon their existing strengths and resources. It is **solution-focussed** in that families develop solutions to the problems that they face, being supported to do so by an independent FGC co-ordinator (Rogers and Parkinson, 2018).

What are the alternative names given to FGCs?

FGCs can also be called:

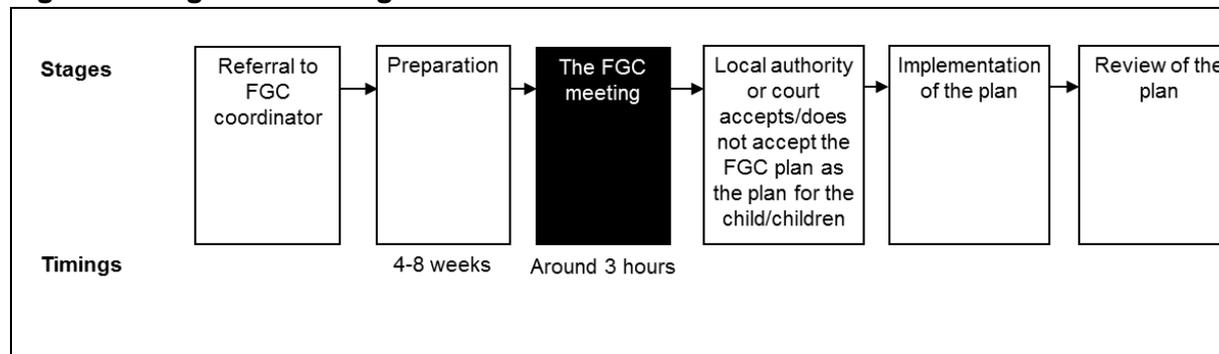
- Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)
 - Family Unit Meeting (FUM)
 - Family Decision Meeting (FDM)
 - Team Decision Making Meeting (TDM)
 - Family Team Meeting (FTM)
- (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018; Dijkstra, 2019).

In some cases these are different names for the same model of decision making, and in some cases these refer to similar but different models. Some may be used to refer to more agency-driven engagement practices (such as TDM or FTM) than FGCs, which are sometimes characterised from other practice by the involvement of an independent facilitator (Marcynyszyn et al., 2012).

What stages and timings are involved in FGCs?

There are five stages of a FGC: the **referral, preparation, the conference, implementation of the plan and review of the plan** (Family Rights Group, n.d). The preparation stage usually takes four to eight weeks (Family Rights Group, n.d, Early Intervention Foundation, 2018). We have summarised the process (Figure 1).

Figure 1: stages and timings of FGCs



What are the origins of FGCs?

FGCs originated in New Zealand. FGCs draw upon Māori culture and their development was a response to the large number of Māori children removed into state institutions.

FGC's origins as a child-centred and family-driven model are rooted in the traditional precepts and practices of many cultures where families share responsibility for community children and work collaboratively to solve problems.

How widely are FGCs used? Where have they been used, and in what contexts?

FGCs are reported to be used in over 20 countries¹ (Family Rights Group, n.d). There is a legal requirement in countries such as Ireland, the Netherlands and New Zealand that all families in youth care are offered the opportunity to make their own family group plan, for example through an FGC (Dijkstra et al., 2019).

FGCs are mainly used in child welfare, such preventative services, safeguarding work and court proceedings. Recently some local authorities have developed the FGC model for use in adult social care (Family Rights Group, n.d), and they have been used with long-term unemployed adults in Norway (Hillebregt et al., 2018).

How are FGCs used in England and Wales?

In England and Wales, **three quarters of local authorities** are reported to run or commission family group conferences for children in their area or be planning to do so (Family Rights Group, n.d). However, only a small minority of councils routinely offer families a FGC before a young child is taken into care (Family Rights Group, n.d). The FGC model

¹ The Family Rights Group lists the following countries as using FGCs (mostly in child welfare): Austria, Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, South Africa, the USA, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

has been used for children experiencing domestic violence and abuse (Parkinson and Rogers, 2018) and in harmful sexual behaviour cases (Anderson and Parkinson, 2018).

What is the evidence base for FGCs?

The evidence base on FGCs in England is developing but promising. An evaluation by the Thomas Coram Research Institute (Munro et al., 2017) found promising findings on outcomes for FGCs used at pre-proceedings stage in two local authorities in England, Wiltshire County Council and the London Borough of Southwark. However, it did not have a robust comparison group. It found that, three to 12 months after FGCs, 75% of children were living with a parent (n=83, 60%) or a relative (n= 22, 16%). For children where no FGC took place, 61% lived with parents (n=22, 50%) or relatives (n=5, 11%). During the study timeframe of 2015-16, proceedings were initiated in 29% of FGC cases, and 50% of non-FGC cases.

The **DfE Social Care Innovation Programme** round 1 included projects which used FGCs. One of these was the Leeds Family Valued programme, which oversaw the expansion of FGCs to more families, including those affected by domestic violence and with a new offer for child protection. The programme evaluation (Mason et al., 2017) found that families who participated in a FGC felt more involved in the process and their values had been respected (100% of families interviewed, n=54). Nearly all also felt their FGC had helped address their problems and felt the services offered were appropriate to their needs (99% and 91% respectively).

The evaluation of Daybreak's FGCs under DfE's *Social Care Innovation Programme* also recorded that court proceedings were initiated in 29% of FGC cases compared to 50% of cases where no FGC was used (Sebba et al., 2017). The Leeds Family Valued and North East Lincolnshire's Creating Strong Communities programme evaluation also reported reductions in court proceedings in response to FGCs (Sebba et al., 2017).

Previous randomised controlled trials of FGCs

There are few examples of RCTs of children's social care programmes or interventions in England, and none cover FGCs (Baginsky et al., 2017b). Nurmatov et al. (2020) carried out a systematic review of studies comparing family group meetings to control group services. They found studies of provision in the USA, Netherlands and Sweden, as well as Munro et al. (2017) and Mason et al. (2017) covering England. They concluded that the evidence base was of poor quality, with few robust comparison groups. Nurmatov et al. found no RCTs on shared family decision making meetings that identified a reduction of entry or re-entry to care, referrals or re-referrals for maltreatment, or increased satisfaction, empowerment or reunification with families, compared to control services. Thus, they concluded that, overall, evidence of effectiveness was weak.

As such we are in a position of equipoise, holding no prior view on whether FGCs at pre-proceedings stage have an impact on child outcomes or not.

Addressing recommendations made in previous research

The key way in which this trial addresses recommendations made in the literature is by including random assignment to a comparison group.

Recommendations for future practice/evaluation from the Early Intervention Foundation's case study of the London Borough of Camden's use of FGCs included:

- Use a measure designed to show change over time, such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale
- Longer-term assessment of FGCs to understand more about their effect and whether any outcomes are sustained
- Testing of how effective volunteer FGC coordinators are in comparison to professionals
- Use of a comparison group or counterfactual to measure impact on families (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018)

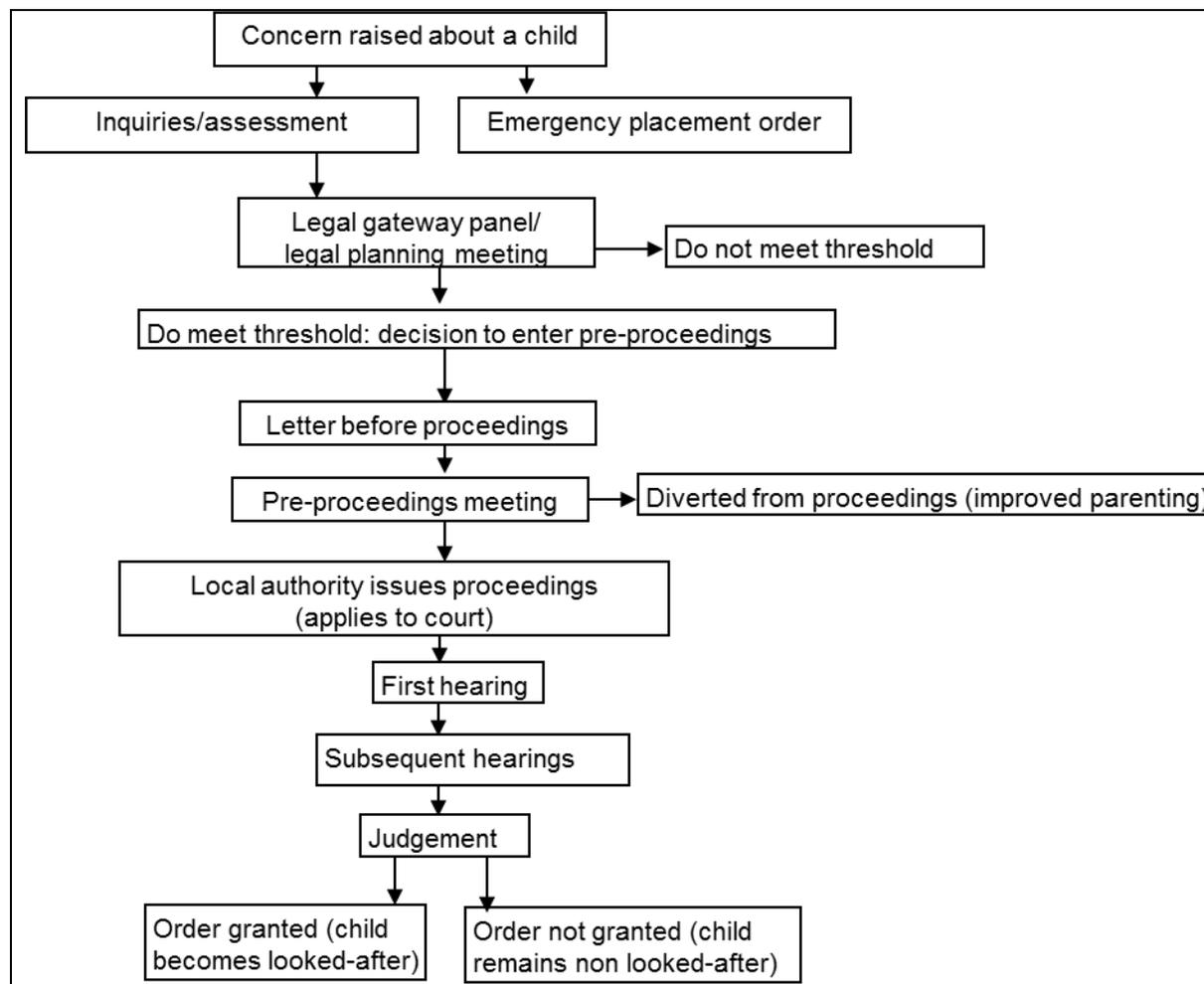
The DfE *Children's Social Care Innovation Programme* included an evaluation of all the funded programmes between 2015 and 2016. This final evaluation report included recommendations that children's service providers should use "a systematic, family-focused, strengths-based approach that supports families and young people to take more responsibility for their own lives" (Sebba et al., 2017). For the round 2 evaluations it also recommended that the evaluation designs should include comparison groups, including RCTs (Ibid).

Intervention and theory of change

Pre-proceedings stage (care-as-usual)

A child is already known to the local authority at pre-proceedings stage, but the birth or adoptive parents (usually, but sometimes other family members), rather than the local authority, have parental responsibility. The child may be a child in need (section 17 of the Children Act 1989), or subject to a child protection plan (section 47 of the Children Act 1989). In response to new information, or a gradually emerging picture of the (high) level of risk, a local authority uses pre-proceedings, and then care proceedings, to escalate a child's status from (usually) a child protection plan to being a looked-after child and share parental responsibility (see Figure 2). Children who become looked-after in emergency situations bypass the pre-proceedings stage.

Figure 2: simplified process from concerns being raised about a child, to court ruling



The pre-proceedings stage begins when a local authority's Legal Gateway Panel or Legal Planning Meeting concludes that the local authority should issue a pre-proceedings letter to the parent(s), or adults with parental responsibility, of a child or children. The letter states that the local authority will seek to take the child(ren) into care, by seeking a Care Order from a court², if the parent(s) (or others) do not take specific actions. Pre-proceedings letters can be issued antenatally (though court proceedings themselves cannot begin until birth). Pre-proceedings letters can be issued at any point until the youngest child in a family reaches the age of 17. Those with parental responsibility are invited to a meeting where, perhaps accompanied by a legal aid solicitor, the local authority reiterates its concerns. Social workers gather evidence about whether or not the child is safe at home, which is submitted to the court. The extent and nature of this information gathering varies. The pre-proceedings stage can be terminated by a local authority if the parent(s) or others make positive changes, or for other reasons, such as a family agreeing to the children being looked after by alternative carers. The pre-proceedings stage ends on the date when proceedings are issued, that is, when the

² A local authority may apply for other kinds of orders from the court instead or as well, including Supervision Orders and Special Guardianship Orders.

local authority applies to the court, or writes to the parent(s) or others to say they will not do this.

Our understanding is that, from start to finish, the pre-proceedings stage lasts around six to eight months on average, but can be longer or shorter, partly due to differences in internal policies and practices within local authorities.

The pre-proceedings stage is sometimes described as 'PLO' or Public Law Outline stage. This refers to Ministry of Justice Practice Direction 12A in the Family Law Procedural Rules first published in 2010 (Family Law Procedural Rules, 2017).

The pre-proceedings checklist includes a record of key discussions with the family (which could include a family plan arising out of a FGC) but is not required to be filed local authorities when proceedings are issued as part of the pre-proceedings checklist (Ibid). The record is only required to be disclosed by request. The Court Orders and Pre-Proceedings statutory guidance (Department of Education, 2014) states that local authorities "should consider referring a family to a family group conference service if they believe there is a possibility the child may not be able to remain with their parents, or in any event before a child becomes looked after, unless this would be a risk to the child." However, there is no requirement for a FGC. There is neither a right to a FGC, nor a responsibility on local authorities to provide FGCs.

Family Group Conferencing

The intervention being evaluated is referral by local authorities of families to FGCs, at entry into pre-proceedings stage. Local authority processes vary, within the boundaries of legal requirements, and all families are different. However, care-as-usual (CAU) during pre-proceedings involves a relatively intensive period of involvement with a family by social workers and other professionals. To this, a relatively intensive period of involvement with a FGC coordinator will be added, though the FGC meeting itself is a short, one-off intervention at around three hours in length.

A typical meeting takes place in a neutral location (not the family home or local authority) (Family Rights Group, n.d; Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

The model of intervention is made up of a combination of work by the charity Daybreak, and work by the 24 local authorities. Daybreak, a provider of FGCs, will provide support to the local authorities in the sample to ensure effective delivery and implementation. The FGCs may be:

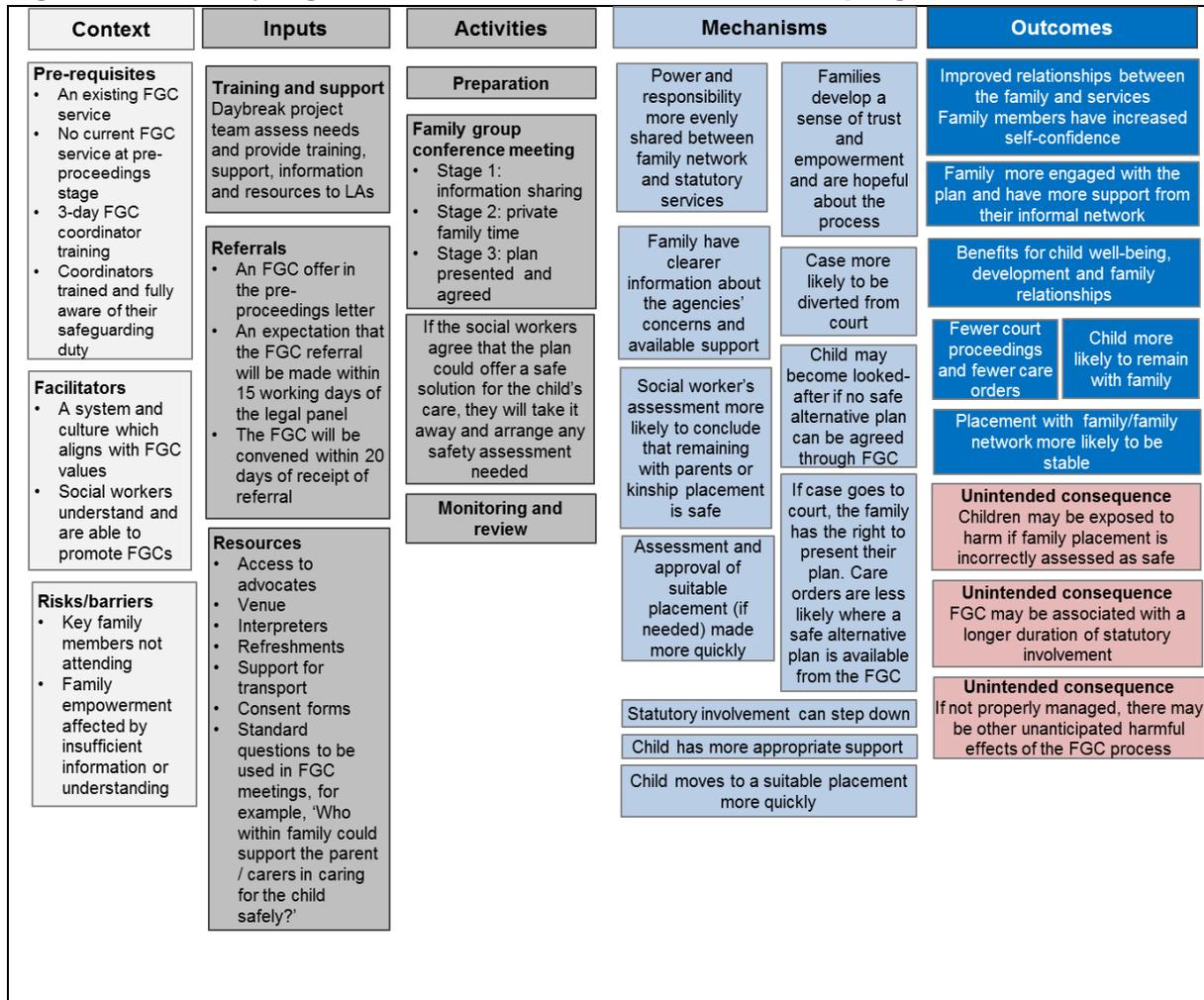
- provided in-house by the local authority (children's services team or other in-house provision),
- provided by Daybreak, or
- provided by another independent FGC provider.

We will request data from local authorities on this.

Description of the model of FGC used in this programme

The model of FGC in this programme is similar to that used in other local authorities and offered by other providers. A full logic model, setting out the inputs, activities and outcomes expected of the model of intervention in this programme, is available, and published separately. It was developed by Daybreak with help from WWCS and Coram. A summary is shown below (Figure 3).

Figure 3: summary logic model of the model of FGCs in this programme



Both FGC coordinators and managers must have received baseline FGC training, including attendance at training on the use of FGC at pre-proceedings stage, provided directly by Daybreak.

The coordinators are responsible for recording all referrals and details of any activity linked to the referral. The coordinator contacts the relevant people and organises the FGC meeting.

In advance of the FGC meeting, the coordinator meets the main carer to obtain consent, and all participants receive written information about the process. The family members and professionals involved are fully briefed in advance, either face to face or by telephone. The participation of children (of any age) is sought, where appropriate.

Coordinators assist the family members to attend the meeting and seek to ensure that any access requirements are met.

At the FGC meeting, the coordinator chairs the meeting, though not the private family time which forms part of the agenda. The coordinator ensures families are aware of what needs to be discussed and helps ensure any questions or concerns are answered (where possible) so that they can put together a plan. The coordinators are responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of participants throughout the process.

Following the FGC meeting, a review meeting is arranged (if required) and coordinators circulate the family plan to meeting attendees. A review FGC would not be necessary, for example, if both the family and local authority agree that the plan made in the FGC meeting is going well.

After pre-proceedings stage

Proceedings begin when a local authority issues proceedings by applying to a court. The government aims that court proceedings should last no longer than six months from the date of the care order application. Published Ministry of Justice family court data for England and Wales shows it took 33 weeks on average to dispose of a care or supervision case in April to June 2019 (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

Other treatments and interventions

It is possible that families who participate in the trial will also take part in the evaluation of Family Drug and Alcohol Courts, which is part of the same *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice* programme. Three local authorities – Birmingham, Bromley and Merton – are taking part in both evaluations. Also part of the programme is an evaluation of the Mockingbird model of foster care, in which three other local authorities in our sample are also participating: Sheffield, Shropshire and Staffordshire. Our process evaluation will investigate this possibility.

Other programmes and interventions families may experience include Family Network Meetings (mentioned as being part of current practice by four local authorities in programme application forms). We will use process evaluation interviews to investigate this possibility. Family Network Meetings are when family members get involved in the decision-making about how to keep children safe and develop the plans for this (Baginsky et al., 2017a). These tend to be social worker led, in contrast to FGCs.

Impact evaluation

Research questions

The primary evaluation question relates to **care status**: does referring families for Family Group Conferencing at pre-proceedings stage, relative to care-as-usual, change the likelihood that children in 24 local authorities in England are in care (looked after), 12 months after the pre-proceedings letter, and if so, by how much?

There are four secondary questions. These are shown below.

Does referring families for Family Group Conferencing at pre-proceedings stage relative to care-as-usual when used in 24 local authorities in England...

- **Perceived inclusiveness**: ...change the mean perceived inclusiveness of how the local authority worked with the parent(s) in planning their child or children's care, as assessed by parents on a 4-point scale, around eight weeks after randomisation.
- **Sustainment of outcome**: ...change the likelihood that a child's living arrangement remains the same or changes, between the date of a court judgement (or date of the letter informing families that their local authority will not pursue court proceedings) and a date six, 12 or 18 months later?
- **Time spent in care**: ...change the amount of time children spend as looked after (versus time spent not looked after), in the six, 12 or 18 months after the pre-proceedings letter?
- **Court diversion**: ...increase or decrease the likelihood that court proceedings go ahead (the percent of children for whom they go ahead), by a date six, 12 or 18 months after the pre-proceedings letter?

Other than 'perceived inclusiveness', for each question we will report results at six, 12 and 18 months, but the headline results will be at 12 months. By 12 months we can expect cases that do enter proceedings to have done so, making this the appropriate time period over which to look at whether court proceedings go ahead. Other outcomes can depend on court rulings and so a later choice of time point or period is appropriate. It is hoped that longer term, richer follow up not covered by this protocol may be possible in future. Additional research questions, relating to implementation, fidelity, and process, will be covered by separate protocols.

Design

The trial will compare care-as-usual to care-as-usual plus referral for an FGC. The local authorities in the sample have in common the fact that they do not currently routinely offer FGC during pre-proceedings, whereas other local authorities in England may do so. So references in this document to 'care-as-usual' should be read as referring to care-as-usual in the local authorities in the sample.

Local authorities will identify families on a rolling basis and Coram will provide instructions for how local authorities can access an online randomisation platform in order to obtain randomisation assignments as and when needed. All families who start pre-proceedings are eligible for the trial, and assignment to intervention and control groups will be 1:1. Local authorities will begin referrals for FGCs for treatment group families from April 2020. All these referrals will end in September 2021, and the final round of data collection will cover October to December 2021. This means that data on fewer families will be available for some of the analyses (for example, more will be available for outcomes at six months than

for outcomes at 18 months). It also means that the final cohort of families included in the main results will have been sent a pre-proceedings letter in September 2021.

Trial type and number of arms		Parallel non-blinded trial with two arms: 1:1 randomisation to care-as-usual or care-as-usual plus referral for an FGC
Unit of randomisation		The family
Stratification variables (if applicable)		Local authority
Primary outcome – care status	variable	Point-in-time legal status taken from local authority records at 12 months after date on pre-proceedings letter
	measure (instrument, scale)	Dichotomised into: 'in care' (looked-after child) or 'not in care' (all other statuses).
Secondary outcome – perceived inclusiveness	variable(s)	Assessment by parents of their perceived level of inclusion in planning their child or children's care, on a 4 point scale. In two parent families where both respond, we will calculate the mean score, so there are 7 possible answers per child.
	measure(s) (instrument, scale)	Responses to the following text message, sent by Coram to those with parental responsibility, for whom local authorities hold mobile phone numbers, and who do not contact Coram to request they are not sent a text message, at around 8 weeks after randomisation: hi, we're Coram. You may remember our information sheet on our study about how local councils work with families. How involved have you been in planning your child(ren)'s care in the last two months? Please reply: 1: not at all 2: slightly 3: very 4: completely. We will send you a reminder in a week unless you reply STOP. Thank you.
Secondary outcome – sustainment of outcome	variable(s)	Living arrangements at two time points, taken from local authority records. Possible living arrangements are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent(s) including adoptive parent(s) • Relative(s) • Family friend(s) • Independent or semi-independent living • Foster carer(s) (unrelated, and not a family friend) • Children's home • Prospective adopter(s)
	measure(s) (instrument, scale)	Whether child's living arrangement, on two dates six, 12 or 18 months apart (three separate variables), is the same, or is different, taken from local authority records. The first date is the date of the court judgement, or in the case of families who do not go to court, the date of the letter

		informing families that their local authority will not pursue court proceeding. The second date is the date six months after this.
Secondary outcome – time spent in care	variable(s)	Number of days between date on pre-proceedings letter and a date six, 12 or 18 months later (three separate variables) spent 'in care' (as a looked-after child), taken from local authority records
	measure(s) (instrument, scale)	For each child a variable will be created to indicate the number of days in the period, between zero and 365 days, spent as a looked-after child
Secondary outcome – court diversion	variable(s)	Whether court proceedings are issued or not, by a date six, 12 or 18 months after the pre-proceedings letter (three separate variables), taken from local authority records
	measure(s) (instrument, scale)	Date proceedings issued, or date of the letter informing families that their local authority will not pursue court proceeding, or confirmation from the local authority that proceedings have not (yet) been issued

Data – summary

We will collect data directly from parents on perceived inclusiveness, by texting the mobile phone numbers of parents, where local authorities hold this information, and where parents do not contact Coram to request that we do not text message them. These texts will be sent on weekdays during the daytime at around 8 weeks post randomisation. They will be followed by reminder texts one week later, for those who do not reply to request that we do not do this, or to provide a substantive response. We will offer entry into a monthly prize draw for responding.

We will collect data from local authority systems on child legal status, living arrangement, family characteristics, FGC participation, and other fields (see Annex 2). Once every six months, Coram will request completed data returns, in a standard template, from each local authority, relating to the previous six month period just finished, containing one row per child (the child is the unit of analysis). We will handle the data in line with legislation, guidance and Coram policies and procedures, to ensure it is secure, that participants' privacy is safeguarded, and that the data is deleted at the end of the project, defined as 12 months after publication of the main findings.

Randomisation

Randomisation will be on a rolling basis with 1:1 assignment of each family to either the intervention or the control group within each local authority. We will use a permuted block design to ensure that randomisation outcomes are more difficult to guess, with blocks of different sizes, so that the treatment and control groups are equally sized in each local authority as well as overall. The randomisation platform will be independent of Coram.

While we intend that randomisation will be 1:1, we may revisit this ratio if uptake of FGCs is much lower than anticipated. If this happens, Coram, in discussion with WWCS, will consider revising the proportion of families that are referred for an FGC, if resources allow. Local authorities have agreed to 2,649 FGC referrals.

Point in time at which randomisation takes place

Local authorities decide to pursue legal proceedings at a Legal Gateway Panel. This is the point in time at which randomisation will take place. At this point, the decision is known only to the local authority. The family becomes aware of the local authority's decision to apply for a care order when the pre-proceedings letter is delivered (by hand, or received in the post) which may be a few days or a week later. There may be one letter or two, in the case of two-parent families, but for simplicity we refer to the letter as singular in this document.³ As our information sheet will be sent in the same envelope, families will simultaneously become aware of this evaluation. A copy of the information sheet that local authorities will send to families can be found at the end of this document.

The appropriate start date for data collection is the date from which FGCs could start to influence family attitudes and behaviours. For members of the intervention group, the pre-proceedings letter will include information about FGC, and so this is the appropriate date from which to measure outcomes.

Randomisation and consent

This design brings the risk that consent refusal is higher for one or other group, due to families in the intervention group conflating participation in an FGC with participation in the evaluation. We will report on the rate at which each group objects to their data being processed for the evaluation.

It would be better to allow families the opportunity to opt out of participation in the evaluation before rather than after randomisation. This would lessen the risk that knowing which group a family has been assigned to differentially affects opt-out rates. However, we consider it more important that families receive their pre-proceedings letter at the same time as information on FGCs, so that they can, if they wish, seek legal aid advice on their participation in an FGC.

We will instruct local authorities to request randomisation assignments (intervention or control) immediately after the Legal Gateway Panel, by accessing a website.

Contingency procedures in the event of failure of the randomisation procedures

We will advise local authorities who cannot access the website, having tried on more than one device, to contact Coram. We will provide a randomisation outcome from the platform, or (if we also experience technical problems) a randomisation outcome taken from a back-up list held securely in Coram's project folder and accessible only by members of the evaluation project team.

Blinding

As is typical of trials in the field of social policy, the trial will be unblinded. Social workers, other professionals, the courts and the evaluators will all know or be able to find out which families have been referred for FGCs and which have not. Families themselves will know whether or not they have been referred for an FGC. As such, there is a risk that perceptions of FGCs will affect the outcome, rather than the impact of FGCs themselves. This will be especially pronounced for proximate outcomes like whether court proceedings go ahead. That is, the decision to abandon pre-proceedings, or issue proceedings, depends on social

³ A family will be randomised once in the trial, regardless of the number of letters.

workers' views of whether families have done enough to change. They may consider that families who have taken part in a FGC have done more than families who have not, whether or not the FGC causes any changes in the behaviour or attitudes of families.

Participants

Local authorities in the sample will identify participants from their records. For more information on recruitment of local authorities themselves, see section on 'Local authorities in the sample'.

Trial participants

The trial participants will be all families with a child or children in the selected 24 local authorities in England who are issued with a 'letter before proceedings' by their local authority between April 2020 and September 2021 alerting the parent(s), or those with parental responsibility for the child or children, to the local authority's intention to start care proceedings, if there is not significant change in the child(ren)'s situation. We estimate the trial to consist of approximately 3,300 families: this is the total of an estimated 1,650 in the intervention group, assigned to be referred for an FGC, and an estimated 1,650, in the control group, assigned to not be referred for an FGC.

Inclusion criteria

Our approach will be inclusive and, in line with advice from Daybreak, will not exclude particular groups of families. We will instruct local authorities to include all families who begin pre-proceedings in the trial. We will include:

- Families where one or more members do not speak English as a first language (FGC coordinators should arrange for interpreters)
- Families where a restraining order or other circumstances that mean that one or more family members cannot be present in the same meeting (FGC coordinators can arrange separate meetings)
- Families with any number of children of any age, from antenatal to the youngest child being 17 (Masson, 2017).
- Families with one or more members based abroad (FGC coordinators can arrange video conferencing)
- Families with any type of problem or circumstances leading to the local authority deciding they should enter pre-proceedings (which may include neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, domestic violence, substance misuse, a combination of these, or other issues).
- Families whose local authorities are seeking any kind or combination of court order(s), such as section 31, or interim orders.
- Families where the children are already living with relatives, friends or neighbours in a formal or informal kinship care arrangement (but the parents retain parental responsibility)
- Families where the children have any legal status other than that of looked-after child (we expect this will usually be child protection plan but can be child in need or other)
- Families whose children have been previously looked after, but the parents (or other family members) have re-gained parental responsibility (so this may not be the first time they have started pre-proceedings)
- Families who have raised a complaint against the local authority.
- Families who have previously taken part in a FGC
- Families where the parent(s) of the child or children are themselves aged under 18

- Families who are being entered into the trial by their local authority after the local authority has finished delivering the number of FGC referrals it agreed as part of the *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice* programme (i.e. unfunded cases which the local authority may decide to pay for itself)
- Families where new information comes to light after they enter pre-proceedings, meaning the local authority takes immediate action to escalate the case, and pre-proceedings are bypassed.

Exclusion criteria

All families entering pre-proceedings will be included, and none excluded. However, for clarity, the following cases will be excluded from randomisation:

- Children who are already looked after.
- Urgent or emergency cases where the local authority takes immediate action, bypassing the pre-proceedings stage. As these families do not enter pre-proceedings, they are not eligible.
- Children in families who have already entered pre-proceedings in the course of this evaluation. Families should only be randomised once.

Analysis sample

For a child to be included in our analysis, they must be in a family meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria above, but the pre-proceedings letter need not have been sent regarding the child. For example, we will request and analyse data from local authorities on new babies born into families after they enter pre-proceedings.

Sample size / Minimum Detectable Effect Size calculations

		Randomised sample	Analysed sample
MDES (Proportion of a Standard Deviation)⁴		0.09	0.095
Baseline/Endline correlations	Child	n/a: all children should be non-looked after at baseline	n/a: all children should be non-looked after at baseline
Intracluster correlations (ICCs)	Family	Unknown, assume very high: 0.9	Unknown, assume very high: 0.9
Alpha		0.05	0.05
Power		0.8	0.8
One-sided or two-sided?		Two-sided	Two-sided
Level of intervention clustering		Family	Family
Average cluster size⁵		Unknown, assume 1.79	Unknown, assume 1.79
Expected final sample size (children)	Intervention	3,300	3,000
	Control	3,300	3,000
	Total	6,600	6,000
Expected final sample size (families)	Intervention	1,850	1,650
	Control	1,850	1,650
	Total	3,700	3,300

⁴ The agreed number of FGC referrals is 2,649 so doubling this gives the assumed number of families in a best-case scenario, 5,298, and the assumed number of local authorities is 24. Allowing for delays and shortcomings in implementation, the assumed number actually randomised is 3,700 families (6,623 children), falling to an assumed 3,300 families (5,907 children, rounded to 6,000 above) after loss to follow-up and exclusions from analysis. We impose that 50% are allocated to treatment. We have also assumed an ICC of 0.9 and exclude any effect of covariates. Our code gives an MDES value of 0.09.

⁵ The assumed number of children per family is 1.79, because the ratio of households containing dependent children to children in the 2018 Annual Population Survey for England, from Nomis, was 1:1.79.

We assume that ICCs at family level are very high because of the likelihood that all siblings in a family have the same legal care status (i.e. non-looked after at baseline).

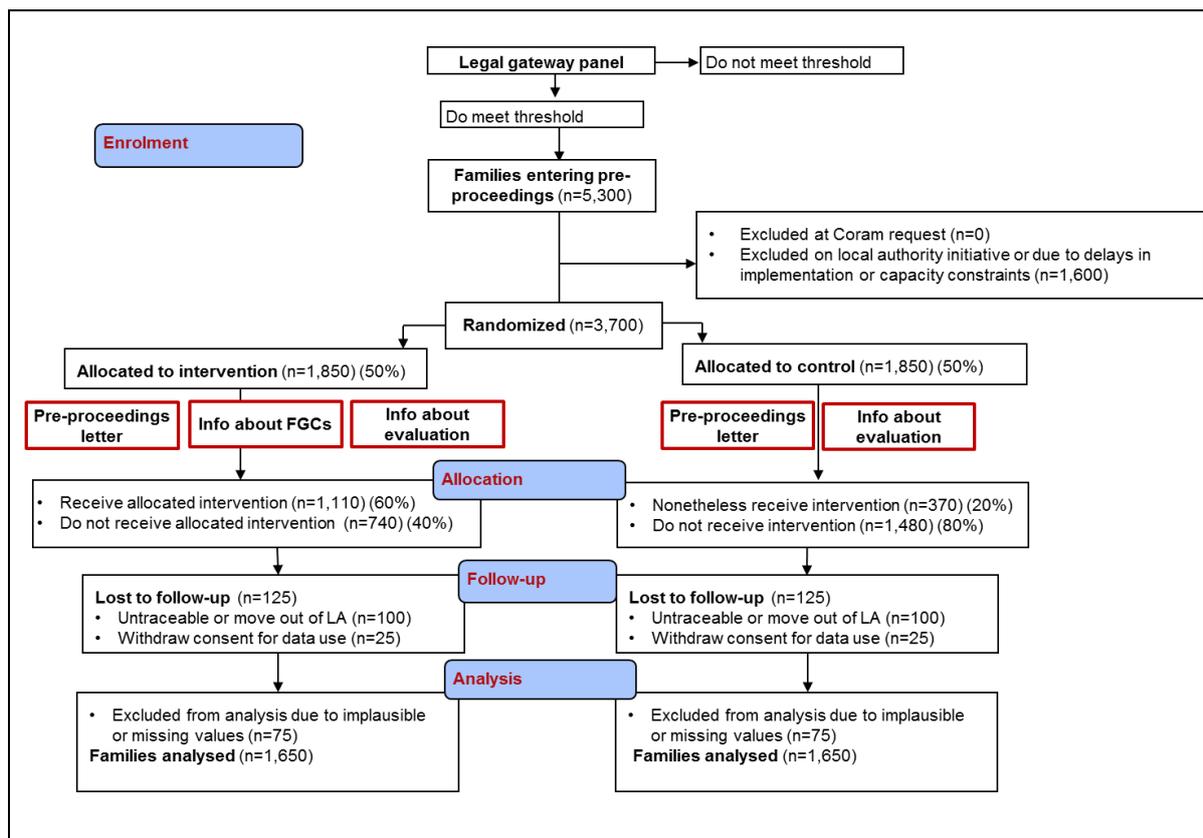
Sample size

We calculated our expected sample size based on the number of FGC referrals the local authorities in the sample have agreed to, which is based on the number of families expected to enter pre-proceedings in the 18 months. This is 5,298. We round this in the flow chart to 5,300 for simplicity.

We expect to lose sample members due to consent refusal, moving out of the local authority, death, or record keeping failures that mean data is not available for analysis of particular families. We will ask local authorities to distinguish between cases that close because families move away from cases that close because of a reduction in risk. We will use available data on families up until the point at which a case closes for either reason, but not make assumptions about later outcomes for these children, so they will not form part of the analysis of later outcomes.

Data cleaning checks may also lead to us excluding some cases from analysis, for example, cases with implausible values. It also assumes that all local authorities take part in the programme, while in fact one or more local authorities may drop out or experience delays in implementation that reduce the number of families they can contribute to the sample. Some families are also likely to get in touch with us to request that their data is not used for the evaluation – we will provide details of how to do this in an information sheet about the evaluation, which we will give to local authorities to include with pre-proceedings letters. For these reasons we expect that data will be available for analysis on 3,300 families (see Figure 4), representing around 6,000 children, assuming 1.79 children per family.

Figure 4: flow chart of expectations for randomisation, attrition and exclusions from analysis



Expectations for receipt of allocation

It is possible that we are too pessimistic in assuming that only 60% of families in the intervention group will receive a FGC, as Daybreak reports that its success rate at turning FGC referrals into completed FGCs is 85%. However, Daybreak has established processes while some of the local authorities in the sample have never attempted to carry out FGCs before, and none of the local authorities in the sample use them at pre-proceedings stage currently.

We conservatively assume that 20% of the control group do receive an FGC by the end of fieldwork. We will gather data on whether FGC meetings in fact happen or not. This could happen for a number of reasons. These include social workers undermining the protocol, courts requesting a FGC, or families changing status to a stage where FGCs are practiced (for example, a family might de-escalate to early help, where FGCs are in use in their local authority). This also accounts for the fact that the control group may receive some of the benefits of a local authority adopting FGCs, though they do not receive one themselves, due to system-level changes like staff taking a more whole-of-family approach in care-as-usual. We will take steps to mitigate the risk of contamination by encouraging local authorities to leave care-as-usual unchanged in the ‘refer for FGC’ group relative to the ‘do not refer’ group, and by explaining the evaluation (including this specific challenge) to local authorities.

Sample size for ‘perceived inclusiveness’ outcome

We expect that only a small number of parents or others will get in touch with Coram to request that we do not send them a text message. We do not know how many families have

one person with parental responsibility, or two people. We will ask local authorities for up to two mobile phone numbers per family. If a mobile number is not available, we will ask local authorities to indicate whether this is because only one person in the family has parental responsibility, or whether a person with parental responsibility has no known mobile phone number. We will report on this. We assume that the average number of adults with parental responsibility per family is 1.5, and so we expect to send around 5,500 initial text messages to 3,700 families, plus one reminder sent around a week later, in many cases. Some parents may change their mobile phone numbers in the two months after randomisation, which would depress the response rate. In case of the death of a parent or child in the two months after randomisation, we will ask local authorities to notify Coram, so that we do not send text messages to these parents.

We will include 'perceived inclusiveness' as an outcome in our analysis only if the overall response rate is 50% or higher, and there is not substantial imbalance in attrition between treatment and control conditions. The response rate denominator will not include mobile phone numbers which prove to be inaccurate or invalid. These data may be analysed if these conditions are not met but these analyses will be classed as exploratory.

Expected effect size

We expect the effect size to be small to medium. Munro et al.'s (2017) evaluation of Daybreak FGCs found a small to medium sized effect. It found that, three to 12 months after FGCs, 75% of children were living with a parent or relative, compared to 61% in cases where no FGC took place, a difference of 14 percentage points. It found that court proceedings were initiated in 29% of FGC cases, but 50% in cases where no FGC was convened, a difference of 21 percentage points. Given this evidence, and the findings of the international evidence base, it is important to maximise the sample size, within reason, to give this evaluation the best possible chance of reaching statistically significant findings, and to maximise the chance that sub-group analysis can be carried out meaningfully.

Outcome measures

Choice of outcome measure

FGCs are a time-limited process with the intention of creating a plan to support and improve a specific parental issue or a problem or issue a young person is experiencing (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018). The primary aim of FGCs can therefore be described as being about improving decision making (means) rather than aiming to improve particular outcomes (ends), but we would expect improved decision making to have a consequential impact on a range of outcomes. The choice of outcome measure for this trial is not obvious, so we considered a number of possibilities.

All possible outcome measures have shortcomings and none will allow us to conclude definitively on whether children are safer or happier. For example, it can often be the right decision, rather than an indicator of service failure, to bring a child into care (Wilkins, 2018). To take another example, it may seem that young people who are not in care and are living independently or semi-independently are enjoying a positive outcome. However, they may be living in precarious temporary accommodation such as sofa surfing.

Outcomes such as participation, well-being, or a family's network of support, require primary data collection. Although local authorities collect data from looked-after children using the

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, this does not extend to children who are not looked after.

Primary data collection risks producing little data. If we collected so little data that analysis could not be meaningfully conducted, we would have wasted the time taken by families who did take part in data collection. In Munro et al (2017) attrition rates for an online survey of parents were relatively high, to the point where the data obtained at six months post-FGC were excluded from analysis.

We therefore decided to mostly measure outcomes taken from local authority records. We also decided to attempt to gather primary data from parents, taking care to design this to maximise the chances of gaining enough data for meaningful analysis, by asking one question of parents. We selected legal status as our primary outcome, because whether a child is in care or not is important in itself, and an important influence on many other child outcomes.

Details of the selected outcome measures

Perceived inclusion

We will be asking our question on perceived inclusiveness only of parents, and not other family members or friends who may be invited to attend FGCs and play a role in care-as-usual. This is a limitation, as we might expect FGCs to alter the perceptions of this wider group.

We will also be unable to distinguish the views of parents in the intervention group on their level of inclusion in care-as-usual as opposed to their level of inclusion in the FGC they were referred for. One may be high and the other low, for example, and we will not know whether parents respond with one of these values, or provide an average.

Living arrangement

Living arrangement is defined as where a child lives. These arrangements can be thought of either as living with family, friends or independently, or as living with previously unknown people. It is not the same as legal care status. Taking the categories used in Munro et al (2017), possible living arrangements are:

- Parent(s) including adoptive parent(s)
- Relative(s)
- Family friend(s)
- Independent or semi-independent living
- Foster carer(s) (unrelated, and not a family friend)
- Children's home
- Prospective adopter(s)

Table: legal status versus living arrangement

		Legal status	
		'In care'	'Not in care'
		Looked-after child subject to a care order (including interim orders)	Child in need, child protection plan, neither
Living arrangement	Living with family, relatives, friends or independently	Unusual but possible ⁶	Most children in England
	Living with previously unknown people	Most looked-after children	Impossible (for example, a child cannot live with foster carers unless they are looked after)

We will ask local authorities for a child's 'legal status' rather than the most recent court ruling, in order to capture situations like children who are looked after under section 20. However, we will enrich our analysis by asking local authorities for the nature of the order or orders, where applicable. This will allow for analysis of, for example, Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs), as an extension to our primary outcome analysis.

FGCs might be expected to increase the likelihood of children moving to live with parents to living with other family members. However, Munro et al (2017) found no difference in SGOs (5% in the FGC group and 5% in the non-FGC group). Children may become looked after by a relative who becomes a connected person foster carer, in which case they will be counted by us as looked after. We will gather data on SGOs via our request to local authorities for the nature of the court ruling, and will report descriptive statistics on this outcome in the intervention and control groups, but we will not include this information as part of our primary outcome analysis.

For children who do not enter the care system, the local authority may not know as much about them, and so we may overestimate the amount of stability, for example by not counting moves from living with parents to living with other family members in an informal arrangement. (However, if most remain on child protection plans, or de-escalate to 'child in need' status, then the local authority should still know where the child lives.) This applies to the sustainment outcome measure only.

In many cases children will move once. This may be due to becoming looked after (though this does not guarantee that a child will move to a new home) but could be for other reasons unrelated to court and local authority decision making. At most, children may experience perhaps five or 10 moves over the course of 18 months, in the case of a child with multiple failed placements.

A move or absence of a move can be interpreted in different ways. We will not capture moves by families from one address to another, unless there is a simultaneous change in a child's legal status or living arrangement. Conversely, we may capture 'moves' for some

⁶ For example, cases where a local authority is helping birth parents without parental responsibility to care for their children, or cases where children live with foster carers to whom they are related.

children who do not physically move (change address), but whose other household members change, due to (for example) other family members gaining parental responsibility. Some moves may arise from bad luck, such as the ill-health of a carer, others might be desirable but resisted by the child and/or carers, and some can be beneficial (Masson et al., 2018).

The time period over which outcomes can be measured will depend on the amount of data available for each child, and the length of time it takes their local authority to begin FGCs at pre-proceeding stage. The minimum will be three months, and the maximum will be 21 months.

Analysis plan

The plan for the statistical analysis of the trial is described below. There is no separate statistical analysis plan document, but revisions to the plan may be made before outcome data is received if they are agreed with Professor Richard Dorsett, WWCS and Coram's ethical advisory group and details appended in the table at the end of this protocol.

Once we have gathered the data, and carried out checks and cleaning, we will carry out analysis using statistical software, publishing full records of syntax/code to enable replication.

We will carry out analysis of all participants for whom good enough quality data is available (see section on missing data for details), and who have not requested that their data not be used for the evaluation.

Primary analysis:

We will calculate descriptive statistics including the characteristics of the intervention and control groups on each variable collected, including fidelity. This will include a crosstabulation of living arrangement against legal status.

We will report full baseline characteristics of the sample, the characteristics of those lost to follow-up, and the baseline of those analysed. This will include the variable list below, plus:

- whether the local authority's FGC were externally commissioned or in-house;
- status of the FGC coordinator (for example, employee of the local authority);
- whether the FGC coordinator and manager were trained to standards set by Daybreak;
- a local area deprivation indicator (below local authority level);
- local authority Ofsted rating as of 2019; and
- local authority type (unitary, London borough, metropolitan district, or county).

To calculate our overall main result, we will use a logit model. We will report the effect in absolute terms (the percentage point difference, if any, between the intervention and control groups in the likelihood of being looked after, 12 months after the pre-proceedings letter), with confidence intervals. Our tests will be two-tailed, as FGCs may increase or decrease the likelihood of becoming looked after.

We will consider the following variables for possible inclusion in the model. We will decide whether to include them or not based on whether or not they significantly predict the primary outcome. One of these is 'time into implementation', because some local authorities are

likely to begin referrals for FGCs at pre-proceedings stage before others. We will take account of what difference, if any, this makes to outcomes, by considering whether to include a regressor for the number of months into implementation of FGCs in a local authority in which the pre-proceedings letter is sent.

- dummy variable for gender of child;
- dummy variables for ethnic group of child (White, Asian, Black, Mixed, Other, Unknown);
- dummy variables for age of child (0-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-15, 16-17);
- number of children in family;
- deprivation indicator (derived from postcode district);
- dummy variables for child's legal status on entry into pre-proceedings stage (child in need, child protection plan, or neither),
- dummy variables for time into implementation of FGCs in local authority of the date on the pre-proceedings letter (early: 1-4 months; mid: 5-9 months; established: 10 months+).

If any of the cells defined as above have fewer than 10% of cases, we will merge them with another cell. For example, if necessary we would merge the 0-3 age group with the 4-7 age group.

We will report the level of statistical uncertainty around all our estimated effect sizes. For our secondary analysis, which includes 10 comparisons (or nine depending on the response rates to the text messages overall and for the intervention and control groups) we will use Hochberg's step-up procedure to correct for the multiple comparisons. Given the difficulty in selecting appropriate outcomes to measure, we plan, conservatively, to adjust for multiple comparisons.

The length of time taken by the court to get from the application to the date of judgement is partly exogenous, due to the efficiency of the court as well as family-level characteristics. As some courts may request a FGC, which would slow down proceedings for the control group, we will report on but not adjust for the length of proceedings, from the date on which proceedings were issued, to date of judgement.

Secondary analysis

In our secondary analyses, we will follow the same model specification used for the primary outcome.

As with the primary outcome analysis, we will carry out analysis to take account of the nesting of children within families and families within local authorities. We will cluster standard errors at the level of the family, and use fixed effects for local authorities.

We will carry out logit regression (likelihood of proceedings being issued and of living arrangements being sustained) and linear probability models (days in each placement type), using the same regressors as for the primary outcome, and reporting Glass' Delta effect size.

Exploratory analysis

Non-compliance analysis

We will primarily assess fidelity through analysing qualitative and quantitative data provided to us by the London Borough of Camden, Leeds City Council and the Family Rights Group, who will be carrying out an exercise commissioned by What Works for Children's Social Care to consider the fidelity of the model.

We will also assess fidelity through our analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected from local authorities, comparing what we find to the logic model. For example, we will assess fidelity as FGCs in which the trainer is trained to Daybreak standards, and local authorities that implement FGCs to Daybreak standards. We will also consider the 'conversion rate': the proportion of referrals for FGC which lead to a FGC meeting taking place. We will also track non-compliance in the sense that we will track the number of intervention group members who do not receive a FGC, and the number of control group members who do. Local authorities may be excluded from analysis if no staff members take part in Daybreak training or if we assess that a local authority has failed to implement the model of FGCs with reasonable fidelity.

Survival analysis

There may be no difference in stability between the intervention and control groups, but changes in placement may occur sooner in one group than the other. We would expect FGCs to accelerate decision-making and planning processes, such that the decision to issue proceedings, or inform parents that the local authority will not be doing this, or any change in living arrangement, happens sooner with than without a FGC. We will test whether this is the case using survival analysis using the first of these dates (some children will change living arrangement more than once, for example). We will report Kaplan-Meier survival curves, survival times for the 25th, median (50th) and 75th percentiles, and standard errors for the intervention and control groups, and the results of a log-rank test we will carry out of whether any differences between the control and intervention group survival curves are statistically significant. Depending on which model best fits the data, we will report on the results of either an accelerated failure time model or a multivariate Cox proportional hazard model, with all covariates (discussed above) initially included, and then removed if non-significant (backward elimination).

Treatment of excluded participants

We will instruct local authorities to include all families entering pre-proceedings into the trial. However, it is possible that some local authorities may fail to include some families in the trial. We will explore the characteristics of these cases in process evaluation interviews with staff, but will not be able to analyse their data, as they will not have had an opportunity to request that their data is not used for the evaluation.

Analysis populations

Our analysis will be of all randomised participants with valid data (intention to treat), but we will also report results of the effect of treatment on the treated. We will carry out Complier Average Causal Effect Analysis.

Stopping rules

It is possible but unlikely that we may need to stop the trial early due to lack of power, or if the randomisation itself causes unacceptable levels of distress to large numbers of families. This decision would be made by Coram, in conjunction with the chair of Coram's ethical advisory group, and WWCS.

Our trial design involves regular, twice annual increases in the amount of data available for analysis. This will enable us to carry out an interim analysis of the relationship between receiving an FGC or not and our main outcomes. The exact point at which this interim analysis will become statistically meaningful will depend on the speed at which families enter pre-proceedings and local authorities implement FGCs, but we expect to carry out an interim quantitative analysis from October 2020.

If our interim analysis finds very large differences in outcomes between the intervention and control groups, we would nonetheless continue the trial. This is due to uncertainty discussed elsewhere in this document about whether particular outcomes are better or worse for children, and due to the fact that our design is based on the minimum number of cases needed for robust evidence of effectiveness (and so an interim analysis based on a smaller number of cases would not be a robust enough basis on which to take this decision).

The level of statistical significance

In line with standard practice we will adopt 0.05.

Robustness checks

We will check the robustness of our placement stability outcome measure, by checking the difference made to our results from defining stability in different ways, such as comparing zero moves to one or more moves, and one move to two or more moves.

We will check for the likelihood of moving out of area between the intervention and control groups. We do not expect FGCs to effect the likelihood of a family moving to another local authority or abroad, or of a local authority losing contact with a family, but we will check this assumption.

Procedure for dealing with missing data and outliers

We may need to generate some dates, where the exact date is missing (see Annex 2 for details).

For missing child demographic details, we will code as 'unknown' and include in the analysis.

We will calculate and report on the response rate of parents to the 'perceived inclusiveness' text messages, overall and for the intervention and control groups.

Imputation of missing data on outcomes

We will follow WWCS's statistical guidance on imputation for missing outcomes. If all child outcomes are missing at every time point (living arrangement, and whether proceedings issued) then the child will be excluded from analysis.

We expect that some data may be missing due to gaps in staffing one or more of the local authority data lead roles, meaning we do not receive one or more of the data returns. If this happens we will use multiple imputation to replace the missing values.

In cases where we are aware that data is missing because the local authority data lead, as a member of the FGC team, has less access to data on the control group than on the intervention group, then we will use null imputation.

If data are missing for both of these reasons, other reasons, or unknown reasons, we will use null imputation.

Data validation checks

We will carry out the following data validation checks:

- Checking for data completeness and any missing codes
- Checking data ranges and types and total number, length and coding of records
- Data screening for duplicates (other than multiple births), outliers, plausible values
- Checking whether data have been imported correctly into the statistical software
- Checking the plausibility of the ordering of dates (for example, FGC occurs before date of first change in legal status/living arrangement /date proceedings issued), where applicable

Exploratory analysis

We may carry out analysis of the impact of the FGC provider or of characteristics of the FGC coordinator, or recommend this as an extension to our analysis in future research. This may depend on our exploration of the data on whether FGCs are consistently carried out in-house or externally commissioned in a local authority, or whether local authorities each report a mixture of the two.

We will keep and, where appropriate, publish records (code or syntax, and study documentation) that will allow the possibility that future researchers can return to the children and follow-up their longer-term outcomes, beyond 24 months.

Contextual factors analysis

We will explore the possibility of analysing differences between family courts as a mediating influence on our outcome measures. However, as we aim for a parsimonious analytical strategy, we will aim to include this in the process evaluation rather than trial analysis.

Process evaluation

The purpose of the process evaluation will be to support the trial by providing evidence on the reason for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of FGC. In our final report on the project as a whole, we will synthesis overall findings into a mixed methods summary, but will otherwise separately report on the impact evaluation and process evaluation.

We plan a number of qualitative and quantitative methods. The key method will be 1:1 in-person semi-structured interviews of around one hour in length, though some telephone interviews may prove necessary. These interviews will be carried out with parents, other family members, young people, and local authority staff. If interviewees give permission for recording, we will record the interviews, and if not, we will take notes. We will take notes from recordings and analyse the qualitative data using qualitative analysis software, taking a thematic analysis approach.

Using unique family IDs, we will seek to link our data on families to that collected by Daybreak from local authorities on the nature of the FGCs (such as the number of attendees of different types). This will enrich our description of the nature of the intervention delivered through the programme.

Process evaluation questions

- Was the project implemented as planned?⁷
- What were the barriers and enablers to successful implementation?
- Were FGCs carried out as planned and to Daybreak standards? Why or why not?
- Were any adaptations made to the FGC model that was planned, and if so, what, why, and where?
- What, if any, changes were made to care-as-usual?
- How much impact do staff and families think what they experienced during pre-proceedings (care-as-usual or care-as-usual plus referral for FGC) had on their outcomes?

⁷ For example, we will explore the nature of the FGCs; whether review meetings are held; which professionals are attending, and other features of the model as interpreted and implemented locally.

The process evaluation will include some analysis of feedback forms gathered from family members immediately after FGC meetings.

We have assessed baseline care-as-usual using written descriptions from circa June 2019 of current practice in the local authorities in the sample, taken from their programme applications. We will follow this up by asking about current practice (for the intervention and control groups) at a later date.

As both FGC and care-as-usual are relatively intensive periods of activity where practitioners intervene in family life, we will investigate whether local authorities take any action to de-intensify work with parents who receive FGCs, in order to allow time for FGC-related activity.

Interviews with families

We will approach a small number of families as part of the process evaluation. These families will be members of the control and intervention groups, to maximise the value of the process evaluation findings.

We will monitor diversity in the sex, age and ethnic group of the children and adult family members. We will seek to interview children aged 10-17.

We will discuss accessibility requirements for interviews with local authorities, who will act as our gatekeepers for access to families. For example, they may alert us to the need for information sheets and consent forms in alternative formats or translations, which we will arrange for.

We will carry out document review and case studies of four local authorities, drawing on a range of sources of information. The plan for the process evaluation will be finalised by April 2020 following discussion with at least two local authorities, and separate ethical approval, to give due consideration to the sensitive subject matter and the fact that families will be going through a difficult time, and likely to be vulnerable. We will then append our full plan, including topic guides, to this protocol.

Cost evaluation

We will carry out a cost-benefit analysis as part of the main report on our findings in 2022. This will draw on information from several sources. In April 2021, we ask the main contacts in all 24 local authorities for costing data on their actual expenditure up to that point on FGC referrals and overheads under the *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice* programme, broken down into start-up and ongoing costs. Including start-up costs is conservative but will produce more useful evidence to commissioners to inform future decisions on whether to introduce FGCs at pre-proceedings stage. We will clean, check and combine the local authority data, querying outliers and ensuring definitions and inclusion criteria are broadly consistent, or make adjustments if not. We identify suitable public domain figures on the cost to a local authority of a year of delivering care to children with different legal statuses. We will adjust these figures for inflation to match the period April 2020 to March 2021. We identify a suitable estimate of the average time spent in different care statuses. As part of the final analysis in 2022, we use our analysis of the care statuses of children in the intervention and control groups at 12 months post pre-proceedings letter, to calculate the average additional cost avoided or incurred by a local authority of providing FGCs. We will report a

range, based on assuming that the cost or benefit lasts for one year (minimum) to assuming the cost or benefit lasts for the whole of the rest of a childhood (maximum).

Funding

The DfE's *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice* programme is a £15.1 million programme, the FGC strand is one of three. DfE is funding local authorities, Daybreak, and WWCS, the evaluation commissioner. Coram will receive funding to conduct this trial from WWCS.

Local authorities may part-fund the FGCs from their own funds, but the cost-per-unit funded is consistent across local authorities. The (full or part) payments by DfE to local authorities will be made on a grant basis. This brings a risk that local authorities fail to ring-fence the funding for FGCs and/or for the evaluation, leading to absent or poor quality data due to under-staffing of administrative or data lead posts. In mitigation, the costings worked out between the DfE and Daybreak allow for data admin costs related to the evaluation.

Ethics & participation

Ethical approval process

Following a recommendation from Coram's Research Ethics and Governance Advisory Group, Coram trustees approved the evaluation plan on 22 January 2020.

The Research Ethics and Governance Advisory Group meets twice yearly and is chaired by a Coram trustee (Dr Judith Trowell) and contains at least one service user representative, external academic advisor, and staff and other independent members. The Group reports to Coram's Children's Services Committee, which is a sub-committee of the overall Board of Trustees. Its role is to advise the Group Head of Impact & Evaluation and help decide whether or not Coram should engage with specific research projects. The Coram project team (Coram's Impact and Evaluation Team) acts as the secretariat to the group but does not take part in its decision making regarding this project. We have gained additional external input from two independent external reviewers from the Institute of Education. Their comments were considered by Coram's Research Ethics and Governance Advisory Group and by members of Coram's Children's Services Committee as part of decision making.

In addition, we will comply with any ethical clearance processes required in individual local authorities as appropriate.

Key ethical considerations

The overall ethical challenge of this evaluation is balancing the potential benefits and detriments for an individual child, with the potential benefits and detriments to future children in general.

Other key ethical considerations are:

- that families taking part are going through a difficult time in their lives and likely to be vulnerable, and
- that families may feel pressure to take part in a FGC.

Ethics risks

We risk inflicting harm on children and families who receive FGCs, if they are harmful, or depriving children and families of benefits they would have received, if FGCs are beneficial. We are in a position of equipoise with respect to the existing evidence base, meaning we do not know whether the FGCs that children will receive through the programme will be beneficial or harmful to them, or neither.

The risk of depriving families of a benefit

If FGCs are beneficial during pre-proceedings, children and families in the control group would be worse off than they otherwise be had we randomised them to the intervention group. They would not receive one or more of the benefits of FGCs that we have identified in the literature, or other unanticipated benefits, though the strength of evidence for these benefits is low. They include:

- FGCs may help **strengthen family ties and relationships** (Frost, N., Abram F., and Burgess, H, 2014)
- FGCs may be an enabling process that can provide the setting for individuals and groups to be empowered. Even if the plan is not carried through, it may have already improved individuals' and families **ability to communicate and problem-solve** (Frost, N., Abram F., and Burgess, H, 2014)
- FGCs may **help reduce the power imbalance** between statutory social work services and children and families. The process helps family members and professionals reframe unproductive attitudes towards each other (Mitchell, M., Tisdall K and Riddell, C, 2018).
- FGCs may **strengthen the relationship between families and social workers and social services** – research report by Munro *et al* (2017) showed that family members feel more supported by their social worker following an FGC and no longer felt that they 'were out to get them'.
- Through facilitated dialogue, consensus and cooperation, FGCs may **improve child protection decision-making** and outcomes for children and their families (Mitchell, M., Tisdall K and Riddell, C, 2018).

The risk of inflicting harm on families

If FGCs are harmful during pre-proceedings, children and families in the intervention group would be worse off than if we had randomised them to the control group, or not carried out the trial. They would experience one or more of the disadvantages of FGCs that we have identified in the literature, or other unanticipated harms, though the strength of evidence for these benefits is low. They include:

- **Disengagement and exclusion:** children and their families may feel disengaged and excluded, particularly if they feel that agendas and strategies to support them are driven forward solely by statutory agencies rather than together with family members (Mitchell, M., Tisdall K and Riddell, C, 2018).
- **Dominant agendas from social workers** is also mentioned in Ney, T., Stoltz, J., and Maloney, M (2011). In their study about families' experiences of FGCs, one participant thought the focus was on building a case about her wrongful parenting and did not focus on what they were doing right.
- **Power dynamics** between family members, with some family members being able to voice their opinions more than others and conflicts arising during meetings when children are present (Ney, T., Stoltz, J., and Maloney, M, 2011; Munro, E *et al*, 2017)

- **Conflict, tension and hostility:** In Munro et al.'s (2017) study of FGCs, findings suggested that family conflicts and diffusion of tension could happen during meetings with children present. One social worker interviewed explained they had been in vulnerable positions during FGCs and had to step in during family conflicts with family members verbally attacking them.
- **Confusion:** social workers highlighted that there was a need to clarify the relationship between FGCs and statutory social work processes. Families could become confused about the role and functions of different meetings (Munro, E et al., 2017).
- **Inappropriateness:** FGCs are not always appropriate for certain families. In some circumstances, family networks are small and/or relationships are too fractured for the process to yield the levels of support that would be required to protect and promote a child's welfare (Munro, E et al., 2017).
- **Worse outcomes:** in one study, FGCs increased the number and length of out-of-home placements for families with older children. FGCs also increased the number and length of out-of-home placements in minority groups (Dijkstra, S et al., 2019).

There is also a risk, for families in the control group who do not receive a FGC and whose court proceedings go ahead, that their proceedings are delayed by a judge requesting that the family undergo a FGC.

There is also a risk that families in the intervention group receive a poor quality service, due to FGCs being implemented with low fidelity by local authorities that are inexperienced in providing FGCs at pre-proceedings stage.

Ethical mitigations

We have designed a number of mitigations against these ethical risks, and take assurance from some of the features of the project and features of FGC.

Local authorities in the sample are currently not using FGCs at pre-proceeding stage

All the FGCs which will be funded through the *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice* programme will be additional FGCs that would not otherwise have happened, had the DfE funding not been granted to the local authorities. This mitigates the risk that families in the control group are deprived of a benefit.

Current practice in allocation of FGCs is non-random

We are not offering families an opportunity to consent to being randomised to either the intervention or control group. This reflects current practice for families in England at pre-proceedings stage. Presently families may or may not be offered an FGC, according to their local authority's practice, over which families have no direct say. Partly due to funding constraints, FGC provision is uneven across England. Our allocation system of randomisation – a lottery – is no worse than this, and may be a fairer basis on which to allocate the scarce resource that is an FGC.

Use of FGCs is widespread in England

The Family Rights Group reports that three quarters of local authorities are reported to run or commission family group conferences for children in their area or be planning to do so. This shows that FGCs are widely believed to be safe for families and acceptable to families.

Local authorities in the sample are volunteers

The local authorities have volunteered to take part in an evaluation, and so should be committed to ensuring that the provision of FGCs to intervention group families, and the care-as-usual for control group families, is carried out safely and ethically.

Our trial is of a model which has preliminary evidence of effectiveness

This trial follows up on the evaluation by Munro et al. (2017) of Daybreak FGCs at pre-proceedings stage in England, which found positive results, which maximises the chance that we benefit the intervention group while making no difference to the control group.

Option to request that one's data is not used for the evaluation

We will provide local authorities with an information sheet about the evaluation to include with the pre-proceedings letter. This describes how families can request that their data is not passed from their local authority to Coram for the purpose of this evaluation. Some families may be distrustful of our evaluation, as information about it comes in a local authority envelope, so we will instruct local authorities to not make any changes to our information sheet, such as replacing or removing the Coram logo.

Primary data collection from parents is light-touch and not sensitive

In Dijkstra et al. (2019) families each received €25 for participating in primary data collection, but this was more demanding than the one question we plan to ask parents. We consider that this light-touch data gathering will not take up enough of respondents' time to require a substantial financial reward or incentive, but we will offer entry into a monthly prize draw for responding. We consider that the nature of the question is not likely to cause distress or upset. We do not refer to families' circumstances or invite comment on these, which should safeguard the privacy of respondents.

Choice of pre-proceedings stage

Choosing to investigate the impact of FGCs at pre-proceedings stage allows for the safeguard of allowing families to seek advice from a legal aid solicitor. Details of how to contact a solicitor are included in the letters. Families will be able, if they wish, to discuss their participation in the evaluation with their solicitor. Families in the intervention group will be able, if they wish, to discuss their participation in an FGC with their solicitor.

Good enough care-as-usual

We will encourage local authorities not to make any changes to their care-as-usual provision for families in both the intervention and the control group during the pre-proceedings stage and afterwards. As local authorities are funded for the FGCs in this project, they will not need to redeploy staff from care-as-usual in order to provide FGCs, and so the quantity and quality of care-as-usual should not decline in the control group relative to the pre-trial situation.

FGCs are voluntary

Participation in FGC is voluntary, but Daybreak training for local authorities will encourage FGC coordinators to explain to families that courts look unfavourably upon non-participation in FGCs, as evidence of a family's commitment to keeping children at home. As such, families may feel some pressure to take part. We will assure ourselves that Daybreak written material for families (templates provided by Daybreak to local authorities) states that participation is voluntary.

Intention to treat design

We will ask local authorities to protect the integrity of the evaluation, to produce the best evidence for future decision making. This means not offering a FGC referral to any families in the control group. However, we will advise local authorities to obey the law and abide by court judgements. If, due to a request from a court or for other reasons, a family in the control group somehow receives an FGC, we will track data on their outcomes as for any other member of the control group.

Offer FGC to control group members at the end of the evaluation

At the end of fieldwork, we will provide all local authorities in the sample with a list of the families in their area in the control group. This will be based on the final, checked and cleaned child outcomes data collection template. For many of these families, a FGC may no longer be suitable, but we will suggest to local authorities that, as their final contribution to the evaluation, their social workers should consider whether or not to now offer a FGC to these families.

Time has been allowed for implementation of the new model

The names of the local authorities taking part in the programme were announced in August 2019, and referrals will begin in April 2020. This allows time to prepare for implementation and reduces the chance that families in the intervention group receive a poor quality service.

Following good practice in research and evaluation

Coram research and evaluation projects adhere to widely accepted frameworks for conducting work ethically to minimise the risk of harm to participants or wider society. These are the frameworks published by:

- the [Economic and Social Research Council](#); and
- the [Social Research Association](#).

Unanticipated risks and harms

We will gather information through the process evaluation strand and through project steering group meetings about any emerging risks and harms. If evidence emerges of serious and substantial harms being caused to families in either the control or intervention group, we will consult Coram's ethical approval board and consider ending the trial early.

Any safeguarding issues that arise (for example, during process evaluation fieldwork) will be escalated in accordance with Coram's safeguarding policy.

If abuse is suspected or disclosed in the course of delivery, Daybreak materials state that FGC coordinators should inform their manager and follow their organisations' safeguarding policies.

Compliance with Coram complaints procedure

If a family member wishes to raise a complaint with Coram, we will direct them to Coram's complaints policy and procedure: www.coram.org.uk/complaints-policy-and-procedure

Procedures are in place to reduce the risk that FGC meetings cause upset or distress

Daybreak materials for local authorities state that FGC coordinators are required to create a safety plan in advance of the FGC meeting. This aims to ensure the meeting takes place in a safe and secure setting, and also mitigate against possible situations which may cause upset or distress to family members. FGC coordinators should consult with professionals working with the family and project manager when planning this.

Conflicts of interest

The principal investigator is not aware of any conflicts of interest, actual or perceived, that could have a bearing on her impartiality. If any changes occur she will make these known to the chair of Coram's ethical advisory group. She will seek statements on conflicts of interest from all Coram staff who work on the evaluation, including an undertaking that, if the situation changes or they become aware of any actual or perceived conflict, they will inform the principal investigator immediately.

Reporting

This protocol, including the process evaluation plan which will be appended to this document, will be published on the website of WWCS and the Coram website, and registered with the Open Science Framework.

We will write up the overall results and seek to publish them in a peer-reviewed academic journal. In this, we will acknowledge the advice we have received from Professor Richard Dorsett and the reference group and the advisory group. Alongside this, working with WWCS we will produce a number of other reports and outputs, such as conference presentations, ordinary language summaries, and sub-group analysis.

In our information sheet, we will offer to share our findings, once these are available, with family members who get in touch to request this. We will also publish our findings on the Coram website. We will send a link to the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) Research Group.

We will offer to send family members and professionals who take part in the process evaluation a weblink, by email, of the results of the evaluation as a whole, once these become available.

Participant confidentiality and privacy

The study will comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018. The chances of individuals being identified due to our processing of the data relating to participants will be minimised by making use of a unique participant study number only on all study documents and any electronic database(s). We will maintain confidentiality and privacy in setting up interviews by keeping references to the evaluation generic (for example, avoiding references to the care system or children's services). All documents will be stored securely and only accessible by Coram staff. These staff will safeguard the privacy of participants' personal data.

Registration

In line with WWCS requirements we will register this trial with the OSF (Open Science Framework) and update this trial registry with outcomes at the end of the project.

Data protection

Adherence to legislation and policy

All data collection will adhere to ethical practice ensuring the confidentiality of information shared and the secure handling of data in accordance with the GDPR and Coram's Data Security Policy. Local authorities are the data controller, and Coram is the data processor, for this evaluation. The legal basis for processing the information on trial participants will be public task; that is, the processing is necessary for us to perform research in the public interest, and the task has a clear basis in law. Local authorities need to fulfil their duties in the Children Act to provide families with the information and support necessary to enable participation in decisions, and to do this, they need evidence on effectiveness. We include a plain English explanation of this legal basis in the 'More information' sheet for adult family members. We plan to collect information on the ethnic group of children, which as special category data requires an additional purpose, which is 'archiving, research and statistics' under the Data Protection Act 1998 (Article 9(j)). HM Treasury guidance (HM Treasury, 2011), requires evaluation to be carried out of the uses to which public money is put.

We will carry out the evaluation in line with Coram's privacy policy for research and evaluation, which was last updated in September 2019.

Requesting that one's data is not used for the evaluation

As in Hollinshead et al. (2017), families will be able to request that their data is not used for the evaluation. This possibility will remain until 1 January 2022. This is the date on or shortly after which we will be sending local authorities the final data collection request. Due to the trial design, with randomisation at family level, any family member's request will mean that we do not analyse data on the whole family.

We will not ask family members why they make such requests, but we will report on the reasons cited by any family members who proactively inform us of their reasons, to inform future research.

We will not analyse data on those who make these requests, to determine how their characteristics compare to others.

The only situation in which participants will not be able to withdraw their data will be where their data has already been integrated into interim results. But their data will be omitted from the final analysis.

Participants who withdraw their data will not be replaced; no action will be taken to increase the sample size to make up for the loss of participants.

Data recording and record keeping

Data will be stored only on Coram's internal network which is fully protected by appropriate firewalls and a dedicated IT support team. The data will only be accessed by the Impact & Evaluation team. We will not sell or rent the data to third parties, or use it for marketing purposes or any other purpose.

Data collected for the purposes of this evaluation will be retained for up to 12 months after the end of the project, defined as the date of publication of the main results. All files containing personal and confidential information will be deleted, but a version of the final analytical dataset will be deposited in an academic data archive.

Data protection impact assessment

We have completed a data protection impact assessment, which is available on request. We will keep this under review, and may repeat it if there is a substantial change to the nature, scope, context or purposes of our data processing.

Source data

Each local authority will have slightly different systems and data storage arrangements. FGCs are not a requirement and do not form part of annual statutory returns to central government ('SSDA903' returns, or the 'Children looked after data return'). As such, overall record keeping systems may not hold information on FGCs, and bespoke add-ons, separate systems or ad-hoc spreadsheets may be in use. This may increase the administrative burden on local authorities in providing us with data, as our template will request both data held in overall systems (such as a child's legal status) and FGC information (such as whether an FGC took place) for each child. This may require local authorities to carry out matching by unique identifier, which may introduce errors.

We anticipate that some of the data may be compiled for us by an administrator or business support officer in the FGC team. This brings the risk that data on the control group, who do not receive a FGC, is of lesser quality than data on the intervention group. We will carry out analysis of missing data, include a free-text data quality field, and use process evaluation interviews to investigate this possibility.

We will consult at least two local authorities before finalising the child outcomes data collection template, to understand more about the data and minimise the burden.

There is a risk that local authorities provide inaccurate data due to their focus on annual returns (903 returns) which cover financial years. As our collection will be twice annually, data may not have been subject to some of the usual checks.

Access to data

Coram will agree and sign memorandums of understanding, including details of data sharing arrangements, with each of the 24 local authorities. The person signing on behalf of the local authority will be of at least assistant director grade, or more senior. Signing on behalf of Coram will be the Deputy Chief Executive.

Once these memorandums are in place, access to data by Coram will be through a designated data lead contact person, suggested by the local authority. Requests will be made by email and data will be uploaded to a secure Sharepoint site, for secure data transfer.

Personnel

Delivery team:

Daybreak:

Name	Role	Responsibilities
Richard Chalmers	Chief Executive	Supervise the delivery team and keep oversight of Daybreak delivery. Assist training local authority staff; audit; remaining in touch with local authorities
Tah Tabod	Project Manager	First point of contact for all <i>Supporting Families: Investing in Practice</i> programme business. Oversee the smooth running of the <i>Supporting Families: Investing In Practice</i> FGC delivery Development, implementation and monitoring of delivery and monitoring Regular contact with all local authority FGC teams and data collectors Providing materials to local authorities Arrange audit of the process
Hannah Gohrisch	FGC Facilitator	Provide training and support to local authority FGC teams Monitor FGC data to ensure that local authorities are on track and following the agreed methodology. Develop and oversee local learning events
Anna Coad	Office Manager	Supervise/provide admin support. Arrange and book visits/ travel
Trainers	One day <i>Supporting Families: Investing In Practice</i> training delivery	Deliver one-day training to local authorities in early 2020

Local authorities:

Organisation	Name of data lead (Feb 2020)	Name of senior manager / social work lead (Feb 2020)
Bath and North East Somerset	Leigh Zywek, Mary Keaney-Knowles	Leigh Zywek, Mary Keaney-Knowles
Birmingham	Andy Couldrick	Andy Couldrick
Blackpool and Lancashire	Annette McNeil, Annie Blaney-Green, Dave Carr	Annette McNeil, Annie Blaney-Green, Dave Carr
Bromley	Wendy Pullen	Wendy Pullen
Derbyshire	Mary Lees, Karen Gurne, Linda Dale, Isobel Fleming	Mary Lees, Karen Gurne, Linda Dale, Isobel Fleming
Knowsley	John Johnson	Tracey Overs
Lambeth	Sheleena Powtoo	Sheleena Powtoo
Leicestershire	Nadine Good, Jane Richardson, Tracey	Nadine Good, Jane Richardson, Tracey

	Sharpe, Zoe Bretherton, Mala Razak, Liz Perfect	Sharpe, Zoe Bretherton, Mala Razak, Liz Perfect
Lewisham	Lucie Hayes, Harriet Jannetta	Lucie Hayes, Harriet Jannetta
Merton	Michelle Waldron	Michelle Waldron
Middlesbrough and Redcar + Cleveland	Diane Sewell-Blythe, Sue Butcher Catherine Prest	Diane Sewell-Blythe, Sue Butcher Catherine Prest
North East Lincolnshire	Deborah Burres, Donna Burns, Matthew Clayton	Deborah Burres, Donna Burns, Matthew Clayton
Northamptonshire	Paul Shanley	Paul Shanley
Nottingham City	Carole Rooth	Tajinder Madahar
Plymouth	Martine Aquilina, Matthew Fulton, Annette Moss, Tracy Green	Martine Aquilina, Matthew Fulton, Annette Moss, Tracy Green
Rotherham	Susan Claydon, Liz Smith	Susan Claydon, Liz Smith
Salford	Carolyn Hamer	Stephen Canning
Sheffield	Helen Sweaton, Karen Harrison, Carly Speechley, Simon Jones, Matthew Oates	Helen Sweaton, Karen Harrison, Carly Speechley, Simon Jones, Matthew Oates
Shropshire	John Foster	Sasha Bellis
Southampton	Lesley Weekes, Katrina Ploumaris, Russell Turner	Lesley Weekes, Katrina Ploumaris, Russell Turner
Staffordshire	Mandy Thomas, Katherine Pardy- McLaughlin	Mandy Thomas, Katherine Pardy- McLaughlin
Sunderland	Keeley Brickle	Karen Davison

Responsibilities of data lead: gathering, checking and providing data to Coram; flagging any data quality concerns or queries

Responsibilities of senior manager / social work lead: ensuring compliance with protocol among social workers and other professionals

Evaluation project team:

Coram:

Name	Role	Responsibilities
Dr Sarah Taylor	Group Head of Impact and Evaluation	Principal investigator
Renuka Jeyarajah-Dent	Deputy Chief Executive	The Impact & Evaluation team and Coram governance procedures are in the portfolio of Renuka Jeyarajah-Dent.
Olivia Michelmore	Senior Research and Evaluation Officer, Impact & Evaluation Team	Lead on data collection and analysis

Emma Borjes	Research Assistant, Impact & Evaluation Team	Monitor data collection, arrange interviews and escalate if obstacles emerge
Kevin Yong	Managing Director, Coram-i	Advice on data collection
Claire Harding	Acting Head of Coram Family and Childcare	Advice on methodology

Timeline

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/leading
September 2019 to March 2020	Preparation and planning, including communications with local authorities.	Coram
2020		
April 2020	FGCs will begin in each local authority from April 2020, once Daybreak has trained local authority staff in the use of FGCs to Daybreak standards and at pre-proceedings stage, and provided materials to local authorities.	Daybreak
2021-2022	Stay in touch with the aim of ensuring consistency and high standards of professionalism in local authorities' provision of FGCs.	Daybreak
On/around 1 Oct 2020	Coram's first data collection request to local authorities, covering the period Apr to Sep 2020	Coram
From Dec 2020	Interim quantitative analysis	Coram
2021		
On/around 1 Apr 2021	Coram's second data collection request to local authorities, covering the period Oct 2020 to Mar 2021	Coram
September 2021	Final referrals for FGCs will take place in September 2021	Daybreak
On/around 1 Oct 2021	Coram's third data collection request to local authorities, covering the period Apr to Sep 2021	Coram
2022		
On/around 1 Jan 2022	Coram's fourth and final data collection request to local authorities, covering the period Jan to Mar 2021	Coram
Jan-March 2022	Analysis and report writing	Coram
April 2022-	Publication and dissemination	Coram and WWCS

Annexes

Annex 1: Local authorities in the sample

As the sample is made up of volunteers, it cannot be considered representative of local authorities in England (it will lack external validity). However, Daybreak and WWCS selected the 24 from 40 applicants with a view to maximising representativeness.

We carried out analysis of publically available data, to assess the extent to which the sample is typical or unusual of English local authorities.

Our analysis finds that the local authorities in our sample cover around 18% of all children in England; and 20% of looked-after children (2017-18 data).

Care Order applications per 10,000 population in 2017-18 are somewhat higher (at 16.6) in the sample local authorities than the overall average. The overall local authority average for England is 12.2.

The average number of referrals was 5,243 in 2017-18 for the 24 local authorities in the sample, which compares to 4,139 for the other 128 local authorities in England.

The local authorities contain a good mix of regions (covering all regions except the east of England) and of types, and cover a wide range of sizes. When considering size in terms of the number of children who became looked-after in the year to March 2018 (most of whom will have gone through pre-proceedings), the smallest is Bath and North East Somerset at 70, and the largest is Lancashire at 764.

When considering size in terms of the number of children living in the area in mid 2018 (the maximum number at risk of entering pre-proceedings), the smallest is Redcar and Cleveland at around 28,000, and the largest is Birmingham at around 290,000.

The average placement stability, measured by the Children's Commissioner as the percent of looked-after children with no changes in placement over 24 months, as of 2017-18, was 53% for all local authorities, and also 53% for those in this sample.

The average proportion of children living in income-deprived households is higher among the sample LAs than all English LAs (21% compared to 18%). This is based on average scores published in the indices of deprivation.⁸ In the sample, Middlesbrough, Blackpool and Knowsley have the highest proportions of children living in income deprived households (33%, 31%, and 30% respectively).

Representativeness is likely to fall if one or more local authorities drop out or experience delays in implementing FGCs.

⁸ Specifically, the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index. Ministry of Housing and Local Government (2019) The English Indices of Deprivation 2019. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019 [accessed 23 October 2019]
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Local authorities in the sample

Local authority	Region	Type	Mid-year population estimate, under 18s, 2018 (ONS)	Ofsted	Number of children who became looked after, 2018	Current practice (~June 2019, from programme application form)	Placement stability (Children's Commissioner 2017-18) (LAC with 0 changes over 24m)
Bath and North East Somerset	South West	Unitary	35,946	Good (2017)	70	Sporadic	48%
Birmingham	West Mids	Metropolitan district	288,388	Requires improvement (2019)	750	Embedded	52%
Blackpool	North West	Unitary	28,904	Inadequate (2019)	210	No FGCs	46%
Bromley	Outer London	London borough	75,055	Good (2019)	161	Sporadic	46%
Derbyshire	East Mids	County	153,272	Good (2014)	338	No FGCs	62%
Knowsley	North West	Metropolitan district	33,477	Requires improvement (2017)	85	No FGCs	49%
Lancashire	North West	County	249,727	Requires improvement (2018)	764	Sporadic	54%
Lambeth	Inner London	London borough	62,629	Requires improvement (2018)	198	Sporadic	58%
Leicestershire	East Mids	County	140,307	Requires improvement (2017)	218	No FGCs	52%
Lewisham	Inner London	London borough	68,458	Requires improvement (2019)	239	No FGCs	59%
Merton	Outer London	London borough	47,266	Good (2017)	86	Embedded	54%
Middlesbrough	North East	Unitary	32,513	Requires improvement (2016)	162	New	58%
North East Lincolnshire	Yorks & Humber	Unitary	34,503	Good (2017)	160	Embedded	53%
Northamptonshire	East Mids	County	170,235	Inadequate (2019)	494	No FGCs	50%
Nottingham City	East Mids	Unitary	68,651	Requires improvement (2019)	212	No FGCs	58%
Plymouth	South West	Unitary	52,552	Requires improvement (2019)	213	Embedded	47%
Redcar and Cleveland	North East	Unitary	27,626	Requires improvement (2017)	123	New	49%
Rotherham	Yorks & Humber	Metropolitan district	57,196	Good (2018)	321	New	45%
Salford	North West	Metropolitan district	56,566	Good (2018)	214	Embedded	56%
Sheffield	Yorks & Humber	Metropolitan district	117,497	Good (2019)	289	Embedded	53%
Shropshire	West Mids	Unitary	59,839	Good (2017)	135	Embedded	59%

Southampton	South East	Unitary	50,832	Requires improvement (2014)	178	Embedded	54%
Staffordshire	West Mids	County	169,603	Good (2019)	433	Embedded	57%
Sunderland	North East	Metropolitan district	54,563	Inadequate (2018)	357	Embedded	51%
Total			2,135,605		6,410		53%

Key to 'current practice' in around June 2019:

- 'Sporadic': FGCs sporadic/uneven/not routinely offered (4 local authorities)
- 'New': FGC service is newly established (3 local authorities)
- 'Embedded': FGC service is well-established (but not at pre-proceedings stage) (10)
- 'No FGCs': No FGC service is offered at all (7 local authorities)
 - Of which, no details are provided on what families receive instead:
 - Blackpool, Derbyshire, Lewisham
 - Of which, Family Network Meetings are offered in place of FGCs:
 - Knowsley, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Nottingham

Map of locations of local authorities in the sample



Ofsted ratings, local authorities in the sample and other local authorities in England

Ofsted ratings as of 28/08/2018	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	Total
24 local authorities in the sample	0 (0%)	10 (42%)	11 (46%)	3 (12.5%)	24 (100%)
The other 128 local authorities in England	3 (2.3%)	46 (36%)	63 (49%)	16 (12.5%)	128 (100%)
Total	3 (2.0%)	56 (37%)	74 (48%)	19 (12.5%)	152 (100%)

Annex 2: Data fields we will request from local authorities

We will send the template – initially blank – to local authorities on or shortly after the first working day of each new six month period (for example, 1 October 2020, covering 1 April to 30 September 2020).

The template will be accompanied by explanatory notes and contact details for Coram’s data lead on the evaluation. We will provide an explanation alongside each field of why we are asking for the data.

Table: child outcomes data fields we will request from local authorities

Data item requested	Comments	Possible responses
ID number for family	<p>Local authorities may need to create this for the purposes of the evaluation, but we will suggest they can pick an existing child ID in their system, such as the ID of the eldest child in the family. Unique IDs will be needed to track which families are allocated to the intervention group and which to the control group. Each child within a family should be assigned the same family ID.</p> <p>It is possible that two or more local authorities may provide the same ID number for two or more different families, which could introduce error in combining different records into one overall table for analysis. As such we will add a local authority identifier prefix into each family ID when we receive the data.</p>	Pre-populated by Coram
ID number for child	To enable checks for duplicates, and matching between time periods. Should be unique for each child including in cases of multiple births. The pre-proceedings letter need not have been sent regarding the child, for example, in the case of babies who were not conceived at the time. Local authorities should add rows as needed so that one row=one child.	The ID must be unique for that child. Only use alphabetic and numeric characters.
[Randomisation outcome: intervention or control]	[We will provide this to local authorities]	Pre-populated by Coram
Date on letter before proceedings		DD/MM/YYYY
Mover flag (whether child has moved address to outside the	We will update ‘[date]’ in each return to show the last date of the previous data collection. For example, for the return covering 1	1: Mover: child is known to have moved to outside the local authority since [date].

Data item requested	Comments	Possible responses
local authority since [date])	<p>April-30 September, this will be '30 March'.</p> <p>This will also allow local authorities to indicate families with whom they have lost touch since the last round of data collection, or who have moved abroad or to another UK local authority.</p> <p>We will make no attempt to trace movers or follow them to their new local authority.</p>	<p>0: Non-mover: child has not moved to outside the local authority since [date].</p> <p>-1: Lost contact: local authority has lost contact with family since [date] and does not know their whereabouts</p>
Date of birth of child	For use in calculating age and matching datasets together	DD/MM/YYYY
Gender of child	So we can find out whether the impact of FGCs differs between girls and boys.	<p>0: Not known (gender not recorded or unknown for unborn children)</p> <p>1: Male</p> <p>2: Female</p> <p>9: Neither (indeterminate i.e. unable to be classed as either male or female)</p>
Ethnic group of child	<p>Ethnic group should be recorded using one of the DfE main categories listed.</p> <p>The information is required so we can find out whether the impact of FGCs differs between different ethnic groups.</p> <p>This is especially important as previous research has suggested that ethnicity may have a bearing on care-proceeding outcomes.</p>	<p>WBRI: White British</p> <p>WIRI: White Irish</p> <p>WOTH: Any other White background</p> <p>WIRT: Traveller of Irish Heritage</p> <p>WROM: Gypsy/Roma</p> <p>MWBC: White and Black Caribbean</p> <p>MWBA: White and Black African</p> <p>MWAS: White and Asian</p> <p>MOTH: Any other Mixed background</p> <p>AIND: Indian</p> <p>APKN: Pakistani</p> <p>ABAN: Bangladeshi</p> <p>AOTH: Any other Asian background</p> <p>BCRB: Caribbean</p> <p>BAFR: African</p> <p>BOTH: Any other Black background</p>

Data item requested	Comments	Possible responses
		OOTH: Any other ethnic group REFU: Refused NOBT: Information not yet obtained
Have the child's mother or father ever had a child taken into care?	As of the date on the pre-proceedings letter, and to the best of the local authority's knowledge. Please report 'yes' if at least one of the mother or father have had a child taken into care.	0: Not known/recorded 1: Yes 2: No
Postcode district	Based on address to which the pre-proceedings letter was sent. To allow analysis of local deprivation. We will collect the outward code only e.g. for a postcode 'SW1W 0NY', we only collect 'SW1W' as part of this field. If the children live at different addresses or pre-proceedings letters were sent to more than one address, please provide the postcode district of the address at which each child spends the majority of their time. Postcodes can differ for different children in the same family.	e.g. 'SW1W', 'M3', 'HP15'
Date of FGC meeting if applicable	We will request every six months, as an FGC may take place after a delay in either of the two groups We will advise local authorities to supply the date of the first FGC meeting, if more than one occurs. We need this information in order to establish a temporal sequence such that FGCs happen first and cause a change in the outcome variable(s).	DD/MM/YYYY 0 Not yet happened -1 Not applicable ('do not refer' group)
Why did a FGC meeting happen ('do not refer' group) or not happen ('refer for FGC' group)	We expect that the most common reasons will be family refusal (intervention group) and court or family request (control group). We will analyse the first set of answers and provide set answer categories (plus 'other') at subsequent data collection points.	Free text field - a short explanation of around 100 words or less.
Whether the FGC was externally		-1: Not applicable (no FGC)

Data item requested	Comments	Possible responses
commissioned or in-house		0: Not known/recorded 1: Commissioned externally 2: Internal
Status of the FGC coordinator (employee of the local authority; self-employed; zero hours contract with local authority; worker for independent provider of FGCs; paid via an agency per case; other)		Not applicable (no FGC) Employee of the local authority Self-employed Zero hours contract with local authority Worker for independent provider of FGCs Paid via an agency per case Other Not known/recorded
Whether the FGC coordinator was trained to standards set by Daybreak		-1: Not applicable (no FGC) 0: Not known/recorded 1: Yes 2: No
Stage of court proceedings	To establish whether FGCs affect the likelihood of court proceedings going ahead.	CP1: Care proceedings have been issued CP2: Care proceedings were not issued and the PLO is stepped down CP3: Care proceedings have yet to be issued
Date court proceedings issued, or indicator that this has not (yet) occurred	To enable analysis of whether FGCs affect the likelihood of court proceedings going ahead	DD/MM/YYYY -1 Not applicable
Date of letter informing families that local authority will not pursue court proceeding, or N/A		DD/MM/YYYY -1 Not applicable
Date of court ruling or date of section 20 agreement if applicable	To enable us to calculate the length of time spent in court proceedings, so that we can take this into account in analysing outcome measures for these children	DD/MM/YYYY -1 Not applicable
Nature of court ruling (or section 20)	To enable us to establish whether FGCs make particular court rulings more likely.	Not applicable (no court ruling) Section 20

Data item requested	Comments	<i>Possible responses</i>
	We will ask local authorities to report all orders; we will aggregate the data.	Adoption Order Care Order Interim Care Order Child Arrangements Order Interim Child Arrangements Order Placement Order Special Guardianship Order Supervision Order Other order (not listed) Order not granted
Nature of court ruling (or section 20)	This question is repeated to allow local authorities to report on situations where courts grant more than one order at the same time.	Not applicable (no court ruling) Section 20 Adoption Order Care Order Interim Care Order Child Arrangements Order Interim Child Arrangements Order Placement Order Special Guardianship Order Supervision Order Other order (not listed) Order not granted
Start date of living arrangement	Each of these require detailed information on the status of children on particular dates. We will request the precise dates from local authorities. It is possible we may be given less granular data, such as the first of the month in which a move took place, or a snapshot of a child's status on the data on which an extract from a system is taken. If this is the case, we will clean the data and generate random dates for status changes within the boundaries of the earliest and latest possible dates for a particular change for a particular child. We will report on	DD/MM/YYYY
Nature of living arrangement		Parent(s) including adoptive parent(s) Relative(s) Family friend(s) Independent or semi-independent living Foster carer(s) (unrelated, and not a family friend) Children's home Prospective adopter(s)
End date of living arrangement		DD/MM/YYYY -1 Unknown

Data item requested	Comments	Possible responses
Start date of legal status (child in need, child protection plan, looked-after child, none of these)	the nature and extent of any such working. We will assign random dates, rather than picking a particular date such as the mid-point of the month, because this will more accurately reflect the way that children's statuses change over time (differently, not uniformly).	DD/MM/YYYY
Legal status		Child in need Child protection plan Looked after child None of these Not applicable
End date of legal status		DD/MM/YYYY -1 Unknown
Comments on data quality (optional)	Option to comment on any issues affecting the quality of the data (e.g. IT problems affecting completeness, accuracy, timeliness).	Free text field

We will ask local authorities to provide data at child level (one row per child).

In the case of children who experience more than one change, in a six month period, of being looked after or not looked after, or living arrangement, our explanatory notes will advise local authorities to provide dates for all of these periods of time, adding columns to the right-hand side of the spreadsheet as needed.

We will add periods of data together to combine static statuses into summary variables. For example, if a child lived continuously at home for a year, the start and end dates of this living arrangement would be the start and end dates of each data return, allowing us to add two six month periods together into 365 days.

With each data collection, the number of columns will grow, as the cells shaded in grey will be repeated. By the fourth and final data collection point in January 2022 we therefore expect to have over 50 variables available on each child.

To this we will add a variable for each child, taken from our data on parents' responses to our 'perceived inclusiveness' text messages (the mean score of the two responses, in the case of two-parent families where both parents respond).

Variables we will create

In addition to these we will create some variables at Coram. One of these will be the month in which the family's local authority started making FGC referrals. We will have this information due to the randomisation process. From this we will calculate the month into implementation of FGCs in which a particular family's FGC takes place (from 1 to 18). This will allow us to take account of what difference, if any, this makes to outcomes, by including the variable in our multiple regression, if it predicts outcomes.

Creating these variables will allow our analysis to investigate the time taken for the model of intervention to become mature. On the one hand, we would expect the effect of FGCs to be

attenuated for families whose FGCs fall early in the fieldwork period, relative to those whose FGCs occur later, as systems and processes take time to embed. On the other hand, the Daybreak training will be fresher in the minds of local authority staff for families whose FGCs fall early in the fieldwork period.

We will condense family ID and child ID variables to produce a variable indicating the number of children in the family. This will minimise the data reporting requirements for local authorities, but under-estimate the number of siblings, as some may be aged 18 or over.

We will also create variables to reflect characteristics of local authorities which we expect to have an influence on the primary and secondary outcomes. These will include type (metropolitan district, London borough, county, or unitary), Ofsted rating (outstanding, good, requires improvement, or inadequate) and level of FGC implementation. This will be based on the information provided by local authorities in application forms, but may be revised as work with local authorities proceeds and more information becomes available to us.

Evaluation by children's charity Coram

Information for adult family members

We are writing to all families who have received a pre-proceedings letter from their local council. We are Coram, a children's charity, and we are running an evaluation project to look at the different ways councils work with families and how this affects the chances that children live with family or friends, or go into care. We also want to know how often children might move between different family members, foster carers or children's homes.

We aim that this project will help to improve public services in future for all children and families. We have been funded to carry out this work by What Works for Children's Social Care. We would like to look at data from over 1,000 families in your position across England, to find out what happens to children over the months after you receive a 'pre-proceedings' letter like the one you have received.

This project has received ethical approval from Coram's research ethics committee and from your council. This means they believe no harm will be done to families whose information will be included, and that the findings will be useful to families and local authorities in the future.

If you are happy to be included in the project, you do not need to do anything. If we do not hear from you, we will send you a text message in two months' time, asking for your views. We will also ask your council for data on your child or children from now on until December 2021. This will let us see the short-term and long-term outcomes of different ways of working with families.

As part of the evaluation we will write reports on our findings. Information collected about your family will be **confidential and anonymous**: we will not use anyone's name or anything about your family that could identify you to other people. All information collected will be stored securely, and may be used for other research projects in future.

If you do not want us to collect, analyse and securely store your family's data for the project, please get in touch with us to let us know by the end of 2021. This will make no difference to the service you receive from your council.

If you would like more information about the evaluation you can email

research@coram.org.uk, phone 0207 520 8181 or write to Impact & Evaluation Team, Coram, 41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ. Please include your mobile number and the name of your council. You can also get in touch if you would like to be added to a list to receive a copy of our findings, when they are published in 2022.

Thank you,

Sarah Taylor
Head of Evaluation
Coram

More information sheet to be supplied on request



Evaluation by children's charity Coram

More information for adult family members

Thank you for your interest in our evaluation.

We are running an evaluation project to find out what happens to families after they have been sent a letter by their local council. The letter states that the council will seek to take your child or children into care, by seeking a Care Order from a court, if you or others do not take specific actions.

About this document

You should have received an information sheet from your council telling you about the evaluation. This document goes into more detail on the evaluation. You can share and discuss it with other people like your solicitor.

Purpose of the evaluation

We want to know if the way your council works with you and your family affects the chances that your children live with family or friends, or go into care, in the months and years after the letter. We also want to know if their living arrangements change and how often, such as how often they might move between different family members, or go to live with foster carers or in a children's home.

We will look at data from over 1,000 families in your position across England, to find out what happens to children over the months after you receive a 'pre-proceedings' letter like the one you have received. We aim that this project will help improve public services in future for all children and families, by providing more evidence to better inform decision making.

Evaluating different ways of working with families

At the point when your council decided to write to you with the letter you received, you were randomly placed into one of two groups of families. Half of families are in one group, and the other half in the other group. Your council will work with the two groups of families in different ways. We are interested in the difference made by the ways of working, if any, to the chances that your children live with family or friends, or go into care. One group are offered a 'family group conference' and the other group are not, but will still receive other support from the council. So you should know which group of families you are in.

We do not know if family group conferences are helpful or not, so we are working with councils to test them. We will follow up with councils to find out what happens afterwards to children whose families take part in family group conferences, and those who do not. This type of evaluation is known as a randomised controlled trial.

What you need to do

There is no need for you to do anything in order to be included in the project. If we do not hear from you, we will ask your council for data on your child or children until December 2021. This will let us see the short-term and long-term outcomes of different ways of working with families. The data will not include your name or full address. We do not need these details because we want to find out about what happens to children in general, not your family specifically. Information collected about your family will be confidential and stored securely in an archive which other future researchers may analyse. When we write about what we find, we will not use anyone's name or anything that would tell people who you or your family are.

We want to collect this data for research purposes, and because councils have a duty to give families the information needed to enable them to take part in decisions, and to do this, they need evidence like this. If you do not want us to collect and analyse your family's data for the project, you can email research@coram.org.uk, phone 0207 520 8181 (you can leave a message outside working hours) or write to Impact & Evaluation Team, Coram, 41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ. If you do this by the end of 2021, your data will not be included in any later analysis or reports. If you opt out of us collecting and analysing your family's data, it will make no difference to the service you receive from your council.

As well as this data collection, we will ask a small number of families if they are happy to speak to us in person or on the phone. We want to hear what families think about how their council works with them. We will explain more to these families when we contact them.

Ethical approval

This project has received ethical approval from Coram's research ethics committee and from your council. This means they believe what we are suggesting will not be harmful to you, and that the findings will be useful to other families and local authorities in the future.

Background to the evaluation and evaluators

We are Coram, a children's charity. The Impact and Evaluation team in Coram have been funded to carry out this work by What Works for Children's Social Care, as part of the Department for Education programme, *Supporting Families: Investing in Practice*. Councils applied to take part in the programme. We are working with your council to carry out the evaluation.

The councils taking part are: Bath and North East Somerset, Birmingham, Blackpool, Bromley, Derbyshire, Knowsley, Lancashire, Lambeth, Leicestershire, Lewisham, Merton, Middlesbrough, North East Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottingham City, Plymouth, Redcar and Cleveland, Rotherham, Salford, Sheffield, Shropshire, Southampton, Staffordshire, and Sunderland. The charity Daybreak is also involved in the programme.

How to find out more

If after reading this document you would still like more information about the evaluation, you can email research@coram.org.uk, phone 0207 520 8181 (you can leave a message outside working hours) or write to Impact & Evaluation Team, Coram, 41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ. You can also get in touch if you would like to be added to a list to receive a copy of our findings, when they are published in 2022.

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Annex: table to record any protocol deviations

Any deviations from this protocol after its publication will be recorded below. Coram will share the table with the project management group at each meeting, if any additions have been made to it since the last meeting.

Nature of deviation	Date	Reason