



# Family Network Meetings



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# Contents

Introduction..... 3

1) What is a Family Network Meeting?..... 3

2) Why have a Family Network Meeting?..... 3

3) Who is involved in a Family Network Meeting?..... 4

4) When are Family Network Meetings held?..... 5

5) Where are Family Network Meetings held?..... 6

6) How can you support a Family Network Meeting?..... 6

    a) Preparing for a Family Network Meeting..... 6

    b) Supporting the Family Network Meeting..... 7

    c) Recording the Family Network Meeting..... 9

    d) Monitoring and reviewing the Safety Plan..... 12

7) Resources..... 13

Appendix..... 13

    a) [Questions to assist in finding networks](#)

    b) [Safety Circles](#)

    c) [Network Finding Matrix](#)

    d) [Family Network Meetings - Frequently Asked Questions](#)

    e) [Example of a Safety Plan](#)

    f) [Family Network Meeting Template](#)



## Introduction

Family Network Meetings are integral to our Signs of Safety Practice Framework. They are not a 'specialist' separate piece of work that is outside of our core business in our day to day work with families, and they are not 'Family Group Conferences' (not a Bexley service). There is no 'one size fits all' approach to Family Network Meetings and this practice guidance aims to provide best practice principles in supporting families with their Family Network Meeting.

The term 'Signs of Safety' is used throughout, but the guidance is relevant for Signs of Wellbeing, Signs of Success and Signs of Safe Independence.

### 1) What is a Family Network Meeting?

A Family Network Meeting brings together all or some of the family's naturally connected network to develop a family owned safety plan or wellbeing plan.

The family should lead on who is involved in the plan and the 'plan rules' (safety plan) - detailing who will do what in everyday life to keep the child safe and well, no matter what happens.

The role of the practitioner is to support the process by engaging the family's network to support them to talk constructively about the worries and think more deeply about what safety looks like for the child so that even when problems arise, the adults that care most about the child are able to act in a way that keeps them safe.



### 2) Why have a Family Network Meeting?

In Bexley, we strongly believe that children belong within their naturally connected network; with people who they know, who love them, and will keep them safe. Whenever there are worries about a child's safety or wellbeing, safety planning work should take place in collaboration with the family and their naturally connected network via the process of a Family Network Meeting.



There are three underlying values that should be present for Family Network Meetings – respect, responsibility and relationship. Family Network Meetings are a way of bringing people together in a way whereby everyone is respected, has a chance to talk without interruption, has an opportunity to be heard, works creatively towards a shared goal, and feels safe enough to express both what is working well, and what they are worried about. Fair process profoundly influences attitudes and behaviours; it builds trust and unlocks ideas, and in turn, engages the voluntary cooperation of the network.

Family Network Meetings can support families to resolve family difficulties that are impacting on their children, to problem solve, and to develop an alternative Care Plan when children and young people are subject to Care Proceedings or cared for by the Local Authority.

### 3) Who is involved in a Family Network Meeting?

The involvement of a naturally connected network is central to increasing child safety. Family Network Meetings can include family, friends, neighbours or people in the community who are important to the family e.g. a Priest, Imam or football coach.

From our first contact with families via the MASH, we should talk to the family about their network and who can help and support them. It is important to use questions that go deeper than simply asking 'who is in your support network'. For example - *Who would the child say are the most important people in their life? Who would the parents say are the people around them that help and support them? Who are the most important*

*professionals involved with the child and family? Who helps with the shopping, who comes round if you as a parent are sick, who comforts when you are sad, who takes the children out to give you a break etc.*



There are various Family Finding tools and techniques that can be used to help families identify their network such as - [questions to assist in finding networks](#), [safety circles](#) and the [network finding matrix](#). Families may also find the use of timelines, genograms, and ecomaps helpful. See Appendix for these tools. Practitioners should attend the *Family Finding & Family Network Meeting* workshop which can be booked via [Evolve](#).

Sometimes, parents may feel reluctant to involve people from their network. It is important to approach parents with compassion and appreciate how difficult it must be to share concerns about their parenting with the people they are close to. However, it is equally important to sensitively persist in supporting the parent to identify a network of people. The [safety circles](#) and [questions to assist in finding networks](#) are particularly useful tools to support a conversation with parents who are worried about involving other people.

It is essential for us to look for the 'signs of safety' within family networks and doing so can prevent unnecessary involvement in families lives or prevent children being made subject to Child Protection Plans or even legal Care Proceedings. Understanding who is involved with children and young people can support children remaining within their extended birth families via the process of legal Care Proceedings if parents are no longer able to care for their children. It is important that this message is given to families to support them in making choices about identifying their networks.



It can be helpful to think about this in the context of your own family or network. What if you or a relative had difficulties with parenting the children in your family? What would you want to happen? Would you want the opportunity to help out? Receive help? Or just go directly into the system or for children in your family to be in the system when you could have been contacted to support them?

### Child or Young Person's Participation

From the outset the child or young person should feel part of their journey and have sufficient time and support to help understand and prepare for their family network meeting e.g. timing, who they would like to invite, solutions to worries etc.



Children should be encouraged to attend the family network meeting, which may be for all or part of the meeting, as deemed appropriate. Consider a variety of ways to aid participation if they are not attending. It is important their views and feelings are shared and taken into consideration throughout the meeting. Preparation work should be flexible and imaginative, to help children and young people express their views as fully as possible. Seek permission as to how, who and what is to be shared on their behalf in respect of direct work undertaken.

Attention should be paid to the issues that children and young people see as important, which can often be different to the adults in their lives. Whether they are present or not you remain the advocate for that child or young person alongside their family network.

## 4) When are Family Network Meetings held?

Whenever an assessment establishes that a child is at risk of harm, is a child in need, or meets the criteria for Family Wellbeing support, the family and their naturally connected network should be involved in a Family Network Meeting to develop the plan.

Family Network Meetings take place if we are involved in legal Care Proceedings to look at who else in a child or young person's family or network may be able to care for them or support them in any way if it is not safe for their parents to do so.

Family Network Meetings take place when children and young people are in the care of the Local Authority and have family/network members who they would like to spend more time with or who would like to see more of them. They take place when there is possibility of reunification.

Family Network Meetings ensure that families are offered every single possible chance and support to be able to come up with their own plans for their own children in a way that is safe and benefits them.

Family Network Meetings may take place as one meeting, or in parts depending on the network's availability and the relationships within the network. If the family say they are not ready for a Family Network Meeting, ask them what they would need to be ready.

## 5) Where are Family Network Meetings held?

Family Network Meetings are informal and take place at a location that the family feel most comfortable. It could be at their home, at the home of someone within their network, or somewhere in the community. Preferably they take place physically but alternatively, Family Network Meetings may be conducted virtually via video call(s) or conference call(s).

LET'S MAKE FAMILY NETWORK MEETINGS accessible

## 6) How can you support a Family Network Meeting?

Family Network Meetings are informal and there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Our role is to support the family and their network to think more deeply about what safety looks like and develop a family owned safety plan in response to the worries.

### a) Preparing for a Family Network Meeting

- **Helpful things to consider ahead of the meeting:**  
Date, time, venue, accessibility, transport, interpreting services, comfort, break-out space, any serious family issues, legal issues e.g. injunction, advocacy/support person. If it is a large group or you feel you need support, it is important that you bring a team member to support the meeting - ensure that you gain permission from the family beforehand. If there is extreme conflict, it may be necessary for another team member to take the lead in the meeting. Ensure that you are aware of any risk factors between family members.
- **What you need to know ahead of the meeting:**  
What's the focus of the meeting and what does the family want to get out of it? What does the network need from you for it to go well? What support do participants need before, during and after the Family Network Meeting? i.e. accessibility needs, communication needs, timing, transport, how best to communicate e.g. text, call, letter, is an interpreter needed.
- **What participants needs to know ahead of the meeting:**  
The purpose of the meeting, what will happen at the meeting, who will be there, where and when to arrive, and how long it will last.
- **Things to consider when crafting questions to support the meeting:**  
How much time is available? What outcomes are you looking for? What is the best sequence of questions? Try to create questions that are inclusive, challenging, inviting and open-ended (avoid questions with yes/no answers).

Before the Family Network Meeting, always check that the danger statement (or statements and goals appropriate to specific service areas) conveys the seriousness of the worries and describes the specific behaviours that you are worried about. Check that the danger statements and safety goals use clear, straight forward language and are understandable to the family.

Ensure that you have asked specific questions about the existing strengths and the existing safety within the family and their network so that you are clear about the things that people are already doing to keep the child safe. These can be built on during the Family Network Meeting to develop the safety plan.

Ensure that you and your manager are clear about your bottom lines and that these have been shared and where possible, developed with the family. These are the non-negotiable things that must be addressed through the safety plan.

It is important to remember that this is the family's meeting; wherever possible, they will be the ones to call people in their network and invite them to the meeting. They may want to think through with you how they will explain the reason and purpose of the meeting to the people they are inviting.

Although it might seem that there are a lot of steps in this preparations stage, it is important to see these steps as part of the work you are already doing and not separate or additional tasks.

Preparation is key but there may be times when situations are so serious that you will need to hold urgent initial meetings in order to explore the 'signs of safety' with a family network, for example when a child may need to be urgently removed from the care of their parents. This can prevent children and young people being placed in foster care if there are network members available.



## b) Supporting the Family Network Meeting



Encourage the family and their network to sit in a circle as this can be inclusive and helps to build trust and equality within the group.

The meeting is informal, but it is always important to do introductions, explain the purpose and structure of the meeting, and agree the ground rules for the meeting to go well.

Check if the family want you to facilitate or if someone else wants to chair or facilitate. Check who wants to scribe or if the family want you to scribe. If there are difficulties with reading and writing, ensure that you are aware of this and look at how you could present an alternative pictorial addition to the meeting.

Share everything you have identified that is working well, the danger statements, safety goals (or statements and goals appropriate to specific service areas) and bottom lines. Allow the network the opportunity to add any information they have about what is going well/exceptions around safety or what they are worried about. See Appendix d) for suggestions if the family get stuck on the worries and find it difficult to move onto the planning.

It is important to note that once you have shared this information and the network are clear about the worries and purpose of the meeting, the rest of the meeting should be led by a questioning approach. If you find yourself 'telling', 'instructing' or even making lots of suggestions... stop!

Developing the Plan - invite the network to work through each danger statement and safety goal (or statements and goals appropriate to specific service areas) and identify what everyone is going to do to address each worry. It is up to the family as to how much involvement they want from you at this point. They might want you to help them develop the plan by asking questions around each worry, they might want you just to write it up for them, they might want you to sit in the room or they might want you to leave the room whilst they discuss and identify the plan and return towards the end. This is entirely up to the family. As every family is different, every Family Network Meeting will be different, however the safety plan should always cover the following areas:

Key issues arising from Danger Statement(s)	Existing Safety / What is Working well?	Stressors and Triggers	Indicators Danger is emerging or present (Red Flags)	Who will do what when problems arise?

It can be useful for families to see what a safety plan can look like. The example at Appendix e) can be used to show families what a detailed safety plan can look like.

**Please note:** If you are holding a Family Network Meeting for children/young people subject to Care Proceedings where alternative carers in the network are being sought, your focus will be on what is being put forward by the family and what support they may need to achieve their plan.

If you are holding a Family Network Meeting for children who are already cared for by the Local Authority the focus will be a little different and Success Goals may be the focus, for example if family members have come forward to offer further support to the child or young person in Foster Care or if parental circumstances change. It is important to understand that family finding does not end with a Care Order.

Once the family have developed the plan, ask questions to test it out until you feel re-assured that it is thorough and detailed enough to keep the child safe. You should do this by leading the family through a series of questions to 'test the plan'. For example, 'what if a parent is ill?', 'what if a child is sick at night?', 'what if a safety person doesn't come?'

You should ask questions to check the particular times that difficulties have arisen previously, for example weekends, holidays and anniversaries in order to check that the network have considered and planned for these times.



You should ask questions to help the network identify the 'red flags' that indicate that the problem/worry might be about to happen or is already happening. For example; 'what are the first small signs that you are about to relapse?', 'what is the first thing someone else would notice if you were about to relapse?' 'what is the first thing somebody would notice if you had relapsed?', 'who needs to do what if somebody notices these first signs of a re-lapse in order to keep the child safe?' These questions help build insight and awareness amongst the network as well as strengthening the safety plan.

Check for clarity about timings, timescales and responsibility for identified actions - ensure it is a SMART plan.



Ending the meeting - it is always good to end the meeting with a scaling question to check everyone's confidence in the plan and their willingness to put it into practice. For example 'on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is - I feel completely confident that this plan will keep [the child] safe, and 0 is - I have no confidence that this plan will keep [the child] safe, where would you scale?' If people scale low, you know the plan still needs further work and you can ask what needs to happen to move them up the scale. Or you could ask 'on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is - I will do absolutely anything to make sure I keep to this plan, and 0 is - I would really like to be able to do all of these things, but in reality I just don't think it is realistic, where would you scale?' Again, the plan should be refined if people are scaling low.

Once you and the network are satisfied that the plan is detailed and rigorous enough to enable the network to keep the child safe, you must agree with them when the next meeting will be and the best way for the plan to be monitored.



### c) Recording the Family Network Meeting

It is recommended that you take flipchart paper, blutack (or equivalent) and pens to the Family Network Meeting. Record the information that comes out of the meeting to include a clear plan of action that covers everything the network agree to undertake. You can then leave the family with the flipchart paper and encourage network members to take photographs so everyone has a copy of the plan immediately. You should also take a photo of all the work from the Family Network Meeting e.g. any further mapping / key points, and upload it to the child's file.

**The information that comes out of the Family Network Meeting is recorded on your Liquid Logic forms (not yet in place for Children Looked After Service)**

Under 'who is involved in the plan' you record the day to day plan for the children, who will do what, when and how. You will record where agencies may be involved, for example if a parent is attending an essential resource that impacts on the children if they don't attend.

The safety part of the plan is recorded under 'plan rules'. This is what happens when behaviour around worries that are linked to the danger statement take place. So, for example, if mum starts drinking what happens? If dad is violent what happens? Who steps in to keep the children safe? And what does it look like?

The key things to record include: bottom lines, timeline, who's involved in the plan, and plan rules (safety plan). See brief examples below and via Appendix e).

**Bottom lines**

Professional bottom-lines are the minimum that must happen for Children's Services to be satisfied and they cannot compromise on.

1. Mummy and Daddy need to find at least 3 people to be part of a safety network, who know and understand the problems and take them seriously. They will support Mummy and Daddy and monitor when they are drinking alcohol to make sure that the children are safe and work to the safety plan.
2. If mummy or daddy are using alcohol or drugs, the safety plan will kick in and safe members of the safety network will come and take the children to stay with them.

**Timeline**

Week	Task	Meetings and Monitoring	Changes
Week 1 - preparations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Map with parents, prepare danger statements and safety goals.</li> <li>• Explore who is in the family network with the parents and who can come forward to help and support the children.</li> <li>• Hold the Family Network Meeting.</li> <li>• Review Family Network Meeting.</li> </ul>	Meeting / phone calls	
Week 2			
Week 4			
Etc. until end of timeline when you expect intervention to end and the plan to be handed over to the family to monitor.			

**Who is involved in the plan?**

Name and Role	How often will they see the child?	What are the specific tasks of this person?	Network lead
Nanna	Every day	Visit the home every day to check if Mummy and Daddy look like they are using drugs/alcohol.	Social Worker / Nanna

## Plan Rules (Safety Plan)

Key issues arising from Danger Statement(s)	Existing Safety / What is Working well?	Stressors and Triggers	Indicators Danger is emerging or present (Red Flags)	Who will do what when problems arise?
Drug/alcohol use around the children.	Daddy is not drinking right now and is sticking to rehab programme.	Daddy worrying about money.	Daddy coming home smelling of alcohol.  Daddy not attended rehab programme.	Drugs worker will call Nanna and social worker to tell them daddy has not turned up for his appointment.  Nanna will come to the house and take the children to stay with her if daddy is using.

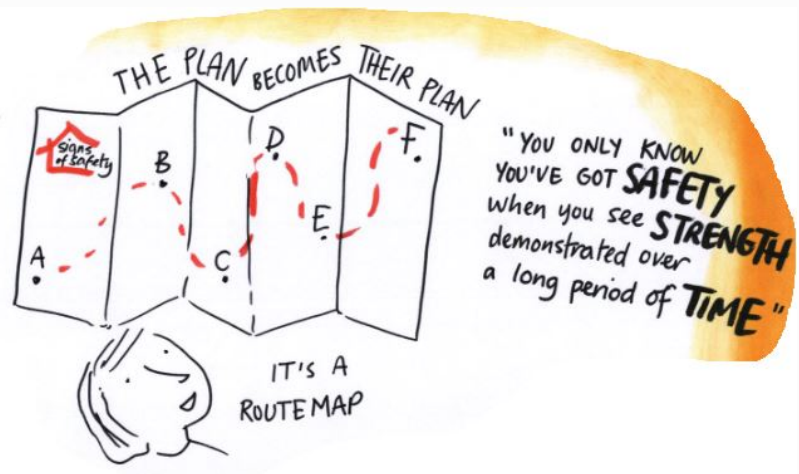
A Family Network Meeting Template is also available under 'Forms' which can be used as a prompt during the Family Network Meeting and to record the key details of the meeting if for some reason it cannot be recorded directly onto the child's latest form, for example with respect to meetings held in the Children Looked After Service. The plan in its entirety - bottom lines, timeline, who's involved in the plan and plan rules (safety plan) must then be printed out to give to the family.

A child friendly version of the safety plan should be completed via the use of direct work tool Words & Pictures and shared with the child so that they are clear about how everyone is working together to keep them safe. Gain this agreement at the Family Network Meeting with a date of when this piece of work will commence.



## d) Monitoring and reviewing the Safety Plan

Signs of Safety defines safety as 'strengths demonstrated as protection over time'. Families need to be able to show that they can implement the safety plan and demonstrate protection over time in a supported and monitored process. There needs to be enough support and monitoring for risk to be managed through regular Family Network Meetings, check-ins with the child, the family, the network and other professionals.



The level of support and monitoring must be determined by the level of risk. Where there is a high level of risk, there will be a need for a high level of professional monitoring initially. If the network are able to demonstrate that they can implement the plan and keep the child safe, the level of professional monitoring can start to reduce and monitoring can gradually start to be handed over to people within the naturally connected network. This should always happen in a planned and structured way.

For safety planning to be meaningful, parents need to be given a chance to succeed in a context where they may fail. The safety plan needs to account for this. If parents make mistakes, the response should be measured and proportionate and should be approached as an opportunity to help them think through what went wrong, to deepen their understanding/insight and to reflect on what needs to happen in the future, which includes reviewing their plan. Encourage the family to take ownership, make decisions and be solution focussed when challenges arise. Explore through appreciative enquiry how they changed this challenge into a success, no matter how small the step might be.



Recording and Demonstrating the Plan – a Safety Journal or a Facebook/WhatsApp group can be used by the family and their network to record what they are doing in relation to the safety plan. For example; when people in the network visit the family, they can record what they did (in accordance with the safety plan), what they noticed was going well, and anything they were worried about. The activity captured can be reviewed in subsequent Family Network Meetings or other meetings which may make decisions about the plan, such as core groups, child protection conferences, child in need review meetings and family support meetings.

## 7) Resources

- Family Finding & Family Network Meeting Workshop is mandatory training, please book via [Evolve](#).
- Family Finding & Family Network Meeting resources [N:\Everyone\Everyone\Signs of Safety](#)

## Appendix

- a) [Questions to assist in finding networks](#)
- b) [Safety Circles](#)
- c) [Network Finding Matrix](#)
- d) [Family Network Meetings - Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- e) [Example of a Safety Plan](#)
- f) [Family Network Meeting Template](#)