

## Wiltshire Council

### Cabinet

17 September 2024

---

**Subject:** Family Group Conferences

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Laura Mayes - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills

**Key Decision:** Key

---

#### Executive Summary

Family Group Conferences (FGCs) have been successfully used in Wiltshire since 1997 to provide family meetings as part of legal proceedings. For the past 12 years, this service has been commissioned to Daybreak to ensure an independent, impartial offer, as laid out in the Seven Quality Standards by Family Rights Group.<sup>1</sup>

FGCs offer families an opportunity to define achievable and sustainable solutions with the support of their extended networks. Professionals share insights and help identify the right support, but the family decides what action to take. The plan is held by the allocated social worker, who sets the parameters of what is permissible to keep the child safe. The family's progress is monitored through the relevant CP/CiN or Support Plan process.

The current contract with Daybreak expires on 31 March 2025 and the purpose of this paper is to propose that the service is commissioned externally from 1 April 2025. Consideration was given to bring the service in-house. However, the risks outweighed the benefits. Thus, the proposal is to go out to tender with a budget of £180,000 per annum including annual uplifts, with the contract drafted so that the provider is only funded for the meetings they coordinate.

#### Proposals

Cabinet is requested to:

1. Approve a budget of £900,000 over a possible five years, for the delivery of Family Group Conferences. The contract will be offered initially for three (3) years with a possible two-year (2) extension.
2. Approve that Family Group Conferences is commissioned externally through an open procurement from 1 April 2025.
3. To delegate authority to approve and award a new contract and any future extensions and all associated documents to the Director of Commissioning and the Corporate Director responsible for People in

---

<sup>1</sup> [Helping families Helping children - Family Rights Group \(frg.org.uk\)](https://www.frg.org.uk)

consultation with the Deputy Leader and the Cabinet Member responsible for Children's Services, Education and Skills.

### **Reason for Proposals**

To make Family Group Conferences (FGC) available to all families that would benefit from this approach.

According to results from a study conducted by Coram in June 2023<sup>2</sup> children whose families were referred for FGC are significantly less likely to go into care or to be taken to court for decisions about their care. This service not only forms an important intervention to support the well-being of children but also prevents the potential for costlier interventions later.

The FGC service offers cost effective family focussed support for families. The Coram Report recommends that 'Local authorities should continue the use of FGCs at pre-proceedings stage where services already exist and consider their introduction in other areas'. (p10)

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care – Final report<sup>3</sup> by Josh McAllister recommends that more should be done to involve family members and wider networks in the decision about children's care.

**Alison Elliott**  
**Director of Commissioning**

---

<sup>2</sup> [Groundbreaking Coram study demonstrates significant impact of Family Group Conferencing in preventing children going into care - Coram Group : Coram Group](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Independent review of children's social care - final report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

# Wiltshire Council

## Cabinet

17 September 2024

---

**Subject:** Family Group Conferences

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Laura Mayes - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills

**Key Decision:** Key

---

### Purpose of Report

1. This report outlines the proposal for how Family Group Conferences should be delivered across Wiltshire.
2. It outlines the reasons why it is recommended that Family Group Conferences are commissioned to an external provider via a competitive tendering process.
3. To delegate authority to approve and award a new contract and any future extensions and all associated documents to the Director of Commissioning and the Corporate Director responsible for People in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member responsible for Children's Services, Education and Skills.

### Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

4. The proposal is relevant to the following priorities and objectives laid down in the Council's Business Plan<sup>4</sup>:

The people of Wiltshire are empowered to live full, healthy, and enriched lives:

- We get the best start in life;
- We are safe;
- We live well together;

5. To support the working themes in the Council's Business Plan 2022 to 2032, commissioning priorities are to:
  - a. **Priority 1** - ensure services are in the right place at the right time.
  - b. **Priority 2** - ensure right people receive services in the right place i.e. increasing services delivered in the community and in people's homes.
  - c. **Priority 3** - ensure right service, right price

### Background

6. Family Group Conferences are meetings led by an independent co-ordinator where family, friends and networks meet to plan and make decisions for a child who is at risk.

---

<sup>4</sup> [BusinessPlan.pdf \(wiltshire.gov.uk\)](#)

They are a way of involving families in decision-making and planning about how best to keep children safe and avoid the need for processes such as legal proceedings.

7. Family Group Conferences were introduced into the UK in the early 1990s and have long been recognised as an important way to meet the underpinning principle of the Children Act 1989<sup>5</sup>: to balance the rights of children to express their views, the rights of parents to exercise their responsibilities, and the duty of the state to intervene when the child's welfare requires it.
8. A 2022 national survey<sup>6</sup> of Local Authorities found that 79.1% (n=167/211) offer Family Group Conferences, most of these, 58.7%, said that the service had expanded in size over the last three years and the FGCs are predominantly (95.9%) offered at pre-proceedings.
9. Family Group Conferences have been successfully delivered as a commissioned service in Wiltshire since 1997 to provide family meetings as part of pre-proceedings. Since, 2012 the service has been commissioned externally to Daybreak.
10. Family Rights Group run the accreditation programme for Family Group Conferences. There are seven quality standards to help families and professionals understand what an FGC is. These are:
  - an independent co-ordinator.
  - participation is voluntary.
  - the conference is family-led and there is private family time to allow for planning.
  - the referred child or adult is the central focus and is supported to participate.
  - the family have all the necessary resources to make their plan.
  - the family's privacy and confidentiality is respected; and
  - there are principles of equality and inclusivity including the promotion of diversity, with respect for and being sensitive to the family's culture and individual identities.
11. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023<sup>7</sup> highlights the importance of FGCs to engage effectively with families and their family network to enable informed decision-making about a child's safety or wellbeing.
12. According to results from a study conducted by Coram in June 2023<sup>8</sup>, children whose families were referred for FGC are significantly less likely to go into care. This service not only forms an important intervention to support the well-being of children but also prevents the potential for costlier interventions later.
13. Foundations, What Works Centre are planning another piece of service and user design research to identify barriers and enablers to increasing access to FGCs at the pre-proceedings stage, this will be published 31 July 2025.

---

<sup>5</sup> [Children Act 1989 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

<sup>6</sup> [Family Group Conference Provision in UK Local Authorities and Associations with Children Looked after Rates | The British Journal of Social Work | Oxford Academic](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Working together to safeguard children 2023: statutory guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>8</sup> [Groundbreaking Coram study demonstrates significant impact of Family Group Conferencing in preventing children going into care - Coram Group: Coram Group](#)

## Main Considerations for the Council

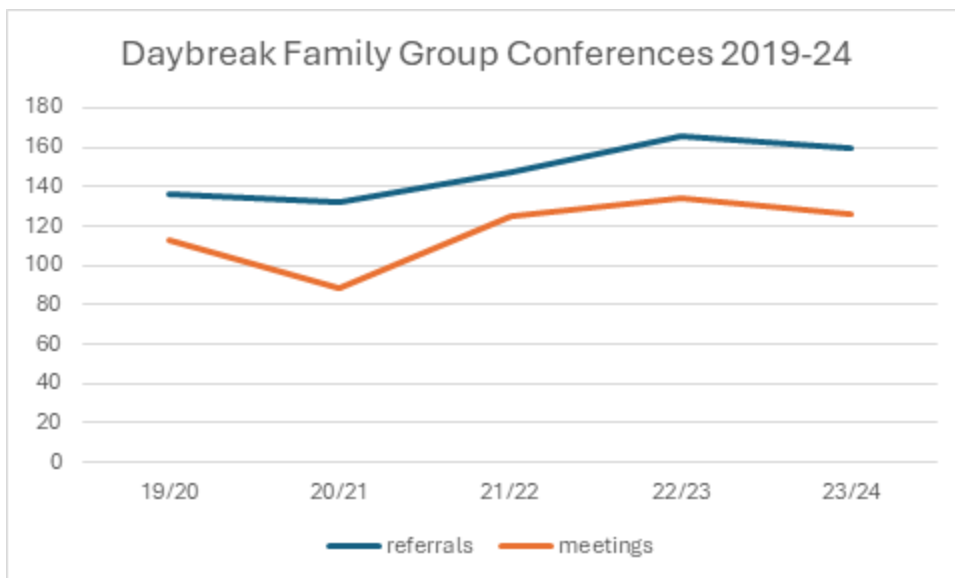
14. To consider whether to continue to commission Family Group Conferences externally.
15. The current budget for FGCs is derived from the Supporting Families Programme. This programme is due to end in March 2025 and there is currently no indication of whether it will continue from April 2025 or what form this may take.
16. The Supporting Families and its predecessor Troubled Families funding has been in place since 2012 and it is unlikely that central government would remove it completely however there is no Supporting Families Minister in the new administration and no reassurances have been provided therefore it is a risk to consider. If funding was removed this successful early help preventative approach service would need to be presented as a budget pressure to Cabinet which could mean other services may need to reduce in order to fund it.
17. FGCs could be extremely valuable to the families of children and young people supported by the Children and Young Peoples Disability Team (CYPDT). This would incur additional costs to the Council to run them but could also be a cost saving to the Council in the long run by utilising family and community resources instead of Direct Payments and enabling the child to stay with the family and out of care.
18. There is no significant evidence of the impact of FGCs on families with children who have disabilities.
19. It is important to consider the source of future funding for FGCs. Unit costs incurred by local authorities and providers, including start-up costs from Coram study

Type of FGC service	Mean unit cost	Interquartile range	Lowest unit cost	Highest unit cost	Cost per FGC per child
Total (in-house and external)	£8,911	£4,645 - £14,524	£598	£20,730	£5,242

Note: the cost per FGC per child is calculated using the mean number of children per family in Coram sample. Data quality concerns mean these numbers are subject to uncertainty.

20. The current contracted rate for a Family Group Conference in Wiltshire is £1045 per conference for the first 127 and £721 for the following 53.
21. The Wiltshire rate is on the lower side of the national recorded rate and it is important to acknowledge that although there is a cost related to providing FGCs the benefit of keeping children out of care outweighs this.
22. According to the Coram Study, the average cost to a local authority to care for a Child Looked After was £82,820 in 2021.
23. The same survey puts the cost of a Child in Need at £2,369 annually and a Child Protection Plan at £18,899 annually.

24. Research undertaken by Paul Mason et al in the Leeds Family Valued Evaluation Report<sup>9</sup> states that ‘FGCs are an effective rights-based process for empowering families with a range of needs, which can increase the likelihood of children remaining in the care of birth family networks. They can be used to address families’ problems early, as well as within statutory child protection.’
25. The randomised control trial<sup>10</sup> by Coram in 2023 found that families referred for FGCs were less likely to be taken to court for decisions about their care. By the end of the study, only three in five children (59%) referred for FGCs had care proceedings issued, compared with 72% of children who did not get a referral.
26. This same study found that those Local Authorities that commissioned their FGC services externally had a higher conversion rate from referral to delivery; 77% of families referred for an FGC were delivered an FGC, compared with 64% for local authorities that used internally commissioned services.
27. Daybreak currently provides the FGC service in Wiltshire and works closely with social care colleagues. 124 conferences were held in 2023/24, 134 in 2022/23 and 124 in 2021/22.



28. Daybreak asks family and friends for feedback on the process:

*‘Face to face meeting in a neutral place have allowed us to achieve more.’*  
*‘Everybody pulling in the same direction and issues being resolved.’*

What difference will this make to the family? *‘By knowing and feeling they are not on their own knowing what support is around and knowing we are a call away.’*

*‘I’m hoping it will have the impact we need to keep the family together. Just knowing they have the extra support helps massively.’*

<sup>9</sup> [Leeds-Family-Valued-Evaluation-Report.pdf](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Groundbreaking Coram study demonstrates significant impact of Family Group Conferencing in preventing children going into care - Coram Group : Coram Group](#)

*'Hopefully now all adults do what is best for the child and get her where she needs to be. Having a clear plan in place makes it easy for all parties involved to stick to that plan.'*

*'Massive difference. The parents have support from the family for care of their child going forward. It gave a lot of opportunity to talk openly and honestly with the family involved about decisions and events for the child's future.'*

29. Professionals also give feedback:

*'I feel this meeting has provided the family a private space to be transparent with each other around the concerns and show the parents how supportive their family is and to recognise this.'*

*'have not been through this process before, and I was impressed at how centred it was on positive outcomes for the children and family.'*

*'A very clear plan was made; the support was clearly outlined and hopefully the family will follow through with this support. It is enabled contact to be made between social care and the family and friends. The FGC gave the family a last chance to stay together rather than separate off.'*

*'The FGC has given the family an opportunity to speak clearly about their individual feelings. The use of others i.e. the advocate's, ensured voices were heard and ensured all views were considered.'*

30. Feedback from family and friends of the FGC process with Daybreak in Wiltshire

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>		<b>Agree</b>	
	<b>number</b>	<b>percentage</b>	<b>number</b>	<b>percentage</b>
The meeting was helpful	59	78.67%	16	21.33%
I felt well prepared for the meeting	46	61.33%	29	38.67%
I felt able to talk freely and had the opportunity to share my views	59	78.67%	15	20.00%
I feel our plan achieved what we wanted it to	53	70.67%	21	28.00%
I feel the child's/young person's views were considered when making our plan	57	76.00%	14	18.67%
I would recommend this service	59	78.67%	14	18.67%

31. A virtual Market Engagement Event was held on Teams on 7<sup>th</sup> August. 10 providers attended the event. Some are already delivering FGCs in other parts of the country and some are considering how it fits with their current delivery model.

**Safeguarding Implications**

32. The principle of FGCs is to keep children safe. It will be a requirement that the FGC provider will ensure that co-ordinators have an enhanced Data and Barring Service (DBS) check and are fully trained to ensure that all participants have all the resources needed to make their plan and that the family's privacy and right to confidentiality is fully respected (within the boundaries of safeguarding procedure).
33. If any concern regarding the welfare of a child or adult is identified via the FGC process, the provider will be obligated to report this to the Children / Adult MASH.

### **Public Health Implications**

34. FGCs contribute to wider determinants of health. According to results from a study conducted by Coram in June 2023<sup>11</sup>, children whose families were referred for FGC are significantly less likely to go into care. It is widely acknowledged and recognised that children in care are more prone to suffer from poor mental health. Therefore, removing the possibility of a child entering care should remove the likelihood of future mental health concerns for that child and the family.

### **Procurement Implications**

35. A compliant procurement process will be followed in line with relevant UK procurement legislation and policy.
36. The procurement process will be designed and run in conjunction with the Procurement Team.
37. Consideration to social value implications will be informed through our socially responsible procurement policy and will be taken into consideration when developing the specification for the service.

### **Equalities Impact of the Proposal**

38. There are seven quality standards that any FGC provider is obliged to adhere to when delivering this service, one of these is that the "service should work to the principles of equality and inclusivity, respecting diversity, including respecting and being sensitive to the family's culture and individual identities"<sup>12</sup>.
39. Thereby, the impact of the service of those with 'protected characteristics' should be positive, as the provider is duty bound to reduce or remove any inequalities and barriers that exist, to ensure that all family and network participants can fully contribute to the process.
40. To ensure that all family and network participants can fully contribute to the process, demographics will be requested and monitored to ensure that no inequalities or barriers are in place.

### **Environmental and Climate Change Considerations**

---

<sup>11</sup> [Groundbreaking Coram study demonstrates significant impact of Family Group Conferencing in preventing children going into care - Coram Group : Coram Group](#)

<sup>12</sup> [FGC Accreditation - Family Rights Group \(frg.org.uk\)](#)



41. FGCs are generally held virtually reducing the need for travel and the environmental impact of this.
42. It is anticipated that the energy consumption and associated emissions will be effectively managed as part of this contract.

### **Workforce Implications**

43. This proposal recommends that the service is commissioned externally. In this scenario the current service employs one member of staff to whom TUPE regulations are likely to apply.

### **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken**

44. As the evidence from the randomised control trial<sup>13</sup> by Coram in 2023 found, families who are referred for FGCs are less likely to be taken to court for decisions about their care. By the end of the study, only three in five children (59%) referred for FGCs had care proceedings issued, compared with 72% of children who did not get a referral.

### **Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks**

45. There is no certainty of Supporting Families funding even though it has been in place since 2012. It is unlikely that central government would remove it completely, however no minister has Supporting Families identified as a responsibility in the new administration and no reassurances have been provided, therefore, it is a risk to consider. If funding was removed this successful early help preventative approach service would need to be presented as a budget pressure to Cabinet which could mean other services may need to reduce in order to fund it.
46. There are four risks identified to outsourcing the FGC service to an external provider:
- Data sharing with an external provider is more complex than sharing information internally. To mitigate this, a collaboration SharePoint site has been implemented. This will be combined with robust information sharing governance processes.
  - Requirements for uplifts could impact on available budget, therefore uplift policies will be written into the contract.
  - Additional bureaucratic step will be required to obtain consent from FGC participants to share information with the provider. This is currently seen as a barrier to access. The consent process will be minimised as much as possible within the terms of GDPR.
  - The provider will be reliant on referrals and therefore some families may miss the opportunity to benefit from an FGC. Work will be done to promote and encourage professionals working with families to consider FGC as part of their support package.

### **Financial Implications**

47. Currently Family Group Conferences are funded from an external grant, Supporting Families. This report assumes that the early help / prevention agenda which has

---

<sup>13</sup> [Groundbreaking Coram study demonstrates significant impact of Family Group Conferencing in preventing children going into care - Coram Group : Coram Group](#)

proven successful in Families and Children is a Council priority and that this funding is ongoing either via the grant, or prioritised general funding. It is further assumed that the cost of recommissioning will be possible at the current contract cost of £180,000 per annum for an equivalent of 180 conferences per annum at an average unit rate of £1,000 per conference.

### Legal Implications

48. Any award of contract will be conducted in accordance with the requirements set out in Part 10 of the Council’s Constitution, the Procurement Manual and the Public Contract Regulations 2015.
49. Legal Services will draft the legal documentation for this matter using a Council template contract which has been tailored to protect the Council’s interests as well as remain commercial. Legal Services will need to be engaged throughout this process, with the relevant legal and procurement advice sought.

### Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

50. A briefing will take place with the Children’s Selects chair on 13<sup>th</sup> September.

### Options Considered

51. Three options were considered:
- To commission the service externally
  - To bring the co-ordination of FGCs in-house
  - To cease providing the service

#### 1. Commission Externally

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigate Risk</b>
Pay structure is more favourable than LA structure £545-566 per conference plus expenses	Limited availability of skilled staff	Risk is held by provider. An experienced provider will have the necessarily skilled staff.
Clearly impartial service with a trusted independent provider		
Robust service specification and contract conditions ensures clear oversight and KPIs		
Write the contract so that the provider is only funded for the meetings that are held.		Risk is held by provider
Quality Assurance undertaken as part of contract management		
Charitable organisations		

can bid for additional funding – this could enhance the service		
There is the opportunity for innovation as part of service specification	Innovation opportunities may deter prospective bidders	Hold a robust market engagement event
Provider provides IT equipment		Provider holds all risk
	Data sharing is more complex with an external provider	Develop collaboration SharePoint site and robust information governance processes
	Requirements for uplifts could impact on available budget	Include uplift policies into the contract
	Additional bureaucratic step required to obtain consent from FGC participants to share info with provider. Currently seen as a barrier.	Ensure consent process is as minimalistic as possible within the terms of GDPR.
	Provider is reliant on referrals and therefore some families may miss the opportunity to benefit from an FGC.	Promote and encourage professionals working with families to consider FGC as part of their support package.

## 2. In-house

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigate Risk</b>
LA has control over recruitment and salaries propose £30-36k per co-ordinator	Targets are not met and therefore, the overall cost per conference would be higher.	Would need to ensure appropriate budget and robust management so that the full complement of conferences is held.
	Team would require a manager and this would incur additional costs.	Cost savings of effective FGCs would balance the cost of a manager.
An LA based service will have the opportunity to liaise closely with other internal teams and promote the use of FGCs council wide.	Recruitment of appropriately skilled staff could be a challenge and this may disrupt the service for a significant period of time	Ensure appropriate pay and conditions.
An LA based service could be more proactive at identifying families who would benefit from an FGC and instigate this option more swiftly		
Consistent workforce	Parents may be less	FGC co-ordinators would sit

with shared organisational values	willing to complete FGC if it is co-ordinated by an LA member of staff, it may appear less impartial	in a separate team to Social Care
LA would have better oversight of the service.	Reduce the perception of impartiality for families	FGC co-ordinators would sit in a separate team to Social Care
Data sharing would be safer as all colleagues would have access to Liquid Logic		
Provide opportunity to innovate the service from continual learning		
Quality Assurance of service by internal team		
	Unable to bid for additional external funding	Fund appropriately
	Legacy cases will need to be carefully managed whilst service is brought in-house	New coordinators to be briefed thoroughly on legacy cases – warm hand-overs made

### 3. Cease Family Group Conference Service

Benefit	Risk	Mitigate Risk
Cost Saving to Council on this contract	More children go into care or need more costly care options	Continue with Family Group Conference offer

52. Neighbouring authorities who have chosen to bring their service inhouse were consulted. The salary range for inhouse co-ordinators is between £30,000 (Grade H)- £36,648 (Grade J) plus an overall supervisor £40,000(Grade L) with the expectation that each coordinator manages between 30 and 50 FGCs a year.

53.

	180 conferences @30 per member of staff plus supervisor	180 conferences @50 per member of staff plus supervisor
In-house	£220,000 - £259,888	£148,000 - £171,932
Commissioned	£170,928	£170,928

54. Commissioning the service allows for a clearly impartial, independent service to be run with a robust specification. The contract written would state that the provider is only funded for the meetings that they hold, this allows the Council greater financial control. The commissioned service also holds the risk and has an opportunity to innovate and pool resources from other contracts enabling this contract to maintain viable.

## Conclusions

55. Family Group Conferences are documented to reduce the need for a family to be taken to court for decisions about their care. This is positive for the children and the wider family and reduces pressure on LA services.
56. The contract for Family Group Conferences should be offered through a procurement process to allow for a clearly impartial independent service to be commissioned with a robust specification. The contract should be written so that the provider is only funded for the meetings that they hold, this allows the Council greater financial control. The commissioned service also holds the risk and has an opportunity to innovate and pool resources from other contracts enabling this contract to maintain viability
57. This report recommends Cabinet agree the following proposals:
- Approve a budget of £900,000 over a possible five years, for the delivery of Family Group Conferences. The contract will be offered initially for three (3) years with a possible two-year (2) extension.
  - Approve that Family Group Conferences is commissioned externally through an open procurement from 1 April 2025.
  - To delegate authority to approve and award a new contract and any future extensions and all associated documents to the Director of Commissioning and the Corporate Director responsible for People in consultation with the Deputy Leader and the Cabinet Member responsible for Children's Services, Education and Skills

### **Alison Elliott (Director of Commissioning)**

---

Report Authors:

Lucy-Anne Bryant, Commissioning Manager, [lucy-anne.bryant@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:lucy-anne.bryant@wiltshire.gov.uk),

Tel: 01225 718068

Emily Wood, Senior Commissioner, [emily.wood@wiltshire.gov.uk](mailto:emily.wood@wiltshire.gov.uk) Tel: 01225 757966

## Background Papers

[Helping families Helping children - Family Rights Group \(frg.org.uk\)](https://www.frg.org.uk)

[Groundbreaking Coram study demonstrates significant impact of Family Group Conferencing in preventing children going into care - Coram Group : Coram Group](#)

[Independent review of children's social care - final report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

[Children Act 1989 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

[Family Group Conference Provision in UK Local Authorities and Associations with Children Looked after Rates | The British Journal of Social Work | Oxford Academic](#)

[Working together to safeguard children 2023: statutory guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

[Leeds-Family-Valued-Evaluation-Report.pdf](#)

[FGC Accreditation - Family Rights Group \(frg.org.uk\)](https://www.frg.org.uk)

---