Briefing

Centre for Justice Innovation

FDAC and Family Help:

Complementary Parts of a Whole-System Response

Purpose

This briefing sets out the Centre for Justice Innovation's policy position on the role of Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) within current children's social care and family justice reform. It has been developed through engagement with FDAC practitioners, judges, researchers, local authorities and wider family justice stakeholders, including through a series of roundtable discussions, and draws on the Centre's existing work on FDAC and wider research on the experiences of families in care proceedings.

This briefing particularly focuses on the relationship between FDAC and Family Help within the Families First Partnership programme.

FDAC and Families First: a shared direction of travel

The Centre for Justice Innovation supports the principles driving current children's social care reform. The Families First Partnership programme's emphasis on early intervention, multidisciplinary practice, relational approaches and safely keeping children with their families closely aligns with what FDAC has demonstrated works in practice. We welcome the investment in Family Help, family group decision-making and family network support as important developments in a more humane, effective and joined-up system.

At the same time, even with strengthened approaches to prevention and early help, the need for specialist court-based interventions for families that do progress to care proceedings will remain. Family Help and FDAC should be understood as complementary parts of a whole-system response: they work with families at different points, with different levels of need, and through different statutory and court frameworks. This briefing sets out what we believe reform must do to ensure both work well together.

What is FDAC?

Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) are a less adversarial, alternative model to standard care proceedings. FDAC offers a trauma-informed, multidisciplinary approach and uses the court as an agent for change: the team builds on the interventions and work that families have done before proceedings are issued and uses the proceedings as a framework to help parents make sustainable changes.

The FDAC model is built around three core features:

- a specialist, independent multidisciplinary team that works with parents during proceedings to understand and address the difficulties that have brought the family before the court, in a less adversarial way than standard care proceedings allow;
- regular non-lawyer reviews, in which the same specially trained judge remains involved throughout the case and engages directly with parents to support accountability, motivation and change. This structure gives parents a genuine voice in the process; evidence shows that this experience of being heard, respected and treated fairly is not incidental to FDAC's effectiveness but central to it, with parents who feel genuinely engaged more motivated to make and sustain change;
- a clear focus on the child's welfare and timescales, supported by the ongoing involvement of the allocated social worker and children's guardian, and by psychological formulation that does more than inform the support offered to the family, it actively shapes the interventions delivered, assesses parents' responses, and allows the team to adapt dynamically as circumstances change, creating a genuinely responsive model grounded in the lived reality of each family rather than a fixed plan applied from the outside.

The Centre's Family Drug and Alcohol Courts: the evidence briefing outlines the robust evidence base for FDAC. This evidence shows that FDAC achieves significantly better outcomes for children and families compared with standard care proceedings, including four times higher rates of reunification. Cost-benefit analysis shows that for every £1 spent on FDAC, £3.20 of net savings are returned to the taxpayer.

The independence of the FDAC team is central to the model's success. Unlike the local authority, the FDAC team is not a party to proceedings. This creates a different dynamic between the team and the family, one that cannot be fully replicated by locality social work teams who hold statutory responsibilities and are directly involved in bringing the application before the court. This independence allows for a fresh approach: FDAC can build on work undertaken during early help and pre-proceedings while also providing independent advice, insight and challenge to the court and other professionals in a way that is distinct from those who are parties to proceedings.

The development of multidisciplinary Family Help teams should strengthen the wider system of support for families, but it does not make an independent FDAC team unnecessary. The independence of the FDAC team must be protected in any reform design, commissioning and implementation.

What the evidence and sector tell us

The evidence base strongly supports FDAC as a specialist, evidence-based intervention for families entering care proceedings. Our engagement with practitioners, judges, academics and family justice stakeholders reinforces a clear set of shared principles for how reform should approach the relationship between FDAC and the wider system.

FDAC and Family Help are not competing or substitutable interventions. They serve different purposes at different points in a family's journey. Strengthening early help is important and welcome, but it will not remove the need for specialist court-based intervention. Some families will continue to need care proceedings, and those who do should have access to the most effective model available.

Our policy asks

As children's social care reforms develop, we are calling on policymakers and reform leaders to act on the following priorities:

1. **Recognise FDAC within the Families First Partnership programme and wider family justice reform through the upcoming Family Justice Strategy**

FDAC should be explicitly recognised as a specialist, evidence-based intervention in care proceedings. Reform planning should set out how FDAC fits alongside Family Help, multi-agency child protection reforms, family network support, family group decision-making and wider family justice reform.

Reform planning should explicitly reject any assumption that the creation of multidisciplinary Family Help teams removes the need for independent FDAC teams.

2. **Protect choice and access for families entering care proceedings**

Where families enter care proceedings and meet FDAC criteria, they should have access to clear information and a genuine choice about whether to enter FDAC or standard care proceedings.

3. Preserve fidelity to the FDAC model while allowing local flexibility

Reforms should protect the core features that underpin FDAC effectiveness: judicial continuity; non-lawyer reviews; an independent multidisciplinary team; therapeutic and trauma-informed practice; effective clinical supervision; relationship-based intervention; and work underpinned by psychological formulation.

At the same time, reforms should recognise that FDACs operate through a range of local delivery models. Local flexibility is important so that FDAC teams can respond to the needs of their families, communities and local service landscape. The aim should be to protect fidelity to the FDAC model, not to prescribe a single organisational structure.

4. Build the evidence and data needed to understand changing demand and outcomes

Government, local areas and family justice partners should build the data needed to understand how reforms affect care proceedings, FDAC referrals, reunification, kinship outcomes, re-entry into proceedings and family stability over time.

It will be important to avoid treating continued entry into care proceedings as evidence that early help has failed. If fewer families enter care proceedings overall, those who do are likely to have higher levels of complexity and need. Outcome measures should therefore account for changing case mix, the longer-term nature of recovery and behaviour change, and the importance of sustained progress alongside reunification outcomes. This work should build on the Centre's existing FDAC data and evidence, including Family Drug and Alcohol Courts: the evidence, the FDAC Annual report 2025, and ongoing FDAC quarterly reporting.

5. Support sustainable funding and commissioning

Funding and commissioning arrangements should recognise the role of specialist problem-solving interventions such as FDAC. Short-term or insecure commissioning undermines workforce stability, continuity of relationships and the quality of therapeutic practice. Reform implementation should support sustainable local commissioning arrangements that allow FDACs to retain skilled teams, deliver high-quality therapeutic intervention and maintain fidelity to the FDAC Service Standards.

6. Strengthen joined-up support before, during and after proceedings

Families should experience a more joined-up system of support across early help, pre-proceedings, care proceedings and post-proceedings. Reform should strengthen links between Family Help, FDAC, local authority social work, Cafcass, courts and community services, including attention to how positive work undertaken with families before proceedings can be built upon during FDAC, while preserving the independence and distinctiveness of the FDAC team.

There should also be clearer development of post-proceedings and aftercare support. Recovery and family stability are long-term processes. The ICPR Improving Care Proceedings report reinforces the importance of ensuring that the voices of parents, kinship carers and children are central to public law reform, supporting the need for proceedings and post-proceedings support to be more relational, humane and responsive to families' experiences.

7. Use learning from FDAC to inform wider family justice practice

Learning from FDAC should inform wider family justice reform, particularly in relation to problem-solving practice, judicial continuity, relational approaches, trauma-informed work and multidisciplinary support. This should be done in a way that protects existing FDACs and does not dilute the specialist model. FDAC principles have an important role to play in developing a wider family justice strategy, particularly where reforms seek to make proceedings more humane, effective and focused on sustainable outcomes for children and families.

Implementation Questions

Through our engagement with sector stakeholders, several important questions have emerged about how reform will be implemented in practice and how the reforms integrate with FDAC. These centre on four areas:

System design: how Family Help and FDAC can operate as genuinely complementary parts of a whole-system response, and how continuity of support can be maintained for families moving from early help or pre-proceedings into care proceedings, while preserving the independence and distinctiveness of FDAC.

Capacity and commissioning: how existing FDACs can be protected through reform implementation, including those operating through different local structures, and how funding arrangements can support workforce stability, clinical supervision and multidisciplinary practice without placing additional pressure on already stretched local systems.

Evidence and outcomes: how data can be used to understand care proceedings, FDAC access, reunification, kinship outcomes and re-entry into proceedings - and how outcome frameworks and court timetables can recognise the longer-term nature of recovery and sustainable family change, particularly if reforms mean that fewer but more complex cases enter proceedings.

Post-proceedings: how aftercare support should be developed to help families sustain progress after FDAC interventions, and how the voices of parents, kinship carers and children can be more consistently centred in family justice reform.

The Centre will continue to work with practitioners, judges, researchers, families and wider sector partners to address these questions, strengthen the evidence base and advocate for reform that protects FDAC while using its learning to improve the wider family justice system. We welcome engagement from policymakers and reform leaders on the issues raised in this briefing.

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About the Centre for Justice Innovation

The Centre for Justice Innovation seek to build a justice system which all of its citizens believe is fair and effective. We champion practice innovation and evidence-led policy reform in the UK's justice systems. We are a registered UK charity.

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