

The Family Drug and Alcohol Courts

Report of the Director of Children's Services

1. Summary

1.1. This report provides an overview of the outcomes from the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) model in Stockport, progress in the development of a GM FDAC model, future vision, and timescales.

2. Introduction

2.1. Parental substance misuse is estimated nationally to be a significant factor in nearly two-thirds of care applications and parents with substance misuse problems are often involved in repeat care proceedings on subsequent children¹. It is a leading cause of child abuse and neglect and is associated with a range of child health and developmental difficulties. Recovery from parental substance misuse is a lengthy and uncertain process, a factor which may help explain why family reunification is particularly fragile in these circumstances.² Parental substance misuse is challenging, and this leads to many children becoming looked after or living in alternative care arrangements.³

2.2. FDACS are a problem-solving trauma informed approach to care proceedings. They are specially designed to work with parents who struggle with drug and alcohol use, FDAC parents will often have other difficulties, including mental health problems, trauma, and experiences of domestic abuse.

2.3. FDACs are different than standard care proceedings as they work with the parents to help them solve the problems that have led the local authority bringing the family to court. To do this, the same judge reviews the case every fortnight in an informal review meeting with each parent.

2.4. Alongside the trained FDAC Judges a team of professionals with different specialisms in areas such as substance misuse, child protection and safeguarding, domestic abuse, mental health and trauma work closely with the family during the court process.

2.5. The FDAC model strengthens the motivation of parents to overcome their problems and is guided by the driving principle of offering parents an intensive service to help them overcome entrenched difficulties. The primary aim of FDAC is to improve outcomes for children and families, ensuring that children can either live safely with parents at the end of care proceedings or, where reunification is not possible, have the best chance for permanency and stability outside the family home.

¹ Parents who misuse drugs and alcohol: effective interventions in social work and child protection. (2011) Forrester, D.; Harwin, J. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

² Roy, J (2020). Children living with parental substance misuse: A cross-sectional profile of children and families referred to children's social care. Child & Family Social Work. Vol 26, Issue 1.

³ Evaluation of the children of alcohol dependant parents, Dept of Health and Social care (2023)

3. Stockport FDAC

3.1. The implementation of the standard FDAC model in Stockport began in January 2020 via a successful bid to the Department of Education- Supporting Families: Investing in Practice Programme for a period of 18months. The first cases being seen in January 2021 (delayed due to COVID restrictions).

3.2. FDAC Team

3.3. The Stockport FDAC team is based on the national standard FDAC model and consists of:

- 1 Service Lead (social work qualified)
- 2 Senior Social Workers
- 1 Specialist Domestic Abuse Worker (additional)
- 1 Specialist Substance Misuse Worker
- 1 Parenting Worker (Video Interactive Guidance trained)
- 1 Specialist Clinical Psychologist
- 1 Business Support

3.4. The FDAC brings together the expertise and specialism of all team members, to contribute to the assessment, formulation and intervention planning throughout the 'Trial for Change'

- Specialist risk assessment and risk management is ensured through the combined expertise of the team.
- The presence of a clinical psychologist is central to formulation and reduces the burden on parents to complete additional independent psychological assessments with different professionals.
- Similarly, the presence of highly experienced social workers, a parenting worker, a substance misuse worker and a domestic abuse worker enable parents to access specialist support during proceedings, rather than being put on a waiting list.
- The FDAC model's approach to assessment usually negates the need for Part 25 applications. The specialist team provides a dynamic assessment, across the 'Trial for Change'; this provides stronger evidence than a one-off expert witness assessment. Furthermore, the FDAC assessment benefits from the combined information available from multiple team members, and multiple perspectives, going far beyond one expert clinical judgement.
- The three times weekly drug and alcohol testing by the FDAC team provides motivation and evidence of a reduction or abstinence in drug/alcohol use.
- Where both parents are part of the FDAC model, the FDAC team assists in reducing the work of the locality social work teams, as all parental assessments are undertaken by the team, leaving the locality social workers more time to work directly with the children.

4. Stockport FDAC Data from January 2021 until September 2023

4.1. There have been 26 concluded cases, working intensively with 47 parents and 37 children. The FDAC team are currently working with a further 10 Stockport cases.

- 26 children being returned to one or both parents' care (in 2 cases this was solely with the father).
- 9 children being placed in the care of close family members on (8 on Special Guardianship Order SGO and 1 foster initially then move to SGO).
- 2 cases resulted in adoption.
- 2 cases, parents have gone on to have more children and no social care intervention has been required.
- 18 parents became abstinent from all drugs and alcohol.
- Average age of parents was 34 years old.
- No part 25's (expert assessments) due to the expertise in the FDAC team.
- 3 contested hearings, however 2 of these contested cases concluded within one day compared to 3 to 5 days in standard proceedings

4.2. Stockport were successful in a bid to GMCA for a Specialist Domestic Abuse and Relationship Worker to join the FDAC team from June 2021 to March 2023. Some of the outcomes achieved through this additionality to the team include:

- 70% of parents referred to FDAC have required domestic abuse interventions within the care proceedings timeframe (this includes interventions for both victims and instigators of abuse).
- 100% of victims accepted into FDAC engaged throughout the process and all were supported in both Family Court and Criminal Court where necessary.
- There was a reported 100% increase in awareness of domestic abuse and the impact this had on children.
- 75% improvement in emotional well-being, following the specialist interventions.
- 66% of instigators of abuse accepted into FDAC engaged throughout the process and all were supported in both Family Court and Criminal Court where necessary.
- There was a 66% reduction in physical violence, 66% reduction in the number of reported incidents and 33% decrease in non-violent threats, following the specialist interventions.

4.3. The FDAC team gather feedback from parents and professionals at the end of proceedings to evaluate what is going well, what we can improve and learning.:

FDAC parents feedback

'I felt the regular non-lawyer reviews and the relationship the judge built with me made it feel fairer; they seemed to have more oversight of the case as it progressed as opposed to the standard process whereby there may only be a couple of hearings and parents are invisible'

'Morning, just want to say thank you. Today is the day K gets placed with me I'm excited, nervous, extremely emotional but so proud that I actually did it! These past 6months have been the hardest, challenging, emotional rewarding months ever, I have changed so much as a person, my life has changed so much and I'm so grateful and thankyou to all of you being there for me and supporting me and all the hard work you do xxxx'

5. FDAC National Research

5.1. Since the first pilot site opened in 2006, the FDAC model has been of significant interest to researchers. Research suggests that, compared to the outcomes of standard care proceedings for similar types of cases, FDACs significantly increase safe, stable family reunification and parental substance misuse cessation⁵, decreases the likelihood of future child neglect and abuse, and decreases recurrent care proceedings⁴ Moreover, research, looking at a five-year follow-up period after proceedings end, strongly suggests that FDACs' positive outcomes are durable over time⁴ [What Does Research Say About FDACs? | FDAC](#).

5.2. The findings from previous and recent research correlates with what we are finding from the data in Stockport, this can also be seen in the FDAC Annual Report 2022/2023

5.3. The most recent research (August 2023), by Foundations, the Government What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, published a major national evaluation of FDAC, which compared all cases from 14 FDAC sites (including Stockport) with a matched comparison group in the most comprehensive study of the model to date⁵ Headlines from the evaluation are outlined below:

Reunification	Substance use cessation	Contested hearings	Part 25 applications
52% in FDAC compared to 12.5% in matched comparison group	4 times more likely to be achieved in FDAC than standard proceedings (33.6% v 8.1%)	4.2% in FDAC 23.8% in standard proceedings	2% in FDAC 37% in standard proceedings

- Children in FDAC sites had lower probability of being placed in local authority care compared with non-FDAC care proceedings (28.6% versus 54.7%). Link to full report can be found here [Family Drug and Alcohol Courts - Foundations](#).
- There is strong evidence that being in FDAC significantly increases the likelihood of children being reunified with their parents at the end of care proceedings. There is promising evidence that the family reunifications created by FDAC are safer and more stable than those in standard proceedings.⁵
- There is evidence that FDAC significantly increases the number of family or kinship care placements, and decreases the likelihood that children are placed in local authority care.⁵
- There is strong evidence that parents in FDAC are significantly more likely to become abstinent from substances.⁵

5.4. In addition to the quantitative outcomes there are some key qualitative aspects regarding the success of the model, for example:

- The unique package of support from the FDAC team.⁵
- The independence of the team from local authority social work teams, which supported parents' engagement with and trust of the programme.⁵
- The problem solving and non-adversarial approach and ethos of FDAC, which has a focus on relationship building, openness and transparency and is beneficial in supporting engagement with parents.⁵

6. Developments

6.1. A weekly project board was set up in 2022 with key senior leaders to look at options for participation and other key factors based on Stockport hosting a Greater Manchester FDAC offer.

6.2. Manchester and Wigan Local Authority joined FDAC in April 2023 and Bolton are due to join in April 2024.

6.3. An FDAC round table event was held on the 30th of October 2023, chaired by the Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester and to look at the opportunity of this.

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- ⁴ Harwin et al (2014). Changing lifestyles, keeping children safe: an evaluation of the first Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) in care proceedings. Brunel University, (2014)
 - ⁴Harwin et al (2014). Changing lifestyles, keeping children safe: an evaluation of the first Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) in care proceedings. Brunel University, 2014.
 - ⁴Harwin et al (2011). The Family Drug & Alcohol Court (FDAC) Evaluation Project. Brunel University
 - ⁴Whitehead & Reeder. (2016). Better Courts: the financial impact of the London Family Drug and Alcohol Court. Centre for Justice Innovation.
 - ⁵Evaluation of the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts August 23 Foundations.org.uk.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. The Manchester Family Court serves families from all parts of GM and provides an excellent opportunity to develop GM wide access to this alternative approach to standard proceedings for families where parental substance use is a significant factor.
- 7.2. The evidence of impact for FDAC's is compelling in terms of reduction in the numbers of children becoming looked after and the positive experience of the families going through court proceedings, regardless of the outcome.
- 7.3. In addition to the national and local evaluations, cost benefit analysis and experience locally, Josh MacAlister has referenced the FDAC model in the recent 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care' (May 2022).
- 7.4. The Specialist FDAC Judges have stated their support for the FDAC to continue in Stockport and for the expansion in GM. The FDAC Judges have also stated the impact this approach and specialist training is having on their wider practice.
- 7.5. FDAC is a great opportunity to improve outcomes for some of the children and families facing the biggest challenges, to reduce the high costs of family breakdown and to promote Stockport ambitions for public service reform.
- 7.6. The hard work and skills of the Stockport FDAC team, the Courts and our staff in the Stockport Family Social Work teams have made FDAC a success in Stockport – more families are safely reunified, and more parents successfully cease their substance misuse and improve their relationships.
- 7.7. There is clear scope to expand the FDAC and build on the success of the past two years in Stockport, however currently, FDACs in England do not have access ringfenced central government funding.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1. Note the contents of this report.

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Appendix



FDAC case study.pptx