

# The power and potential of space and place in family group conferencing: Reimagining the role of the venue in child protection practice

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## Abstract

Family Group Conferencing is a family-led decision-making process used in children's social care in the UK. Unlike traditional meetings between families and professionals when there is a safeguarding concern, Family Group Conferences are often held outside children's services' premises in a 'neutral' venue. In this article, we critique the idea that a meeting location can be neutral as spaces may be experienced differently, and hold multiple meanings, for the family, their network and professionals who take part. Starting from the premise that relationships with and in space have the potential to disrupt power imbalances and affect families' and professionals' experiences, we propose the meeting location for the Family Group Conference is instead viewed as a core component of the intervention. This bespoke approach begins with the question, how could the meeting venue improve the experiences of Family Group Conferencing for families and professionals? To answer this question, we use two fictional vignettes written from the

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perspectives of a young woman and her social worker. The vignettes were created based on the combined practice and research experience of the co-authors and are used in the article as a tool to theorise the possible benefits and limitations of considering the meeting venue as an intervention component. By reimagining how meeting somewhere meaningful to the family could influence families' and professionals' experiences of Family Group Conferencing this paper contributes to social work research and practice in the UK and beyond.

### **Keywords**

Family group conferencing, space, place, children, vignettes, family-led decision-making

## **Introduction**

There is a growing body of research which recognises the importance of space and place in shaping children's social work practice (Akesson et al., 2017; Bryant and Williams, 2020; Disney et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2018; Jeyasingham, 2018). Some of this work highlights the challenges institutional spaces pose to the way families and professionals work together (Stanley et al., 2016). Factors including the atmosphere of the room, the layout of the furniture (Ogle and Vincent, 2022) and where people sit (Race and Frost, 2022) may affect people's experience of decision-making meetings. Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a process of family-led decision-making used in children's social care. One part of this process is the Family Group Conference itself, a meeting where the family and their network of extended family and friends lead on making a plan to address safeguarding concerns (hereafter we refer to the entire Family Group Conferencing process as 'FGC' and the meeting, or conference itself, as 'the FGC' or 'FGCs'). Unlike traditional ways of working, a central tenant of FGC is that families are involved in agreeing on the practicalities of the meeting, and this includes having a say in where and when it takes place (Family Rights Group, 2022). Yet, there is a paucity of research evidencing how, on what basis and by whom decisions are made about where FGCs are held and the influence this has on families' and professionals' experiences of the meeting. Evidence from management research suggests practical decision-making around meeting times and locations has implications for the power dynamics in meetings (Huxham and Vangen, 2004). In the case of FGC, including families at an early stage in practical decision-making could influence their sense of ownership and engagement throughout the process making it a worthwhile topic to explore.

Despite the centrality of place in FGC, it is not conceptualised as a place-based intervention in the way that some other social work interventions are. For example, Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin and Lloyd, 2022) explicitly recognises, targets and incorporates the places in which young people feel safe or at risk within the intervention model. In contrast, FGC acknowledges that where the meeting is held might impact the intervention. To this end, in the UK, some practice guidance, reports and research recommend FGCs are held in 'neutral' venues outside of the family's home or the local

authority offices to address power imbalances between families and professionals (Munro et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2023). Meeting in a neutral venue is considered important and it is common to hear the neutral venue referenced as a gold standard in practice. However, the recommendation to hold an FGC in a neutral venue is not consistently included in FGC quality standards or practice guidance (Family Rights Group, 2022).

In this article, we use two fictional vignettes to look beyond current practice and theorise the power and potential of viewing the venue as a key intervention component in FGC. Intentionally and creatively considering what the meeting space could do from the onset, and choosing a venue that best meets a family's unique needs and circumstances, could have positive implications for families' and professionals' experiences of FGC which are currently unexplored. Moreover, reconceptualising the meeting venue as a key intervention component could help bring consistency to practice recommendations about where FGCs are held.

## Family group conferencing

FGC is a voluntary process for decision-making that aims to bring a network of family and friends together around an individual to enhance their support system, address challenges, or enable the individual to achieve a goal. FGC originated in New Zealand in the 1980s as a way of including Māori children's extended family network in their care planning in response to discrimination and institutional racism in social services (Rangihau, 1986). Since then, the popularity of FGC has grown, and it is used across the UK in various contexts, including in child protection social work when there is a concern about the welfare of a child and the ability of the parents/carers to keep the child safe.

The FGC model is well developed in academic literature and practice reports (Frost et al., 2014; Mason et al., 2017; Morris and Connolly, 2012; Munro et al., 2017). There are three stages to the FGC process – the preparation stage, the conference itself and the review of the plan (Stabler et al., 2019). During the preparation stage, an independent coordinator works with the family network and professionals to prepare them for the conference. To note, we use 'professionals' in this article to refer to anyone who is involved in the FGC as part of their paid work recognising that the parents and their network may be professionals in their own right. Involving the family and their network is central to FGC. This includes the child, their immediate and extended family, and their wider social network. The preparation stage involves making practical arrangements, such as deciding who should be at the FGC, when and where it should take place. According to FGC practice guidance, 'the date, time, and venue for the FGC should be informed by and agreed by the family' (Family Rights Group, 2022: 2).

Following the preparation stage, the conference itself consists of three parts which are facilitated by an independent coordinator – information sharing, private family time, and agreeing on the plan. Professionals and the family network both attend the first part. All information that is shared with the family at this point should have been shared during the preparation stage. After this, the professionals leave while private family time takes place. In the context of child protection social work, private family time offers the opportunity for the family and their network to develop a plan to address concerns around the child's

safety. There is no set amount of time for this part of the conference, and it often involves the sharing of food. After private family time, in the last part of the conference, professionals are invited back to hear the family's plan, ensure that it addresses their concerns and offer support.

### *Space and place in child protection social work*

Social scientists often make a distinction between 'space' and 'place' asserting that people socially construct place by giving meaning to space (Cresswell, 2014). In their editorial of the edited volume on space and place in Qualitative Social Work, Bryant and Willians (2020), citing space and place scholar Doreen Massey define place 'as a meeting place rather than as always already coherent, as open rather than bounded, as an ongoing production rather than pre-given' (34). This definition is useful as it recognises the shifting, multiple, and at times, conflicting meanings that places hold for different people. In short, place may be defined as a 'meaningful location' (Cresswell, 2014: 12).

People give meaning to space through personal experiences, by naming it, through storytelling, by sharing ideologies, making memories and developing emotional attachments (Cresswell, 2008, 2011, 2014; Nairn and Kraftl, 2015). Spaces and places are not static and include physical objects, social relations and mobilities and may stir up feelings of belonging, place attachment, or the absence of both among those that inhabit or imagine them (Akesson et al., 2017; Massey, 1991). Power relations are necessary to consider where space and place are concerned because once established, place can be used as a social structure by which others make determinations on 'who and what belongs where and when' (Cresswell, 2011: 237).

In child protection social work, while there is some research on the impact of space and place in meetings between professionals (see Beddoe et al., 2022) the impact of space and place on meetings and decision-making between families and professionals is under researched. Studies focused on the experiences of parents and children in child protection conferences highlight that they struggle to make themselves heard during meetings with professionals, and do not always feel able to have their say (Cossar et al., 2016; Muench et al., 2017). These studies do not set out to explore whether the places where child protection conferences are held influence families' experiences, however, the influence of space and place on children's involvement is evident in the analysis. For example, Ogle and Vincent's (2022) research on how children express their views in child protection conferences found that the physical environment and the atmosphere of the room may inhibit children's participation. They found that the formal setting of these meetings evoked feelings of nervousness, fear, and shyness among children. In some cases, sitting near a social worker or the conference chair made children feel reassured (Ogle and Vincent, 2022; Race and Frost, 2022). Space and place are often unacknowledged but influential factors shaping families' experiences of meeting with professionals when there is a child protection concern.

## *Space and place in FGC*

Family Group Conferences change the power dynamic between families and professionals because professionals are invited to trust families with finding solutions to the challenges they face (Holland et al., 2005). Barn and Das (2016) explain how meeting outside the local authority offices is a continuation of this logic:

It was believed that a statutory social services department office as a venue for an FGC may be perceived as threatening [to families] and that a neutral space could minimise feelings of mistrust and help to promote better [family] engagement. Often, a community organisation location was deemed to be more acceptable and less threatening (951).

Local authorities throughout the UK take various approaches to the recommendation to hold FGC in a neutral venue. In some local authorities, families draw on the skills and knowledge of the independent FGC coordinator to help choose a safe, collaborative, and culturally appropriate meeting location (Barn and Das, 2016; Holland and Rivett, 2008). In other local authorities, while the practice is not documented, decisions about where FGCs are held are likely informed by practical constraints such as limited budgets. The uneven application of budget cuts as a result of austerity have deepened the already uneven geographies of wealth in local authorities' children's services across England (Disney and Lloyd, 2020). This means some local authorities have more resources than others, and therefore potentially more opportunities to explore innovative practices.

The idea that a meeting venue can or should be 'neutral' is problematic because places are never neutral, they hold different socio-symbolic meanings, and these meanings may be shared or individually constructed; shaped by a person's past experiences, memories, and assumptions. If one acknowledges that spaces and places hold various and sometimes contested meanings, this begs the question – how does the meeting venue impact people's experiences of FGC?

Qualitative research provides a glimpse of the variety of FGC venues used in the UK, and the often-unanticipated role they played in the intervention. Holland and Rivett (2008) found a family in their study benefited from meeting in a venue outside of their home because they felt their home was distracting. The venue enabled the family's network to come together to listen and understand each other's points of view. Some argue that the explicit choice of venue may have different meanings and potentials for different ethnic and racial groups, but more research is needed to explore this further (Mohamed, 2024). In Mitchell's (2018) research in Scotland, an FGC was held in a family members' home but the reasons for this were not included. In other research, the venue choice was made based on available transport and geographical accessibility to facilitate the families' attendance (Flynn et al., 2007; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2010). Insight can also be drawn from exceptional practice examples. In adult social care in the London Borough of Camden, professionals worked with individuals to identify a venue that was meaningful to them. For example, a woman had her FGC on the stage of a theatre where she had once performed (Fisher et al., 2022).

When the location of the FGC is highlighted in research findings, it is typically noted as a family's preference or with a brief explanation of how the location enabled the engagement of the family. In adult social care, there is evidence of innovative practice with regards to the FGC meeting venue, but this is far from widespread and there is no evidence of this happening in children's social care. There is a need for further creative theorising to unpack the power and potential of the meeting location in shaping families' and professionals' experiences of FGC when there is a child protection concern.

### *Using vignettes as a creative approach to theorising practice*

To theorise the potential benefits of intentionally considering the FGC meeting location as a key intervention component, we took a creative approach. Drawing on our combined research (LS, BB, and TF) and practice (TF) experiences, the co-authors, together with a creative writer (LM) developed vignettes to theorise possibilities that may reach beyond standard practice in the UK. A vignette is a short, evocative scene used to describe or illustrate a larger phenomenon. While our vignettes are fictional, the characters we created, and the situations that we placed them in, reflect the life circumstances of people who could be offered an FGC in the UK today. This approach is not unprecedented and we were inspired by [Parkinson and colleagues \(2018\)](#) who drew on their professional and practice experience to create a fictitious collective case-study as a prompt for considering the use of FGC with older adults. They took this approach because they were investigating a new field of practice with little research evidence ([Parkinson et al., 2018](#)). Beyond social work research, we also draw on [Fish and colleagues \(2022\)](#) who used vignettes in their research on educational practices in New Zealand. They write:

Vignette texts provide space for the imagined characters and, therefore, us, the authors, to assert opinions, test and revise theories, raise misgivings and draw conclusions. Vignettes offer the writer and reader a forum to disrupt understandings, explore tentative suggestions, and imagine alternative possibilities by forging a creative space within the text ([Fish et al., 2022](#): 38).

Like Fish and colleagues, we use vignettes to 'imagine alternative possibilities' in child protection practice. However, we did not conduct an empirical study, so unlike Parkinson and colleagues and Fish and colleagues who used vignettes as a data collection method, we used vignette as a theoretical tool. Creating vignettes allowed us to reimagine a hopeful future version of social work practice where the meeting location plays a key role in improving families' experiences of FGC.

To develop the vignettes, the co-authors met for a day-long in-person workshop where we drew on our combined research and practice experiences to create personas for two imagined characters - a young mother and her social worker. Personas are fictional composite characters. Typically used as a design tool in sectors such as marketing, personas are often used to encourage empathy with different user groups and identify their needs ([Salminen et al., 2022](#)). This involved writing the character's name on the middle of a piece of flipchart paper, and creating a spider diagram about their lives, preferences and

backgrounds. We assigned each character a name, age and identified the important people in their lives. After crafting a rich backstory for each character, the creative writer went away and used this to draft two vignettes. The process of creating the personas helped us to think more deeply about the characters and what they might think and feel and created a framework for pooling our research and practice experiences. Throughout the day-long workshop, we discussed how someone who is about to have an FGC might feel, the life circumstances that could have led them to that place, and the potential impact that meeting in a meaningful venue could have on their experience. We used vignettes rather than traditional empirical research to address our questions because it is not standard practice for local authorities in England to consider the meeting venue as a core intervention component in FGC. Yet, as the literature in this article illustrates, space and place influence families' experiences of meetings with professionals in the context of children's social care. Using vignettes allowed us to start a conversation that we hope will cause researchers and professionals to creatively consider the possibilities of the meeting location, a currently underutilised and under theorised intervention component.

In the remainder of the article, we critically reflect on the potential of considering the meeting location as a core part of FGC.

### *Theorising the role of the meeting location*

The following vignettes are set in a fictional local authority in an urban setting. They focus on the person for whom the FGC has been organised and the social worker that has made the FGC referral. This choice was made to reflect on the potential difference between FGC and other social work led meetings. Other participants will experience the location differently, and their experiences would be an equally valid focus, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

The first vignette is from the perspective of Grace, a care experienced 15-year-old who is 6-months pregnant and undergoing a Section 47 assessment. Grace is about to have an FGC in a social club, a venue that is meaningful to her because she has fond memories of a childhood birthday there with her family. Grace's FGC Coordinator helped her explore her family network and her aunt Meg who she lives with, her boyfriend Alfie who is the father of her child and his family, her brother George, her best friend Suze, hopefully her mother, as well as other friends and supporters, will attend her FGC. The second vignette is from the perspective of her social worker, Stephanie. Stephanie worked with Grace when she was in care and has a relationship with her. She is instinctively uncertain about holding the FGC in a social club where alcohol is served. The focus of the vignettes was informed by gaps in the current literature. We chose to concentrate on the lead up to the FGC in Grace's vignette because the family's role in choosing and preparing a space ahead of the meeting is largely absent from the literature. There is also, to our knowledge, little literature surrounding how a meeting space may make professionals feel. We therefore included more on this topic in Stephanie's vignette. We imagine that Grace was given the opportunity to choose the venue for the FGC by the FGC Coordinator and the social worker during the preparation stage of the FGC. Just as professionals spend time with families to identify their social networks, professionals could dedicate time to

thinking creatively with families about where they want to hold the FGC. We imagine the that following vignettes were preceded by conversations between Grace, Stephanie and her FGC Coordinator about where Grace feels most comfortable, the accessibility needs of her and her family, as well what she hopes the atmosphere of the FGC will be.

These first-person accounts consider the potential and implications of treating the venue as a key intervention component from both Grace's and Stephanie's perspectives. It should be noted that the vignettes are not data, they are realistic, but purely fictional, used here to spark further critique and theorising in the remainder of the article.

## Grace's story

The last time I was here I was ten and covered in my own birthday cake, I guess that's why I wanted to come back for my family group meeting thing. Belvedern Social Club looks homey but a bit shit, so me and Suze have come early to do it up with baby shower decorations before everyone arrives. Alfie is in the corner blowing up all the balloons for us. I've seen how to put them up on Insta, and I really want it perfect.

It hasn't changed much in five years, that birthday party was so fun, I really want that vibe for my meeting. I'm nervous about everyone being together, and I'm excited for the baby, but I know not all of my family is. My mum is a maybe, but you never know which mum is coming. I'm hoping the bar downstairs is closed.

I've had so many meetings with social since I moved in with Meg, in those grim rooms with a big table with all those people staring at me. That's why when my social worker Stephanie asked where I wanted my meeting, I chose somewhere totally different. I've got loads of pics up on the walls of my friends, family and scans of the baby.

My family pulled through and helped with the food, George even got me a special cake with lots of icing. I think that they are trying hard to be supportive. Not gonna lie, once the meeting bit is over, I want it to feel like a party. A party for me and Alfie, he's got family coming too. Think it might be awkward, the first time everyone is meeting and that, but everyone knows it's important.

The dusty chairs are the same ones I used for party games when I was small. Suze and Alfie are putting them out for everyone coming to the meeting. Think my brother's coming, some friends, my head of year who has really helped me through things at school. I'm going to show everyone that I'm ready. My people arrive with presents for the baby and food for the table. It feels like a party already.

In this vignette, Grace chose to have her meeting in the Belvedern Social Club, a venue that is meaningful to her because of her positive memories of a childhood birthday there. In the following discussion we highlight how holding the FGC in a venue that was meaningful to Grace could improve Grace and her families' experiences of the meeting.



## *A sense of ownership*

The principles of FGC encourage families' involvement in choosing a venue. In practice, children and young people are not often consulted about where FGCs are held. As researchers and practitioners, we have observed that a 'neutral' venue is often suggested to a parent/carer by a professional which is affordable for the local authority to hire and accessible to both professionals and the family. Holding an FGC outside of local authority children's services premises and the family home is intended to break down power hierarchies and ensure that neither professionals nor families are advantaged by being in familiar surroundings (Barn and Das, 2016). However, the idea that a meeting venue can or should be neutral, that is, devoid of meaning, is a misnomer. Neutral spaces become meaningful places as soon as people enter them carrying their own histories, beliefs, assumptions and memories. Basing the choice of venue strictly on an attempt to level the power playing field fails to recognise the other roles that the meeting location may play in FGC. Involving the family, and children and young people in particular, in the process of choosing a meeting venue that is right for them, be that in a community centre, a relative's home, or a school, and exploring the potential role that the meeting location could do more to improve families' experiences than taking a straightforward 'not in LA premises' 'not in a family home' approach to FGC locations. Through their involvement in the planning and decision making around the venue, families may develop a greater sense of ownership of the FGC ahead of the meeting.

The first few lines of Grace's vignette point to her active involvement in preparing for the FGC. In Grace's story she says, 'me and Suze have come early to do it up with baby shower decorations before everyone arrives. Alfie is in the corner blowing up all the balloons for us. I've seen how to put them up on Insta, and I really want it perfect.' Grace's active involvement with her network in preparing the venue illustrates that she is taking a leading role in her FGC. FGC, unlike other types of meetings between families and professionals, can encourage active participation from all the family network, no matter their age.

The opportunity to choose and customise the meeting venue may be particularly meaningful for children and young people, a demographic group who are often excluded, or forgotten, in the design, planning and decision making around how public and community spaces are used (Skelton and Gough, 2013). Young people in particular are often denied access to spaces when adults view them as 'out of place' (Naim and Krafl, 2015: 4), or a nuisance (Pain, 2006; Skelton and Gough, 2013). Giving young people the opportunity to choose the meeting venue could potentially demonstrate that social care professionals care about and understand young people's position and experiences.

If children and young people, their family, and their wider network are intentionally included in decisions about where the FGC is held, and they choose a place that they have a personal connection to, this could increase their sense of ownership over the meeting. We propose that if those who the FGC is about have a sense of ownership from the start, this could benefit them by encouraging their participation in the meeting and their future care planning.

### *A positive anticipation ahead of the FGC*

From the vignette, we can extrapolate that Grace was looking forward to her FGC in part because she was integrally involved in choosing where it would take place, who would be there, and what the venue would look like. The aim of her FGC is to make a plan to ensure she and her baby are safe and looked after. It is fitting that the FGC is held in a place where she has fond childhood memories of being nurtured and cared for by her family. Familiarity with the venue, and a sense of connection to place based on positive memories, may help combat anxiety and give families a positive feeling of anticipation ahead of the meeting.

In addition, the geographical location of a meeting may also be significant. A venue that is in an individuals' community, for example, may feel intrinsically more accessible and welcoming than a venue that they have never been to, or that they must travel a considerable distance to reach. Meeting in one's community could decrease worries around travel ahead of the meeting and may be empowering for families who feel a strong sense of connection or belonging in their local area. If professionals dedicate time and attention not only to exploring a family's social network and connections, but the places and spaces where they have a strong connection to, then the meeting venue could become a central intervention component that fosters a hopeful feeling of anticipation ahead of the meeting and sets families up to have a positive experience at their FGC.

### *A sense of comfort during the meeting*

The meeting venue may create the conditions for families to feel comfortable and engaged during a meeting. This is alluded to in Grace's story when she contrasts her choice of venue for her FGC with the typical meeting locations where child protection social work usually takes place. She says, *'I've had so many meetings with social since I moved in with Meg, in those grim rooms with a big table with all those people staring at me.'* This part of Grace's story sadly mirrors the reality within children's services in the UK today. Children and young people, families and professionals have commented on the difficulties of holding meetings in what are often uncomfortable institutional settings (Dickens et al., 2015; London Borough of Camden, 2019). Grace goes on explain that that is why she chose to meet *'somewhere totally different.'* The opportunity to meet somewhere familiar, local, and/or meaningful could help children and young people and their families to feel more comfortable discussing deeply personal, and often difficult subjects.

The way that a person feels in a particular place is affected by the atmosphere of the space (For more social work research on atmosphere see: Ferguson, 2010; Hicks, 2020). The atmosphere is shaped by innumerable different variables – from the temperature of the room to the way that seating is arranged to the greeting that one receives on arrival. The vignette provides a snapshot of what Grace's FGC meeting venue was like. Grace notes, *'I've got loads of pics up on the walls of my friends, family and scans of the baby. My family pulled through and helped with the food, George even got me a special cake with lots of icing.'* In research on FGC, the presence of food is cited as a factor that helps make people feel more comfortable (Barn and Das, 2016; Bell and Wilson, 2006). Food

and food practices are socially significant for children and young people and play a key role in their relationships with others (Neely et al., 2014) and sharing food can help create the conditions for relationship building and collaboration (Absolom and Roberts, 2011; Rees et al., 2012). Offering and sharing food at the FGC could contribute to fostering a welcoming atmosphere, allowing participants to feel more comfortable and open to sharing their perspectives.

Grace describes the social club as *'homey but a bit shit'* and makes reference to the dusty chairs. This is meant to signify that a venue does not have to be expensive or elaborate to be meaningful to a child or a family. The reality of austerity constrains local authority children's services budgets in the UK (Webb et al., 2022). It is our intention that Grace's story serves as an example of how creative practice does not have to cost the world.

This section theorised the possible benefits of meeting in a location that is meaningful to a family, including contributing to a sense of ownership of the meeting, creating a positive sense of anticipation ahead of the FGC and a feeling of comfort at the FGC. In the next section, we consider Stephanie's perspective, a fictional social worker, to provide a snapshot of professionals' thoughts and feelings about holding an FGC in a place that may feel unfamiliar and unusual to them. To continue our aim to theorise beyond 'practice as usual' we also suggest three unexpected benefits to professionals.

## Stephanie's story

What was I thinking? A social club? Up narrow stairs that smell like years worth of pints have been spilt into them. Also not great for accessibility will have to make sure everyone gets up there safely. But this is what Grace wanted, and the coordinator told me it should be somewhere familiar. It was quite a hassle finding the Belverden's number apparently. Something tells me this is definitely the first local authority event held in there.

I'm under strict instructions that I have to wear 'better clothes' by Grace, a more casual look. I've brought my friend's baby shower pregnancy pillow for Grace. I've known her for so long I want today to be useful. I met her when her aunt got a Special Guardianship Order, that was such a tough time for them. Grace is so resilient.

I admit my stomach sank a bit when I was assigned to her case, but I've decided to see it as another opportunity to work with her again. It will be good for her to have someone familiar around right now. The coordinator has been so busy calling everyone, I'm just hoping if Grace's mum does attend that she doesn't draw attention away from the agenda today. The room looks really great, you can tell she's put a lot of effort into the decorations.

Sitting on a stool at the bar, waiting for private family time to be over, staring at a signed football shirt behind the bar. The first bit of the meeting has gone smoothly, Grace's family are opening up more than in my previous visits. Both sides are making some really solid promises, I hope things are taking shape up there.

I like how the room has instantly put everyone at ease, even Grace's mum seems more comfortable. The custom cake on the table has really made me smile. The atmosphere in there is really something.

### *Changing the power dynamics*

When professionals engage in FGCs they often partake in a community-majority conversation rather than a professional-majority one, as is common in Child Protection Conferences. The social worker that makes the move to step into the community, to listen, signals respect and their valuing of the individual and the process. Meeting in a setting that the family chooses may be transformative not only for families, but also for professionals as it disrupts usual power dynamics as professionals enter spaces and places that may be new to them but familiar to the families they work with.

From the vignette, it is clear Stephanie was concerned about the risks the venue itself held, namely, the presence of alcohol on the premises and worries around accessibility. Inviting a family to choose a meaningful venue may result in professionals feeling like they have less control of the meeting and its outcomes. Grace's excitement about having her FGC in the social club juxtaposes with Stephanie's initial worries about the variables that she cannot control. The vignettes illustrate how the social club holds a different meaning for Grace than for Stephanie. Holding an FGC in a location, such as the social club, may disrupt the 'usual' power dynamics between a family and professionals and create an opportunity for social workers to take a step back, and relinquish some of the control over the FGC to families so that they can take the lead on planning and decision-making. This may be experienced as a benefit by both families and professionals. However, it should also be acknowledged that there are real constraints on the ability of professionals to do this where they are responsible for processes such as risk assessments.

### *Learning more about the context of family life*

As Stephanie's initial misgivings illustrate, professionals may find less conventional meeting venues inconvenient or risky. However, meeting in a venue that is meaningful to a family could provide opportunities for that family to connect in a way that would not be possible elsewhere. This in turn could give professionals a better understanding of the family in context and the opportunity to see them differently. Less institutional spaces may increase opportunities for connection between families and between families and professionals providing professionals with a more contextual and wholistic understanding of the family with whom they are working.

In the UK, social workers often do not spend a significant proportion of their time engaging in the day-to-day life of the local communities where the families they work with live (Ferguson et al., 2020; Jeyasingham, 2019). The process of exploring potential venues with the family could help professionals learn about grassroots and informal support structures that could offer help to families locally. Using a community venue may also provide opportunities for relationships to be built between statutory, community and

voluntary services, through social work professionals becoming more familiar and regular faces in these community spaces (Waites et al., 2004; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2010).

### *Seeing the family in different light through engaging in a different way*

The social club was a place where Grace's family had previously come together to celebrate her birthday. The location of Grace's FGC reflects part of her personal history that may not be widely known by those attending the FGC from outside of her immediate family, including professionals. By having the FGC in the social club professionals have an opportunity to learn about Grace as a person with her own unique history and experiences. The social club lends insight into Grace's identity and what is important to her while also providing insight into her 'lifeworld' (Burns and Früchtel, 2014: 1148) for those attending the meeting.

### *Limitations and challenges in practice*

There are practical limitations to considering the FGC venue as a key intervention component. Austerity and tight social care budgets mean that there is likely little funding to rent venues. Due to the uneven geographies of austerity, these practical limitations will likely be felt more acutely in some parts of England, especially those 'recovering from legacies of deindustrialisation' (Disney and Lloyd, 2020: 7). Moreover, professionals are often time poor with high caseloads (Ravalier et al., 2020). These working conditions are not conducive to spending additional time with individual families to explore how the venue for their FGC might support their overall experience of the meeting. In addition, a loss of community assets means there are fewer community spaces where an FGC could be held. We acknowledge these structural challenges but are heartened by stories of innovative local authorities working creatively with families despite these challenges. For example, at the London Borough of Camden's annual 'Love Shows Up' Conference social workers, people with lived experience, and researchers gathered to hear social workers share creative approaches taken when thinking about the importance of the FGC venue (London Borough of Camden, 2024).

The vignettes also highlight the challenges of balancing competing rights between children and parents/carers and between families and professionals. A young person may wish to have their FGC in a particular location, but this choice could be challenged by parents/carers. In that case, professionals could be faced with negotiating who gets to decide where the meeting is held. Disagreements within families about the venue could add a layer of complexity to professionals' jobs ahead of the FGC. In addition, social work professionals in the UK typically arrange meetings within standard working hours (Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.) particularly when other agencies such as health, education and the police are involved. This means that more creative venue choices may not be available. Also, meeting in a family's local community could mean more travel for social workers. There is a need to balance the families wishes with the practicalities involved including ensuring it is possible for professionals to attend.

Lastly, although providing families the opportunity to choose the venue could address uneven power dynamics between families and professionals, we recognise that there is an inherent power differential between social workers and families, especially when there is statutory social work involvement. In this article, we have suggested one way uneven power dynamics could be addressed.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to begin to theorise the possibilities of intentionally considering the role the FGC venue could play in enhancing families' and professionals' experiences of FGC. We did this by using fictional vignettes to provoke creative thinking beyond current practice in the UK. By involving a creative writer in crafting the vignettes, it was our aim to appeal to a wider audience, to move outside the boundaries of academic language and practice-oriented case studies to understand what a teenage girl and her social worker might think and feel. The vignettes are fictional, but grounded in the reality of the significant practice and research experience of the coauthors who drew on countless real-life examples when working with the creative writer to develop the vignettes. In co-authoring the vignettes and then unpacking their meaning, we recognise the critique that our analysis may confirm the argument we set out to make. Our aim is to further theorising and start a conversation, and we invite researchers to conduct empirical research that builds on our theorising to refute, confirm, and add nuance to the possibilities presented here.

Scant research exists illustrating the variety and benefits of different meeting locations in FGC. There is a need to map current practice to understand on what basis and why FGCs are being held where they are. In addition, the theories proposed in the article regarding the power and potential of meeting in a meaningful location could be tested by using the vignettes as an elicitation tool with future stakeholders and research participants during interviews or focus groups. Future research may also benefit from considering the influence the FGC venue could have on outcomes, a topic area beyond the scope of this paper.

In practice, we recommend that local authority children's services give professionals permission to creatively explore how the FGC venue could support families' needs. In the same way that FGC Coordinators work with families to identify their network, a similar approach could be taken to understand the places and spaces that might help facilitate a better FGC experience. For this to be possible, there is a need for policy-level and structural changes within children's social care to encourage the widespread adoption of creative and bespoke approaches to working with families when there is a child protection concern.

Lastly, it is important to recognise that FGC is not a panacea, and certainly involving the families in choosing a meaningful venue is not a silver bullet that will erase the challenges of practice that supports family-led decision making. Moreover, it is not our intention in this article to privilege FGC over other social work interventions and practices. We hope that this is the start of a conversation about how FGC practice may be improved by thinking intentionally and creatively about the role of space and place, and

how this could be used in wider social work practice. By considering the best-case scenario and being radically hopeful in our imagining, we endeavour to take small, but significant steps towards improving future practice.

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