

Pan Bedfordshire



The problem-solving court

Pan Bedfordshire
Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC)
Leaflet for Families



What is the Family Drug and Alcohol Court

The Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) helps families where children are put at risk by the substance misuse of their parents.

FDAC works with the family, keeping the child at the centre of everyone's thinking.

The FDAC court is different from other courts. It is all about trying to solve the problems that have led the local authority to bring you to court. To do this, the same Judge reviews your child's case every fortnight. And there is an independent team of workers to support the Judge and to help you and your family.

Parents who join FDAC are given what we call 'a trial for change'. This is work with the team and with other services that gives you the best possible chance to overcome your problems. At the same time FDAC tests whether you can make enough change quickly enough for what your child or children need. We find that most parents welcome this chance to prove themselves. It also gets parents and professionals working together in a way that means everyone is clear about what has to be done, and when and why.

FDAC gets much better results than when parents go to court in normal care proceedings. This is what a research study at Lancaster University has found:

- More parents had solved their problems by the end of the care proceedings.
- 40% of FDAC mothers were no longer misusing drugs and alcohol, compared to 25% of the mothers in normal care proceedings.
- 25% of FDAC fathers were no longer misusing drugs and alcohol, compared to 5% of the fathers in normal care proceedings.
- More children are able to live with their parents at the end of FDAC proceedings. This was so for 35% of FDAC mothers, compared to 19% of the mothers in normal care proceedings.
- When children go home, there is less neglect or abuse by parents who have been in FDAC. A year or more after proceedings had finished, there was further neglect or abuse of children in 25% of FDAC families, compared with 56% of families in normal care proceedings.
- The research said that parents were overwhelmingly positive about the FDAC team. The team motivated and engaged parents. They listened to them and did not 'judge' them badly. They were honest with them and were both 'strict' and 'kind'. The team gave parents practical and emotional support, and they made sure that everyone was helping parents stick with their plan of work.
- You can read more about the research at this link: <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/cfj-fdac/publications/>

We believe that the best result is that families overcome their difficulties and raise healthy and well-adjusted children. Sometimes that is not possible, and then social workers have to try to help children find a different home to grow up in. We help parents keep going, trying to overcome their difficulties. We hope this will help them stay involved with their children (where possible) and have a good chance of caring for future children.

Why have you been invited to join FDAC?

The local authorities look at all the cases that they are taking to court, to see which ones are suitable for FDAC. A case might be suitable:

1. Because parental substance misuse is the local authority's main worry, or one of their main worries
2. Or because parents are showing real signs that they want to make changes to their life.

Do parents get a choice about joining FDAC?

Yes, it is up to you. You can decide to join FDAC. Or you can say you want your case to go into normal care proceedings. Your solicitor will give you advice about all of this.

At the first court hearing the judge will ask if you want to do the first FDAC assessment. If you say yes, you join FDAC there and then.

What happens next?

Between the first and second court hearing you will do an assessment with FDAC and you have a meeting with us that we call the Intervention Planning Meeting. This is where the FDAC team will work with you to agree a Plan of work. We call this Plan the Intervention Plan. The assessment and the Intervention Plan are written up as a report, and you can discuss this report with your solicitor. When the Plan is agreed the judge will say this is what everyone is going to follow. This usually happens at the second court hearing, in week four of the care proceedings.

The judge then expects everyone to do their best to follow the Plan. To show that you are committed to your bits of the Plan, the judge will ask you to sign an agreement to be open and honest with the team and the court.

After the second hearing, the 'trial for change' begins. As part of this, you will have a court hearing each fortnight. These are to encourage you in your work, to see how things are going, and to check that the Intervention Plan is still right for you. This is also the time to solve any problems along the way and to make decisions about a life-long plan for your child, and to do so as quickly as is possible.

What happens if you say no to FDAC?

If by the second hearing you are not happy with what FDAC is offering you, you can opt out and the case will go into normal care proceedings instead.

If you have any questions, you can talk to your solicitor or the FDAC team.

Who will I see at court and from the FDAC team?

At court

The same Judge, or one of a small team of Judges, is in charge of what happens on your case. The FDAC Judges are trained to help families stay motivated and get better at taking charge of their lives and solving problems. There will be some court hearings with your solicitor and other solicitors involved, but you will also have regular hearings (every fortnight) without any of the solicitors. This sort of hearing is called a non-lawyer review. It is your chance to talk to the Judge for up to 30 minutes each time, about what is going well and not so well with the Intervention Plan, and what to do about any problems you are having. Once parents get used to this, most find that it is a good way of having their say and feeling in control of what is going to happen next. Parents say they feel heard.

The FDAC team

You will get help too from the FDAC Team who assessed you and helped decide your Intervention Plan. The team includes people with different skills, which is why it is called 'a multi-disciplinary team'. It has Social Workers, a Parental Substance Misuse Specialist and Domestic Abuse Expert. There is also a Child and Adolescent Psychological consultation and (where identified as necessary) parental psychiatric screening. FDAC has links to other services such as Housing and therapeutic agencies.

Parent mentors

FDAC have access to parent mentors. These are volunteers, called Parent Mentors. They have overcome drug or alcohol problems in their lives and some have been involved in care proceedings. Increasingly some will have been through FDAC. Parent Mentors can provide parents with support, encouragement and reassurance when they are at court, or being assessed, or working on their Intervention Plan.



What help will I get from FDAC?

The FDAC team will do a series of assessments about your family's strengths and any concerns.

1. The initial assessment is done in the first 2 weeks of proceedings. It helps identify the timescales for your children, what your goals should be, and what treatment and support you will get in the next 4 to 8 weeks. This will be reviewed each time you go to court or have a Review Intervention Planning Meeting with the team and other workers.
2. Every two weeks the team writes a short review report, about what is going well and not so well in your case. It will comment on things like your attendance for treatment sessions and the results of drug and alcohol testing.
3. During the first 8 weeks a Child and Adolescent Psychologist will have a meeting with parents, foster carers, teachers, social worker, guardian and perhaps others. This is to identify the children's needs.
4. Where the FDAC assessment identifies concern about a parent's mental health they will have a psychiatric screen.
5. An assessment of the parents' relationship with their children and their capacity to meet their children's needs will be done once parents have been abstinent for some months and have made some progress with their own problems.
6. By the time of the third Intervention Planning Meeting (normally 18 weeks into the case) the FDAC Intervention team will say whether they consider parents have made enough progress for their child to live with them permanently. The team will report on this assessment no later than the week 19 of the case. The court will then hold an Issues Resolution Hearing (normally week 24) to decide when to bring the proceedings to an end. This might need a contested court hearing. If so, that would be before week 26. Or the team might decide that the case should continue beyond 26 weeks if, say, time is needed to check on children who have recently been returned home.
7. If a case goes beyond 26 weeks there will be extra hearings and review reports, with a final report done for the final hearing.

What sort of treatments and support will be written into my Intervention Plan?

It will be a mix of interventions. Some will be from services in your local area. Others will be the work that the FDAC team will do with you. This will depend on what your family needs, but it will probably involve these 4 things:

1. **Abstinence:** Parents get support and advice on being abstinent from street drugs and alcohol and on abstaining from domestic abuse and criminal activity. (This might include community drug and alcohol programmes that provide individual and group education and advice about what triggers this behaviour and how to prevent it happening again).
2. **Understanding & repair:** Parents get support, advice and treatment to help them understand the problems that might be causing substance misuse, domestic abuse and mental health problems. Nearly all the parents who use FDAC need help to find safer ways of dealing with how trauma has affected them. Many children need help to make sense of the disruption to their life that is caused by their parents' difficulties that end up in care proceedings. Some parents and children need treatment for mental health problems such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, (treatment and support might include parents being encouraged to attend a local service that runs an intensive programme or, say, an anxiety group).
3. **Strengthening relationships:** Parents are helped to be more sensitive and responsive with their children and to strengthen their relationships with other adults, such as their partner, the child's other parent, and the wider family.
4. **A lifestyle where the child is at the centre:** Families are helped to develop a lifestyle that enables parents to give high priority to the needs of their children. (This might include help to find education and training that enables parents to care for their children and be engaged in other activities).

How long does FDAC take?

The FDAC work has to fit with two different sorts of timescales. One timescale is about what is right for each child and the other is about what the court process requires.

The very best result from your time in FDAC is that you overcome your problems in time to meet your children's needs. The question is how long your children can afford to wait for the situation to improve. The answer is that we can't afford to wait so long that your children miss out on the second best result. This might be getting settled with a member of your wider family, or being adopted, or living with foster carers. When we talk about 'the children's timescales' we mean the time by when a decision must be made for the child, based on their age and needs.

The court also has timescales. A limit of 26 weeks has been set for finishing care proceedings. This is what is expected for those FDAC cases where children will not be returning home to their parents.

If families are making good progress in FDAC the court will usually allow proceedings to go on beyond 26 weeks to test out plans for children to return to parents' care.

What will be expected of me if I join FDAC?

We believe that no parent wants to cause their child to suffer and that every family in difficulty wants things to get better. But parents often don't know how to sort things out themselves and they are afraid that if they ask for help they will be judged badly and punished.

We find that things work best when everyone is open and honest. This means families and professionals alike. We know that we have to earn a parent's trust and respect. We find it helps if everyone knows exactly what to expect and what they have to do. So, we tell parents and professionals what they can expect from us and what we expect from them.

Under FDAC families have achieved amazing things. Mainly this is because they have discovered how to reach out for help and how to work as part of a team.

We want to take your wish for something better and tell you: "You are not alone now, you can do it, and we will help you do it". At the same time the Judge will be saying: "You have to do it, whatever you do there will be consequences".

Contact details for further information

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