**Family Drug and Alcohol Courts to be extended to Kent and Medway and East Sussex.**

The Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) has been in operation in London for the past seven years and latterly has also opened courts in Gloucestershire and Milton Keynes. Now, due to a government funding commitment of £2.5 million from the Department of Education, the FDAC is to be expanded nationally and FDAC centres in Kent and Medway, East Sussex, Plymouth, Torbay and Exeter and West Yorkshire will open.

The FDAC was founded by the pioneering judge Nicholas Crichton who, until his recent retirement, was the Resident District Judge of the Inner London Family Proceedings Court. The FDAC is an innovative approach to dealing with child care proceedings where parental substance abuse is the primary issue for concern. The FDAC offers a court-based family intervention programme that aims to address child welfare and safeguarding concerns by simultaneous addressing the entrenched and complex difficulties their parents face with substance misuse. It adopts a problem-solving therapeutic approach which in essence is comprised of fortnightly court reviews by the designated FDAC judge alongside a high level of intensive support by a multi-disciplinary team of specialists who assist parents address the myriad difficulties they are experiencing. These will typically include medical support, psychological assistance, mentoring and advice and assistance dealing with housing and welfare benefit issues that frequently arise. The quid pro quo for this intensive level of therapeutic support is the requirement of total abstinence. Abstinence from drugs and alcohol is monitored and it is a strictly observed requirement. Parents who cannot maintain abstinence have their cases reverted back within the traditional framework of ‘ordinary’ care proceedings.

An independent evaluation of the FDAC undertaken by Brunel University published its second report in May 2014 [[link to Report available here](http://www.brunel.ac.uk/chls/clinical-sciences/research/ccyr/research-projects/fdac)]. It made a number of important findings and is no doubt the catalyst for the recent government commitment to funding the FDAC. The report analysed a sample of cases which were all noted to be ‘hard cases’ . The parents’ difficulties were multiple, longstanding, and invariably featured the ‘toxic trio’ of substance misuse, mental health difficulties and domestic violence.

Some of the findings include: -

* 40% of FDAC mothers were no longer misusing substances compared to 25% of comparison mothers.
* 25% of FDAC fathers were no longer misusing substances compared to 5% of comparison fathers.
* Less than half of the FDAC mothers relapsed in the first year.
* There were fewer instances of further neglect or abuse in FDAC cases than comparison cases.

The evaluation concludes “the many similarities between the FDAC and comparison cases make it reasonable to infer that involvement in FDAC was an important contributory factor to the difference in outcomes in relation to cessation of misuse, reunification, and reduced risk of neglect or abuse after return home. It suggests there is an added value to be gained from the FDAC approach that combines treatment and assessment within care proceedings.”

FDAC parents report that the FDAC approach is by no means the easy option. Many find the high level of therapeutic intervention challenging and “really hard – really draining” as it requires them to address and face up to the complex realities of their addictions and lifestyles. Nonetheless, many are committed to the programme as they value the practical and emotional support they are given and parents express high levels of engagement and motivation to succeed.

Commitment to the FDAC has been expressed in unreserved terms by the President of the Family Division of the High Court on numerous occasions. Sir Munby has said recently “I consider FDAC as one of the most important and innovative developments in public family law in decades. It delivers better outcomes for the children and parents subject to it and achieves this in a manner which respects the humanity of the parents” and “the simple reality is that FDAC works. It must be a vital component in the new Family Court.”

It is no small achievement that public funding for the FDAC has been secured at a time when all other public services are facing the swingeing cuts so familiar in this age of austerity. It is an important step forward for the FDAC and the wider family justice system that more FDACs are being created. After much uncertainty as to whether the London FDAC would receive continued support and government funding, it seems likely that the FDAC is now firmly on the way to becoming permanently embedded within the national family court structure, which can only be a good thing.