

JUDICIAL FAMILY WORKING GROUP

Early Resolution Forum

An information sheet for the parties on the Early Resolution Forum.

1. What is the Early Resolution Forum?

The Early Resolution Forum, led by a judge, is a new way of helping families and has been set up to help resolve issues in dispute for cases in the Family Proceedings Tier in Belfast which can benefit from having a Court Children's Officer (CCO) present to help the parties reach an agreement. The main aim of the Forum is to improve outcomes for children by reducing delay.

2. Who decides if my case is selected for the Forum?

Your legal representative will advise you if your case could benefit from the Forum and will then ask you for your consent. Parties should be realistic, willing and capable of finding a resolution on the day of the Forum. (The case will only be included if both parties give their consent).

The judge will then make the decision on whether your case will be included in the Forum with input from your legal representatives.

3. What is involved in in Early Resolution Forum?

The purpose of the 'Early Resolution Forum' will be to discuss the issues in a case where an agreement cannot be reached. You will be asked to attend court 1A in Laganside Court with your solicitor and/or barrister. A CCO will also be at the Forum to speak to you and help everyone to try and come to an agreement. The judge leads the discussion and manages the process.

On Early Resolution Forum days:

- A meeting will take place with all legal representatives involved in the case together with the CCO and the judge to discuss the particular issues. The parties will not be present at this meeting. (It is not unusual for legal representatives to discuss issues in cases between themselves, or with a judge, in the absence of the parties).
- After this meeting, the parties will then be asked by the Judge to participate discussions about those particular issues with a view to reaching an agreement on that day. This includes joint discussions with parties and the CCO in a consultation room without legal representatives. Parties will have the opportunity for a short consultation with their legal representative before the legal representative returns to the court room with the CCO for a second

discussion with the judge who will give an indication of what they see as a resolution, before all parties will be allowed time outside of court to discuss this judicial indication. After this, the judge will determine whether or not to speak directly with the parties - legal representatives and the CCO will be in the court room also at this stage.

4. What happens if an agreement is reached in my case?

If an agreement is reached during the Early Resolution Forum, your solicitor and/or barrister will advise you of next steps. Generally, if an agreement is reached, the case will be considered administratively at the next available sitting of the Family Proceedings Court and any orders made will be sent to your solicitor. Parties will not be required to attend the Family Proceedings Court review.

5. What happens if an agreement is not reached in my case?

If an agreement cannot be reached at the Early Resolution Forum, your case will be put back into the normal court list.

6. Forum Evaluation

The Forum will be under ongoing review a short, focused review will take place after six months and a formal review after 12 months to make sure everything is working well. We welcome feedback about your experience during the Forum. You can contact the Reform team by email at: LCJOREform@courtsni.gov.uk.