

Annual report to Members by Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive on the activities and achievements of Family Rights Group between September 2003 to September 2004

Introduction

I was struck on my first day at Family Rights Group by the expertise, dedication and humour among the staff. And that impression has continued to grow during the six months that I've now been in post. I particularly want to thank Tana Thomas and Bridget Lindley, both of whom worked hard to provide organisational stability following Robert Tapsfield's departure as chief executive and prior to my arrival and have been very supportive since.

I am grateful to the Management Committee members, particularly Rosemary Jones for the advice and support given and to the many people that Family Rights Group regularly works with, who voluntarily give their time and knowledge and who have been equally welcoming.

Taking over from Robert Tapsfield as chief executive is a tall order. He did an excellent job in promoting Family Rights Group's reputation as *the* organisation representing the interests of families whose children are involved with social services. He also laid the foundations for significant projects that have come on stream this year, including the new Advice and Advocacy Service. I am confident that with our strong senior management team in place, including Bridget Lindley who has been recently appointed to the new position of Deputy Chief Executive and with our excellent staff team, we will be able to build upon these developments.

What follows is a short, selective summary of the breadth of work that Family Rights Group has undertaken over the year. If you are interested in any issues, please do get in touch with myself or the adviser leading the project and we would be happy to discuss our work in more depth. Most projects have reference or advisory groups and we are always looking to involve members and supporters more in our work.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES DURING THE YEAR

Advice and Advocacy

The new advice and advocacy service is now up and running with a talented permanent staff team, alongside a number of highly qualified sessional advice and advocacy workers. The launch event held in January was attended by senior civil servants, senior officers from local authority social services departments, members of the judiciary and legal profession and family members, all of whom participated in a lively debate about the service and its potential role nationally.

The advice line is open between 10 am -12pm every weekday morning, as well as afternoon opening 1:30pm -3:30pm. As a result of the morning opening and promotion of the service, we are on course to double the number of callers to 2500 over the year.

Many of the advice sheets have been redrafted and updated and are now available on the Family Rights Group's website. We have also been funded by Joseph Rowntree to write an advice sheet for disabled parents.

The advice service provides a valued service to families, and it also keeps us up to date with the problems that families are confronting. A database has been constructed that captures all key case information, enabling us to be alert to emerging trends, such as the rise in the number of fathers contacting the advice line, and the significant number of callers trying to cope with aggressive or even violent teenage children. The service thus informs our policy and project work, including the development of new funding proposals.

We have successfully recruited Sandra John to the newly created project officer post, which is excellent news. Sandra will work with Sue Murray the project manager to take forward the development of the service. Key priorities include increased usage of the advice line by Black and minority ethnic families and achieving the Legal Service Commission Charter mark.

The advocacy service is now being piloted in London. The service was designed following consultation with former advice line callers. Agreements have been negotiated with six London local authorities to refer families when child protection (section 47 Children Act) inquiries are initiated. Clients can also self-refer. An advanced two-day training course on child protection was run in May attended by new staff and representatives from three advocacy projects in Newcastle, Merseyside and Newham. This will feed into a network to be developed in the year ahead.

Our BEMAAP project continues to deliver training and support to organisations providing advice and advocacy services for Black and minority ethnic families.

Two newsletters have been produced alongside briefing materials during the year. The London BEMAAP network was launched in the summer and networks are also being developed in Manchester and Leicester. A national conference is planned in December 2004.

A key challenge is to secure funding for the advice service post March 2006, and to develop the long-term future of the advocacy service. We have held meetings with Margaret Hodge, MP Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families and with senior civil servants in order to push our case for core funding for the advice service, and that families subject to child protection investigations should be entitled to an advocate. The good news is that a recent report, commissioned by the Government specifically into delays in public law Children Act cases, is recommending that families have access to publicly funded specialist advocates at a much earlier stage in the proceedings, through organisations such as Family Rights Group. The report also recommends formalising the use of family group conferencing and the more effective involvement of voluntary agencies with such cases. We are currently lobbying hard to pilot these measures, and have invited Lord Filkin the lead Minister at the Department for Constitutional Affairs to a briefing in the Autumn, along with a couple of interested local authorities.

For further information about the Advice and Advocacy Service contact Sue Murray, Advice and Advocacy Manager or Bridget Lindley, Deputy Chief Executive and Legal Adviser.

For further information about BEMAAP contact: Tana Thomas, Policy Adviser.

Family and Friends Care/ Grandparent Carers Project

Two well-attended seminars on family and friends care were held in London and Manchester. These considered carers' experiences, including the local authority assessment process. We are keen to develop new models for assessing and supporting family and friends care, and are currently working with Hampshire County Council on piloting a revised assessment form. The outcome from the seminars will feed into a 'survival guide' for family and friends carers that will be launched in the autumn.

This summer we launched a new book entitled Growing Up in the Care of Relatives or Friends. The book summarises evidence including new findings from research conducted by Family Rights Group in two local authorities. The book's authors argue strongly that family and friends care should be treated as a distinct care type. We have also contributed a chapter on families and friends care to the RHP Companion to foster care second edition, which will be published this autumn.

Also published this summer was a guide entitled *Getting Together – A Guide to Setting Up and Running Support Groups*. The guide was developed because the 2001 survey of grandparent carers revealed that those who attended support groups said that they had made a positive difference to their lives, and most said that support groups would be of great help to them. We are currently developing, with input from the two local grandparent groups in Peterborough and Coventry, an 8-week training course and manual that could be used by grandparent support groups. We are also producing scripts that will be translated into a number of languages and which highlight many of the issues faced by grandparent carers, such as the sense of isolation often felt.

Many family members continue to suffer significant financial hardship when taking on the care of a young relative, who cannot live with their parent. Last September we launched a well publicised report entitled *'Funding Family and Friends Care: The Way Forward*. The publication sets out the current situation in Britain, considers what we can learn from countries abroad and recommends that all family and friends carers should be entitled to an allowance that reflects the cost of care. The launch was followed by a meeting with Margaret Hodge MP at which the grandparents highlighted the need for action. Family Rights Group also gave a presentation of the report's findings at the inaugural meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Grandparenting.

Among the stresses that many grandparents and other relative carers face is the financial cost of acquiring a residence order. We have now devised a guide to a *Do It Yourself Residence Order*, which is on the website and we are aware has been successfully used by at least six families.

Contact between the child and parent is a key issue for many of the parents and family carers. We are currently working with De Montfort University to develop a research bid to the Community Fund that would examine the views of parents whose children are cared for by relatives, including ways to effectively manage contact.

For further information on the grandparents carers' projects contact Margaret Greenfields, Policy Adviser or Alison Richards, Legal Adviser.

For further information on family and friends care contact Anne Morgan, Policy Adviser.

Family Group Conferencing

Family Rights Group continues to promote the use of family group conferences as a key way in which those who know the child best can consider how to meet the requirements of a child in need of care or protection. We are recognised as the leading authority on family group conferences in this country and have been

funded by the Department of Health and the Welsh Assembly to develop a resource kit over the next two years.

We continue to service the Family Group Conference Network with its webpage and discussion board, regular newsletters and open Network meetings. Attendance at the meetings has improved in part due to being held in different locations across the country. The meetings have considered how family group conferences (FGCs) could be applied to different areas, explored the use of FGCs within child protection, their use in education settings in order to tackle truancy, and how FGCs are being applied to address tensions within the community. In addition we are meeting with a group of FGC co-ordinators to develop a core-training programme for co-ordinators.

Last November we organised the launch of the European Network in London, a follow up conference will take place this November in Brussels. The aim is to exchange information, develop a common research agenda, and raise the profile at the political level. We have already started preparing for the next international conference to be held in Manchester in November 2005, hosted by Family Rights Group in partnership with American International Institute for Restorative Practice.

In February we held a conference attended by young people and practitioners, at which we launched a guide and training materials to improve young people's participation in family group conferences. This was followed up with a meeting with Margaret Hodge at which the young people movingly set out their reasons why their family group conference had made a difference. We subsequently wrote a letter to Margaret Hodge in which we set out our key recommendations including:

- an expectation that local authorities provide a FGC service by incorporating the availability of FGCs into the inspection criteria by which Social Services (or what will become Children's Services) are rated
- giving families the right to have FGC when there are care or protection issues concerning a child in their families
- requiring a FGC to be convened before any decision is finally made for a child to be placed in long term foster care or be adopted; and,
- placing a duty on local authorities to support plans made by families at a FGC thereby promoting the interest of the child.

In April the first Families Voices event took place supported by Family Rights Group but led by the families. It was a great success with over sixty families taking part in the weekend of activities held in Birmingham. We are now considering with the families how this can be taken forward including future funding.

We also exploring with the Race Equality Unit options for developing family group conference services amongst organisations working with Black and minority ethnic families.

For further information on family group conferencing contact: Anne Morgan, Policy Adviser or Tana Thomas, Policy Adviser.

Adoption and Children Act 2002 including Special Guardianship

Family Rights Group is continuing to work with other organisations on the guidance, regulations and court rules under the new adoption framework. This work is influential, however, it is time consuming and continues to be unfunded. We are pursuing the DfES to ensure that Family Rights Group is invited to tender to provide training on the new framework.

We are particularly interested in the order for special guardianship whereby parents will retain their legal relationship to their child and the carers will get full parental responsibility. We are funded by Nuffield to produce guidance and training materials on special guardianship. We have consulted extensively with parents, family members, young people and community organisations involved with Black and minority ethnic families and unaccompanied refugees. As always we are very grateful to all those who contributed their time and views. A very successful seminar was held in March attended by policy makers, judges, practitioners, academics, family members and civil servants. We led on the joint response to Government's draft guidance, and civil servants sought our views further as to how they could address our concerns. Over the next six months we will be developing briefing and training materials and publishing a reader on the new order.

For further information on the new adoption framework including special guardianship contact: Bridget Lindley, Deputy Chief Executive and Legal Adviser or Alison Richards, Legal Adviser.

Safeguarding Children Project

Family Rights Group has been one of the organisations working with the NSPCC on developing multi-agency training based upon Government guidance on 'what to do if you have concerns about a child'. The materials consist of a training pack, a video and a publication including a chapter on the wider family environment by Megan McNeill and Anna Gupta.

For further information contact Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive.

Poverty project

We have been working with the anti-poverty organisation ATD Fourth World and the Royal Holloway to support families to train social workers and professionals in the social care field about the impact of poverty

For further information contact Tana Thomas, Policy Adviser.

Family Policy Alliance

Many of the calls we get are from families who are desperate because their children are not receiving the support they need. In some cases this is due to a wrong diagnosis but mainly it is because of a lack of resources.

We are working in collaboration with two other leading organisations in the field – Parentline Plus and the Family Welfare Association – under the umbrella of the Family Policy Alliance, in order to strengthen the voice of families seeking support.

We responded jointly to the Government's Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' (the precursor to the Children Bill) emphasising the importance of working with parents. Subsequently we drew up amendments to the Children Bill that is currently going through Parliament that would give parents and children a right to know what information is held about them by any agency and to whom such information is disclosed, as long this doesn't put an adult or children at risk. We also pressed the case that any threshold to report a 'cause for concern' should be tied in with a responsibility to assess whether the child is in need as defined by the Children Act and provide appropriate support. These amendments were debated in the Lords, and we also organised a meeting at which the FPA and Barnados, representing the Children's charities, jointly pressed our case with the Minister Baroness Ashton. We intend to continue strongly lobbying MPs, when the Bill is debated in the Commons during the autumn.

In addition we contributed and ran discussion groups at a FPA seminar on family support, led on the development of their funding bids and have drafted the joint response to the NFPI/JRF Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children.

Over the next six months we will be consulting with families to inform the development of a families' manifesto, to promote to the political parties prior to the general election.

For further information contact Bridget Lindley, Deputy Chief Executive and Legal Adviser or Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive.

Website

Usage of the Family Rights Group website has increased rapidly over the past two years. In 2002-3 the site had on average 680 hits a month, by 2003-4 this had risen to 1700 and by the first four months of 2004-5 we had on average 2780 hits a month, equivalent to over 33 000 across the year. As well as advice and information the site also contains a discussion board for grandparent carers, which is well used by individuals. A recent evaluation by carers provided excellent feedback as well as ideas for further developments on the grandparents pages of the site. There is also a discussion board run for members of the Family Group Conference Network in order that they can keep in touch and exchange information about developments in the field.

We are intending to submit a bid to the DfES to provide funding to enable us to maintain and develop the website further including extending the grandparents carers page to address issues faced by other relative and friends carers. Our bid to the Parenting Fund proposes hosting a discussion board for fathers and one for professionals on how best to consult and involve fathers in the care of and decisions about their children's welfare.

For further information on the website or if you have ideas as to how it can be developed please contact: Debbie Cooper Jones, Website and Information Officer.

Organisational development including income generation

The organisation was without a fundraising from autumn 2003, until the very welcome recruitment of Simon Tarlton as business and marketing officer in June 2004.

The result, however, of not having for some months during the year a fundraiser or permanent chief executive in post to initiate funding proposals means there is likely to be a dip in income in 2004/5. Significant effort is being made to redress this, with income generation the organisation's key priority and considerable energies are being invested in initiating and developing with partners exciting proposals that address identified needs and identify potential funders. Projects include the work of the Family Policy Alliance, work with fathers, work with the parents of children with autism, addressing the requirements of disabled parents and development of our Information Technology (IT) resource and the ways in which we make our work and findings available to wider audiences.

The voluntary funding environment has seen further contraction in the last twelve months with charitable funders being increasingly targeted in their application of funds. Family Rights Group has been fortunate enough to have enjoyed fruitful

relationships over many years with a small number of Trusts and Foundations. As overall resources continue to diminish (and the demands put upon funders increase) the maintenance and development of these relationships will be of increased importance as funders seek to work much more in partnership with the charities they fund.

A draft staff handbook was initiated by the interim chief executives and is currently being piloted. One of the priorities for the senior management team over the next year will be to ensure that the handbook covers all key procedures, and anticipates as well as complies with employment legislation. A long running concern at Family Rights Group has been the lack of sufficient space to enable staff to work effectively and hold meetings. Fortunately a new room has become available which should considerably improve the working environment. A staff away day was held in the summer and ideas from the day have been further considered at the monthly team meeting. All staff now have regular supervisions with their line manager.

Currently there are a number of vacancies on the management committee. In part to assist the recruitment of new members, the management committee in September will be considering the optimum range of skills, knowledge and experience required to lead the organisation, and will be clarifying the roles and responsibilities of committee members.

Over the next year the chief executive will be working with staff and trustees to develop a long term vision for the organisation including a five year work plan.

For further information on fundraising contact Simon Tarlton, Business and Marketing Development Officer.

For further information on organisational development contact Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive.

Communications

Family Rights Group's new visual identify was agreed last year, and guidelines have now been produced in order that there is consistency in the presentation of materials.

We have recently had some excellent coverage in the press. Family Rights Group been quoted in the Daily Telegraph, Times and the Daily Mail. We have had letters in the Guardian and Independent and we have been interviewed for Radio 4's World Tonight and Sky News as well as local radio. Alison Richards and a family carer are also due to appear on Women's Hour on a piece about family and friends care, hopefully on the 10th September. We have also had articles published in Family Law, Childlaw UK and Community Care, as well as coverage in other specialist magazine. However, more thought is required as to how to who we are trying to influence and how to use our very limited staff

resources to maximum effective in order to get our aims and objectives across. This will be addressed in the communications strategy that is being drawn up this year.

For further information on communications contact Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive.

Training & Consultancy Activity

Training & Consultancy continues to form an important source of income for Family Rights Group and has been identified as an area for growth in the future. Since the last AGM we have delivered over £60,000 worth of training to a variety of organisations in a wide range of subjects. Those most popular subjects continue to reflect those areas where Family Rights Group (FRG) are recognised as particularly expert in the field as practitioners – family group conferences and family and friends care being particularly strong.

At their meeting in July the Trustees were presented with a paper that recognised the expansion of Family Rights Group's activity in the area of training & consultancy as important for developing new and reliable income streams, distinct from the traditional funded sources. It seeks to put in place a strategy for development aiming to increase the contribution training income makes to the overall turnover of the organisation from 10% to 25% by 2006/2007. The strategy, which is available on report, is now being aggressively pursued, including identifying initial monies that would fund policy officers to develop the core training materials and work with interested clients.

For further information contact Simon Tarlton, Business and Marketing Development Officer.

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