

# Evaluation of Family Rights Group Parent/Carer Advocacy Service 2009 – 2010

## Final Report – Executive Summary February 2011

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

Family Rights Group is a registered charity which advocates and campaigns for parents, carers and other relevant family members in connection with local authority decision-making about children who are involved with, or require Children's Services in England and Wales. The service is independent of all statutory agencies and aims to help families understand their rights, and to explore the issues which have arisen between the family and Children's Services. It does this by working to increase the voice children and families have in the services they use and by promoting policies and practices that assist children to be raised safely within their families. The organisation's services include a national advice line and a parental advocacy service

The advice line is a free, independent and confidential telephone advice service for families throughout England and Wales which is staffed by highly qualified lawyers, social workers or advocates with comparable experience. Families can also make contact by email or by letter and a range of advice sheets are available via the website ([www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)). The advice line service is currently funded until April 2011 by the Department for Education, as part of their Family Information Direct service.

Since 2003, Family Rights Group has provided a family advocacy service informed by a protocol devised by Lindley & Richards (2002). Direct (in person) advocacy for parents whose children are subject to child protection (s.47) enquiries is currently available to families living in three<sup>1</sup> London boroughs via partnership agreements between the local authority and Family Rights Group. The authorities part fund the service. Additional funding has been provided by the Government's Hardship Fund. During direct advocacy support, the advocate will work with a parent/carer from the point of initial investigation until the end of the first review conference. Referrals for direct advocacy support can be made by social workers in the partner local authorities or support can be requested directly by parents or other professionals via the advice line.

Written, telephone and online support is also available to families throughout England and Wales via the indirect and self advocacy support service. This is the practice of professional advocates negotiating with the local authority by letter, email or telephone on the service user's behalf (indirect advocacy) or the practice of drafting a letter or using a pro-forma which can then be used by the service user (in their own name) to contact the local authority. The focus of both indirect and self-advocacy has been to support parents where there are child protection enquiries to understand the nature of agencies' concerns, to be fully informed in the process and challenge if appropriate and to get the support necessary to address any risk to the child. The service also has assisted family and friends carers i.e. family members who are or wish to raise a child who is unable to live with their parents. These carers often need help to make clear to the local authority their wish to raise the child, to challenge local authority decisions where appropriate, to understand the implications of different legal options and to get the support the child/they need for the placement to work.

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<sup>1</sup> For the first six months of the evaluation there was a fourth partner local authority but this agreement has not been renewed due to constraints on local authority funding

During the evaluation period Family Rights Group has also piloted direct advocacy support for a small number of cases in the three Boroughs where the child has been subject to a child protection plan for over twelve months and parental non-engagement with the local authority is a matter of concern. In these 'entrenched cases' an advocate is provided from just after the third review conference until just after the fourth review conference. Additional funding for advocacy support in 'entrenched cases' has been provided by the Lloyds TSB Foundation.

## **Evaluation**

Family Rights Group commissioned an evaluation of the family advocacy service from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009 – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2010. The evaluation has been completed by Claire Fraser, a freelance Research Consultant and Professor Brid Featherstone, Director of Social Work, NUI Galway. The same team have previously evaluated the family advocacy service from 2006 – 2009 (Featherstone & Fraser, 2009).

The objectives of the evaluation were:

- To evaluate the parental advocacy project for one year from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009 – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2010 from the perspective of advocacy clients, social workers, conference chairs and partner local authority leads;
- To explore in more depth, a small number of 'entrenched' cases – defined as cases where 'the child has been subject to a child protection plan for over twelve months and non-engagement with the local authority is a matter of concern';
- To update the literature review on parental advocacy (since 2009 report) and to write a review of the literature on working with entrenched cases;
- To explore the feasibility of a future randomised controlled trial (RCT) to objectively assess the impact of parental advocacy on outcomes.

## **Literature Review**

Many parents/carers experience difficulties in responding to statutory child welfare concerns which can undermine the process of successful parental engagement with the local authority and the child protection process (Adams, 2009; Buckley et al, 2011). Research has demonstrated that where individual advocacy support is provided for parents/carers involved with local authority child protection concerns it is able to address some of these problems and makes a very positive contribution both to parental engagement and children's safeguarding (Douglas & Walsh, 2009; Dale et al, 2005).

Whilst local authorities are generally supportive of advocacy support for clients at meetings, there is no statutory requirement for authorities to provide families with independent advocacy support. Consequently provision of advocacy support remains patchy and poorly funded and is one of the reasons why parental engagement in child protection processes is still falling short of expectations (Broadhurst et al, 2010).

Much of the recent literature on parental engagement has focused on attempts to work with 'hard to reach' or 'entrenched' families. Examples cited in this report include the benefits to local authorities of co-working with non-statutory agencies (Morris et al, 2008); examples of peer support provided by 'veteran parents' with prior experience of the child protection

system (Nilsen et al, 2009); and strategies for engaging with families where there is parental substance misuse (Taylor et al, 2008).

Effective parental engagement may also be important in reducing the incidence of child maltreatment as families who are fully engaged are likely to be more compliant (Little, 2001; Featherstone et al, 2010). Some of the literature has explored whether failure to cooperate in 'hard to reach families' is wilful or unintentional. For example, is a 'hard to reach' family unconcerned for the child's well-being or has there been a failure to achieve meaningful engagement (Thoburn, 2010; Roach & Sanders, 2008)?

Policy and legislative changes continue to have a significant impact on the child protection process. The Public Law Outline (PLO) remains a contentious issue, attracting much criticism as it is believed to have increased bureaucracy and risks de-skilling social workers (Broadhurst & Holt, 2010; Masson, 2010; Gillen, 2009). The Integrated Children's System (ICS) has attracted similar criticism (Broadhurst et al, 2009; Hall et al, 2010) which has prompted Government to issue further guidance on its use (DfE, 2010).

The death of Peter Connelly in 2007 prompted widespread review and debate about the approach to safeguarding children in England (Munro, 2010; Broadhurst et al, 2009) and is believed to have contributed to an increase in safeguarding activity (ADCS, 2010b). This rise, and the associated cost implications, comes at a time when local authorities are facing unprecedented cuts to funding following the coalition Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. There is an urgent need for services such as advocacy that support working in partnership with parents and other targeted early intervention services to be protected from these front line cuts. Protecting these services is likely to prevent the need for much costlier interventions further down the line (ADCS, 2010c; Featherstone et al, 2010).

## **Findings**

Twenty-nine advocacy clients (18 direct; 3 indirect; 8 self) contributed their views to this evaluation, 86% of whom were female, 14% male. Ethnicity was known for 25 clients: 48% White; 21% Asian; 17% Black. The evaluation participants represented 35% of the total direct advocacy client group supported during the evaluation period. 8% of the indirect advocacy clients and 5% of the self-advocacy clients supported during the year also shared their views with the independent evaluators.

### *Direct Advocacy Clients*

Direct advocacy clients participated in the evaluation either via a postal questionnaire; a telephone interview or a face to face interview. A range of complex issues had brought the 18 families into contact with the local authority; domestic violence was a central feature in almost half of the cases reviewed. Advocates provided a full range of support services to these clients including accompanying clients to meetings; providing information in relation to legal rights and local authority procedures; and speaking on behalf of clients at meetings in order to support and empower the client.

87% of direct advocacy clients found the support provided 'helpful' and the same percentage noted they had felt able to trust the advocate *and* were satisfied with the way the advocate had represented their needs. Advocates' legal and procedural knowledge had facilitated clients' understanding and participation and was a reassuring and calming influence for

parents who felt daunted by the child protection system. This enabled less confident parents to feel supported and empowered which facilitated their participation in the child protection process.

The impact of direct advocacy support was also evidenced: 73% of clients 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that having advocacy support made it easier for them to communicate with the local authority. 40% of direct advocacy clients also believed that advocacy support had influenced the outcome<sup>2</sup> of their case because it had enabled them to contain their emotions; to feel empowered; to understand their rights; and to challenge the local authority where this was considered to be appropriate.

Parents who had previously attended meetings with the local authority without advocacy support were able to highlight the difference subsequent support had made. For example, with support they were able to remain calmer; to communicate more effectively; and they were able to understand the procedures being put into place. In some cases, advocacy simply ensured that a parent who had previously failed to attend now had the confidence to attend meetings.

In making suggestions for developments to the service, direct advocacy clients wanted longer term support available to parents/carers; additional numbers supported each year; and an extension of the direct advocacy service so that it is available to those living outside of the partner local authority areas.

#### *Indirect and Self Advocacy Clients*

Eleven indirect and self advocacy clients participated in the evaluation via a telephone interview with the independent evaluator. It had been hoped to consult with a much greater number of clients (only 13% of the clients supported during the year participated in the evaluation) but contact details for clients (particularly mobile telephone numbers) were often no longer current. The eleven participants had all sought support as kinship carers of family member's children although as noted above indirect and self advocacy support was also provided during this period on other matters related to the care and protection of children. Support services provided by advocates in these eleven cases included the provision of information on legal rights and local authority procedures; generally supporting and empowering the clients; writing letters on their behalf and obtaining copies of reports.

91% of the indirect and self advocacy clients consulted had found advocacy support 'helpful' as it had provided much needed information which had enabled clients to feel fully informed and to remain objective in meetings. In one case advocacy support was considered to have resulted in the local authority becoming 'more responsive'. 100% of indirect and self advocacy clients felt able to trust the advocate and 82% were satisfied with the way the advocate had represented their needs.

The impact of indirect and self advocacy support was also evidenced: 91% of clients 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that having advocacy support made it easier for them to communicate with the local authority. 54.5% also believed that advocacy support had

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of 'outcome' in this evaluation is used to denote positive impacts of advocacy support on parental engagement, working in partnership with the local authority and parental involvement in decision making, rather than outcomes in relation to the plan for the child(ren) per se.

influenced the outcome of their case because it had facilitated and speeded up the local authority response; increased the confidence and will of the kinship carers to continue with their case; and increased knowledge about the options available to kinship carers.

#### *Social Workers*

Nineteen social workers provided feedback using the social worker evaluation form on 23 cases where there had been direct advocacy support. The families were involved with the local authority in the main due to parental mental health, domestic violence and parental substance misuse.

Without exception, the social worker participants were very positive about advocacy support, describing many benefits for parents/carers *and* the local authority. 60% considered that advocacy support had influenced parental engagement with the local authority. This was believed to be due to increased understanding of the child protection process, and in some cases, the local authority concerns. Advocacy support was also considered to have calmed some clients such that they were then able to contribute constructively in meetings.

In the majority (80%) of applicable cases, parental engagement was not thought to have led to a different outcome for the child<sup>3</sup>. In three cases however, a different outcome for the child was considered to be linked to increased parental engagement due to the parent feeling more supported and therefore more able to work with children's services.

In making suggestions for developments to the service social workers wanted to see the service expanded to other boroughs and the support period for individual clients lengthened; greater publicity to ensure all practitioners were aware of the service and a system which ensured that all clients were able to meet with their advocate prior to the day of the conference.

Three in-depth interviews were also completed with social workers in the partner local authorities. These further highlighted the high level of support for advocacy services and a desire to see the current service expanded, for example, by providing support at an early intervention stage for parents on the threshold of child protection. Social workers also raised concerns about the likely impact of the current economic climate by highlighting how a failure to fund advocacy support would be a failure to recognise the long-term cost-benefits of supporting parents in this way. Social workers were also concerned about the rise in care proceedings and the impact this was perceived to be having on attempts to 'work in partnership' with parents. Advocacy support was believed to be a key factor which could support partnership working.

#### *Conference Chairpersons*

Twelve conference chairpersons provided feedback on 29 cases where there had been direct advocacy support. The families in the cases reviewed were involved with the local authority in the main due to domestic violence, parental substance misuse and parental mental health.

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the term 'outcome' was not sufficiently defined on the evaluation form such that respondents interpreted this only as leading to a different decision at the child protection conference. In fact, a different 'outcome' was intended to be interpreted more broadly, for example, in relation to timescales, impact etc.

The conference chairs greatly welcomed the involvement of advocates in the child protection process and highlighted benefits similar to those raised by social workers. Advocacy support was considered to be helpful for clients, was delivered in an appropriate style and clients were considered to be well represented. Conference chairs were also highly satisfied with advocates' level of knowledge of child care law and social work practice.

71% of conference chairs believed that advocacy support had influenced parental engagement with the local authority. This was because it had facilitated full and meaningful participation; reassured nervous parents, boosting their confidence; calmed angry parents and in some cases, made the difference in terms of whether or not the conference was attended by the parent.

In two thirds (65%) of applicable cases, parental engagement was not thought to have led to a different outcome for the child, perhaps again reflecting the wording of the evaluation form as noted above. However, in a third of cases, a different outcome for the child was considered to be linked to increased parental engagement due to the parents' cooperation with the drafting of the plan and their subsequent adherence to it.

In making suggestions for developments to the service, conference chairs' feedback mirrored that of the social workers. For example, chairs wanted to see the service expanded to widen access to advocacy support and to ensure that all clients were able to meet with their advocate prior to the day of the conference.

Two in-depth interviews were also completed with conference chairs and these revealed the same concerns raised by social workers in respect of the impact of the current economic climate, policy changes (e.g., PLO) and difficulties in achieving 'partnership working', all of which were believed to further underscore the need for independent advocacy support.

### *Entrenched Cases*

Advocacy support for 'entrenched' cases was piloted with the partner local authorities during the evaluation period and three cases were explored in-depth for this evaluation. In the first case ('A') there had been difficulty engaging the parents who had a tendency to minimise the local authority concerns. Advocacy support was highly valued and this appears to have enabled the parents to engage with the local authority, to accept some of the concerns raised and to cooperate with the child protection process. The client, advocate and conference chairperson all agreed that advocacy support had a positive impact although the case social worker was more cautious; recognising there had been some improvement but that there was still some way to go. The children were still subject to a child protection plan as advocacy support ended and delays in completing a parenting assessment appeared to be preventing further review of the case. There were some concerns from all those interviewed that the gains observed may be lost without advocacy support in the future.

The second entrenched case ('B') had been designated as such as although on the surface the parent seemed very cooperative and agreeable to the actions suggested by children's services, there had been a consistent failure to act and therefore the concerns remained unaddressed. The client greatly valued advocacy support and at the time of the interviews it appeared that some tentative steps were being taken towards engaging with the local authority's concerns. The advocate hoped that advocacy support would impact positively on

outcomes for the children and family but it had not been possible to evidence this impact to date. The social worker and conference chair were unsure of the longer term prospects for both parental engagement and positive outcomes and both indicated that the absence of advocacy support may reduce the level of parental engagement in the future. The future absence of advocacy support in this case was also likely to have a negative impact on the local authority as the prior support was noted to have freed up social worker time on the case.

In the third entrenched case ('C') the lack of parental engagement was considered, particularly by the case social worker, to be due to the mother's mental health difficulties. The client was immediately grateful for advocacy support, having felt disempowered in her previous dealings with the local authority. As a result of this support she described feeling more empowered and as a result, could be said to be participating with the child protection process. However, the client felt that ultimately, even with advocacy support, that she was powerless to challenge the local authority who she believed were treating her unfairly. The case social worker did not believe advocacy support had impacted on parental engagement. The advocate recalled particular difficulties in engaging with the local authority and, whilst positive about advocacy support more generally, was more cautious about the impact it had achieved in this case. At the time of the interviews advocacy support had ceased but the parent was now receiving alternative support from the head teacher at her child's school. She was hopeful that this would enable her to continue to feel empowered in future meetings.

#### *Partner Local Authority Leads*

Interviews were completed with senior representatives at three partner local authorities. In two of the authorities there was a high level of satisfaction with the process of referring early intervention cases to Family Rights Group and in meeting agreed targets. This was thought to be due to the process becoming embedded in local authority procedures, a clear sign of progress since the last evaluation. In the third authority advocacy support for parents was still not considered to be embedded in social work practice and the interviewee was able to offer a number of possible reasons for this including high staff turnover; bureaucratic and time pressures within the child protection system; and the current adversarial climate in social care services. The need for an internal 'champion' who could promote the benefits of advocacy for both families and the local authority was highlighted.

Referral of entrenched cases was more problematic with only one of the three partner authorities meeting their target. This was felt to be due to the inherent difficulties in working with entrenched cases, such as the reluctance to engage with all, even non-statutory, services. In addition, as this system was being piloted, it was not yet embedded in social work practice.

All the local authority leads were able to describe clear benefits of advocacy support in early intervention cases. In addition to the personal advantages to the parent/carer as highlighted by other professionals, the leads were also able to identify clear gains for the local authority. For example, advocacy support was believed to be effective at improving family-social worker engagement and in supporting the conference process as a result of increased levels of communication and the increased likelihood of reports being issued in advance of the meeting.

The potential benefits of adequate funding for independent advocacy for parents involved in meetings with the local authority were acknowledged, not least because it would remove the current postcode lottery of access to such services. However, in such circumstances respondents indicated a preference for provision supplied by the third sector such as Family Rights Group in order to emphasise independence from the local authority.

Policy and legislative changes were also discussed with partner local authority leads. These discussions revealed front-line evidence of some of the issues discussed in the literature review, for example, concerns about the impact of PLO and the rise in care proceedings and acute concerns about the impact of cuts to local authority funding.

### **Evidencing Outcomes**

There is a need for future evaluation of the Family Rights Group advocacy service to produce objective outcome data to evidence the cost-benefits analysis to the local authority of commissioning this support to families. This has become even more urgent in light of the budget cuts being implemented across all local authorities.

A number of ideas for an 'impact evaluation' have been considered including a randomised controlled trial or a quasi-experimental design involving a treatment group in a partnership borough and a comparison group from a borough without a partnership agreement. The preferred option is however a prospective cohort study which adopts a longitudinal approach with a treatment group due to ethical issues with some of the other designs.

### **Conclusion**

Family Rights Group advocacy service continues to be highly valued, both by the clients who are supported, and by the local authorities who are involved with these families due to child protection concerns. Advocacy support in early intervention cases has become embedded in two of the three partner authorities but there is further work needed to embed the new service for entrenched cases. In the third authority a number of suggestions have been made to assist advocacy support to become embedded in social work practice.

The revised evaluation methodology has facilitated the collection of independent data which evidences the significant impact of advocacy support on parental engagement. This is important since both the policy and academic literature continues to highlight how parental engagement is inextricably linked to reducing the incidence of child maltreatment. The literature on working in partnership with parents in the child protection arena also continues to emphasise the importance of independent advocacy support in achieving truly meaningful engagement.

Whilst some impact on outcomes was noted in this evaluation, it is likely that a longitudinal design such as a prospective cohort study will be needed to fully demonstrate the cost-benefit analysis of advocacy support to local authority partners, particularly with regard to entrenched cases. The need for this objective evidence has become particularly pertinent in the current economic climate.

## Recommendations

### National developments:

- That Government introduces a statutory right to independent professional family advocacy for parents whose children are subject to child protection enquiries, alongside funding for third sector organisations to provide this provision.
- A national network of family advocacy services is required to support best practice and promote standards. External funding is required to support the initial setting up and development of such a network.
- That, in recognition of how marginal a service professional family advocacy currently is, funders are sympathetic, particularly in the current financial climate, to supporting the continued innovative development of professional advocacy services, particularly in respected of 'entrenched' cases.

### Local developments:

- Support for the development of professional family advocacy services and the commissioning by local authorities across England and Wales of such professional family advocacy services for families involved with Children's Services.

### Continued developments of Family Rights Group's professional advocacy service:

- Family Rights Group's service should continue to be funded and expanded further:
  - So that indirect and self-advocacy support, which ceased following the evaluation due to lack of funding, can be reinstated to provide support to families throughout England and Wales.
  - Further development of advocacy support in 'entrenched' cases where families have been highly resistant to local authority engagement is needed to embed this service in frontline social work practice.
  - Advice materials on legal and administrative processes in child welfare should continue to be updated and extended, for example creating a DVD of parental experiences of the child protection and conference process.

### Evaluation:

- An independent evaluation of future professional family advocacy developments is commissioned using a longitudinal prospective cohort design to objectively demonstrate the cost-benefits to local authorities and long-term outcomes of professional advocacy support.
- The findings of this evaluation be shared with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) following their call for the potential benefits of providing support to vulnerable adults whose children are subject to child protection procedures to be investigated by research organisations in order to inform policymaking at a national and local level (ADCS, 2010c).

## Postscript

The service level agreements between Family Rights Group and the partner Boroughs is ending from summer 2011 as a result of budgetary pressures. Whilst a senior local authority manager noted that investing in advocacy offers longer term financial savings– “*plans move along quicker, the children come off child protection quicker, or we’re less likely to end up in proceedings*”, nevertheless, fragmentation of budgets and the need for immediate savings is influencing commissioning and local authorities are resisting signing annual contracts for a non statutory service. In the current climate Family Rights Group believes local authorities are most likely to spot purchase a professional advocacy service for specific cases, particularly where there may be evident immediate cost savings to themselves, for example in preventing children in the family entering care. The Charity will therefore be marketing a spot purchasing service to London Boroughs. Please contact [Pam Ledward](#), Advice and Advocacy Service Manager at Family Rights Group to find out more information.