

Family Rights Group strategic plan 2012-17

Family Rights Group's Vision

That children live safely and thrive within their family and community

Who are we?

We are the charity in England and Wales that advises families whose children are involved with, or require, local authority services because of welfare needs or concerns.

We promote policies and practices that help children to be raised safely and thrive within their family and community.

We campaign for effective support to help struggling parents and family and friends carers, who are raising children that cannot live at home.

We work to ensure that when the State is involved in families' lives, it draws upon their strengths to meet their children's needs.

What we do

- **We inform, support and advise** struggling families, so that they understand their situation, including their rights and the options available to them;
- We help **families to have a voice and make, or influence, decisions** about their children;
- We undertake **research, deliver training and champion** policies and practices that help families to support and protect vulnerable children.

Our unique position

We are the organisation that:

- Puts the child's welfare central whilst championing families' right to fair process.
- Has a history of, and commitment to, listening to and involving families in all our work.
- Provides independent advice to, and advocates for, families involved with, or needing, local authority services, offering a combination of expertise and experience in the law and social work procedures and practice.
- Pioneers family-centred approaches to planning for children in need or at risk
- Challenges constructively when necessary and always provides workable solutions.
- Has a track record in research and promoting evidence-based solutions
- Is committed to working with families, community groups, professionals, academics and policy makers to enable more children to live safely and thrive within their families, school and community.
- Is independent from government and statutory services.

Other agencies may have one or indeed some of these characteristics, but Family Rights Group is the only national organisation which brings all these different qualities together.

The rationale for our work

There are over 65,000 looked-after children in England. This is an increase of 9% compared to five years ago. Care order applications are now at record levels and children taken into the care system are regularly being separated from siblings and often face multiple, temporary places as well as court delays, as an expensive system struggles to cope.

Family Rights Group believes that more could be done to prevent children being taken into care and to enable them to live safely within their family.

Firstly, providing parents, who may be struggling with their children for multiple reasons, with much greater help and support at an early stage can bring dramatic changes. Yet too often thresholds for specialist services are set so high that families' requests for help and support are rejected until problems escalate into a child protection crisis. That is why the Charity works for better services for families and children and to ensure that families' voices are heard during service planning and delivery.

Secondly, there is substantial evidence that parents and families remain central to children's wellbeing, even if the child is at risk: the vast majority (93%) of children with a child protection plan live with their families and 92% of children who are looked after eventually return to their families. Plans for a child, including child protection plans, therefore need to involve mothers, fathers and the wider family, because they are key to the successful implementation of the plan. Moreover, it is a breakdown in partnership working between the local authority and family that is often the trigger for why children end up in care proceedings.

Our work with families shows that when parents are subject to such compulsory State intervention they can often feel angry, upset and bewildered and are unable to hear what they're being told by social workers and an antagonistic relationship can develop. Our advice and advocacy service dramatically changes the dynamic between the two parties. It enables parents to have their views heard, challenge where necessary and hear, and therefore address, key concerns.

There has been a sharp increase over the last twenty years in the numbers of children who cannot live with their parents being raised by wider family and friends. We estimate that four times as many children are being brought up in family and friends care as are in the care system. Yet our work shows that when a child cannot live at home, more could be done to fully explore and support placing children into the care of a grandparent, aunt or uncle, older sibling or close friend, who can give the child the security, continuity and love they so desperately need. Family group conferences are an extremely effective way of identifying who in the wider family could take on the care of children if they can't live with their parents - but only a minority of families are being offered this option.

The evidence is that family and friends care arrangements often work best for the child, but this is typically at the expense of the carers' mental and physical health and in some circumstances the strain can cause the placement to breakdown. That is why we are campaigning for a national support framework, including a financial allowance for family and friends carers raising children who cannot live with their parents.

Broadening our remit

Family Rights Group has until now been the Charity that advises and supports families whose children are involved with, or require, local authority children's services, typically because they have unmet family support needs or the children are subject child protection enquiries or care proceedings.

A strategic review of the organisation found that the need for this specialist advice and advocacy services for families, and for our policy and campaign work, is greater than ever. However:

- The raft of current and proposed legislative changes is creating an increasingly complex legal interface between childcare, education and youth justice legislation, increasing struggling families' need for more broad ranging, specialist advice¹.
- A coherent, informed and powerful voice is needed to influence, and challenge, both the Government's wider Troubled Families agenda and local Troubled Families programmes.
- The organisation we previously referred families to about their child's non-school attendance and risk of/or actual exclusion is no longer able to provide a national advice service.
- There is no independent specialist advice service for parents whose children are on the edge of, or are involved in, the youth justice system.

The Charity's new strategic aim is therefore to incrementally extend its remit to provide struggling families with specialist advice and advocacy when their children are subject to, or are at risk of, compulsory state intervention, be that in child welfare, youth justice or school exclusion and to provide them with a coherent national policy voice.

EVALUATION, OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

We inform, advise and advocate for parents and family members in order that they can do the best for their children; and we undertake research, develop and champion policies, and deliver training in order to help create the best environment possible for families to succeed . Our work makes a difference by:

- Helping struggling families get the support they need to prevent problems from escalating so as to reduce the need for compulsory state intervention

¹ For example changes to the school admissions code mean those children previously in care and who are now under a residence or special guardianship order (often living with family and friends carers) are given higher priority; and from Nov 2012 a young person who is remanded will be treated as being a looked after child in the care system.

- Improving the relationship between families and statutory agencies, thereby helping children to remain safely within their family network, and averting the need for avoidable, costly care proceedings
- helping children who are in care system to safely return to their family earlier.

This approach assists individual children and families as well as society as a whole and is cost effective. For example, our advice service, saves the taxpayer £11 for every £1 invested.

With nearly forty years' experience we know how much difference we make to the lives of children and families. However, we are committed to commissioning and publishing independent evaluations of our work, so that we can continually review our performance and demonstrate our impact.

STRATEGIC AIMS AND ACTIVITIES 2012 ONWARDS

Family Rights Group will:

1. **Inform, support and advise** struggling families, so that they understand their situation, including their rights, and the options available to them.

Our ambitions:

- To secure funding so we can continue to provide an excellent specialist advice service for families.
- Making optimal use of telephone, digital and multi-media technology, including films so that the number of families and practitioners who benefit from Family Rights Group's advice services continues to grow and they get the help they need deal with their situation.
- To provide broader ranging advice and develop referral systems with other organisations in the education and youth offending sectors, in order to ensure families have the specialist help they need to face multiple problems.
- To continue to support the setting up and running of a local family and friends care support groups, so that those carers who wish to are able to be part of a local group wherever they live in the country.

2. Help **families to have a voice and make or influence decisions** about their children

Our ambitions:

- To provide indepth help to more families who need extra assistance to negotiate with the local authority or when they are involved with court proceedings about their child's needs, care arrangements or concerns about their safety, behaviour and wellbeing.
- To run events and forums and provide opportunities so that children being raised in family and friends care have their views heard

- To lead the development and to champion family-centred child welfare approaches in England and Wales, drawing upon local, national and international evidence, for example by:
 - Running a professional direct family advocacy service which helps individual families and demonstrates the efficacy of family advocacy and how it can be applied in different circumstances.
 - Helping to increase the number of families offered a professional family advocate, by developing a national professional advocacy network and training advocates working in related fields, such as adult mental health, to enable them to develop their skill base and expertise in child care law.
 - Supporting the further development of FGC projects, so there is a child welfare FGC service in every locality in England and Wales, of which least 60% have adopted national quality standards, there is an expansion in the circumstances in which FGCs are offered and that 90% of all FGC services are members of the national FGC Network.
 - Developing links with and training resources for mediation providers, in order that where appropriate, family mediation can be offered to families to resolve disputes when the local authority is involved with families about the safety and well-being of their children.
- 3. Undertake **research, delivery training and champion** policies and practices that help families to support and protect vulnerable children and enable more children, who cannot live with their parents, to have safe and secure placements with family and friends carers

Our ambitions:

- To continue to be at the forefront of action research, which takes account of the perspective of all stakeholders, including children, on effective ways of working with parents, both mothers and fathers, in order to influence policy and local practice
- To continue to be the leading expert organisation on family and friends care, carry out research and publishing studies in order to further develop understanding of the experiences of children being raised in family and friends care, and their carers, and what works and what needs to change.
- To have a greater impact by continuing to increase our influence

Specific campaign ambitions

- To form and lead a 'struggling families alliance' with other relevant organisations to challenge the stigmatisation of parents and draw upon evidence of what works to promote children's welfare, prevent problems from arising and avert them from escalating.

- To be recognised amongst opinion formers and the media as the leading voice on safe and effective alternatives to care.
- To raise the profile, and develop the work, of the Kinship Care Alliance including lobbying successfully for a national financial allowance and an entitlement to other support for family and friends carers in order to improve the wellbeing of children who cannot live at home;
- To lobby successfully for families to be offered a family group conference prior to children being taken into care (except in emergency situations);
- To lobby successfully for families to have greater access to independent advice and family advocacy services when their children are subject to child protection enquiries under s47 Children Act 1989

4. To achieve our aims, we will ensure the charity has a sound infrastructure:

Our ambitions

- To have a sound financial strategy that includes a robust budget, long term financial planning and security of funding for the advice service.
- To increase unrestricted income and diversify our funding base by:
 - nurturing our relationship with existing and potential charitable funders;
 - implementing a targeted corporate fundraising strategy;
 - streamlining our training and consultancy services with a dual aim of raising unrestricted funds and influencing policy and practice;
 - boosting income from on-line fundraising, events
- To raise funds to further develop our core expertise and capacity, as well as opportunities for projects to address emerging trends and needs.
- To continue to improve financial efficiency across the organisation.
- To improve awareness of our organisation amongst target audiences, by implementing a media, communications and marketing strategy.
- To improve and develop our website and digital communications to increase accessibility and usability.
- To continually improve ways of involving service users to influence and inform our work.
- To continue to build an open and effective organisational culture that values the contribution of all staff and encourages and develops their skills and knowledge to deliver the organisation's strategic objectives.
- To regularly review office, IT, personnel and administration to ensure they remain appropriate to enable delivery of the organisation's objectives.
- To work within the highest standards of good governance.