

Family Rights Group's Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022

Agreed by the Board of Trustees on 2 November 2017

This plan sets out Family Rights Group's (FRG) ambitions for the next five years from 2017. The plan draws upon a theory of change. It also incorporates the results of a series of discussions and reflections on the charity's strengths and weaknesses. It recognises the threats and opportunities we face. And it takes account of our external environment and how this impacts on the charity and on our beneficiaries.

FRG is experiencing a period of growth as a result of very welcome investment in our innovative Lifelong Links work. This plan aims to recognise the opportunities that this brings to extend our impact and influence and to secure income beyond the initial grant funds, through a combination of subscriptions, consultancy and training fees.

1. Family Rights Group's Goal

Family Rights Group's goal is to enable children to be raised safely and to thrive within their family and community.

Family Rights Group (FRG) is unique. There is no other organisation in Britain that could achieve our mission and vision. FRG's commitment to human rights and social justice, when combined with our unrivalled legal and child welfare expertise, enables us to offer specialist advice to families, policy makers, practitioners in law and social work and other organisations. Our work remains vital at a time of increased levels of poverty, reduced access to legal aid, record levels of care applications and welfare and immigration reforms impacting upon the most vulnerable..

FRG will continue to review and respond to changes in the social, economic, political and policy environments, ensuring that our work best meets the needs of current and potential beneficiaries. In some cases, this will be through providing services directly or by running projects ourselves. However, given the scale of need and demand for FRG's services and expertise, we will also pursue further collaborations and partnerships to extend our reach and our influence.

2. Who are we?

Family Rights Group (FRG) was founded in 1974. Family Rights Group's overall objective is to enable children to live safely within their family network, where possible, and to strengthen the positive family and community support networks of young people who cannot live with their parents.

We advise parents whose children are in need, are at risk or are in the care system and grandparents and other relatives and friends about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare.

We campaign for families to have their voices heard, to be treated fairly and to get help to prevent problems escalating. We champion family group conferences, Lifelong Links and other policies and practices that maximise the chances of children being raised by, or safely maintaining a relationship with, their family network.

We aim to achieve the following outcomes

- a. Families are treated fairly** when the state makes decisions about their children including having a right to free, independent, specialist advice.
- b. Parents** are supported to safely raise their children.
- c. The wider family** is always considered as potential carers to avert a child unnecessarily entering the care system. There is increased support and recognition for kinship care.
- d. Children and young people** unable to live with their parents are supported to have a healthy, positive relationship with their family network.

3. Principles

The principles that underpin Family Rights Group's work are:

- our starting point is the child within the family;
- we put the experiences and direct voice of families at the heart of everything we do;
- we value our direct experience of providing services to families and this informs all our work with policy makers and practitioners;
- we value our independence from government and statutory services;

- we will challenge when required and we will always provide workable answers to challenges we raise;
- we work with families, community groups, lawyers and social workers, academics and policy makers to enable more children to live safely within their families;
- we value our specialist legal and social work expertise.

The importance of Family Rights Group's work

It is a fundamental human right of every child to be raised by their parents and of every parent to raise their child, provided they are safe. Where this is not possible, there is evidence that children are more likely to thrive within their wider family network than within the care system.

Applications for care proceedings in England and Wales are at record levels. The number of children looked after in the care system is now at its highest level since 1985. Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division for England and Wales¹ has described the family justice system as in "*crisis and, truth be told, we have no very clear strategy for meeting the crisis. What is to be done?*"

There are multiple factors causing the high rates of care proceedings and rising numbers of looked after children including: reductions in funding for preventative services such as domestic violence refuges; welfare reforms; and, a more risk averse culture operating in many local authorities.

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. We believe that the strengths and capacity of families are too often under-estimated or ignored.

Our work with families shows that when parents are subject to such compulsory state intervention they can often feel angry, upset and bewildered, are unable to hear what they are being told by social workers and an antagonistic relationship can

¹ http://3.www.familylaw.co.uk/news_and_comment/15th-view-from-the-president-s-chambers-care-cases-the-looming-crisis#.WKsdrGJvjwo

develop. It is often breakdown in partnership working and perceived non-cooperation that is the trigger for local authorities to issue care proceedings. Our advice and advocacy service dramatically changes the dynamic between the two parties. It enables parents to have their views heard, to challenge where necessary and hear, and therefore to address, key concerns. An evaluation² of the service estimated that every £1 invested in our advice service saved the public purse £28 in care costs and local authority costs of long term or more intensive statutory involvement. The number of families contacting Family Rights Group's advice line are at unprecedented levels and continuing to rise. Funding constraints mean our advice service is currently able to advise only 3 in 10 callers who try to contact us.

There has been a sharp increase over the last twenty years in the numbers of wider family and friends raising children who cannot live with their parents. 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 to 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 cannot live with their parents. Unfortunately, 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. In some circumstances the strain can cause the placement to breakdown. That is why we are campaigning for improved rights to financial and practical support for family and friends carers raising children who cannot live with their parents.

In 2013, we were one of the organisations that instigated The UK Care Inquiry³. The Inquiry concluded that the care system's greatest failing is that it too often breaks, rather than builds, relationships for children in care. We have subsequently led the development of the Lifelong Links approach in the UK which is designed to help

² http://frg.org.uk/images/PDFS/160429_Impact_Evaluation_Report_Final.pdf

³ <http://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/reforming-law-and-practice/the-care-inquiry>

address this by identifying relatives and other supportive adults, who are willing to make a life-long commitment to the child or young person in care.

4. Family Rights Group's strategic ambitions in the next five years

4.1. To provide specialist services so that families understand their situation, including their rights and options, and can make informed decisions when they require support from, or the children are subject to intervention by, children's services

Our ambitions for the next five years:

- To provide a free, specialist digital and telephone service to inform, advise and support families involved with children's services.
- To secure sustainable funding for the continuation and development of the advice service, ensuring sufficient strategic management and quality assurance capacity.
- To meet the greater demand from families for advice.

Current levels of funding for 2017/18 allow for the following targets for the year:

- To provide individual, personalised telephone advice to at least 5,000 families a year;
- That FRG's advice service continues to meet external quality standards e.g. those of the Helplines Partnership;
- That we maintain and update our websites and our online resources including the free, downloadable advice sheets and interactive digital information and signposting information;
- That at least 120,000 users benefit from our specialist online advice via FRG's digital forums;
- That at least 400,000 website visitors access our online advice.

Alongside continuing to build on these targets, we will seek funds:

- To make it easier to navigate the website and the content more accessible;
- To provide indirect and self-advocacy to families involved with children's services who need additional follow up support;
- To invest in FRG's advice and advocacy database so that data about service users' experiences can be analysed in order to influence the charity's agenda;
- To train and support partner organisations to have the skills and knowledge to advocate for their service users within the child protection system;
- To train local advice agencies so that they are better able to provide initial advice and information to families involved with children's social care.

The advice service is funded by the Department for Education (DfE) until the end of March 2018. We are exceeding all the advice service targets. The grant is for two years with the DfE having an option to renew for a further two years i.e. until the end of March 2020. The grant currently partially covers the costs of the service and does not cover advocacy work.

4.2 To influence legislation, policy and practice

Our ambitions for the next five years:

- A. To pursue policy and campaign work underpinned by the following policy aims:
- To ensure that families' voices are heard and their views and experiences are central to decision making. This includes families having greater access to independent advice and family advocacy services when their children are subject to child protection enquiries under s47 Children Act 1989.
 - To promote a child's right to live safely within their family and to prevent children from being removed unnecessarily. This includes families having the right to being offered a family group conference prior to children being taken into care (except in emergency situations).
 - To help build lasting supportive relationships for children in care, including with the family network.

- To challenge the stigma experienced by families whose children are subject to state intervention.
- B. To continue to be the leading organisation that:
- Develops safe and effective ways to enabling children to live within their family network;
 - Campaigns for kinship care to be valued as a permanence option for children and appropriately supported;
 - Has specialist knowledge about the experiences of families, whose children are involved with children's social care;
 - Works with parents and kinship carers to support them to influence child welfare and family justice systems about which they have direct experience.
 - Is recognised amongst opinion formers and the media as the leading voice on safe and effective alternatives to children having to enter the care system.

Key ways in which we will achieve these ambitions:

- To further develop and support the flourishing Parents' and Kinship Carers' panels so the voice of those with experience of the child welfare and family justice system influences decision makers and practitioners at local and national level.
- To identify opportunities and propose amendments to draft or existing legislation, regulations and guidance affecting those involved with children's services, be they family and friends carers or parents, including young mothers and fathers.
- To secure funding to provide legal and specialist briefings as Intervenors in cases heard in the Court of Appeal or Supreme Court, when we can add specialist knowledge of the wider ramifications for the rights of other families subject to child welfare state intervention.
- To continue to lead the policy and campaign work of the Kinship Care Alliance, raising its profile and extending its influence.
- To continue to lead the work of Your Family, Your Voice Alliance, placing families at the heart of supporting system change.

We are currently partly funded by a range of trusts and foundations for this work and will continue to seek funds from independent sources.

4.3 Undertake action research, deliver training and champion policies to improve child welfare systems and professional practice

Our ambitions for the next five years:

- To promote the increased use of family group conferences in order that families are able to take a lead to address child welfare concerns.
- To ensure that family group conferences are delivered to a consistent, high standard including through encouraging and supporting local FGC services to become accredited and coordinators to achieve the post graduate award.
- To continue to be the organisation leading the Family Group Conferences Services Network and the foremost provider of family group conference training and consultancy services provider.
- To promote additional ways in which family group conferences can be used to improve outcomes for children and young people e.g. youth offending, school exclusion and mental illness.

This work will dovetail with the development of Lifelong Links (see below) to which FGC services are integral.

- To build on our domestic violence project work to disseminate effective ways of working with families affected by domestic violence so that they are supported to raise their children safely and are treated fairly. This will be underpinned by a knowledge inquiry to reach agreement between agencies on principles for working with families affected by domestic violence, including adult and child survivors and perpetrators.
- 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 mothers and fathers in order to influence policy and local practice.

- To continue to work with academics and practitioners nationally and internationally to identify promising approaches to working with families whose children are in need or at risk and to share and disseminate our expertise.
- To directly engage families with relevant experience in the training and events that we deliver to practitioners.
- To identify opportunities for improved professional practice in the child welfare and family justice systems and offer training, consultancy and advice to professionals and agencies interested in improving their practice.
- To continue to pursue opportunities to influence practitioner training via contributing to training programmes run by larger partners.

We will continue to pursue funding from independent trusts and foundations for our project work. The Family Group Services Network and associated training and accreditation activities brings in unrestricted income to the FRG via subscriptions and fees. We use core funds to for work to engage with academics and practitioners and to identify unmet need. We will continue to undertake regular fundraising activities to contribute to our core funds.

4.4 To lead the development and support the implementation of the Lifelong Links approach in the UK, in order to build lasting support networks for children and young people in the care system.

Our ambitions for the next five years:

- To successfully lead the trial of Lifelong Links so that we will have a robustly evaluated practice model in the UK that enables looked after children to have enduring, safe relationships and informal support networks that are essential to their wellbeing. The approach also aims to radically change the way that

children's social care plan for care leavers so that they can have lasting, constructive relationships with members of their family and a wider support network.

- To develop an accreditation system for Lifelong Links in order to help to ensure consistent high quality standards in how it is implemented.
- That more than 1,000 young people in care benefits from the Lifelong Links approach during the initial three year trial.
- That Lifelong Links is sustained in the trial sites and eventually becomes the norm for how children in the care system.
- That a longitudinal evaluation of Lifelong Links assesses the impact of the approach, including whether it is effective and whether cost savings are generated.
- That FRG and the trial sites have the expertise, experience, resources, contacts, evidence and know-how to successfully sustain and scale up use of the model and ensure it is implemented consistently in other authorities in order to significantly enhance systems of care and support for children and young people.

The Department for Education has funded the trial of Lifelong Links in England for three years from April 2017. Some funding has been secured to trial Lifelong Links in Scotland and we are continuing to pursue other funding sources from a range of funders.

The intention beyond the trial is that unrestricted income and fees are generated through Lifelong Links related training, consultancy and accreditation.

4.5 To develop and strengthen our infrastructure

Our ambitions for the next five years:

- To continue to fundraise and develop partnerships that secure a stable financial basis including sufficient reserves to meet legal and contractual obligations and fluctuations in income;

- To continue to develop income generation through fees for training and consultancy and accreditation;
- To maintain and further develop robust financial monitoring systems and processes;
- To recruit and retain sufficient and suitably qualified and experienced staff to deliver funded work, including direct services to families;
- To ensure we have sufficient management capacity to support and lead FRG during a period of growth;
- To ensure we have high quality finance and administration functions and access to high quality back office functions (ICT, HR,);
- To ensure we have access to high quality advice to support our lobbying and communications work;
- To maintain, invest in and develop our data collection systems to gather and analyse service user experiences and feedback;
- To continue to provide strong leadership and governance.