



Transcript of presentation by Angela Frazer-Wicks, Chair, Family Rights Group

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The voice of families with lived experienced within the child protection and family justice system

I am Angela Frazer-Wicks, I am a birth parent, having lost my eldest two children to adoption back in 2004 predominantly due to DV. I am also mum to a ten-year-old daughter who has had no local authority involvement whatsoever and shortly before Christmas last year I was reunited with my eldest son.

I'm going to share my personal journey as someone with lived experience. I'll take you from where it all started, what I've seen happen along the way and where I've ended up now. I'll also touch on what I hope to see in the future.

For me it all started back in 2004 when I said goodbye to my boys. I promised to write to them as soon as I could. My final words to my eldest son, who was five at the time, were Mammy will write really soon. I had been told that I could have letterbox contact once or twice a year and it was the only thing stopping me from completely falling apart.

Unfortunately, not long after saying goodbye I was told that, due to the fact there were no adopters for my sons at the time we said goodbye, there was no agreement for letterbox. I was destroyed and unable to see a way forward. My children were waiting for a letter I couldn't send and I had no way of letting them know. I was no longer legally their mum, I had no rights at all. I had no idea how I was meant to carry on and I began to spiral into depression. I thought no one cared.

Fortunately, my solicitor did care and had contacted the charity After Adoption. A lovely lady called Norma got in touch. At first, I didn't trust her and wouldn't speak to her as she was a social worker. She was very patient, she understood and took the time I needed to convince me that she simply wanted to help me. She didn't force anything, she just spent time building a relationship.

She told me stories of other mothers just like me, told me I wasn't to blame for everything that had happened to me. She told me she wanted to help me fight for letterbox. As my boys now had adopters she was able to get me the precious letters I had waited so desperately for. My boys were back in my life. Safe healthy and happy and this helped me start to take small tentative steps towards a future without them.

Norma asked me to speak to other mums so that they would know they could trust Norma and the others at After Adoption. I made a short video for her. She had helped so much I wanted to repay her in any way I could. I went on to speak to small groups of social workers, helping them to see how their practice could help or destroy families like mine.

Norma then asked me to speak at a conference. I was absolutely terrified, having been through the system, being judged, blamed and labelled I didn't think anyone would listen or believe my story. But I wanted so badly to help stop others suffering like me so I agreed.

When the time came, I stood in front of a large room of social workers and told a small part of my story. It was the first time I had spoken publicly and in front of so many people. I was so nervous I shook throughout. As it turned out I needn't have been nervous as it was a huge success, I even got a standing ovation! It was the first time in what felt like forever that I felt worthy and not a complete waste of space.

At this event I met Bridget Lindley of Family Rights Group and she convinced me to work with them, to speak out and raise awareness of the issues facing families just like mine, she believed that the system could only change if people heard the reality of what was happening to families. I had no idea how it could help but I instantly agreed.

To start with I helped in small ways, giving my opinion on advice sheets, taking part in research projects.

But less than a year from meeting Bridget I was invited to co-chair an international conference for FRG. I was convinced I couldn't do it but everyone at FRG supported me every step of the way.

And that was the beginning of an unbelievable journey. I began to speak at more events and the more I spoke out, the more people listened and the more they listened the more others began to realise they needed to listen too. It was never about bashing social workers or making people feel guilty about what happened to me and my children, or even trying to change what had happened to me. It was about educating and informing both policy and practice. It was about changing things for others. I wanted to explain how it felt to be totally powerless over what had happened to my family and how important it was for families to have a voice and be part of the process.

I didn't know anything about partnership working back then or what the Children Act said, all I had was my own lived experience and a willingness to share my story. I didn't understand the importance of what I was doing, it was just nice to have a positive outlet for what had been a truly horrific experience for both me and my children.

Luckily for me, Family Rights Group did understand the importance of involving and listening to those with lived experience. In the years that followed, with their support, I went on to speak at numerous events, feature in newspaper articles and even record short clips for radio. It was great to finally have a voice, but it was a little lonely sharing my story alone. I always had the support of everyone at FRG but I found that some people thought I was the exception, that what had happened to me wasn't truly representative of practice, that I had either been unlucky to lose my children or I was lucky to have found my voice. If we were ever going to get more people to listen, we needed more voices than just mine!

In 2013 Family Rights Group was one of 8 charities who came together to form the Care Inquiry. I spoke at one of the events alongside adopters and adopted young people. I had never been in the same room as adopters or adoptees before and I was scared they I would be seen as the enemy, the one to blame. What I discovered transformed my life. When we shared our own personal stories, we realised that we were all being failed, we all felt powerless and we all needed support that just wasn't there. We had all been judged and labelled. That event helped me to shake off a lot of the guilt and shame I had carried for such a long time.

Fired on by what we had heard Family Rights Group formed their panels, expert panels made up of people with lived experience of the child welfare and family justice system. We brought together birth parents, adopters, parents who were once in care themselves and kinship carers. Despite our different experiences we all shared a common goal – to improve the system for everyone who needed it. We shared our lived experience in the hope we could prevent other families going through the same things we went through.

Although our intention was to help others, we ended up helping ourselves too. We formed friendships, supported one another and developed a bond unlike any other. Brought together by negative experiences but fired on by positive and empowering friendships. I mean, if anyone had told me, all those years ago, that I'd be friends with adopters I'd have thought they were crazy! Now some of my closest friends are adopters. My relationships with them went on to strengthen the relationship I had with my son's adopters and they went on to form positive connections with their child's birth family.

Over the years the panels have grown and gone from strength to strength. We are wonderfully supported by our panel facilitator, Beverley. She looks after us and makes sure that none of the work we do harms us. She is always at the end of a phone, sends us birthday and Christmas cards and just generally takes care of us. Family Rights Group understands we are an asset, one to be treasured and invested in. Only this morning we were in a meeting with journalists, learning how to safely share our stories. Over lockdown they have ensured we can all participate in zoom meetings and aren't left isolated.

With their support the panels have gone on to inform all the work of Family Rights Group, we have spoken at international events and become an intrinsic part of FRG. So much so that 50% of the Board of Trustees is made up of people with lived experience. In 2016 I was appointed a Trustee myself, an enormously proud moment for me and my family.

And on 11th November this year, 13 years on from that very first conference, I was honoured to be appointed Chair of the Board of Trustees, becoming the first birth parent to ever hold the role.

Family Rights Group have demonstrated the importance of partnership working, leading by example and setting the bar for others to follow.

They understand that whilst we may not want the perspective we have, it is a unique and valuable insight that can help shape policy and practice. Our experiences can help educate and inform, and most of all we have a right to be seen and heard, not just within the context of proceedings but by the wider system as a whole. As things currently stand the only way for families to feed back into practice is negatively, via complaint. Not only does this put a huge number of families off as they are concerned anything they say may impact the outcomes of their case, it also prevents any positive feedback from being imbedded into wider practice.

I believe that families should have a way to feed into policy, practice and system design and implementation, both at local and national level. If we don't ask families if what we are doing is helping then how can we know it works? We need true collaboration and partnership. It's not enough to invite one person to share their views and then claim to have listened or involved those with lived experience. We need the system to work, we want to keep our families safely together so it's only right that we have a say in how this happens.

Over the years I have seen a much-needed shift in the way families are viewed and seen them begin to be valued and rightly so.

Back in 2016 I was a stakeholder in the care crisis review. The review was in response to Sir James Munby's call for action. He stated the system was in crisis and something needed to be done. FRG took up the call to action and brought together stakeholders from across the system to look at what was going wrong and how we could put things right and ensured that stakeholders included people with lived experience. One of the things I spoke about at almost every meeting was the importance of working with those with lived experience.

As a direct result of this I was contacted by Cafcass and asked to help them set up what is now their Family Forum. They wanted to give the families and children they worked with a way to feedback into their practice. We worked together to ensure that they got it right, that they supported the families they were working with and learned from them but understood

how difficult it was for people to come forward and speak. Last year I met the founding members of the forum and seeing how excited they were to join and finally have a voice was indescribable. What I was doing was actually making a difference and it fired me on.

I went on to join BASW 80/20 Steering Group looking at relationship-based practice and advising how they can involve people with lived experience.

I delivered training for DV workers alongside legal experts, explaining how CP complicates things for the victims they work with and ensuring that they don't inadvertently make things worse for them by giving them the wrong advice. I delivered DV training for social workers alongside experts ensuring that they saw the reality of what the victims were facing and how hard it was for them being stuck between the perpetrator and the local authority, terrified of both. After each event someone always said to me, I'd never thought of it that way or I won't do that again and that always gave me such a sense of pride knowing that what I was doing was changing things, even if only in a small way.

In January last year I was appointed Co-Chair of Cafcass Learning and Improvement Board looking at improving the way they work with families where there has been domestic abuse. The board is made up of representatives from across family justice together with adults and young people who have experienced domestic violence. My role, along with chairing the board, has been to ensure that they are able to contribute to the work, that they are heard, listened to but most importantly supported and not further traumatised. Sharing your own lived experience can be therapeutic but it can also be deeply upsetting, having to relive things that some of us barely survived takes enormous courage and this should be acknowledged and everything possible done to support those telling their stories.

In March of the same year I was chosen out of over 1000 applications to sit on the Experts by Experience Board of the current Independent review into children's social care.

I also sit on the Advisory Board for the Born into Care Study at Lancaster University alongside various academics and professionals. One of the highlights of this piece of work had been getting to meet the birth mums who have advised the study. A group I have named the Hope mums. They are a group of dedicated and selfless women who have been through unspeakable grief and loss and who now work to try and help others in the same situation. They genuinely have no idea how amazing they are and what an impact they have had on the study and all those involved. The work they are doing to design boxes for women whose children are removed at birth blew me away. The care and thought they put into every single part of the work they are doing, their determination to get it right, to help others but not to make things feel worse for them is, well it's just amazing to see. I feel privileged to have been welcomed into their group. A special mention has to go to Claire Mason at Lancaster University and Kate Chivers at Birth Companions who have supported the mums throughout and done a wonderful job ensuring the wellbeing of the women they work with.

I have also been delighted to be invited to speak to social work students at Lancaster alongside Karen.

I have helped local authorities set up panels and councils of their own. My hope for the future would be that every local authority and every local family justice board has panels of people with lived experience feeding into every aspect of their work.

And speaking of hope, last December life as I knew it changed forever when my eldest son, whom I hadn't heard from since he turned 18 four years earlier, finally got in touch. I discovered he had been trying to contact me but the local authority had told him I was a safeguarding risk to his younger brother, who was not yet 18. All the work I had done raising awareness, the fact I have a daughter with no local authority involvement had made no difference. I had been judged on my past. A decision made based on an inaccurate and outdated file written by people who didn't know me because they never took the time to get to know me. Despite all my successes I was still labelled.

My son then told me it was my work with Family Rights Group that enabled him to find me. He had seen my videos, read all the articles, seen the work I had been doing and demanded the local authority connect us. And they did. Tomorrow he turns 23 and for the first time in 18 years he has a gift from me and for the first time since he was 3 years old I can wish him a happy birthday on the day. I can't put into words what it means. He has told me he is proud of me, of the work I have done. All these years of fighting for others and it ended up changing my life completely.

I have now gone on to have opinions pieces published in national media, recorded radio programmes for the BBC and spoken across the world on the issues facing families. But no matter how loud my voice is, it's not enough. We need more voices, joined together if we are to ever be truly heard.

Whilst there is still an enormous way to go and huge changes are still needed, the progress I have seen genuinely gives me hope for the future, one where families are involved not because someone says they must be but because all those involved in the child welfare and family justice system finally understand why we should be.