



Welcome from Party Leader



Phil Else, Party Leader

Dear Friends.

Autumn bears down on us, and so it would appear our Summer newsletter is kind of late. For that I can only apologise, as putting this together has played second fiddle to getting our Family Law Survey up and running.

With the passing of the Summer holiday so too have we seen the back of the proof of one of the Family Court's wonderful hypocrisies. For many of us, having our children stay with us during a school week has been banned because it will "mess the children about" (insert your own CAFCASS officer's nonsense here). Yet, despite the abuse that we would cause to our children by regularly swapping them from house to house, they are somehow capable of staying with us more often when there may be the issue of extra childcare costs during the school breaks.

If only these people could see the common sense of such things, and how it is lacking in the original decisions, I doubt we would have all the problems we do today.

Speaking of common sense, I think I may be starting to detect a slight shift in the rhetoric of some politicians. Tory leader David Cameron has recently brought the term "family break-

down and its associated problems" in to a discussion about the causes of crime. Also, people in the media are now starting to shift the blame for [questionably] worthless contact orders on the parents who initiate a refusal to allow children to see their other parent, rather than bad decision-making.

It may be that we are seeing the first cracks in the iron facade of the politicians, showing the pressure that is being put against the Government and the courts is perhaps beginning to work. I doubt that there will ever be a time when the Government stand up and say, "yes, you are right, we will change", but one day soon, change will come sneaking in on embarrassed tip toes and apologise for the delay.

The major news today is that our first survey of family law is ready at last! We're hopeful this survey will mark the start of a greater public awareness of the Equal Parenting Alliance.

We believe this survey is something new that distinguishes us from the other groups.

But before we announce it more widely, we'd like as many of *you* as possible to complete the survey and give us some feedback on what you think of it. (There's still time to change it now if we find any major problems, before launching it to the public at large). You can find the survey at www.familylawsurvey.co.uk where you can complete it online or download a Windows program to help you fill it in.

News In Brief

EPA at Labour Party Fringe - We were asked to speak at a Labour Party Fringe meeting entitled "Shared Residence". Steve spoke in a "Question Time" style meeting in the Comedy Club, Manchester on the 25th September. Other speakers were from Families Need Fathers and Real Fathers 4 Justice.

It was disappointing that neither the Labour Party nor CAFCASS were able to provide a speaker due to *diary commitments*. I suspect this shows what they *really* think of Shared Residence.

EPA Family Law Survey Launched - We are now launching our major survey of family law contact issues. This we hope will bring us to wider public attention (and possibly into some controversy as the significance of this survey slowly dawns on the establishment). The survey is discussed in full in the rest of this newsletter.

Dept of Constitutional Affairs consultation - on court transparency is open for comments, which have to be in by 30th October, see back page for more details.

SURVEY EXPLAINED

Core Issues

Contact Issues & Your Case

This is the largest section of the survey, and for most people, this is *what it's all about*, so we hope everyone taking the survey will complete this section.

Apart from asking basic information about your case, we want to see what contact you had with the children before the parents separated, and before and after the court case. If the children have to suffer indirect contact, or supervised contact, we also ask you about this.

There's also a section on common problems with contact, mostly on false allegations.

Finally you can give your overall view on family law.

Judges

Rate each Judge involved with your case. What did you think of them? Help us find the good and bad judges.

CAFCASS officers and other experts

Rate each CAFCASS officer and other experts (such as psychologists, social workers etc) concerned with your case.

Hopefully, these results will become a useful online source to help people choose appropriate experts in family law cases. In most cases, when an expert is appointed, there is no way to obtain any useful information about their competence etc - until it's too late.

Solicitors and Barristers

Have you come across any particularly good or bad solicitors or barristers? It doesn't matter whether they were acting for you or not, you may still have some useful information to report.

Supplemental Issues

Mediation?

How useful did you find it?

Effect on You of Family Law?

How has involvement with a family law case changed your life?

Did you go LIP?

Did you represent yourself in court at any time?

Please tell us about it.

Courts

What do you think about the environment and facilities in the court buildings themselves?

Though this may seem like an awful lot of information to collect, it's definitely not just an academic exercise.

Firstly we are giving a voice to the tens of thousands of parents who go through the family courts each year. At least *someone* is finally listening to what they're saying.

But the main reason we're conducting this survey is to get real statistics and opinions on the way that family law is currently working. The problem with the current movement is there is *no* objective data on which to base any claims or assertions.

It's no good just shouting (for example) that the courts are biased against fathers because there is

absolutely *no way* of proving whether this is true or not. *All* the available 'evidence' is anecdotal.

On the other hand, our survey aims to collate the experiences of parents in such a way that the results and treatment of their cases can be directly compared.

Although this survey is far from perfect (and indeed it can easily be criticised for the self-selecting sample of people who will probably fill it in) – but it's still going to be the best we have.

Of course, none of our theories mean anything if not enough people fill the survey in. We'd like as many of our members and supporters as possible to please fill it in.

You can find the survey at www.FamilyLawSurvey.co.uk

SCORING THE SURVEY

How will we calculate our ‘ratings’ from the survey results?

One of our aims from the survey, is to be able to publish ratings or scores for any judge, CAFCASS officer and other expert, solicitor and family court for which we get enough survey results returned.

So how are we going to calculate them?

Basically most questions in the survey have five possible answers, ranging from *very good* to *very poor*. A ‘very good’ response will score +2 points, an ‘OK’ response will score 0 points, and ‘very poor’ will score -2 points. (Unanswered questions, and all ‘Don’t Know’ responses will also score zero points).

So simply adding up all the scores would give us a simple score for that judge.

However, not all the questions are equally important, so we have also assigned a ‘weighting’ to

each question, basically saying how *important* we think the response to this question is. So, for example, the question asking how much a judge put the interests of the child first is a very important quality of a judge, whereas the question about how well a judge treated a LIP (Litigant In Person) is – we consider – less important.

Because more important questions have a higher weighting, a ‘good’ response for an important question is worth more than a ‘good’ response for a less important question.

The weighting for a question is simply multiplied by the score for that question, and these totals summed to get an overall score.

This example show how a judge’s score can be calculated for a single survey response:

How would you rate this Judge for the following ...	+2	+1	0	-1	-2	0	Weighting	Score
Listening to both sides of the argument:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OK	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	1	0
Fairness:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> OK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	2	-2
Ability to understand the main issues:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> OK	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	1.5	0
Effectiveness: acting on the main issues:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> OK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	1	-1
Making everyone feel at ease in court:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> OK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	1	-1
Putting the interests of the child first:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OK	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	3	0
If you represented yourself in court (as a litigant in person) how would you rate your treatment by this judge of you as a LIP?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> OK	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Don't Know N/A	1	0
If you had the same judge again in the future, in another case, would you initially be:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Pleased	<input type="checkbox"/> Pleased	<input type="checkbox"/> Neutral	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Displeased	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Displeased	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	1.5	-1.5
Overall, how would you rate this Judge?	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> OK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know	3	-3
							Total	-8.5

So this judge’s simple total is -8.5 (in the range -30 to +30). If we then adjust this so it is on a scale from 0 to 100, this judge’s score ends up as 36 *. A judge that had ‘very good’ in response to every question would score 100, and a judge with ‘very poor’ down the line would score zero.

In case you’re wondering, we only calculate ratings using the questions that can be scored on

our simple +2 to -2 scale. So a free text comment on a judge of “lazy, incompetent idiot” would not be taken account of in calculating a judge’s total score.

We will also, of course, be averaging scores according to the number of survey results we get. The more returns we get, the more meaningful will be the results.

* The normalised score calculation is $(-8.5 + 30) \times (100 / (+30 - -30)) = 35.69$

THE BACK PAGE

The Department of Constitutional Affairs would like to hear what you think!

Many people are convinced (including some members of the judiciary, the legal industry and Parliament), that family courts need to be more open.

The Department of Constitutional Affairs (DCA, which is the Government department responsible for family courts, headed by Harriet Harman) is conducting a public consultation into how the openness of the family courts can be improved.

The public, or any interested body, can comment on the DCA's proposals for opening the courts **by the 30th October 2006**.

The Equal Parenting Alliance will be formally submitting a response, and we hope some of our members will submit their own as well.

We'll be sending a 'template' response to you all in the next few weeks, based on our formal response. This will make it easier for you to respond yourself even if you haven't got time to start from scratch.

You can download the DCA consultation document from:

<http://www.dca.gov.uk/consult/courttransparency1106/cp1106.htm>

Equal Parenting Alliance – campaign group or political party?

We often get asked this. The best answer is that we are both these. Although, of course, we *are* a political party, there are major differences between us and the other parties.

The main aim of a traditional party is to win enough votes (or seats) to form a government. They do this because they want power.

It's *not* their aim to change people's minds - it's just so much easier for them to *change their message* until they think it will appeal to as many people as possible. (Clearly, looking at New Labour this seems to have been a winning strategy to date).

Unfortunately, we don't have this luxury.

We exist because we believe that family courts are failing tens of thousands of children a year largely due to their lazy and inept procedures and policies.

We exist because we believe the existing campaign groups are not getting the message across alone.

We exist because - for many of us at least - we were given no choice but to sit back and watch as our children were needlessly harmed — all mean-

while the family courts ignorantly postured around their best interests.

Don't let anyone dismiss us as no more than a *single issue party* — we are a single issue party like no other.

Our *single issue* encompasses changing the minds of a nation, taking on a massively profitable legal industry, challenging a century's wobbly thinking on sexual politics, persuading an easy-riding media that there is a real problem – but with solutions available now – and (as an aside), changing the law!

Compared to our single issue, I think stopping a bypass through Neesdon would be the work of a mere Wednesday afternoon!

So, while of course we want people to vote for us, we want their votes *not* so we get elected, but so we show the strength of feeling about our dysfunctional family law system and hence gain influence.

It is a hard task we set ourselves. Make no mistake.

But our children deserve nothing less.

It's not that we are suggesting family courts are a joke, but the following conversation was overheard in the Mad Hatters family court last week :-

Litigant - This family court has completely ignored the evidence before it and I cannot see how it has even *begun* to put the best interests

of the child first. In my opinion this court is a farce and total pantomime.

Judge - Oh no it isn't.

Litigant - Oh yes it is.

Judge - **Oh no it isn't.**