

NAGALRO PRESS RELEASE**25 February 2010****Credibility of Cafcass waiting list figures undermined**

Doubt has been cast on the accuracy of improved waiting list figures publicised recently by Cafcass, the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, even though Cafcass describes its figures now as 'official statistics'. BBC Radio's File on Four programme yesterday reported that cases are being removed from the waiting list through allocation to managers, even though the children concerned will not be seen and will not receive the proactive service necessary to protect them.

Some managers have up to 20 public law cases and over 100, in one case over 200, private law cases allocated to them in areas where there are long waiting lists, or where inspections by Ofsted are due. File on Four reported that cases are being allocated in bulk to managers, and also to practitioners who have no time to do work on them.

The service to vulnerable children, many of whom have been hurt and abused, is in crisis with Anthony Douglas, Cafcass Chief Executive, admitting to File on Four that Cafcass plans to embed a lower level of service for children on a permanent basis. Managers already carry heavy workloads and are therefore unable to visit children, interview parents, to read social work files, write evidence-based reports or attend court to represent the child. Practitioners who are already overstretched find cases allocated to them without consultation, and are being put in situations of considerable professional conflict.

Ann Haigh, Chair of Nagalro, said today "It is particularly worrying if we cannot trust the figures Cafcass produces about how many children are waiting for a service. How can the Cafcass Board and government ministers be sure they know the true numbers of children who are waiting?"

The evidence given to File on Four reinforces the findings of Nagalro's recent survey of its members' public work for Cafcass. 'Time for Children' found that practitioners across the country are being instructed to prioritise administrative tasks in preference to spending time with children. Risk is being assessed at arms-length, by practitioners reading limited amounts of the relevant papers, but without seeing or talking to children.

There are real risks that the wrong decisions are being made for individual children because cases are getting only superficial attention via duty systems. Some children may stay with parents when still at risk of neglect and abuse. Others may remain in care or be adopted when a grandparent or family member could have provided a home.

When a named guardian is appointed for a child it is frequently months after cases started, and so late in the proceedings that further damaging delay is incurred.

Nagalro believes it is time to look at different models of providing a flexible, timely and expert service for vulnerable children and the courts, so that children's rights are protected and their voices once again properly heard when crucial decisions are being made about their future. Ann Haigh said: "Nagalro is keen to make a positive contribution to future plans and we look forward to discussing the issues raised in 'Time for Children' with the Family Justice Review Panel."

-----ENDS-----

For further please information contact:

Karen Harris Principal Administrator, Nagalro office 01372 818504
Alison Paddle Nagalro Press Officer 01539 737232

Notes to Editors:

1. NAGALRO is the Professional Association for Children's Guardians, Family Court Advisers and Independent social work practitioners. The association aims to promote and enhance the quality of practice of those concerned with the independent representation of children's interests before the courts, throughout England and Wales.
2. Children's Guardians are appointed in public law proceedings in the family courts i.e. where Local Authority Children's Services take court action to protect children whom they believe are suffering significant harm within their families, - physical, sexual or emotional abuse. The role developed to give children a voice after the tragedy of Maria Cowell, a seven year old girl whose voice was not heard when the court returned her to mother and step father who murdered her. Guardians are also appointed in adoption proceedings, emergency protection order, and secure accommodation applications. Family Court Advisers act in private law cases, reporting to the court on children's welfare in relation to contact and residence issues. A Guardian can also be appointed for a child in private law proceedings under Rule 9.5 where their welfare requires independent representation.
3. The Nagalro website can be found at: www.nagalro.com
4. 'Time for Children' a survey of Nagalro Members public law work for Cafcass, published on 21 January 2010, is downloadable from the Latest News page of the Nagalro website.
5. A podcast of BBC Radio's File on 4 programme is available from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00qvm9h#synopsis>
6. Details of the Family Justice Review Panel are on the Ministry of Justice website at: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/newsrelease160210a.htm>

NAGALRO PO BOX 264 ESHER SURREY KT10 OWA
Tel: 01372 818504 Fax: 01372 818505 nagalro@globalnet.co.uk www.nagalro.com