

New Family Social



Annual General Report

For the year ending 31 January 2011



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People

Trustees

Anisa de Jong (Chair)
Ashley Wade-Smythe
Cath Lambert
Farhad Divecha (Treasurer)
Iain McNulty-Ringshaw
Javier Lopez
Lucy Smith (until October 2010)
Simon Mansfield-Sturgess

Company Secretary

Barry Burland

Staff

Director: Andy Leary-May
Membership Secretary (from 14 March 2011): Laurence Benkhabebe-House

Introduction from the Chair

It has been an exciting year for NFS. As an organisation we have developed enormously, in particular in strengthening and professionalising the organisation's structure and functioning, including becoming a registered charity. We have also built on and expanded peer support opportunities, as you can read in this report.

At NFS's first ever AGM in February 2010, it was agreed that the core function of the group should be to provide peer support and that - given the fact that the group is still young and its resources limited - care should be taken that any expansion of activities would never be at the expense of this core function. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that some external activities can be mutually reinforcing, for example, increased media exposure can lead to more members and thereby provide greater opportunities for peer support. In particular, it was agreed that building up the membership base and ensuring that the organisation raised and secured its income were key to ensuring the organisation's long-term survival.

The Director and Trustees have worked hard to implement this strategic direction. Whilst acknowledging that LGBT adoption is always a political issue, and that advocacy of LGBT adoption is also an essential part of NFS, we prioritised securing our peer support function and building up the strength of the organisation. Moreover, we wanted to ensure that any 'representational' activities would have to reflect the diversity of the membership and should not become the political or personal voice of a few. To guide this we adopted a clear position statement on the NFS 'About Us' webpage:

"Our members have very diverse backgrounds, needs and views and New Family Social seeks to address all their needs in broad ranging ways. As such, New Family Social does not claim or seek to be the voice for all LGBT adopters and foster carers. Rather, we aspire to reflect a diversity of voices in our work with agencies, social workers, the media and other organisations."

On behalf of all the Trustees, I would like to thank Andy for all his fantastic work, as well as all the volunteers, in particular Peter for his invaluable contributions across many aspects of NFS, Barry and his employer, Milbank, for their legal help and use of their facilities for meetings, the message board moderators for their important and sometimes thankless task, Gin for maintaining the Family Finding section of the website, Ashley for running the lending library, and Kerrigan and Jason for making the camping holiday not only possible but such an amazing success. I would also like to welcome Laurence to the organisation. Last but not least we would like to thank all the members for being so involved with NFS, and supportive of each other throughout all our adoption journeys.

Anisa de Jong (Chair)

Introduction from the Director

To try to sum up the last year in a few words, I think it was: “more steady progress in lots of different areas, without losing sight of why NFS was started”

Some of the highlights for me, since the last AGM, were:

- Membership growing from 266 to 421 families and prospective families
- Our first camping festival last August, with over 100 adults and 60 children
- New areas of the UK reaching a critical mass of members, and having regular events (eg the South East Coast group, now using a hired venue bi-monthly).
- Our new Membership Secretary, Laurence, beginning to keep in touch with members new and old and making sure their needs are being met.
- Reaching an income from annual agency subscriptions which secures the basic running of the support network.

My hope for the next year (to be equally concise!) is: “to take what’s good about NFS and make it even better”. In particular:

- To redevelop the website to suit our needs. This should improve every aspect of NFS, making activities more effective and efficient, and making it easier for volunteers to play a active role.
- To devolve more responsibility and activity to volunteers in each region of the UK, and to encourage more active and cohesive local groups.

For me, the activities above are what NFS is all about, and are the reason I started the group in 2007. As resources allow there are many other things we as a group can do to help our families, and those members hoping to form a family. These are discussed later in this report, but I am particularly excited about our new guides which are to be published by BAAF later this year. These will be a very cost-effective, accessible way for agencies to ensure that social workers, panel members, foster carers, birth parents and children have the up-to-date advice and reassurance that is so badly needed.

In 2009 NFS received funding for an outreach project which resulted in NFS becoming well known to many agencies, and also kick-started our agency subscriptions. In the past year my focus has been on other areas, although our members have continued to do great work in spreading the word. From Autumn this year I hope to start spending more time maintaining existing agency relationships, and forging new ones, and the joint production of the new guides with BAAF will also boost the visibility and standing of NFS.

I think we should all be of proud of what NFS has become, and I look forward to working with members, volunteers and trustees over the next year to keep moving things forwards, and keep sharing support.

Andy Leary-May (Director)

Organisational and Structural Developments

Board of Trustees

At NFS's first AGM in February 2010 a Board consisting of eight Trustees was elected, one of whom resigned for personal reasons in October of that year. The Trustees met bi-monthly in this financial year, namely in March, May, July, September and December 2010, and in January 2011. We also had lots of email discussions in between, as well as other smaller meetings regarding specific activities and projects, as detailed in this report. Minutes of all Trustee meetings are available to the members via the online message boards.

Charity Registration

NFS was granted charitable status at the beginning of October 2010. In order to do this the Charity Commission requested that we make a slight change to the wording of the Objects in the NFS Articles of Association, which was done by Resolution of 29th July 2010. The change does not affect any of the activities NFS undertakes or would seek to undertake in the future. The amended Articles of Articulation are available on the NFS website ('About Us').

As a charity we were able to set up a CAF bank account and make arrangements for reclaiming gift aid and other tax relief. We have also set up an account with Virgin Money Giving which allows for online donations with automatically reclaimed gift aid. We amended the membership fee structure, which allows us to claim Gift Aid on the part of the membership fee that can count as a donation.

Membership

It was agreed at the 2010 AGM that members should be given a vote as to whether membership should be opened to foster carers, as well as transsexual and transgendered people (regardless of their sexual orientation). These votes were taken via an online poll and as a result membership has been opened up to LGBT foster carers as well as to transsexual and transgendered adopters and foster carers.

Measures and procedures have been put in place to protect the integrity of the fostering and adoptive environment, for example by providing a separate section on the online message board, and having some peer support meetings inclusive and some exclusive of foster carers. Since extending membership, 13 foster carers and prospective foster carers have joined NFS.

In this financial year, the number of members has grown from 266 families in February 2010 to 366 families at the end of January 2011. In addition, the 'Northern Support Group', a support group of about 40/50 members for lesbian and gay adopters, have agreed to merge with NFS and this is to be implemented shortly.

Subscription Agencies

Adoption and fostering agencies that subscribe to NFS provide an important part of our income. The number of subscribing agencies has grown from 20 in February 2010 to 50 at the end of January 2011.

Employment & Staff Training

The Director was paid on an hourly basis, but during this year a formal Director's job description and employment contracts have been developed. Outside this financial year - but worth mentioning here - is that on the 1 March 2011 Andy Leary-May became employed as the Director on a permanent contract for 21 hours per week. We also employed Laurence

Benkhaleb-House on 15 March 2011 as a Membership Secretary for 14 hours per week.

The Director undertook eight hours of training on the essentials of running a Charity, and the Membership Coordinator has been induced to the post by the Director. From September 2010 the Director provides a bi-monthly Director's report to the Trustees which are also available to members via the on-line message boards.

Other Organisational Issues

NFS developed further professionally, for example we took out an Annual Public Liabilities Insurance which is required for the Camping Holiday and meet ups. We also communicated with Ofsted on whether we need to register, and although so far we have not been strictly required to do so, it is something we are considering for the future, especially if and when we are providing more professionalised support (beyond peer support) to adopters and/or children.

Grant Applications

The Director applied for a grant of £15k from Unlimited to enable him to develop NFS. Unfortunately his application for a level 1 grant was refused because the panel felt NFS as an organisation didn't have enough track record, although a level 2 grant of £5k was received. At a second round of applications a level 1 grant was once more not awarded, this time because it was felt that the organisation had in the meantime achieved sufficient independent strength to get where it wanted to be without their financial support!

A grant application has also been submitted to the Nominet Trust for the development of our website and online activities (submitted in March 2011).

NFS was also provided with a google grant which gives us a budget for advertising our organisation.

Peer support

Meet ups

The monthly meet ups in London have continued to attract an average of 30 adults and 15 children. Every other month, these meetings are opened up to prospective adopters to give them a chance to meet with experienced adoptive families, whilst leaving some meetings closed as a 'safe space' for those who have already adopted only. At meet ups members have a chance to share experiences, provide peer support and the children get to mix with other LGBT adoptive families. At meet ups we may have 'pot luck' buffets, arts and crafts, outdoor games, music, board games etc.

An increased number of regional meet-ups have been facilitated by local volunteers who make use of regional mailing lists developed on the online message board and have access to NFS funds for venue hire if required. Regular regional meetings are now held in some places, including East Anglia and the South-East coast; the latter has had three bi-monthly meet ups with a core of about 12 adults and 10 children attending. An increasing number of occasional meetings are also being held across the UK including Leeds, Birmingham, Bristol, and Edinburgh.

Once the merger with the Northern Support Group is complete, we hope to have more regular meetings in the North West of England. NFS also made a formal agreement with Adoption UK to hold joint social meet-ups in South Wales, given the small number of adopters in that region.

Along with local support contacts (below), the members who arrange these events make up the vital team of volunteers who help NFS's network of support to be active and effective.

Network of local peer support contacts

A network of regional support volunteers that can be contacted online or by phone has been developed. It's function is peer support, rather than professional/expert advice. The new membership secretary will soon be ensuring that new new members are welcomed by a support contact in their own local area.

Some of these volunteers are the same people that arrange meet-ups, but the structure is different in each region. To ensure an easy point of contact for members in each region, a new regional coordinator will soon be appointed in each area, with a regional e-mail address. Guidance and policies are being developed for volunteers, as well as opportunities to meet as a group and help with the development of NFS.

Individual advocacy

It was identified that there is at times a need for individual support and advocacy for NFS members who encounter problems, misunderstandings, tensions or prejudices with agencies regarding their sexual orientation or gender. NFS member Elissa Palser started to develop plans for an advocacy and mediatory role for which funding could be sought. Currently, NFS does not have the resources to undertake significant individual advocacy or mediation, although the Director and volunteers do undertake aspects of this on an ad-hoc basis.

Camping Holiday

In August 2010, NFS was able to hold a 3 day camping festival for its members, thanks to the generous offer from members Kerrigan and Jason of both their land and their help. Over 100 adults and 60 children attended; the event was a huge success, and of great benefit to adults and children alike. A second camping holiday is being planned for August 2011.

Website

This year the resources and layout of the website have been further developed and expanded, including a calendar indicating where local meet-ups are being held, on-line resources on LGBT adoption, a news section and information targeted at those at the very initial stages of the adoption process.

The on-line message boards are very active, and have been divided into topical clusters.

A Family Finding Forum, maintained by NFS volunteer Gin, has also been developed on the website: NFS supporting agencies can advertise unlimited profiles for free, and NFS members that are looking for a match can look at children's profiles.

Plans are being developed to overhaul the current site so as to facilitate further online activities (see also 'Grant Applications')

Outreach and External Activities

Outreach & Media Representation

NFS advertised itself in a Pride Magazine and printed postcards that are being distributed at relevant events. We also shared a stand with BAAF at the 'Alternative Families' show in London in October 2010.

NFS volunteer Peter coordinated the responses to media requests. Specific requests from journalists were forwarded to those members who had indicated that they were willing to receive such requests. As a result, our members have appeared in a variety of media, including the Sunday Telegraph, The Times, Tetu, Attitude and other LGBT mags, parentchannel.tv, numerous regional and national BBC radio channels, Radio City, BBC 1 Ten O'Clock News, ITV's Daybreak and other media outlets. In most cases, journalists are seeking human interest angles, though NFS members have been able to raise issues and mention NFS while giving personal stories. These appearances have been flagged up on the News section of our website and via the messageboards.

Often journalists seek access to a case study or interviewee at short notice or in a particular region, and NFS will address its systems for making quick and targeted links between media outlets and NFS media volunteers. Requests from the press are however decreasing and radio producers reported that their listeners no longer voice much opposition to gay and lesbian adoption. NFS does receive a large number of requests from producers of lifestyle television shows. While many members would like to see incidental media representations of families like ours, the requests elicit not much response, likely because members feel hesitant about infringements to their privacy or because the timing is not right. LGBT adoption (as well as parenting generally) is increasingly represented in drama and comedy (The Kids Are All Right, Modern Family etc).

Given the diversity of viewpoints amongst the membership, and the decision not to prioritise any 'representational', campaigning or political side of NFS, responses 'on behalf of' NFS remain limited to very basic, factual issues that are likely not to be controversial amongst the membership, for example our response in March 2010 to the High Court's decision with regards to Catholic Care's request to be exempt from equalities legislation.

Research

Two of the Trustees, Anisa and Cath, developed an overview of academic and other work on LGBT adoption and this has been published on the website.

NFS also assisted the Centre for Family Research at Cambridge University with participants for their major new research examining family life and child development within different types of adoptive families headed by gay fathers, lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents.

NFS, with support from Cambridge University, undertook two surveys: one of LGBT adopters and one of social workers, examining their experiences and attitudes with regards to adoption by LGBT people. The outcomes of these surveys will be published once the data has been analysed, and will also feed into the BAAF Advice Notes mentioned below.

Advice Notes

NFS started a collaboration with BAAF in developing a series of Advice Notes on LGBT adoption. These Advice Notes will be published towards the end of 2011.

Training

NFS volunteer Peter gave three training workshops on behalf of NFS in 2009. Since then the Trustees decided that developing an 'NFS training' that was representative of the member's views, would require an allocation of resources in terms of management and supervision that were not in line with the agreed prioritisation of developing peer support and strengthening the organisation. Therefore, Peter continued the development of such training in his own name. NFS developed a section on our website where approved quality trainers and other service providers can advertise their independent services in return for a discount to our supporting agencies.

Other Engagements

The NFS Director, Trustees and Volunteers have responded to a large number of issues and requests on an ad hoc basis. These included:

- Assistance to the Charity Commission in the court case which subsequently prevented the "Catholic Care" agency refusing same-sex couples. The agency had claimed that LGBT adopters were less likely to adopt "hard-to-place" children, and NFS provided research findings, statistics and the opinions of 8 agency managers to dispute this.
- Assistance with a major, pending, legal case in Northern Ireland which will hopefully pave the way for greater equality for LGBT adopters there.
- Consultation with the development of two gay adoption story-lines for the BBC, both of which are ongoing.
- Providing contributors for LGBT parenting groups, corporate LGBT networks, Local Authority recruitment events, agency staff training sessions and many other regional events.

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