



Valerie Sterling

Year of call 1981



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Valerie Sterling is Head of the Family Team and has a national reputation for representing her clients with skill, sensitivity, and empathy. Her family barrister practice covers the full range of family law, including finance, private law children cases, and public law care cases.

Valerie has extensive experience in matrimonial finance and the financial consequences of relationship breakdown, including where complexities arise due to the nature or location of the parties' assets, the source of their income, or where there is intervention by a third party, including trusts. She regularly represents parties with substantial assets, including family businesses and farms – or where there is a significant pension provision, often for professionals in the public sector, such as the NHS, Education and the Armed Forces. Renowned for her skill in representing her clients, Valerie takes a pragmatic approach.

With a chancery and commercial law background, Valerie is experienced in analysing detailed company accounts, valuing businesses, seeking disclosure of financial assets, assessing whether they have been, or are at risk of, being dissipated, and managing complex property portfolios. She takes a thorough and analytical approach to her cases and has developed a reputation for providing realistic and comprehensive advice.

Valerie has in-depth skills in private law Children Act proceedings involving complex and intractable residence and contact disputes, Prohibited Steps Orders, Specific Issue Orders, applications to relocate both internally and internationally, and Article 15 Brussels ii. She is recognised for her thorough approach to difficult and sensitive family situations, such as child abduction and international relocation. Valerie understands that disputes involving children can be emotionally charged and persuasively delivers her client's cases to achieve the best possible outcome.

In her public law care work, Valerie represents local authorities, parents and children at all tiers of the Family Court, specialising in serious child abuse cases and adoption. Having worked for 16 years for Leeds City Council, she has acquired a profound understanding of public law work. She has attended many case conferences and adoption panels as a legal advisor.

She frequently conducts complex finding of fact hearings, including care cases where there are allegations of non-accidental injury, neglect, abuse, and violence. Valerie has an excellent understanding of medical evidence and how to prepare for effective cross-examination of expert witnesses. For example, Valerie has represented parents alleged to have sexually abused their own children and where their children are expressing extreme sexualised behaviours. When representing the guardian, she is experienced in calling the expert witness such as the consultant psychiatrist, psychologist or independent social worker.

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Valerie sits on the local Resolution and Family Law Bar Association committees.

Expertise

Matrimonial Finance

Valerie represents clients from diverse backgrounds in medium to high net worth cases. She has broad experience of business, property and pensions, profit and loss accounts, third party interests, appeals and making successful applications for costs.

Valerie takes care in thorough and insightful preparation of complex material. In particular, she has wide experience of representing professional parties including consultant physicians and surgeons, as well as members of the teaching and accountancy professions and members of the Armed Forces.

Notable Matrimonial Finance cases

Re: Z

Significant case involving the complex legal issue of the beneficial ownership of a house in the sole name of the client's mother-in-law, notwithstanding input of matrimonial monies for the lump sum to exercise the 'right to buy' from the local authority. Successfully argued for the inclusion of the mother-in-law as intervenor and for her in-person attendance at court both at FDR and at the final hearing.

Re: Y

Contested FDR. Significant case because Husband attended from his hospital bed remotely with his counsel in the courtroom. Involved complicated finances of multiple family businesses and investment properties and antipathy between parties. Successfully negotiated heads of agreement during the FDR, and an agreed order was filed with the court.

Re: X

Acting for the Husband. This is a significant and complex case with special measures for W and H's previous bad litigation conduct. I ascertained, and the judge agreed, that the W's solicitors had not complied with the court timetable, and this pressure would have created anxiety for a litigant in person like H. Judge summarily reduced the costs awarded.

Re: X

Represented a husband in a contested final hearing and succeeded in obtaining an option to buy the wife out of the FMH because he had primary care of a child of the marriage.

Re: H

Represented a wife in a complex case revolving around a preliminary key issue as to whether a substantial payment from her father's retirement pension to the parties was a bridging loan or an outright gift. Successful finding and a costs order made

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against the other party.

Re: Z

Complex contested case in which there was a requirement for detailed analyses of business accounts as well as paper trail of spending patterns and lifestyle choices.

Re: P

Represented a high net worth client with assets of over £10 million involving family trusts and settlements.

Re: Q

Represented a wife in which her husband was in breach of a previous court order and had applied for variation of the same. She in turn applied for enforcement.

Re: O

Represents the respondent husband in a contested matrimonial finance case whereby a pensions on divorce expert (PODE) has been instructed as a single joint expert to provide a report on the most cost effective way to divide the pension provision via a pension sharing order. This is an ongoing case listed for Financial Dispute Resolution (FDR) later in the year.

Re: P

Represents the applicant wife in a complex case involving intergenerational family businesses alongside a property portfolio which required expert forensic accountancy evidence and valuation evidence.

Re: Q

Represented a high earning individual with a significant pension where there was disparity as to pension provision requiring expert pensions on divorce evidence and skilful negotiation to resolve issues.

Care Proceedings

Valerie represents local authorities, guardians and parents in the most complex of care proceedings. Having worked for 16 years for Leeds City Council, she had acquired a profound understanding of public law work and attended many case conferences and adoption panels as a legal advisor.

She has an excellent understanding of medical evidence and how to prepare effective cross-examination of expert witnesses. For example, Valerie has represented parents alleged to have sexually abused their own children and where their children are expressing extreme sexualised behaviours.

Valerie handles with appropriate sensitivity cases involving personality and mental health issues.



Notable Care Proceedings cases

Re: CD

Complex case involving a vulnerable Mother and allegations of sexual harm involving minors against the father of her new baby. The court could not place weight on these allegations as the police had not taken action. My role was to achieve an independent social worker's assessment of the case as an impartial second opinion on risk.

Re: AB

Final hearing care and adoption case. Acted for a Mother with significant mental health issues in a case involving allegations of physical and emotional abuse. Put forward M's case and kept her calm throughout the court process. Whilst one child was put up for adoption, the other was allowed to remain in the extended family and have professionally supervised family time with M.

Re:X

Represented a mother with longstanding mental health issues in a five day contested hearing where threshold – which included non-accidental injury and emotional harm – was disputed. Further to the President's Public Law Working Group Nov 2024 report on adoption the LA will keep the question of post adoption contact under review.

Re:X

Represented a mother in the pool of possible perpetrators for deliberate infliction of a serious wound on her infant. This eight day finding of fact case involved obtaining and analysing corroborative evidence of many text and social media messages.

Re: G

Acted for a mother alleged to have caused a range of inflicted fractures or at least that she failed to protect her child from these injuries having occurred over a period of time. The latter case involved cross-examination of a consultant radiologist and a consultant paediatrician as to causation.

Re: L

Acted for a local authority who have brought care proceedings following a chaotic set of home circumstances. There followed a range of professional assessments and ultimately a programme of rehabilitation with suitable social work support took place.

Re: M

Represented a guardian who scrutinised and challenged local authority care plans requiring effective advocacy to articulate her views.

Re: A

Represented a local authority in a long running case involving five respondent parties. At the time when protective measures were taken, the mother had been arrested for neglect and public order offences involving her and her then partner, along with her having poor mental health, which had impacted on the home conditions for the children. There was also substance misuse, historic

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domestic abuse and breach of a safety plan.

Re: C

Represented a local authority in a case where the threshold was required to be amended. A viability assessment on the father was negative because of his minimisation of drug use. The parents displayed a lack of engagement. The mother pursued a mother and baby unit placement. The mother before the court did not actively oppose continued removal of her child.

Re: E

In an ongoing complex care case, Valerie represents a vulnerable mother who is undergoing an independent social work assessment as to the prevalent risks of her caring for her daughter on her own; and what additional safeguarding measures can realistically be put in place, in the medium to longer term, to protect the child which would enable her to remain in the care of either of her parents. This is listed for a five-day contested final hearing at the end of 2024.

Re: G

Represents a mother facing care and placement orders against a background of the most serious domestic abuse wherein her team have applied for an independent social worker's assessment of 'risk'. This case is complicated by parallel criminal proceedings, in respect of which full police disclosure is being sought.

Re: J

Represented a young father who faced threshold allegations of serious harm to his child involving expert evidence from a consultant paediatrician as to causation.

Re: K

Represented a father whose partner had a significant history spanning a long time of involvement with local authorities. Their newborn and subject child was the subject of many assessments as to prospective risk and his ability to protect which involved cooperative working with the LA culminating in a positive outcome and rehabilitation subject to safeguarding plans.

Re: L

Represented a father who at the request of a local authority assumed the care of his child when urgent care proceedings were instigated due to concerns regarding another child in the household. The client was the subject of a positive viability assessment. There then followed a fact-finding hearing to which he was a party involving a range of expert paediatric evidence, and a contested final hearing.

Re: M

Acted for the guardian in a complex and long running case of factitious disorder and factitious disorder imposed on another which ranged from the fact-finding hearing – involving expert evidence which Valerie called on behalf of the child – to the final hearing.

Re: N

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Represented the guardian and child in a sensitive case where the court has paid regard to Practice Direction 3AA re the participation of vulnerable persons.

Valerie's role was to call the experts and the guardian, to cross examine the lay party and to liaise.

Children Act & Private Law

Valerie has a broad experience of private law Children Act proceedings involving residence, contact, Prohibited Steps Orders, Specific Issue Orders, applications to relocate both internally and internationally and Article 15 Brussels ii.

She able to represent her client's case in a persuasive manner and achieve the optimum outcome.

She has particular experience in the most complex cases involving a Rule 16.4 appointment of a Children's Guardian or NYAS worker.

Notable Children Act & Private Law cases

Re: GH

Complex because of both parties' vulnerability, Mother having threatened to self-harm and evidential issues regarding M's private diaries. Successfully objected to having the diaries excluded and had them admitted as evidence. Cross-examination of M enabled the drawing out of inconsistencies. When M challenged the results of a hair strand test results, called on a forensics expert who confirmed the results came from drug use.

Re: EF

A significant case involving a Mother's claim that she had suffered serious physical and emotional abuse by Father. F said the claims were a lie. My role was to gather evidence from M's GP using her medical records and analyse text messages between F and M to demonstrate M had been the victim of coercive and controlling behaviour, which led to her not reporting abuse because of fear for herself and her children. Achieved a successful outcome as the court preferred M's accounts of the key incidents, all findings sought were found proved, plus two additional findings flowing from the evidence as given during the case.

Re: K

Recent experience of representing a mother in a contested High Court wardship against leading counsel, involving complex DNA and paternity issues with an international element.

Re: N

Acted for a vulnerable mother in a two day finding of fact hearing in which Special Measures were required so that mother could give her evidence from behind a screen. Comprehensive findings were made in her favour.

R: G

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Acted for a mother who was assisted by an interpreter in a case involving complex police information and immigration/Home Office issues. The client had been the subject of many years of the most serious domestic and sexual violence.

Re: T

Represented a mother in a complex case involving special measures. Each party was assisted by an interpreter.

At the initial contested fact-finding hearing, Valerie sought and obtained serious findings against the father of controlling and coercive behaviour.

There was a further issue as to the father's immigration status and there had been communication with the Home Office in this regard.

Cafcass then reported and the case was listed for a contested final hearing. The issues then were whether there should be any direct contact between the child and her father, indirect contact and the client's application for an order under section 91 (14) Children Act 1989.

The court ordered that the child live with the client and not have any direct contact with her father, but he could send her indirect contact 4 times a year.

A section 91 (14) order was made for a period of five years meaning that the father was not entitled to make any application for an order under the Children Act 1989 without first obtaining the prior leave of the court, with all applications for leave, or future case management and hearings, being allocated to the trial judge where this was possible.

Child Abduction & International Relocation

Valerie is currently in demand to deal with cases of child abduction and international relocation. These often involve a parent taking a child abroad without the agreement of the other parent. Valerie is skilled in acting rapidly to get a child back – or to defend a parent raising the answers of acquiescence or grave risk or intolerable circumstances should the parent and child return.

Notable Child Abduction & International Relocation cases

RE: R

Valerie represented a mother who unilaterally without the consent of the father and in breach of court orders took their young daughter out of the jurisdiction to Scotland. Pursuant to section 41 of the Family Law Act 1986 Part 1, the English court was satisfied that it had jurisdiction to make orders because the child had been habitually resident in England all her life and had been removed from England by Valerie's client to Scotland without the consent of the father who had parental responsibility for her.

RE: S

Client applied for a Child Arrangements Order ('CAO') to confirm that her son lived with her as he had done since the parties separated for the purposes of entry to Australia. By the making of the CAO, the mother recognised that she required the court's permission for her son to relocate with her to Australia. This was a hybrid hearing with the father attending by CVP from overseas.

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The parties were not agreed.

The court found it was in the boy's interest to live with his mother in accordance with the CAO but did not find it necessary, proportionate or practical to make a defined contact order. The order confirmed inter alia that pursuant to section 13 of the Children Act 1989 the client had permission for her son to relocate to Australia.

Appointments

- Head of the Family Team, New Park Court Chambers

Education

- Manchester University
- Manchester High School for Girls

Languages

- French
- German

Memberships

- Family Law Bar Association
- Resolution

Publications

I have written articles for Family Law, the Local Government Website and Justice of the Peace.

- Recent Radicalisation Cases in the Family Court (30.10.15)
- Think carefully before you press 'send'! (11.02.14)

Local Government Lawyer

- A history of violence (a study of two recent cases about fact finding hearings) (25.11.2010)

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- Perpetrators, anticipatory rulings and other issues. Part Two: Review of key cases in 2009 concerning children and care (12.01.2010)
- Fact-finding cases and placing for adoption: a two part review of key cases in 2009 concerning children and care. Part One (15.12.09)
- Media representatives attending family hearings (23.11.09)

Family Law

- 'DNA, Paternity Deceit and Reliability of the Birth Certificate as a Historical Document' (August 2009)
- 'More Contact for Breast Feeding Mothers' (April 2005)

Justice of the Peace

Articles:

- Update on Separate Representation for Children in Private Law Proceedings: (11.03.03)
- Cohabitees and Financial Obligations (15.06.02)
- White v White Analysis and Update of Recent Cases (04.05.02)
- White v White Analysis and Update of Recent Cases (09.03.02)
- Separate Representation for Children in Private Law Proceedings (01.12.01)
- Occupation Orders and the Family Law Act 1996 (18.8.01)
- Effect of Domestic Violence on Contact (04.08.01)
- Non-accidental Injury – Child Care Law and Procedure (18.12.99)
- Section 202, Housing Act 1996: Homelessness, Local Authorities and the New Right of Appeal (27.11.99)
- The Introduction of the Housing Act 1996 section 152: Antisocial Behaviour and Local Authority Injunctions: (14.08.99)

Review:

- 'Being Seen and Heard' – educational video on needs of children whose parents have a mental illness (22.01.05)
- 'Special Bulletin of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Implications for Family Lawyers' and 'Working with the Child Care Protocol' (08.05.04)
- 'Surviving Violent Crime & The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority' (06.09.03)
- Child Abuse 3rd Edition (14.06.03)
- Funding Family Proceedings (Special Bulletin) (03.05.03)
- Children Act Private Law Proceedings: A Handbook (05.04.03)

Directory Quotes

"Valerie is an authoritative junior."

Legal 500 2025 [Family]

"She is very approachable and has empathy with clients, who have confidence in her."

Legal 500 2024

"A razor-sharp intellect and superb advocacy skills. She is tenacious and willing to fight to the very end on cases. Very detailed and

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thorough in her work.”

Legal 500 2023

“Clients can clearly see the quality in her work and representation within proceedings. She will fight for the client and takes a no-nonsense approach.”

Legal 500 2021 (Family)

“Willing to fight to the very end for the client.”

Legal 500 2019 (Family)

“Very experienced in complex public law children cases.”

Legal 500 2018 (Family)

“Recommended for a broad range of family matters.”

Legal 500 2017 (Family)

“Her broad family practice includes public and private law children disputes, and family finance matters.”

Legal 500 2016 (Family)

“She is extremely thorough and her attention to detail is phenomenal.”

Legal 500 2015 (Family)

“A specialist in all areas of family law, particularly public law children cases involving allegations of abuse.”

Legal 500 2014 (Family)

“Recommended and appeared in the Court of Appeal case of Re: M (children), a case in which parents had been denied access to children following physical abuse.”

Legal 500 2013 (Family)

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