

Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Improvement Plan: second annual review 2023

Background

1. Following the [report](#) of the Ministry of Justice's Expert Panel on Harm in the Family Courts (June 2020, 'the Harm Panel') Cafcass established a [Learning and Improvement Board](#) to consider the implications of the report recommendations in respect of our work. The Board is chaired by Cathy Ashley (Chief Executive of Family Rights Group) and Angela Frazer-Wicks (Chair of Family Rights Group) and includes parents and young people with lived experience of the family justice system and domestic abuse.
2. Initially established for 18 months, the Board's first task was to support the development of the [Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Improvement Plan](#) (published in June 2021). This was informed by a significant baseline audit of our work where domestic abuse was alleged or known and we used these findings to develop the plan to strengthen our work with children and families in private law family proceedings. The purpose of the Board has been to debate, advise and consider the extent to which our intended improvement priorities are being implemented and making a difference in practice. A [summary of progress against the plan](#) was published in June 2022 and it was agreed that the Board's work would be extended for a further 12 months.
3. The Board will come to a close in June 2023. It has been instrumental in supporting the practice improvements Cafcass has made over the last two years. It has helped to inform how we engage families with lived experience of domestic abuse and how we will continue to do this alongside our partners as we take our improvement work into its next phase. Understanding the impact of domestic abuse on children remains one of Cafcass' national practice improvement priorities.

What has been achieved in the second year?

4. The Improvement Plan sets out priorities across four areas of our work:
 - The effectiveness of management oversight
 - The quality and impact of practice undertaken by Family Court Advisers
 - The way we increase opportunities for feedback from children and families
 - Our influence as a key partner in the family justice system
5. Achievements in the second year of the Plan include:
 - A mandatory **Domestic Abuse Learning and Development Programme** was launched in May 2021 for all Cafcass Family Court Advisers, based on Cafcass' revised [domestic abuse pathway and guidance](#) which was developed in collaboration with partners. By the end of March 2023, 95% of our 1,560 frontline staff and managers had completed the workshop element of the Programme with new starters required to enrol on the mandatory programme. This has strengthened Family Court Advisers' ability to risk assess patterns of domestic abuse and how they work with children and survivors.
 - The launch of new mandatory training in May 2023 on **mental ill health and the abuse of power where there is domestic abuse**. The training module explores the ways perpetrators can use mental ill health to abuse in everyday life and proceedings.

- Policy and guidance on working with partners, wider family members and professionals was introduced to help practitioners to **consistently speak to those who know the child** to inform our analysis and recommendations to court.
- **Audits have found evidence of improvements in Cafcass' domestic abuse practice**, with an increase in the quality and sensitivity of safeguarding interviews to support the disclosure of domestic abuse and evidence of Family Court Advisers clearly and sensitively explaining decision making to children. The most recent audit concluded that in most cases, Family Court Advisers understand the harm, risk of harm and impact on children of domestic abuse and their analysis of this informs their recommendations to the court. There was also evidence of strong practice in working sensitively with children to understand their experiences and using language which is thoughtful and sensitive and therefore unlikely to compound trauma. Audits have been moderated by volunteer members of the Learning and Improvement Board.
- We are further embedding our relationship-based practice framework [Together with children and families](#) through annual week-long organisation-wide training and learning. The next week of learning will take place in October 2023. The framework sets out an expectation to work with children and families by developing trusting relationships built on listening, understanding, clear reasoning, respect and integrity.
- We have developed **letters to be sent to all children and young people** by Family Court Advisers. These include introductory letters so that children know who their Family Court Adviser is and what their role is, and goodbye letters to explain what the Family Court Adviser has recommended and why, and what the court has ordered.
- We concluded our **complaints review** and established a new Complaints and Correspondence team in April 2023 to take forward the recommendations that include a focus on listening and learning. Learning from complaints and compliments will be considered monthly to inform our improvement plans.
- Cafcass launched a **Feedback Strategy** and a new system for collating and reporting on feedback. We launched [Hear to Listen](#), a dedicated telephone line for young people to share their experience of Cafcass, and have included feedback questions in an App that Family Court Advisers use with children. A digital feedback system was launched in March 2023 to ensure we consistently ask for feedback, including in all letters sent to children, parents and carers. The strategy provides a consistent approach to receiving feedback, and we are receiving more feedback from children and families as a result.
- We have **concluded a review of management oversight and supervision**. Cafcass' [Supervision Policy](#) has been revised and changes include incorporating triggers for situational supervision between a Family Court Adviser and their manager where a case outcome in court differs from the Family Court Adviser's recommendations, and there is a concern that risk remains for the child.

Focus for the next 12 months

6. Our priorities for the next 12 months include:

- Continuing to **strengthen our practice** when working with children and families who have experienced domestic abuse. Understanding the impact of domestic abuse on children remains one of our national practice improvement priorities with progress being assessed through national and local audits, improvement progress reviews, child and family feedback, and evaluation of the use and impact of our practice and management quality standards.

- **Publishing a revised complaints policy** which has been drafted in consultation with the Learning and Improvement Board. It provides greater clarity about the Cafcass complaints process and strengthens the emphasis on listening and learning from concerns raised. We will update our website with information for families on the new complaints process later this year.
 - **Consistently learning from feedback** through our feedback strategy launched in June 2022. We will continue building our systems to prioritise listening, learning and improved practice. We are also prioritising the increased use in all operational service areas of collaborative audits to enhance learning and to collate more direct feedback in conversation with families.
 - Further embedding the expectations that we have at Cafcass regarding our practice framework [Together with children and families](#) including consistently sending introductory letters to children at the start of proceedings and increasing our use of storyboards with them. Storyboards are a series of pictures with text under them to explain what has happened in their family, what the plan will be and how adults around them will keep them safe. We will also continue to help Family Court Advisers and managers regularly evaluate and discuss effective assessment of children's needs. This includes the analysis of harm and risk of harm in the child's plan, taking account of what is special and unique about the child, sharing their reasoning behind recommendations, and the words they will use to share recommendations with children and families.
 - Continuing to improve our **data on families where domestic abuse is known or alleged**, including recording of protected characteristics and the range of needs of children. We are also working to improve data collection on domestic abuse allegations and whether findings are made by the court, the child's experience of proceedings, congruence between our recommendations and the decisions of the court, and the detail of ordered arrangements for children on our case management system.
 - Continuing to share learning from our Domestic Abuse Learning and Development Programme with **partners in the family justice system**.
7. We will publish a further annual review next year of our progress against Cafcass' domestic abuse practice priorities, setting out the progress made in the previous 12 months and priorities for the next 12 months.

ENDS