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CAFCASS: INVESTING IN SERVICES, DELIVERING IMPROVEMENTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Cafcass, the organisation that looks after children's interests in the family courts, today publishes its annual report for 2007-08, which highlights intense work to deliver improved services for children and families.

Anthony Douglas CBE, Cafcass Chief Executive explains, "Cafcass is still only in its seventh year and we are still improving core systems so that we can deliver excellent services. This has involved investment in IT to provide better case management and opportunities for flexible working but it has also involved training our staff in our safeguarding framework and our new national standards. In this coming year the near doubling of our training budget is another signal of our intent.

Our work on ensuring children's voices are heard in court and in the policy making arena goes from strength to strength and this is also reflected in the excellent work being done by our Young People's Board.

The trend in trying to divert parents away from the adversarial setting of court in private law work continues and taken over three years there has been a 67.8% increase in Cafcass staff hours spent on dispute resolution work.

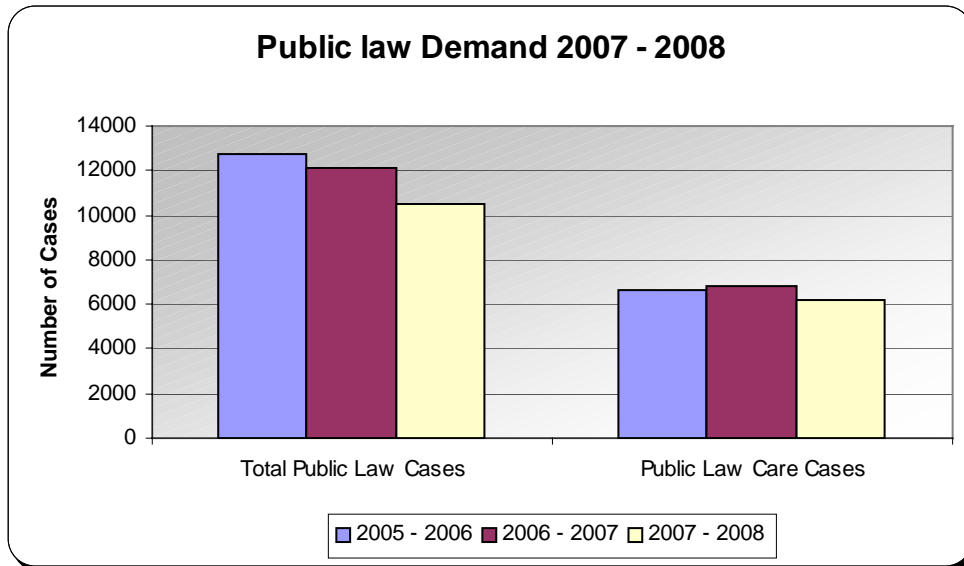
This year we have moved to a new structure to enable more frontline staffing resources to be focused on our casework rather than on bureaucracy. Now that allocations across the country are generally on target we have embarked on a comprehensive practice improvement plan to improve the quality of our work. This will be our focus for the coming year and I am pleased to say that we have been given the tools to do the job in the form of an increased three-year budget settlement from government.

Over the last year we have improved on all of our KPIs but I know that staff across Cafcass are committed to doing more. For this year we have introduced two new KPIs – one focusing on quality and the other measuring our performance on safeguarding checks. This is an indication both of our commitment to delivering improved services and also of our desire to be open and accountable in what we do. We have also been in the forefront of reforms to the family justice system in England, in areas like the new Public Law Outline"

Baroness Jill Pitkeathley, Chair of Cafcass adds, "This year has seen significant improvement in our capacity to deliver frontline services. There have been major enhancements in our IT capabilities, in management information and our policies and procedures, and we have produced and implemented new National Standards. A great deal of important collaborative work in the wider family justice sector has happened this year, and we have been at the centre of it."

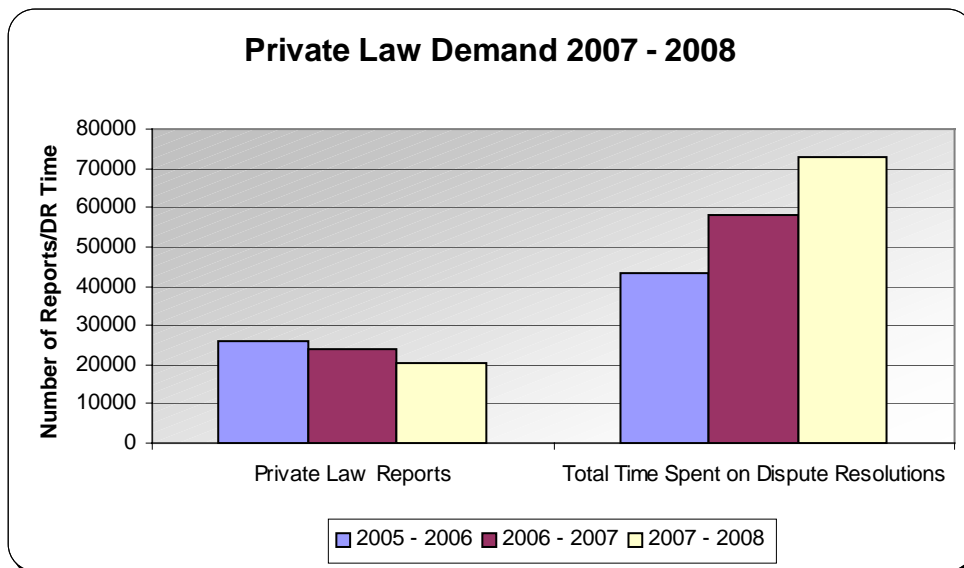
Trends – Public Law

In comparison with previous years, public law care applications to court have fallen during 2007-08 by 8.3%. However previous trends show that when new developments have been introduced, such as the Protocol for Judicial Case Management in 2003, applications to court also fell while local authorities adjusted to new requirements. We are currently seeing a similar trend and will continue to monitor public law work closely to assess the impact of the PLO on demand.



Trends – Private Law

In 2007-08 Cafcass received a total of 39,432 private law case requests. One of our goals in our private law work is to invest time in working directly with families to reach agreement where it is safe to do so and to reduce conflict. Research has shown that ongoing conflict within a family is damaging for children, which is why we are making this investment. However, more work needs to be done on the longer-term sustainability of agreements reached through this type of work.



Reducing unnecessary court battles

In 2007-08, our FCAs participated in 19,534 dispute resolution meetings, spending 72,704 hours on these cases. This is an increase in time spent on early intervention of 25.6% this year and an increase of 67.8% over three years.

Where agreements cannot be reached through dispute resolution, the Court may order a full report on the welfare of a child or children involved in private law proceedings. This is done under Section 7 of the Children Act 1989 and the court will clarify the specific areas for the FCA to cover in this report. A private law case can involve more than one type of order and frequently leads to more than one Section 7 report. We responded to 20,267 requests for private law reports during 2007-08, a reduction of 15.3% on last year's figures.

This reduction in the number of Section 7 reports may be due to our increased focus on dispute resolution work but we cannot be certain of the link between the two. We also need to understand the correlation between lower rates of divorce nationally, the increase in single parents and the decline in referrals to court. We would also exercise caution in making comparisons with previous years because we do not believe that data on dispute resolution had been recorded robustly. We can however say that an analysis of Section 7 reports carried out in Norfolk demonstrated that our FCAs were spending 42 hours on average on each report, as opposed to around 25 hours in 2001, because we are filtering out the less complex cases through dispute resolution. We would expect this to be a common experience across all of our service areas. A time-recording exercise planned for April 2008 seeks to identify new average case times.

Case study – Breaking down the barriers

A highly conflicted situation between two parents for almost a year resulted in the judge making a Rule 9.5 application. The father had previously been assessed by another agency as unlikely to change and they recommended that he no longer have contact with his children. However, the children appeared to be strongly attached to him and there was concern about how such a proposal would affect their long-term well-being.

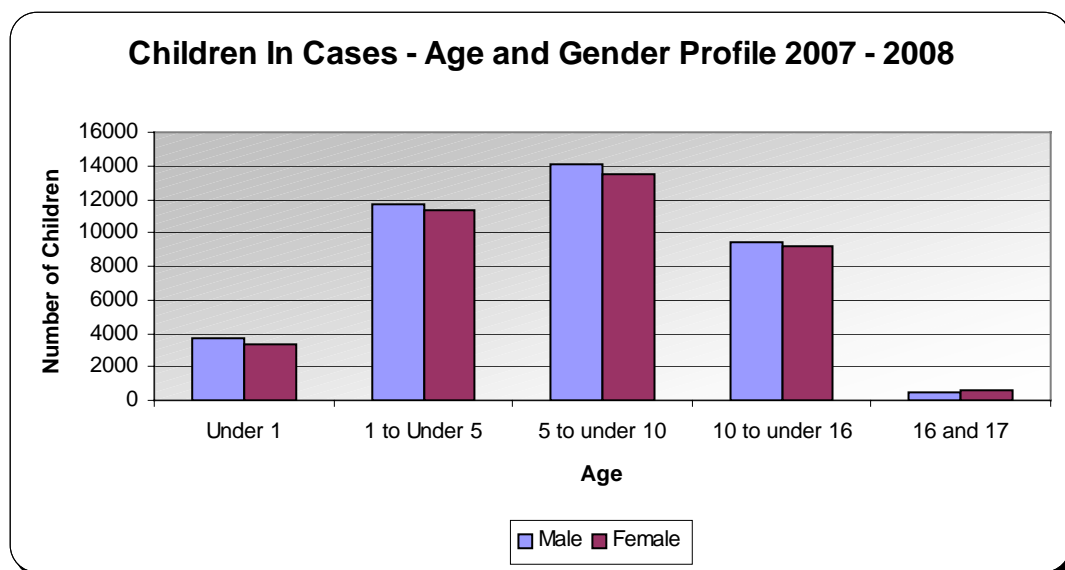
At this point the legal representatives, the children's solicitor and the FCA met to discuss a possible way forward. The parents were offered a joint, structured meeting, in a neutral venue, the Cafcass office.

During the meeting the parties were able to come to an agreement enabling contact with their children to occur. A further meeting was arranged to ensure the planning was effective and to assess the outcomes for the children. Over the course of six weeks, both parents reported a much-improved situation for their children with contact that met the children's needs occurring consistently.

The FCA reported that, “This approach has proved particularly useful where parents refuse to meet together in the usual way at the Cafcass office. The formality of having solicitors present, along with a structured agenda offers safety to both parties, clear focus to the meeting and provided a context enabling constructive change most likely to meet the needs and wishes of their children.”

Children in cases

In 2007/8 we worked with a total of 77,134 children and young people. This comprised 39,263 males (50.9%) and 37,871 females (49.1%) as shown in figure 8. Additionally, we support many more children and families through the work we commission from contact centres around the country.



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Notes for Editors:

- The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) was formed as a new service for England and Wales on 1 April 2001 as part of the Government’s commitment to supporting families and children. It brought together the services previously provided by the Family Court Welfare Service, the Guardian ad Litem Services and the Children’s divisions of the Official Solicitor’s Office.
- Cafcass has a statutory responsibility to ensure that children and young people are put first in family proceedings, that their voices are heard, the decisions made about them by courts are in their best interests and that they and their families are supported throughout the process. We operate within the law set by Parliament and under the rules and directions of the family courts.
- Cafcass’ role is to work with Children and Families in the family courts. The following list provides some examples of the types of cases we work with:-
 - Adoption (public law)
 - Care Orders (public law)

- Emergency Protection Orders (public law)
 - Residency and contact following divorce and separation (private law)
- Cafcass is sponsored by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and is a non-departmental public body.
- For the year 2007-2008 CAF/CASS promoted the interests of 77,134 children. This does not factor in the work we do with children and their families in dispute resolution and our support of contact centres.
- Cafcass recently established a Young People's Board who have experience of our services. They advise us on matters of policy and practice.
- Cafcass' new National Standards are available for download at our new website www.cafcass.gov.uk
- For 2008-09 Cafcass is implementing a major practice improvement programme to improve the quality and consistency of frontline practice.

For further information:

Head of Communications – Takki Sulaiman: 0207 510 7036 or 07778 419218