



# Sustaining ambition for children

*working together, building*

*resilience, inspiring change*

2026-2029

Cafcass Strategic Plan  
2026-2029

[www.cafcass.gov.uk](http://www.cafcass.gov.uk)



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# Foreword

## From our Board and Chief Executive



**We published our last strategy, ‘Ambitious for children’ in November 2023. At that time, the family justice system was still recovering from the disruption and the impact of the pandemic. Much of our focus was about ‘sustaining practice effectiveness’ in order to realise our hopes for children and families.**

In the years to be lived and led for this new strategy (2026-2029), it feels encouraging and positive to be able to set out how we will now ‘**sustain our ambition**’ for all children, but specifically for the c130,000 with whom we work in family court proceedings each year. To do this, we intend to lead both **the priorities set out here, and in parallel, our practice and corporate improvement programmes**. Both go hand in hand if we are to enable positive change for children.

Everything we do at Cafcass derives from our commitment that children will be able to say that they have experienced exceptional care and services, anywhere in England where they have had an engagement with us and every time they do so.

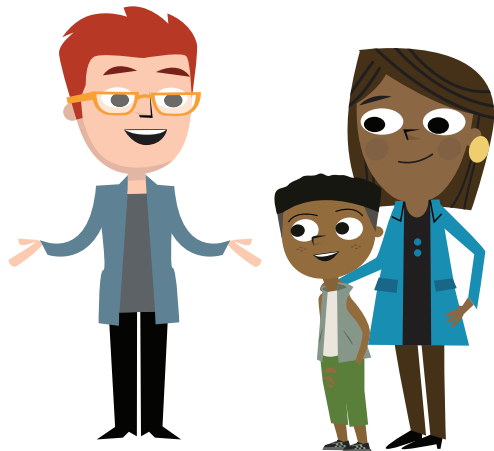
Continuing with our now familiar focus on the **quality of practice, our effectiveness as an employer and as a family justice system partner**, we set out here **nine priorities** for the three years – each supported by a number of work programmes, success measures and a clear suite of statements from children about what is important to them.

Fundamental to every single work programme, is our statutory responsibility to keep children safe in family court proceedings and to promote their welfare. In both public and private law and those proceedings where an application is made to deprive a child of their liberty, there are complex assessments to be made about harm and the risk of further harm to children and their protective adults. **This plan should give everyone reading, clarity and confidence that in all of our work – as complex and contested as it may be – we will treat people fairly, we will use our authority with care, we will promote the principle of equality and the value of uniqueness and we will be relentless about what matters to children and what protects them.**



To do this, we need to retain and attract the best people. Our colleagues feel the pressure of vacancies, of sickness absence and the impact of people leaving the organisation. Children feel it acutely too – having to wait longer to meet their family court adviser or to meet a new one if someone they have been working with leaves. In this plan, we commit as leaders to focus on the capacity we need to find and keep, the investment we need to make in professional development and the action we need to take quickly and consistently when adults in proceedings threaten, harass or abuse anyone working at Cafcass.

As a partner in the family justice system, we know that improving the experiences of children and families in proceedings comes only from work that is done in collaboration. This plan extends through the whole implementation period of the Child Focused Court reforms.



Working together, we will resource, lead and regularly evaluate the difference the changes are making for children and families. Designed so that Cafcass sees more children, sees them earlier and is able to advise the court more quickly, the reforms present a significant opportunity to consider the safety and protection of child and adult victims of domestic abuse at the first and single decisions hearing. We are excited to be at the centre of this transformation of private law proceedings and committed to it, because it makes sense for children and for the professionals undertaking this work.

We say every time and in every national report, that **it is a privilege to be able to help children, families and carers in decisions that affect both their present and future lives. You have our commitment that we will do all that is possible to operate efficiently and effectively as a public service body in the explicit interests of children’s safety and welfare.**

Thank you for taking the time to read this plan.



Professor Eileen Munro  
CBE Deputy Chair



Jacky Tiotto  
Chief Executive



Sally Cheshire CBE  
Immediate past  
Board Chair until  
May 2026

# Foreword

## From the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB)

**As members of the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB), we are pleased to have worked closely with Cafcass for many years to improve their work with children and families in proceedings. The organisation continues as a very supportive sponsor for our board. We meet regularly with senior leaders, with practitioners and managers. We are actively invited to have our voices and our experiences at the heart of the work Cafcass is doing. We know that we can influence this strategy as we did the last.**

In all our sessions with Cafcass staff, we speak honestly about what makes a difference. We say that children should always feel listened to, be understood, and be respected. We say that when we meet our family court adviser, we should know who they are, why they are involved, and how they will help us. We talk about consistency — knowing that wherever a child lives, they should have the same quality of support and the same chance to be heard. We also speak about the importance of feeling safe, especially where domestic abuse is a factor in our proceedings. We want to feel safe from physical, emotional and sexual harm and we want every professional to understand the emotional impact that conflict, abuse and harm has on us.



We have asked that this strategy prioritises communication with children that is clear, kind, and personalised. That professionals check their understanding about what we have said, explain their decisions, keep in touch, and tell us what has been done with our feedback. We have said that all these things really matter.

Feeling prepared for meetings also matters. Being able to track what is happening in our proceedings matters. Having adults with the skills, time and compassion to work with us matters. **And we have asked that change should always start with one simple question: What will this mean for children?**

We want to hear over the time of this strategic plan that the things that make the biggest difference during proceedings are always at the front of every professional mind, including:

- being **engaged with regularly** and not having long periods without seeing our family court adviser.
- **feeling safe** and comfortable in the environment where we meet.
- seeing staff who **understand our experiences** and our uniqueness.
- having progress at a pace that is right for us — not rushed, not delayed; and
- making sure all partners, including local authorities and the courts, work together so that **children do not fall through ‘system’ gaps.**

We know that this strategy prioritises many of the things we have asked are included.

Our hope is that our success statements (pages 15,19, 23, and 27) will not only provide a measure as to whether this strategy is achieving for children, but whether they also become part of everyday practice across the family justice system.

Children and young people will remember how they were treated long after their proceedings have ended. As one member put it: *“I will never forget my FCA — the difference they made.”* We want every child to be able to say the same.

**Children’s voices must lead the way — and we are pleased to see that happening here.**

### Family Justice Young People’s Board



# About Cafcass

**Cafcass is the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. We work with more than 133,000 children each year, and independently advise the family courts in England about the welfare of children, what is safe for them and in their best interests.**

We provide a service to children that prioritises their safety, understands their experiences, listens to their voices and their needs, and takes into full account their families and those who are connected to them.

Our vision and all our associated ambitions are that children receive an exceptional service, wherever in the country they engage with us and every time they do so. We use feedback and data to assess how well we are doing. We spend time learning how to understand what children say is important to them and what needs to change in response to their feedback. Ultimately, we try to find a balance between our statutory responsibility for their safety and welfare, what they tell us during proceedings and in their feedback. The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) are instrumental in helping us to achieve this balance and we will continue during the three years of this plan to ask whether we are getting it right.



# Sustaining ambition for children 2026-2029: Our vision, our values and our priorities

**In 2023, we established our first series of ambitions. Published as a three-year strategic plan, ‘Ambitious for Children 2023-2026’, it described how we intended to succeed for children through nine important programme priorities set out under three established areas of focus: Practice, People and Partners. The plan has served us well as a framework for prioritising how we serve children and their families. It has also enabled us to hold ourselves accountable for improvement and change over the period.**

Three years on, we know we are doing better in our work with children. More of our internally assessed and audited work is being judged to be good or better.

The sort of evidence seen, is that more children are prepared for their visit with their family court advisers through the use of introductory letters. We are listening to children’s feedback and more of them are receiving personalised introduction and goodbye letters.

Family court advisers and children’s guardians are sharing their advice and describing what children feel about this in reports to the court. Children are being seen more often and the assessments of harm and the risk of further harm continue to improve in specificity and the quality of the analysis and judgement.

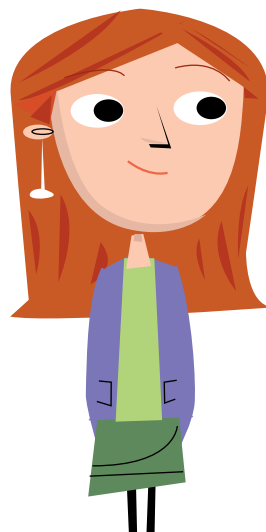


The [Ofsted inspection in January 2024](#) gave testimony to the dedication and commitment of our people at Cafcass, and the judgement of ‘outstanding’ provided recognition of the sustained positive difference our work makes to the lives of children. This judgement was again consolidated following a targeted [Ofsted inspection in October 2025](#), specifically looking at the effectiveness of practice and advice to the family court in private law cases where domestic abuse is a factor. Inspectors determined that in these types of children’s cases, Cafcass had strengthened practice and advice, that children remained the central focus throughout the organisation and that child and adult victims of domestic abuse were being well supported in most proceedings.

As a national organisation however, we are determined that no child or family has a poor experience with us. This means working harder still to improve the consistency and effectiveness of practice. Our inspections and internal quality assurance framework still identify some teams where practice is not good enough. Reducing local variation remains a foundation priority for this next strategic planning period.

In addition, we cannot expect to lead effective and improving practice or business processes, if we do not have enough people in work. Attraction, retention and keeping people well at work are also foundation priorities for the next three years.

On this basis and for the next three-year period, we intend to continue with the same priorities (see figure 2, page 12), adjusted to increase the rate of improvement where this is possible and to bring more scrutiny to some of our work that requires more targeted leadership. In the same period, our local operational service area oversight will move more deeply into specific teams with challenges in respect of recruitment, sickness absence and consistently effective practice that is judged to be good or better.



We retain the same vision for this strategic planning period.

*“For every child whose current and future living arrangements are decided by the family court, we seek to provide an exceptional experience, everywhere and every time.”*

All work programmes and priorities in the three years, will prioritise the safety and welfare of children, listening to feedback from them and their families and making sure that every operational service area and professional function is reaching the level of the best in respect of the quality and effectiveness of practice. **These are the cornerstones underpinning our vision and ambition for children.**

A single page overview is set out on page 11, and a one page overview of our priorities can be found on page 12.

## Child Focused Courts

In respect of private law proceedings for children and families, 2026-2027 marks the beginning of a programme of fundamental change in how these arrangements are to be managed across the family court system. On 17 March 2026, the Government confirmed Child Focused Courts – formerly known as the Private Law Pathfinder – would be implemented across the entirety of England and Wales. This is supported by £17 million in Government funding for 2026-2027 and represents the most significant reform of private family law proceedings in a generation.



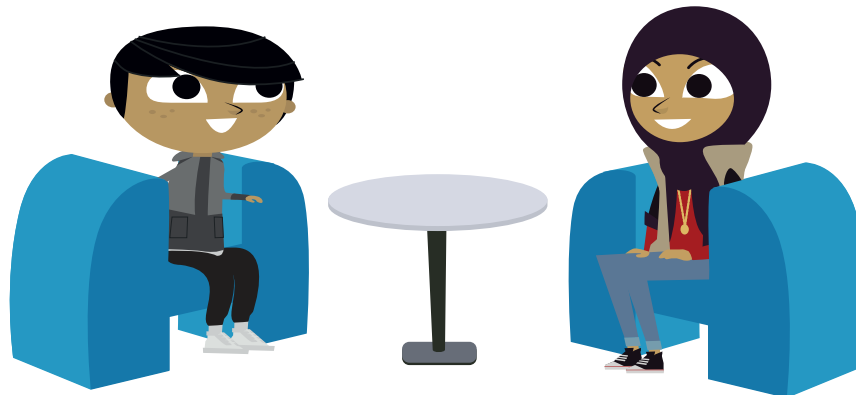
The family justice system is embarking on a change programme that requires significant practice and culture change at Cafcass, in the family courts, within HMCTS and in local authority children's services where they are involved. The Child Focused Model replaces the Child Arrangements Programme (CAP) with a more investigative and problem-solving approach that prioritises earlier information gathering, multi-agency collaboration, and the voice of the child being central from the outset of proceedings.

The opportunities for children cannot be overstated. More will be seen by family court advisers, they will be engaged at the start of their proceedings and it is intended that there will be one and only one single decisions hearing to conclude the proceedings.

For Cafcass, the Target Operating Model requires us to see up to 75% of children, to understand, assess and provide an analysis and advice to the court within eight working weeks of the application being received.

The reforms are designed with a particular focus on improving the family court experience and outcomes for child and adult victims of domestic abuse. Locally commissioned Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs) are available when a referral is made, to provide support to adults and to offer advice to the court.

Local authorities will complete Child Impact Reports when the court order this and when they have been recently involved with children assessed as in need or in need of protection.



We have spoken to some children and young people about this new way of working in private law proceedings. Their definitions of success are set out on page 27. They have been clear that the quality of professional understanding about domestic abuse is fundamental to their safety and welfare. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's assessment that the pilot courts are "effective at engaging with domestic abuse" gives us confidence, but we recognise that consistency in trauma-informed safe practice for the family justice system must continue to improve as the model scales nationally. In addition, continuity of practitioner was one of the most strongly expressed priorities from children and young people. Child Focused Courts, which require deeper early engagement through the Child Impact Report, makes continuity of relationship more achievable and more essential. As we move to national implementation and invest in additional social work capacity, we must ensure that workforce planning supports relationship continuity for children.

To make sure that we are able to continue leading improvement and discharging our statutory responsibilities for children effectively, we have set out additional priorities for Child Focused Courts in this strategic period and which will be led by an internal transformation team working closely with the courts and the MoJ.

**Child Focused Courts as a work programme is therefore formally adopted as a fourth 'pillar' of our strategy in addition to our work on practice, people and our engagement with partners.**

We very much welcome these reforms and look forward over the next three years to full implementation and all that means for our Cafcass service to children and their families.

**Figure 1: Sustaining ambition for children 2026-2029**

**Our strategy and associated priorities are built on our vision and underpinned by:**

- ✓ our responsibility for children’s safety and welfare in proceedings
- ✓ a commitment to listening and using child and family feedback to learn and to improve
- ✓ reducing local variation in the quality of children and families’ experiences as well as the effectiveness of our work with them
- ✓ organisational values that promote respectful relationships, always looking for family strengths as well as risks, holding children centrally in all that we do, showing our reasoning for decisions we take and the advice we give, and understanding uniqueness in children, families and ourselves.

### Our vision

*For every child whose current and future living arrangements are decided by the family court, we seek to provide an exceptional experience, everywhere and every time.*

### Our four cornerstones

Exceptional experience for all children in proceedings

Listening to children and families’ experiences

Safety and welfare of children in proceedings

Reduce local variation

### Our five values



Always looking for the strengths and risks



Believing in respectful relationships



Decision making is clear and reasoned



Holding children and families at the heart of our practice

What’s important to you?



Wanting to know more about you and what is important in your life

Being happy with my mum and playing piano!

### Our three pillars

### Our nine priorities



#### PRACTICE

Our practice ambition is to enable all children to tell us that they have had an exceptional experience when they engage with us, everywhere and every time.

- 1 Further improve the quality and impact of practice and reduce local variation
- 2 Seek out and learn from feedback – (including children’s experiences of family conflict, abuse and harm and sharing their messages with family justice system leaders)
- 3 Enable Cafcass systems to support practice and target support where it is needed to improve children’s experiences

#### PEOPLE

Our people ambition is to attract, retain and keep colleagues well at work, to offer professional development and sustain a working environment that enables our people to thrive.

- 4 Attract, engage and retain people
- 5 Provide a safe, child focused and modern environment that works for our colleagues
- 6 Lead and govern well



#### PARTNERS

Our partner ambition is to collaborate with other professionals to improve the experiences of children and families in family law proceedings.

- 7 Improve children’s safety and experiences of proceedings
- 8 Collaborate and influence to reduce delay in proceedings
- 9 Collaborate and influence to lead and implement Child Focused Courts



### CHILD FOCUSED COURTS

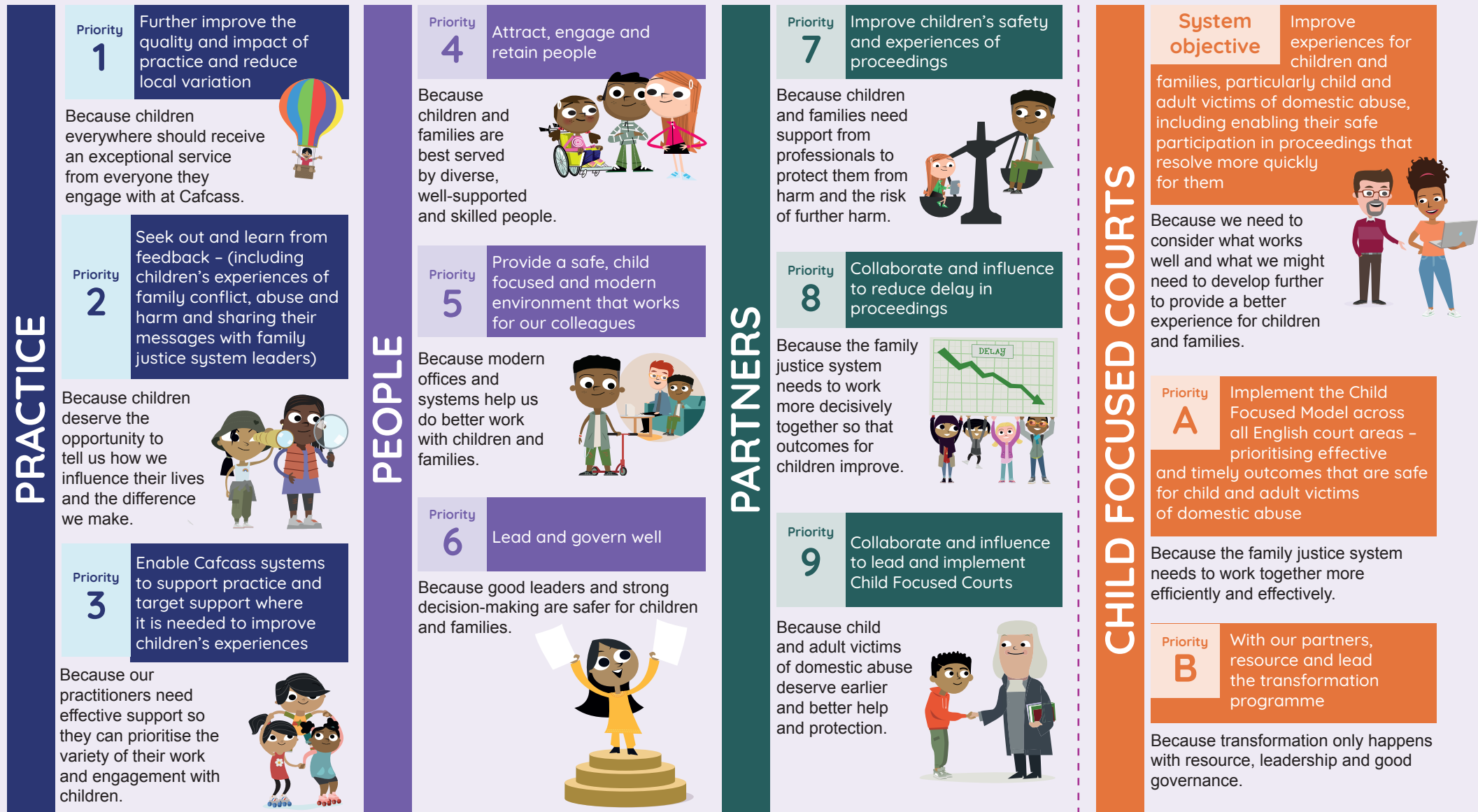
**System objective:** Improve experiences for children and families, particularly child and adult victims of domestic abuse, including enabling their safe participation in proceedings that resolve more quickly for them.



- A Implement the Child Focused Model across all English court areas – prioritising effective and timely outcomes that are safe for child and adult victims of domestic abuse
- B With our partners, resource and lead the transformation programme

**Figure 2: An overview of our new strategic priorities**

Everyone at Cafcass, our people, our board, our partners remain ambitious for children. We have updated our nine priority programmes for 2026 to 2029 to set out how we intend to succeed for children, what we will do to enable our colleagues to become stronger representatives of children’s best interests, and how we will work collaboratively to improve outcomes for children and families, everywhere and every time they engage with us.



# Our Practice ambition and work programmes 2026-2029

Our Practice ambition is to enable all children to tell us that they have had an exceptional experience when they engage with us, everywhere and every time.



## Priority 1: Further improve the quality and impact of practice and reduce local variation

We want children to receive the same exceptional experience from us wherever they are located in the country. To achieve this, we will:

1. **See and engage all children** throughout their proceedings.
2. Increase the effectiveness of **management oversight and supervision arrangements**.
3. Embed the consistent use of our **Together Practice Framework**.
4. **Improve the oversight and national consistency** of practice and systems for children who have yet to meet their first or new family court adviser.
5. Take action to **review and protect caseloads** to enhance the quality of practice and to support the work to bring cases to conclusion.
6. **Reduce delay in proceedings, including improvements in the oversight of Rule 16.4 orders**.

## Priority 2: Seek out and learn from feedback – (including children’s experiences of family conflict, abuse and harm and sharing their messages with family justice system leaders)

We want children to be able to tell us how they experienced their proceedings and their engagement with Cafcass. We want to listen to, learn from and act on their feedback. To achieve this, we will:

1. **Evaluate our current strategy for seeking and learning from feedback**, including improvement and change in response to practice alerts.
2. Lead consistently and implement learning from **complaints, compliments, significant incidents and learning reviews**.
3. **Develop an ‘insights’ survey for all children involved with Cafcass**, trying to provide national feedback to system leaders and policy makers about the impact of family conflict, harm and abuse on them – three phased years.

## Priority 3: Enable Cafcass systems to support practice and target support where it is needed to improve children’s experiences

We want colleagues to have the support and time they need to do their jobs effectively so that they can focus on their engagement with children. To achieve this, we will:

1. **Lead, monitor and report progress against operational service area improvement plans**, preparing for mid and end year reviews and self-evaluations – assessing progress throughout each year of this plan.
2. **Review, revise and implement a new system for information and screening to support both the Child Arrangements Programme and Child Focused Courts** – including arrangements to allocate safeguarding letters.
3. Review and implement a **workload management system for social work practice**.

**Priority 1: Further improve the quality and impact of practice and reduce local variation**

7. **Lead and improve national priorities for public and private law.**
8. **Improve practice in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor**, including specific changes to recognise children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, and promoting consistent use of Cafcass' Domestic Abuse Practice policy.
9. Lead and improve the **quality of assessments of harm and the risk of future harm** to children in public and private law proceedings and when the thematic learning review is complete, consider what is needed to assess the risk of sexual harm for very young children.

**Priority 2: Seek out and learn from feedback – (including children's experiences of family conflict, abuse and harm and sharing their messages with family justice system leaders)**


**Priority 3: Enable Cafcass systems to support practice and target support where it is needed to improve children's experiences**

4. Further embed in all teams, the use of our **performance and accountability arrangements** so there is consistency in identifying where practice needs to improve further and faster.
5. **Lead and implement 'Strengthening Practice Support' programme**, including a review of local quality assurance systems and the impact on practice.




# What children and young people say is important to them

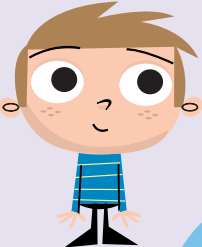
We worked with Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) members to think about what is important to children and young people in their family proceedings and what they could expect to experience if we are getting things right. This is what they said success would feel like to them in **practice**. We have set out the same for our **people, partner and child focused court** priorities in later sections.



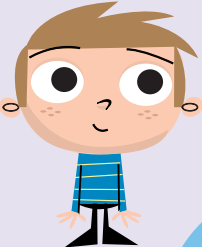
Make sure I understand the reasons for your advice to the family court.



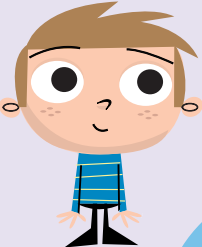
Tell me what you did with my feedback and help me understand why you are asking for it.



Check with me that you've understood what I've said and keep checking in if things change.




Take me seriously and help me see that my voice shapes what happens.




Tell me how long things are expected to take and explain why they might be delayed.



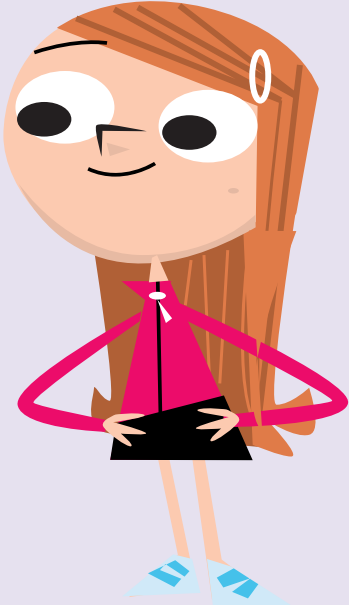
Understand how domestic abuse has affected me, both emotionally and physically, and do everything you can to help me feel safe and protected.



Every professional should know how racism and being treated badly or differently because of my heritage affects me. Please take my experiences seriously and talk to me about them during our work together.



Safeguarding letters, Section 7 and Child Impact Reports should be timely and responsive, especially if something worrying happens.



Remember I may not feel I have had an exceptional experience but try to give me the best experience possible.

## How will we know how well we are doing for children?

We have developed a range of performance data and success measures to help us to determine the progress we are making. Examples of these measures for practice can be found below – we have set out the same for people, partners and child focused courts priorities in later sections. A more detailed version of these measures is included in the main report (annex 2).

It is the combination of what children have told us is important to them in family court proceedings, their feedback and what they tell us during proceedings, and our performance data and success measures that tell us whether we are achieving what we intend for children.

| How will we know how well we are doing for children?  |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| Priority 1: Further improve the quality and impact of practice and reduce local variation   | Priority 2: Seek out and learn from feedback – (including children’s experiences of family conflict, abuse and harm and sharing their messages with family justice system leaders)  | Priority 3: Enable Cafcass systems to support practice and target support where it is needed to improve children’s experiences   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ We will sustain in <b>person engagement</b> with all children.</li> <li>✓ We will see a continued increase in the <b>proportion of practice that is rated good or better</b>.</li> <li>✓ In proceedings where <b>domestic abuse</b> is a factor, the quality of practice will continue to improve.</li> <li>✓ We will see improved <b>use of letters, sharing recommendations and children’s responses</b> shared with the court.</li> <li>✓ We will see continued <b>decline in the average duration</b> of children’s cases in public and private law.</li> <li>✓ All work judged to be inadequate will <b>show safe and immediate intervention</b> and improvement for children.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ We will see an <b>increase in the volume of feedback received from children</b> and the proportion of reported positive experiences with Cafcass will improve.</li> <li>✓ <b>Learning reviews</b> will result in visible and changed practice, evidenced in annual performance boards.</li> <li>✓ <b>Children’s complaints</b> will feature in all performance oversight including specific learning and change.</li> <li>✓ We will develop three <b>annual insight reports</b> from children and use them to inform change in the family justice system and in the making of children’s policy in England.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ There will be <b>eight effective annual reviews of progress</b> and improvement and <b>one additional for Cafcass Associates</b>.</li> <li>✓ <b>Safeguarding letters</b> will be allocated consistently across regions.</li> <li>✓ <b>Caseloads</b> will be more manageable for all practitioners with systems to help them close children’s cases efficiently and safely because orders are received promptly from HMCTS.</li> <li>✓ <b>Improving and reducing performance will be identified effectively</b> and quickly by senior operational leaders.</li> <li>✓ There will be increased use of the <b>strengthening practice programme</b> and feedback will be positive about its intention and outcome.</li> </ul> |

# People ambition and work programmes 2026-2029

Our People ambition is to attract, retain and keep colleagues well at work, to offer professional development and sustain a working environment that enables our people to thrive.



| Priority 4: Attract, engage and retain people  | Priority 5: Provide a safe, child focused and modern environment that works for our colleagues   | Priority 6: Lead and govern well  |
|--|--|---|
| <p>We want children and families to be served by diverse, motivated, well-supported and skilled colleagues. To achieve this, we will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Prioritise wellbeing including support</b> for practitioners and managers affected by the death and injury of children.</li> <li>2. Prioritise, lead, and implement initiatives to support the <b>retention of colleagues, including effective induction and recognition</b>.</li> <li>3. Prioritise, lead and regularly report on <b>resourcing and recruitment</b> in all operational service areas, implementing targeted attraction and retention initiatives in 'hard to recruit' areas.</li> <li>4. <b>Review and include the resourcing requirements for Child Focused Courts</b> in all operational service areas, taking account of 'go live' dates and capacity needs.</li> </ol> | <p>We want our colleagues to have modern offices and systems to enable them to do their best work with children and families. To achieve this, we will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implement and evaluate the impact of the <b>new health, safety and security priority</b>, including clear action, support and follow up for practitioners and managers who are threatened by adults during proceedings.</li> <li>2. Implement and regularly evaluate the impact of the <b>estates strategy</b>.</li> <li>3. <b>Continue to implement ChildFirst changes to include mandatory child need recording and to enable oversight of practice effectiveness</b> for children.</li> <li>4. <b>Develop a digital strategy</b> and include the use of artificial intelligence to improve process efficiencies.</li> </ol> | <p>Good leaders and stronger decision-making will help us make the improvements we need to provide safer outcomes for children and families. To achieve this, we will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Strengthen the leadership and oversight</b> of sickness absence management, to reduce sickness absence in all teams, prioritising where children are most affected by absence.</li> <li>2. Revise and implement our <b>equality, diversity and inclusion priorities</b>, including setting up the project to understand the experiences of Black and Asian women in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor.</li> <li>3. <b>Review the use of our leadership and practice quality standards</b>, including the priority associated with visible in-person leadership.</li> </ol> |

Priority 4: Attract, engage and retain people

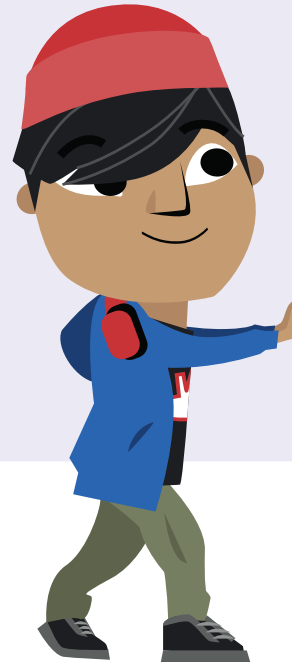
- 5. **Complete the review of arrangements for our 'flexible' workforce** – including Cafcass Associates, locum and fixed fee work.
- 6. **Revise arrangements for the Cafcass social work academy**, including training provision for less than three years qualified social workers.
- 7. Review and introduce **leadership development and talent initiatives**.
- 8. **Develop a full training programme for practitioners and managers to support their development and readiness** to work in Child Focused Courts.
- 9. Develop a plan for **opportunities for alternatively qualified professionals** in supporting and advising families in private law proceedings, and consider the **risks and opportunities for practitioners to work in all family law proceedings**.

Priority 5: Provide a safe, child focused and modern environment that works for our colleagues

- 5. Continue **modernising Corporate and Business Services** to meet the needs of children and families who engage with Cafcass.
- 6. **Review and strengthen Analytics capacity**, so there is sustainable capability to provide management information for current and future arrangements in family proceedings, children's outcomes are clearly understood, and there is strong assurance over data quality.

Priority 6: Lead and govern well

- 4. Prioritise the **review of in-person and flexible working arrangements**, to ensure these meet the needs of children and families who engage with Cafcass.
- 5. Clarify, lead and embed the **consistent implementation of the performance capability** policy.
- 6. Develop with the Cafcass Board, a **senior leadership succession plan and strategy**.
- 7. Complete the review **addressing the efficiency and effectiveness of complaints arrangements**.
- 8. **Evaluate the impact of the Recovery and Improvement Board**, including progress in identifying local variation in areas that require more targeted support.



# What children and young people say is important to them



Listen to what safety means to me and act to protect me throughout proceedings.

Have the skills, kindness and time to understand me and my experiences.

I will never forget my FCA. If you're coming to work for Cafcass, you should know that the role you play in my life is important and lasting.

Make our meetings comfortable — a mix of fun and serious when needed.

Make sure I know who is there to help me throughout my journey with you.

Make sure I feel safe and comfortable where we meet and talk.



Treat me as an individual, recognising my uniqueness.

Make sure I feel welcomed in the office or online.

## How will we know how well we are doing for children?

### Priority 4: Attract, engage and retain people

- ✓ Practitioners and managers will report that there are **supportive systems** for them to access when they are involved in proceedings **when a child dies or is seriously harmed**.
- ✓ There will be **fewer social work vacancies, reduced turnover, and quicker recruitment** of high calibre applicants, particularly in areas with the greatest capacity challenges.
- ✓ There will be a reduction in the **number of children waiting to meet their family court adviser or children's guardian**.
- ✓ We will continue to support colleagues from **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic** backgrounds to progress into **leadership positions**.
- ✓ All practice teams will be able to **allocate public and private law proceedings effectively and agree timescales in areas where Child Focused Courts** are being implemented.
- ✓ The skills and training made available to all practitioners and managers will equip them with the **skills to manage all law types as required**.

### Priority 5: Provide a safe, child focused and modern environment that works for our colleagues

- ✓ Children will say that they have been able to see their Cafcass worker in a **safe and comfortable space**.
- ✓ Colleagues will report that they are able to work effectively in **safe offices that promote communication and creative work**.
- ✓ **Cafcass practitioners and managers consistently report all incidents involving threatening behaviour** from adults in proceedings with appropriate and prompt action taken by managers.
- ✓ In all incidents where an **adult in proceedings is threatening or abusive** to a Cafcass colleague, appropriate **child protection action will be taken** to make sure that the children in those proceedings are safe and protected.
- ✓ **Reporting capability from ChildFirst** will enable reliable data about what is happening for children, particularly in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor.

### Priority 6: Lead and govern well

- ✓ **Sickness absence will reduce** in all teams and functions and where it does not, there will be a targeted oversight and intervention programme so that children's cases do not have to be repeatedly reallocated causing delay for children.
- ✓ The **uniqueness of children in proceedings will be clearly set out in reports and advice to the family court**.
- ✓ **Anti-racist practice** will be discussed more regularly and will be visible in our work.
- ✓ Cafcass colleagues report that they feel part of an **organisation that values and promotes difference and opportunity**.
- ✓ **Induction arrangements** are clear, realistic and enable new starters to work effectively and safely.
- ✓ **Local variation in practice quality reduces** and there is greater consistency in children's experiences.



# Partner ambition and work programmes 2026-2029

Our Partner ambition is to collaborate with other professionals to improve the experiences of children and families in family law proceedings.



## Priority 7: Improve children's safety and experiences of proceedings

We will work with partners to make sure that children are safe and protected from harm or the risk of future harm in proceedings. In order to achieve this, we will:

1. Improve how we learn as system partners about **proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor**.
2. Improve our work with the **senior judiciary so that there is coordination about local interventions and plans to reduce delay in Rule 16.4 proceedings**.
3. **Revise and implement a new section 7/ Child Impact Report/section 37 and Rule 16.4 protocol with local authorities**.
4. **Engage with the Families First reforms** and influence their effectiveness and safety for children in proceedings.
5. **Work more closely with the Department for Education National Safeguarding Panel, collaborating on learning reviews and improving practice in family justice**.

## Priority 8: Collaborate and influence to reduce delay in proceedings

We want to work more decisively with partners on long running proceedings and processes that create delay for children. To achieve this, we will:

1. Understand and report on the extent to which the **advice given by family court advisers and children's guardians influences the final decision made by the family court for children**.
2. Report, influence and intervene with the **main factors causing delay for children**.
3. **Monitor and report on regional variation with the Public Law Outline**, establishing judicial partnerships to do so.
4. **Prioritise with HMCTS the prompt, secure and accurate transfer of data**, including new applications, the dispatch of orders and review the impact of the new portals.

## Priority 9: Collaborate and influence to lead and implement Child Focused Courts

We are working closely with partners to implement Child Focused Courts and to continue to do so, we will:

1. **Safely implement Child Focused Courts across all Cafcass regions**, collaborating with the national governance leads and being clear about operational readiness criteria for each new area – including that no area should go live without confirmed workforce capacity, training completion and effective multi-agency partnerships.
2. Complete the internal evaluation of the **impact, risks and opportunities of the Child Focused Model**, including specific analysis of whether child and adult victims of domestic abuse are experiencing improved safety and support – addressing the January 2026 MoJ evaluation findings.
3. **Secure effective partnership arrangements with local Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) services, local authority children's services and other relevant agencies** in each new area, so that the multi-agency approach central to the model is functioning before implementation.
4. **Engage with the development of the new Practice Direction (PD36Z successor) and Courts and Tribunal Bill** so that Cafcass' operational requirements and children's experiences are present in the legal and procedural framework.

**Priority 7: Improve children’s safety and experiences of proceedings**

**Priority 8: Collaborate and influence to reduce delay in proceedings**

**Priority 9: Collaborate and influence to lead and implement Child Focused Courts**

- 6. Work with the family courts to **prioritise and secure professional safety and respectful behaviour in proceedings – including making use of the potentially violent persons protocol.**
- 7. Be an active partner in supporting the MoJ with the **implementation of the recommendations set out in the Public Accounts Committee [‘Improving family court services for children’](#) report.**



# What children and young people say is important to them

When you change how you work, think about how it affects children and use the FJYPB members to understand what impact this may have.



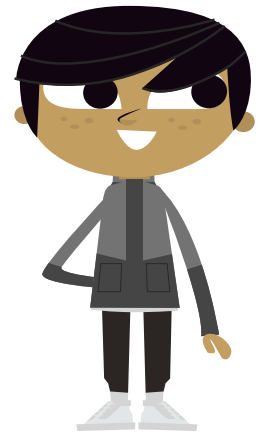
Keep in touch with me — don't leave long gaps where I don't hear from you.

Involve children and families when making improvements to Cafcass.

Make sure the pace of my case works for me — not too rushed and not too slow.

Work effectively with the courts to progress my case without delay.

Help me see how my children's case is progressing, like tracking a journey.



Recognise that emotional abuse and controlling behaviour can be just as harmful as physical abuse.



Make sure everyone in my proceedings is focused on what is safe and best for me.

## How will we know how well we are doing for children?

### Priority 7: Improve children's safety and experiences of proceedings

- ✓ **Learning from our Domestic Abuse Practice Reference Group**, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's 'Everyday Business' report and our partnership with SafeLives continues to support improved practice.
- ✓ There is a **new national protocol agreed between Cafcass and ADCS** in place to enable children to stay central in proceedings where there is more than one social work agency involved in proceedings.
- ✓ **Rule 16.4 proceedings run to 26-week timetable** and they help resolve complex issues for children more quickly and effectively.
- ✓ **Serious incidents and learning reviews offer appropriate opportunity for the National Safeguarding Panel to learn with Cafcass.**
- ✓ Colleagues feel **safe and respected in the courtroom**. There are more regular and appropriate **referrals to the potentially violent persons list** supported through relevant training and guidance.

### Priority 8: Collaborate and influence to reduce delay in proceedings

- ✓ We are able to **report on the reasons for delay and understand local and national barriers** to reducing durations.
- ✓ **Most children's cases will conclude before 26 weeks.**



### Priority 9: Collaborate and influence to lead and implement Child Focused Courts

- ✓ We will have the workforce and operational infrastructure to **implement Child Focused Courts effectively** in each new operational area.
- ✓ Children and families report they are **listened to and protected in Child Focused Court areas and teams – with specific evidence for child and adult victims of domestic abuse.**
- ✓ Multi-agency partnerships are established and functioning in all new areas before launch, including **effective IDVA referral processes, information-sharing agreements with local authorities and police forces for the coordination of timely safeguarding checks.**
- ✓ The new **practice direction is realistic and workable for Cafcass** and has provision for circumstances where demand, complexity or resources require proceedings to extend beyond the eight-week timeline.
- ✓ There is **effective partnership with MoJ and good governance** of the change programme.
- ✓ **Family time arrangements are safe, effective** and do not increase the duration of private law proceedings such that a second report is required.
- ✓ **Evaluation evidence demonstrates that the pace of proceedings in each new area supports children's emotional readiness** and the quality of engagement with children improves.

# Child Focused Courts practice change programme

Our Child Focused Courts system objective is to improve experiences for children and families, particularly child and adult victims of domestic abuse, including enabling their safe participation in proceedings that resolve more quickly for them.

**Priority A: Implement the Child Focused Model across all English court areas – prioritising effective and timely outcomes that are safe for child and adult victims of domestic abuse**

**Priority B: With our partners, resource and lead the transformation programme**

## What do we need to do?

We will work closely with our family justice system partners to develop the necessary arrangements to realise the benefits of Child Focused Courts for children and families.

Our programme priorities include:

1. Establish the necessary **leadership, governance and Cafcass Board reporting arrangements to implement Child Focused Courts effectively across all regions**, learning from operational experience in our ten existing Child Focused Court areas.
2. **Agree operational team processes and structures** that prioritise **continuity of practitioner** (including Cafcass Associates) for children throughout their proceedings and that **enable public and private law children’s cases to be effectively allocated** within agreed timescales.
3. **Embed the Child Impact Report and the associated social work practice as a high-quality, child-centred assessment** that identifies and describes safety, welfare, the harm children have experienced, the risk of future harm, the impact of the family dispute on them and the advised arrangements that serve their best interests.

We will work alongside our family justice system partners to make sure that Child Focused Courts have the right resources, leadership and governance in place for children and families.

Our programme priorities include:

1. Clarify and **secure the capacity, resource and timeline requirements** for the full implementation of Child Focused Courts, working within the allocation for 2026–2027 to recruit and deploy additional social work capacity across the eight new court areas.
2. **Agree a phased strategy for implementing Child Focused Courts nationally**, ensuring that each area is operationally ready before going live and that readiness criteria include workforce stability and practitioner and manager training.
3. **Devise and implement training and development programmes** that equip all practitioners and managers with the skills required for Child Focused Courts – including the preparation of Child Impact Reports, trauma-informed practice, and engaging effectively with children of all ages.

**Priority A: Implement the Child Focused Model across all English court areas – prioritising effective and timely outcomes that are safe for child and adult victims of domestic abuse**

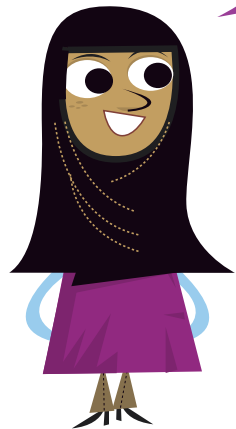
**Priority B: With our partners, resource and lead the transformation programme**

### What do we need to do?

- 4. Strengthen and embed effective practice in all proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor**, ensuring that both child and adult victims are identified, supported and protected – including through effective referrals to locally commissioned IDVAs and specialist domestic abuse services where this is required.
  - 5. Agree a robust means for evaluating the experiences of children and families in each new area**, including specific evaluation of safety and outcomes in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor, and whether the timeliness of proceedings supports children’s emotional readiness.
  - 6. Provide children with clear, age-appropriate explanations of what is happening in their proceedings**, how their views have been considered, sharing recommendations with them and including their responses in the report to court.
  - 7. Lead the change programme**, so that the Cafcass national improvement priorities, the existing quality assurance systems, performance accountability arrangements and the Together practice framework continue to underpin all social work practice.
- 4. Ensure the transition from Child Arrangements Programme to Child Focused Courts in each area is managed safely**, with clear arrangements to avoid disruption to children in open proceedings.
  - 5. Work closely as part of the MoJ-led programme board overseeing implementation of the Model to secure shared performance data and objectives, fidelity to the model as it is implemented and to influence the final practice direction required for the Child Focused Model.**
  - 6. Develop a partnership contingency protocol to activate** should any Cafcass operational service area, court area or partner agency have significant difficulties complying with the Practice Direction.



## What children and young people say is important to them



Meeting my FCA earlier helps me form a relationship and sense of trust, which is so important to me.

See me as an individual and don't fit me into a box - my situation might be more complicated than it looks.

Having a relationship with the same social worker is important to me. Faster proceedings don't mean better.

Make sure the people helping me take my experiences of domestic abuse seriously and explain things in a way I can understand.

Make sure I don't feel rushed or overwhelmed by how quickly your advice is given to the court.

Help me feel confident that I'm getting real care and attention, not just being moved through the system.

Quality time with me counts more than how often I see you.



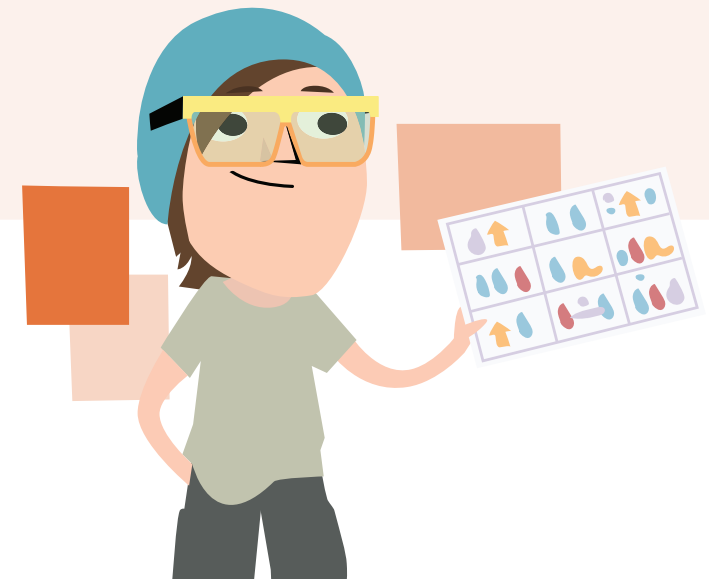
**Priority A: Implement the Child Focused Model across all English court areas – prioritising effective and timely outcomes that are safe for child and adult victims of domestic abuse**

**Priority B: With our partners, resource and lead the transformation programme**

**How will we know how well we are doing for children?**

- ✓ **More children are seen earlier in proceedings, with at least 75% of children in Child Focused Court areas** having direct engagement with a family court adviser before the single decision hearing.
- ✓ **Shorter duration of proceedings** from receipt of application to decision, with evidence of sustained improvement across all operational areas.
- ✓ **Earlier identification of domestic abuse, safeguarding concerns and specific needs**, including effective coordination with local authority children's social care services and IDVAs where required.
- ✓ **Children report that they have received an introductory letter, that they understand what is happening in their proceedings, that their views have been taken seriously, and advice to the court has been clearly explained to them, with their views included in the child impact report.**
- ✓ There is **one practitioner through the child's proceedings and reduced reallocation of children's cases.**
- ✓ Local quality assurance and impact audits **seek children's feedback in increased number** and they report that their proceedings move at the right pace for them.
- ✓ The **proportion of practice judged good or better in Child Focused Court areas is at least equivalent to or better than the quarterly reported overall effectiveness of practice.**

- ✓ **The workforce capacity required for national implementation is in place**, with recruitment targets met and vacancy rates within acceptable thresholds in all new areas.
- ✓ All new **Child Focused Court areas launch on time** and to the agreed readiness criteria, with no area going live until staffing, training and systems are confirmed.
- ✓ **Governance arrangements are functioning effectively**, with clear escalation routes and **risk management between Cafcass, MoJ, HMCTS and the judiciary.**
- ✓ **Practitioners report through colleague surveys that they feel trained, supported and confident** in delivering the Child Focused Model.
- ✓ The **transition from the Child Arrangements Programme is managed safely** in each area, with no adverse impact on children in open proceedings during the changeover period.
- ✓ **Family time arrangements are safe, effective** and do not increase the duration of private law proceedings or require a second report to the court.



# We welcome your feedback

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