



**CHILDREN AND FAMILY COURT ADVISORY AND SUPPORT SERVICE**  
**Paper for the Cafcass Board meeting on 9 October 2019**  
**INITIAL OVERVIEW FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**KEY POINTS**

- This is an initial report of early impressions and emerging delivery priorities from the new Chief Executive
- There are some key characteristics for an organisation focused on sustaining its effectiveness which will need to be incorporated into our strategic plan. These are set out in section 4.1 – 4.6 below.
- Our strategy for 2019-23 was published in September of this year. The work in support of our vision is described against practice, people and partners. Whilst this is a four year strategy which will benefit from a delivery programme to be launched in January 2020, there are some immediate priorities for the next 12 months which are set out in section 5.2 below.
- The areas of our work for longer term strategic prioritisation are described in section 5.1 of this report.
- Cafcass is uniquely placed within the family justice system to establish and influence the many opportunities that exist to improve the experiences and outcomes for children, their families and carers. Some of this detail is set out in section 6.1 of this report.

**1. AIM AND PURPOSE**

- 1.1. To provide an initial overview of early impressions alongside some short and longer term strategic priorities.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BOARD**

- 2.1. To note this initial report.

**3. INITIAL IMPRESSIONS**

- 3.1. I have been in post at the time of writing for four weeks and my firm impression is that I have joined a high functioning organisation, which is exceptionally well stewarded, mature and focused on the right things; those being, the children it is required to represent, the families whom it seeks to support, the quality of professional practice and critically, the people who are employed to support and carry out our complex work.
- 3.2. Cafcass knows in impressive detail, the demands on its staff, including trends in activity and the causes of fluctuating pressures. The business systems are impressive, as is the innovation and energy to continue to identify further efficiencies and improvements. The quality of practice and management oversight has been prioritised and in consequence, the

quality of staff, both social work and business / corporate support is strong. In early engagements with key partners and sponsors, I have found the organisation to be held in high regard, particularly with the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Judiciary.

- 3.3. There are of course areas where we need to improve, though I have found consensus on what these are. As the largest employer of social workers in England, we are vulnerable to the reality that there are not enough practitioners available for the work that needs to be done in the children's social care system nationally. In addition, and because the market is highly competitive, we must develop a strong, innovative and comprehensive workforce strategy focused on recruitment, retention and professional development. Leadership and practice informed by the people closest to the work we do (whether directly or indirectly with families) needs to strengthen as does our use of and understanding of our own data in respect of both outcomes for children but also as an analysis of what is happening to children and families who are the subject of public and/or private law proceedings.
- 3.4. Investing time in seeking deeper feedback from the families, carers, children and partners with whom we work will be critical to our improvement planning. Closely aligned to this will be the activities we undertake to learn from our strengths but also where we get things wrong. Our Families' Forum is set to be a fundamental part of our new feedback and learning system designed to strengthen practice and the relationships we have with the vast numbers of families and children with whom we work. Children's voices need to become yet louder in the family justice system and our influence on the leadership of reform will be critical in the months ahead.

#### **4. SUSTAINING EFFECTIVENESS**

- 4.1. As an organisation with an Ofsted judgement of 'Outstanding', but with both high ambition and responsibility to continue to improve, the next four planning and delivery years are going to be challenging and I hope, energising. Our leadership and strategic skills will need to be clearly and explicitly focused on **six specific areas** to consolidate what we have achieved but to excite and encourage further stretch and development across Cafcass.
- 4.2. In respect of public law, we will need to nest the principles of the Children Act 1989 at the heart of our **vision**. In practice this will include asking hard questions about what the 'no order' principle means to us as well as increasing the influence we bring to bear on the principle of children being brought up in their families (if this is in their best interests) and where this is not possible with their parents, in arrangements with connected people or other family members. In respect of private law, we will need to be clearer about the need for our involvement as well as our expectations about what is done before court and our response in the system when the required 'gatekeeping' has not been observed.
- 4.3. Our **practice culture and environment** will also need to be in strong focus, making sure that we examine the transparency of our decisions, the rationales we share with parents, carers and children as well as continuing to prioritise high practice accountability balanced with strong and supportive oversight. Our vision must be visible in our frontline practice and we must continue to be robust and realistic about having and acquiring sufficient resource and capacity. Innovation and creative practice are prioritised currently but will become more important in our 'stretch' phase as will the extent to which we allow ourselves to be influenced by those closest to the work we lead (directly or indirectly) with children, their families and carers. Our **practice framework** will need to be more easily described in respect of how strength-driven and relationship focused it is.
- 4.4. **Learning and research** are also fundamental to our next phase. The extent to which we are ready to learn, to sponsor and access research, to look outwards, to deeply examine our practice in any serious case reviews, published judgements and complaints will be critical to enriching our work and our professional experiences. We will need to be open to

and willing to learn from the things that families, children and partners tell us we need to improve or strengthen.

- 4.5. Cafcass has an established means of incorporating **feedback** from children, through area quality reviews (AQR) and through the work of the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB). As we strengthen our use of the experiences of children, their families and carers, we will require new mechanisms such as practice audits which include direct contact with families and children to assess the extent to which we have helped them to achieve their goals. Our work will also benefit from more direct engagement with local authorities to increase our understanding of their proposed care and safety plans. Regular enquiry to the frontline about consistency, safety, perceptions about senior leaders, working conditions, recognising stress and job satisfaction will become ever more important if we are to reach an exceptional level of delivery.
- 4.6. **Leadership** and transformation run parallel in any organisation seeking to reach the highest level of performance and satisfaction for those it serves and employs. Leaders and managers at Cafcass are already highly motivated and the standard of their work is to be commended. However, to sustain what we have achieved and to model what else is possible, we will need even greater insight and depth in respect of our practice, our consistency and the nature of our engagements with families and children. Data rich outcomes, impact and learning will be critical in the next improvement period. Our vision will need to translate directly into all practice, and leaders will need to sustain ambition corporately, and in all regions and functions. The Board will also be instrumental in sponsoring and overseeing the delivery of our priorities and further transformation.

## 5. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

### 5.1. 2019-23

Our delivery plan and success framework feature as separate items for discussion on the Board agenda. Both are currently in draft and subject to further work in the forthcoming roadshows. I will not therefore rehearse them in detail in this report. However, for coherence in respect of what is set out above, I will refer to our proposed areas of priority in brief.

In respect of **practice**, we will be prioritising:

- ✓ Practice improvement *led by frontline managers, all staff, practitioners and senior leaders* to sustain effective practice, culture and systems
- ✓ Practice improvement *influenced by families and children*
- ✓ Practice *improvement learning from complaints, published judgements, serious case reviews, the work of the FJYPB and reviews of the practice environment*

In respect of **partners**, we will be prioritising:

- ✓ Shared *leadership of implementation of the reforms* arising from the recent judicial working groups on public and private law, working closely with the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education as government sponsors
- ✓ *Engagement with the Family Justice Board and the associated Local Family Justice Boards* to ensure there is a consistent improvement programme with clear timescales for delivery
- ✓ *Closer working with Her Majesty's Court and Tribunal Service (HMCTS)* to agree shared priorities for modernisation and efficiency
- ✓ *A renewed programme of work with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)* to understand regional variation and to improve the impact of pre- proceedings with families

In respect of **people**, we will be prioritising:

- ✓ *Securing the resources and people* we need to manage existing pressures but in addition to enable us to invest in innovations to reduce activity and demand
- ✓ *Strengthened leadership and oversight of performance*, quality assurance and data
- ✓ The development of *leadership and manager standards*
- ✓ *A continued focus on well-being and success*, including a review of whether we can develop our own social work academy **and** becoming an employment centre of excellence for any one working directly or in support of improving the lives of children
- ✓ *Creating a programme building on existing efficiency and change activities* which extends productivity and is driven by a modern high – tech environment

## 5.2. 2020-21

Our strategic plan extends over a three-year spending review period, but over the next 12 months, there are some pressing priorities which we are immediately developing.

These include:

- a **demand reduction programme** in private law to be made possible through fast tracking the arrangements to ensure that a robust gatekeeping process is in place
- the **development of a workforce strategy** to enable us to manage current demand (reducing caseloads and duty allocations) and divert capacity into 'invest' to improve or save projects
- close and urgent work with the judiciary, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education and the ADCS to **develop a family justice reform implementation plan**
- a new **data development initiative**, providing strong data on outcomes and impact but also enabling us to understand regional variation (in both public law applications and the outcomes of proceedings) thereby helping us to influence national policy discussions and local areas for improvement
- engagement with **external research community** (through our setting up of the Research Advisory Committee), and producing more transparent and meaningful routine analyses for ourselves and externally
- a '**practice stretch**' programme, informed by improved learning from feedback, a clearer practice framework and from practice that hasn't been strong enough
- development of our new '**Families' Forum**' which will focus on restorative work with families, carers and children when our practice has fallen short of what is expected and learning from them about what will improve the experiences of all families and children being supported by us
- **strengthened oversight and governance** by leaders and managers in respect of performance, delivery of strategic priorities, complaints, recruitment and retention, budget and the implementation of reforms
- the implementation of our **new case management system**, ensuring that our recording of practice continues to improve and in addition strengthens the voices of children, carers and families

## 6. SYSTEM OPPORTUNITIES

- 6.1. The period of our strategic planning and implementation will be an exciting one which presents many opportunities to improve the quality of Cafcass' work, the impact and positive difference we are able to make for children, their families and carers and the

influence that we have in the family justice system. Our partnership with government departments, ADCS and the judiciary will enable us to plan and work together to put pressure behind reform and to share in the implementation of a change programme – together becoming a leadership force in family justice.

- 6.2. Managing current demand and pressure in the system continues to be our priority and we need to act with urgency to prevent further pressure and the inevitable decline in performance and outcomes for children and their families if growth continues without necessary and additional resources. We must be relentless in our focus and realistic about what we prioritise. Longer term however, there is a much more significant conversation that the family justice system and key partners must have. Current reforms will make some positive difference, but they will not significantly reduce demand in private law nor will they reduce the rate of proceedings in public law.
- 6.3. Both will require us to reconsider the extent to which the state involves itself in family life and therefore what we can reasonably expect the demands on family justice to be in the next decade and beyond.

## **7. IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

- 7.1. Our strategic plan and priorities are designed wholly and centrally to improve the experiences of children and to enable us to represent their best interests at all times.

## **8. FINANCIAL ANALYSIS**

- 8.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **9. RISK ANALYSIS**

- 9.1. There are no direct risk issues arising from this report.

## **10. DIVERSITY ANALYSIS**

- 10.1. There are no direct diversity implications arising from this report.

**Jacky Tiotto,  
Chief Executive,  
9 October 2019**