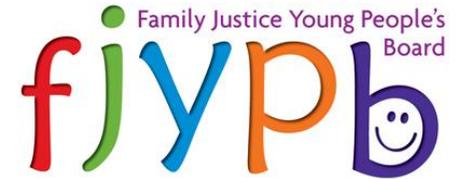


Court Reviews



Court Overview Report

Background

The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) consists of 50 children and young people from diverse backgrounds who have had direct or indirect experience of public and private law proceedings or who have an interest in family justice. Members come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds from all over England and Wales and are aged between 7 and 25 years old. The FJYPB supports the work of the Family Justice Board (FJB) by enabling young people to have a direct say in the way in which services for children and young people are run.

The President of the Family Division, Sir James Munby, requested that the FJYPB undertake the court reviews.

Purpose

The court reviews presented an opportunity for members of the FJYPB to undertake a review of court facilities and services in a DFJ area and to share findings and recommendations in a report. The main areas of the court buildings that members have reviewed are the security area, the waiting/reception area, the court room, judge's chambers and the toilet facilities. The reviews also considered how child-friendly the court staff presented. During the review and, at the judge's discretion, FJYPB members have met with the judge(s) in the court building to discuss how judges hear the views of children and young people and the barriers that judges think prevent this.

The court reviews are part of a much larger commitment of the FJYPB to develop and promote a more child-inclusive family justice system amongst key agencies. Their aspirations are laid out in the FJYPB [National Charter](#).

Identified judicial areas

The twelve judicial areas reviewed by the FJYPB were:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| 1. York and North Yorkshire | 2. Bournemouth | 3. Birmingham |
| 4. Hertfordshire | 5. Leeds | 6. Hampshire |
| 7. Essex | 8. Newcastle | 9. Manchester |
| 10. Wiltshire | 11. Bristol | 12. Liverpool |

Key Learning

Security:

The FJYPB recognise that security is essential in all court buildings to protect professional staff, children and families.

Positive observations:

- The members of the FJYPB all found that the security staff themselves had been friendly during their visits.

Issue raised	Quick Fix Solutions	Comments
It is felt that the security process could be intimidating or even scary for visiting children and young people.	It is recommended that when checking children and young people the security staff are descriptive of the security process and informative in a child friendly manner.	The FJYPB have devised an e-learning training module with HMCTS that can be used by all court staff including the security staff to increase their awareness of the needs of children and young people in the court arena.
A conversation had been overheard in the waiting area of one court between security guards talking about members of the public who had recently visited the court building.	Ensure that all security staff are made aware of the need for confidentiality and discretion in public areas. Children and young people would be worried that they too would be publically discussed if they over hear such conversations.	This issue was raised in the e-learning module.

Waiting Areas, Private rooms and Family Rooms:

The FJYPB have been informed by court staff that children and young people attend court on a daily basis to either; visit the judge or magistrate, attend a criminal court or more commonly attend with a family member who is due in court.

Positive observations/Initiatives:

- The Leeds area is privileged to have the use of a crèche facility. They have an agreement with a local charity that provides free child care to children whose parents are attending court. Court hearings are then set around the times of the crèche facility.
- The DFJ for Birmingham, HHJ Thomas, has purchased some inexpensive plastic baskets and then asked staff to donate some toys and resources. To further advertise this to families it was agreed that posters would be displayed around the court which asks individuals to request a toy box from court staff.
- In recognition that the cost of refreshments at Birmingham court is high they are considering a small charitable service that could provide light refreshments at a low cost.

- Liverpool Civil Justice Centre recognised that their public family room was tired and required urgent attention, redecoration and replenishment of the toys and resources. As a result the court raised just over £4000 in order to undertake the necessary work for their family room. The FJYPB undertook this review with Knowsley Children in Care Council who have offered their support with the family room's renovation.
- HMCTS in York have devised their own notice board for children and young people.

Issues raised	Quick Fix Solutions	Comments
No family room facilities.	The ideal would be to provide a specific waiting area or room that could be allocated for children and young people who visit court, however the FJYPB recognise that this is not always possible.	It was noted at one Civil Justice Centre that they did not have a family room. The centre would use or reserve the consultation rooms that are available on each floor of the court building. From observations of such rooms they were felt to be inappropriate as they had no facilities, resources or information for children and young people. A mobile box of resources for children would help improve this.
It was felt in all of the court buildings visited that the general waiting areas lack information and resources for children and young people.	To provide some basic toys that are available to children and young people in the rooms accessed by them. Court to provide a notice board specific for children and young people.	The FJYPB have developed an example display board and have provided this to HMCTS.
The types of refreshments that have been observed across the courts visited vary in their type and quality. Some courts offer just a tea and coffee vending machine, whilst others have a snack and drinks vending machine. However it is felt that the purchase price was expensive and that some of the vending machines were out of order or not fully stocked.	To ensure that vending machines are in working order and fully stocked.	All courts should consider snacks and drinks available for children and young people visiting the courts that can be purchased at a reasonable cost.

Judges meeting children and young people:

The members had opportunity to view some court rooms and judicial chambers. Their general opinion was that they had appeared to look authoritarian and official, but that this was purposeful and a positive as it highlights that important decisions and matters are discussed in these surroundings.

Positive observations/Initiatives:

- Generally the judges that the FJYPB member met with are in favour for meeting and communicating directly with children and young people when appropriate.
- Some of the Judges that the board members met stated that they often write back to children and young people if they have received a 'letter to the judge'. They assess each child's case individually to identify if a letter would be appropriate.

Issues raised	Quick Fix Solutions	Comments
Judges and magistrates have stated that they do not get many requests to meet directly with children and young people.	Cafcass and the local authorities to give greater consideration to making a request for a meeting with the judge for the children and young people that are involved with the family courts. The FJYPB recognise that this can be impacted upon by resources within agencies.	The FJYPB support children and young people having the opportunity to meet with the judge. It is recognised that there are financial implications for all organisations involved with this.
Some children and young people may feel intimidated in court rooms and judicial chambers.	<p>Photographs of the types of court rooms to be displayed on the recommended children's display board in the general waiting areas and in the designated family rooms.</p> <p>The hearing room or court room be slightly rearranged when children and young people visit in order for the child to be seated next to the judge, rather than opposite them across a table.</p>	
Judicial members have identified that there are two main barriers to meeting with a child or young person: the lack of training and gathering evidence.	<p>For those judicial members who do meet with children and young people to share their methods of best practice.</p> <p>Judicial training to be reviewed and endorse a further commitment to specific training for judges and magistrates meeting directly with children and young people.</p>	The FJYPB have supported the judicial college in devising an e-learning module entitled, 'The Child and Young Person's Journey through the Court.'

Other Initiatives:

- A number of courts arrange tours for children and young people who are looked after or who have additional needs. These include Chelmsford, Colchester and Manchester.
- Bournemouth court has a café that is open to staff and the public which was temporarily closed, however it was recognised this was a vital space for service users.
- Bournemouth court has a gallery space in the main lobby area displaying art from local schools, which made the court more welcoming and appealing to children and young people attending court
- Some courts have faith rooms including Bristol and Manchester which the board members liked.
- Cafcass are developing an Interactive Court Skills App for practitioners to help children understand and navigate the court system. The FJYPB have shared their views about the App in the early stages of development. A demo of the App is near completion and will be piloted soon.

Key Recommendations:

1. The FJYPB would recommend that there is a notice board in every family court for information for children and young people who are subject to family proceedings, based on the model proposed by the board.
2. The FJYPB would recommend that feedback forms are developed as an effective method for children and young people to feedback about the court building, meeting the staff and their general overall experience. These have been developed by the FJYPB and shared with HMCTS.
3. For those courts that lack the space and capacity to accommodate separate waiting areas for children, young people and families, the FJYPB proposes that each court has a portable storage unit, which contains a range of suitable toys and books for all ages.
4. A number of judges identified that some form of training would be helpful for when they meet with children and young people. A training pamphlet may be helpful in addition to the e-learning encompassing the FJYPB's, 'Top Tips for Judges'.
5. The FJYPB acknowledge that judges meeting with children and young people may not always be appropriate perhaps due to a child's age, understanding, or the case in hand. However, the Board does encourage that judges remain open-minded on this issue, and endeavour to meet with a child or young person where appropriate and where resources allow.