



Cafcass Open Board Meeting

5th December 2014:

Panel Discussion Report

December's Open Board meeting provided Cafcass with the opportunity to present its strategic priorities for 2015 and beyond to stakeholders and the public.

Introduction by Baroness Claire Tyler, Chair of the Cafcass Board



Baroness Tyler emphasised that the importance of strengthening the voice of the child lies at the heart of Cafcass' work. She recognised the continual value and challenge provided by the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) to help Cafcass become better and better at articulating the voice of the child in the family courts.

Setting the scene: Anthony Douglas, Cafcass Chief Executive looks ahead

Anthony Douglas confirmed that Cafcass' main focus between 2015 and 2020 is on innovation and finding innovative ways to use its budget and improve services for children, particularly because of the even tougher financial climate. He will be ensuring that Cafcass encourages and embraces the best ideas from a wide range of people. In this way, Anthony said that Cafcass can encompass different approaches to working with children and develop an even better quality of service.



Both Anthony Douglas and Baroness Tyler recognised the role the Open Board meetings play in achieving greater transparency and openness, and strengthening the service through the input of our stakeholders, the families we work with and the wider public.

Members of the Board and Cafcass staff set out how the organisation is looking to maintain and improve the quality of its services to children, giving examples of innovation in practice, in the most resourceful, creative and cost-effective way. Cafcass is required to open two of its Board meetings each financial year. Stakeholders were given the opportunity to probe the proposals and priorities with the Board and senior staff as the meeting progressed, making for a constructive and interactive session.

Members of the Board, including representatives from the FJYPB, and Cafcass' senior management team introduced Cafcass' five strategic priorities:

- **Influence**
- **Quality**
- **Family Justice Innovation**
- **Diversity**
- **Efficiency and effectiveness**

The following pages set out the key themes from the presentations on these priorities and discussions stemming from these.

Themes

I. Focussing on quality and outcomes to improve the child's experience

“Cafcass is in a position now where we have real recognition for the quality of work we do.”

Mary MacLeod, Deputy Chair of the Board

Mary MacLeod set out the emphasis Cafcass is placing on improving its capacity to identify and measure experiential outcomes for children. A short study of user experiences is being conducted. Cafcass is looking to develop practice models, such as its second Quality Account, which will set out the work done in 2014/15 to further improve the quality of Cafcass services.

Ursula Brennan, Permanent Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice, commended the idea of a Quality Account and asked how Cafcass would focus on the key indicators to ensure the best quality of service for children. In response, Mary MacLeod and Anthony Douglas confirmed that Cafcass will hone in on the areas of its work that affect quality outcomes, such as our teaching model of auditing and quality assurance and the Learning and Development programmes which provide a constant focus on continuous professional development.

Cafcass is also exploring whether analysing and assessing experiential outcomes is beneficial. Measures will vary - being able to gain a better understanding of the impact of abuse and neglect on children is important, for example, there is a differential impact on every child, and it is important to understand the ‘nuanced impact’ of abuse and neglect on each child.

2. Ensuring that the ‘golden thread’ aligns Cafcass and the focus remains on the best interest of the child

“We are agile. We manage resources in a tight budget, but with a demand in public and private law that we can’t always predict.”

Baroness Tyler

Baroness Tyler emphasised the importance of maintaining the alignment that exists in Cafcass between top level strategy and front line practice which allows staff to work effectively in the best interests of children. Ofsted referred to the ‘golden thread’ running through the organisation in their report of Cafcass in March 2014, in which Cafcass received Good with Outstanding Leadership.

Board member Kamaljit Singh told delegates that Cafcass must continue to strive to bring the uniqueness of each child to the court’s attention. Cafcass must also promote greater awareness of all dimensions of the child’s journey, encouraging a culture of urgency and a ‘team around the child.’ The need for venues for children and families that are accessible and family friendly was identified. Cafcass aims to strengthen front-line practice, investing in development and training, as well as using Diversity Ambassadors to promote equality and diversity in front-line practice.

3. Continuing to do more with less: being innovative in light of financial pressures

Referring to Cafcass’ forthcoming budget, Board member John Lakin reinforced that “we have to do more with less.” Cafcass is proud of the high percentage of funds invested in front line practice and will do its best to protect front line staff from future financial pressures.

Cafcass works to be resourceful with its money by investing heavily in technology. Family Court Advisers (FCAs) are provided with 4G enabled tablets to make their tasks with children and in court easier and quicker to carry out. There will be new IT procurement, and Cafcass is considering integrating more closely with IT systems used in the Ministry of Justice. Cafcass will continue to invest in its own staff, “growing its own future leaders.”

4. Responding to the changing face of private law

The Board and subsequent discussion identified that changes to legal aid provision have impacted on private law cases, requiring FCAs in some cases to spend longer in court, being asked by some self-represented parties about the court process, and judges becoming more inquisitorial. It was also recognised that there have been positive aspects: there is more in-court conciliation and FCAs are able to use their dispute resolution skills effectively.

Anthony Douglas highlighted that the court process exists to resolve the most serious issues that can only be solved by a judicial determination, and that going to court often escalates conflict between parents to the detriment of children. The changes have meant that Cafcass is working to help signpost dispute resolution services outside of the court, as well as undertaking commissioning and partnership work with other organisations. Christine Banim, National Director of Services, and Steve Hunt, Senior Head of Service, introduced the Supporting Separating Parents in Dispute pilot (SSPID)¹, a Cafcass initiative launched at the beginning of November 2014. The pilot offers two separate services to help parents who are in dispute with their ex-partner about arrangements for their children following divorce or separation, helping them to access information, guidance and support about the most appropriate dispute resolution pathways available to them. It also helps mediators who are working with families in dispute through a dedicated freephone telephone helpline.

Stakeholders noted the continued importance of ensuring there were sufficient safeguards built into any services after the pilot to identify children at risk. Cafcass acknowledged that the depth of problems parents present are often not readily apparent and agreed that a focus on safeguarding must be built into any initiative.

5. Beyond Cafcass: working within the wider family justice sector

Stakeholders identified that it is important that Cafcass works in collaboration with other organisations within the family justice sector. As a social work body that is recognised for its expertise, stakeholders and Board members both agreed that it is imperative that Cafcass shares its information and knowledge with others in the sector and helps to effectively signpost the services available to families. A relatively new stakeholder, Only Dads, indicated its willingness to collaborate with Cafcass where appropriate, an offer which was welcomed by Anthony Douglas.

Baroness Tyler acknowledged the opportunities afforded through the Ministry of Justice’s sponsorship, providing the opportunity to be involved in discussions that shape policy decisions and further enabling Cafcass to consider how it might operate effectively across the sector. Baroness Tyler said that Cafcass would consider this position proactively, looking to see if and how other areas and organisations do things differently, and whether Cafcass could add value to more organisations within the sector. Board member Francis Plowden proposed that Cafcass’ work to attain a ‘helicopter view’ of the whole family justice system, using its unique position and data to produce high impact and relevant research that can benefit everyone. He emphasised the importance of Cafcass making an active contribution to the family justice system.

Judith Masson from Bristol University suggested that Cafcass use its influence and knowledge to be able to work in advance of the social work cycle. The nature of social work is that practitioners have to respond quickly, and not being able to foresee could deflect from the work Cafcass does. In response, Anthony Douglas affirmed the idea of a mature partnership working across the board. It was recognised that this would also come as a challenge to local and national Family Justice Boards. As Chair of 10 of the 22 Justice Boards, Cafcass needs to be able to spot issues at the earliest stage possible.

¹ More information about SSPID can be found [here](#).

Board Members

Name

Nickie Aiken

Geoffrey Bush

Caroline Corby

John Lakin

Mary Macleod (**Deputy Chair**)

Francis Plowden

Honor Rhodes

Fay Selvan

Kamaljit Singh

Stuart Smith

Claire Tyler (**Chair of Cafcass Board**)

Attendees

Name

Organisation

Christine Banim

Cafcass

Nicola Blakebrough

Cafcass

Ursula Brennan

Ministry of Justice

Christine Casely

Cafcass

Melanie Carew

Cafcass

James Clark

Cafcass

Anthony Douglas

Cafcass

Duncan Fisher

Kids in the Middle

Ross Fisher

Cafcass

Kevin Gibbs

Cafcass

Amandeep Gill

Practical Law (Family)

Bob Grieg

Only Dads

Ann Haigh

NAGALRO

John Hall

Ministry of Justice

Steve Hunt

Cafcass

Fiona Ivits

Resolution

Colette Jacobs

Cafcass

Holly Jeapes

Cafcass

Nicola Jones-King

MW Solicitors

Judith Masson

Bristol University

Elizabeth Morrison

Cafcass

Linda Pow

Member of the Public

Arran Poyser

Ex-Chief Inspector for Cafcass 2001-2005

Angela Spilsbury

Department of International Development

Ruth Sutherland

Relate

Liz Trinder

Unveristy of Exeter

Two new members, Nickie Aiken and Caroline Corby, were welcomed to the Cafcass Board:

Nickie Aiken has been a Conservative Party councillor for the Warwick ward in Pimlico, London since 2006. She is a Cabinet Member for Public Protection and oversees the borough's relationship with the Metropolitan police, emergency planning, licensing, environmental, health and safety services. From 2010 to 2013, she was the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Community Protection and oversaw the merger of Westminster's children's services department with Hammersmith Fulham and Kensington Chelsea.

Caroline Corby worked in the City for 13 years specializing in private equity where she also served on a number of private sector boards across a range of industries. In 2007 she joined the Board of the London Probation Trust (LPT) and she served as chair of LPT from 2012 until July 2014. Caroline is a non-executive director of London North West Healthcare NHS Trust and the Criminal Cases Review Commission. She also chairs Fitness to Practice Panels for the Nursing and Midwifery Council.