



Cafcass Board, Open Meeting Minutes

Thursday 1 May 2025, 13.30 – 15.30

70 Gray's Inn Road, London

Present

Sally Cheshire, Chair
Eileen Munro, Board member and Deputy Chair
Catherine Doran, Board member
Dal Babu, Board member
Helen Jones, Board member
Mandy Jones, Board Member (attending virtually)
Peter Fish, Board member (Chair)
Rohan Sivanandan, Board member
Steven Cox, Board member
Keisha Wilson, Boardroom Apprentice

In attendance - Cafcass

Jacky Tiotto, Chief Executive Officer
Julie Brown, Director of Resources
Rehana Hanif, Deputy Director for Operations and Improvement
Gemma Gerrish, Deputy Director for Operations and Improvement
Sarah Parsons, Deputy Director Special Projects
Jen Skila, Chief People Officer
Julia Dark, Head of CEO Office
Merryn Hockaday, Head of Communications
Shabana Jaffar, Head of Legal Services
Helen Johnston, Assistant Director - Policy
Barry Tilzey, Assistant Director – Performance and Quality Assurance
Dawn Goodwin, Assistant Director – Principal Social Worker
Rebecca Dale, Senior Policy and Implementation Manager (observer)
Nicola Blakebrough, Corporate Manager (Secretariat Services)
Holly Earthey, Corporate Officer (Secretariat Services)
Peter Mitchell, Executive Assistant (CEO Office)

In attendance Ministry of Justice (MoJ)

Luke Taylor, MoJ

Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB)

Olivia, FJYPB representative

Apologies

Catharine Seddon, Board member

1. Introduction from the Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged that there were stakeholders and members of the public observing the meeting via Zoom. No questions had been received in advance of the meeting. Questions could be submitted after the meeting and these would receive a written response.

1.1 Welcome and apologies

Apologies were noted and that one Board member was attending the meeting remotely.

1.2 Declarations of interest

No new declarations of interest were received.

1.3 Minutes, actions and matters arising.

The minutes from the previous meeting held on 30 January 2025 were approved as an accurate record. The Board were satisfied with the completion of actions. There were no matters arising.

2. Family Justice Young People's Board Report

The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) representative reported on the work that had taken place since the last Board meeting on 30 January 2025.

The Safe Family Time Guide for mediators had been launched at the end of April. The FJYPB had also worked with Adoption England to create a film that highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships with birth families (only and if safe and in the best interests of the child). The film considered the benefits and challenges of making safe arrangements and would be released on 14 May.

The FJYPB had worked with Nuffield Family Justice Observatory to help create a 'Judges writing to children' toolkit, which hopefully would be used by Judges when sending letters to children and young people after their proceedings.

Representatives had attended the Central Family Court Annual Conference with the topic of 'children and young people are experts in how they experience the services across your area'. Members of the FJYPB had created the guide with support from chairs of Local Family Justice Board's (LFJBs) and the purpose had been to help LFJBs include the voices of local children and young people in their work.

A successful recruitment campaign had resulted in 14 new members joining and the FJYPB now had a total of 57 members. Diversity data of the membership was requested for a future meeting. The most recent meeting on 8 March 2025 had implemented a new 'buddies' system to make new members feel comfortable and welcomed whilst they settled into their new role.

The meeting also reviewed the current involvement that the FJYPB had in the Pathfinder pilot courts and it was advised they were assisting with guidance on writing the letter to children that was attached to the Child Impact Report. It was felt that letters to children had to be relationship based and sent at the right time for children to receive and Cafcass should consider developing a 'do no harm' attitude re this policy. It was questioned whether the pace of proceedings which concluded faster under the Pathfinder model could potentially move too fast for some age groups of children. The FJYPB representative responded that the priority was for children to not feel that their individual interactions with professionals had been rushed.

The Board suggested that domestic abuse should feature on the agenda for the upcoming Voice of the Child conference taking place on 31 July 2025 as it was important to ensure the whole system

was working towards improving outcomes for children where domestic abuse was a feature. This and the inclusion of the Pathfinder model would be considered at the next planning meeting.

A workshop on the current practice quality standards which should be followed during the children's complaints process had also taken place during the March meeting. Members of the FJYPB had commented on the current processes and provided thoughts and ideas on what else should be considered. Overall, the FJYPB supported the practice quality standards and that they met expectations.

The Chair thanked and recognised the FJYPB for their important work.

Action 1: The FJYPB to provide diversity data of current members at a future meeting.

3. Chief Executive Officer's Report

The Chief Executive introduced the report and noted that contribution would be provided by members of the Corporate Management Team.

Part 1: Demand, performance and operational practice:

Quarter 4, 2024-25

The Chief Executive reported that there had been 55,377 new children's cases featuring 85,272 children from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025, which equated to a small 0.3% decrease in demand. The ordering of Section 7 reports and addendum reports in private law was on a downward trend but regional variation remained with both court culture and the rollout of the Pathfinder pilot influencing the variation.

Family Justice System Objective One: Ensure children and families have timely outcomes

It was positively reported that in the last year there had been a 25.4% decrease (2,767 children) in proceedings lasting more than 52 weeks. However, there were still 8,143 children whose cases had been open for 52 weeks, of which 2,195 children had been in proceedings for 100 weeks or longer.

In the period 1 October to 31 December 2024, 34.6% of section 31 care proceedings in public law had concluded within 26 weeks, which was a positive improvement with proceedings now lasting 39 weeks on average. In the same period in private law, where proceedings concluded at the first hearing, the average duration was 10 weeks and where further work was ordered at the first hearing the average duration of proceedings was 55 weeks. It was reiterated that Cafcass were not involved in children's cases for the whole duration of proceedings.

The average report filing time in public law was 9.2 weeks, in private law for the filing of safeguarding letters this was 4.1 weeks and in private law for the filing of Section 7 reports this was 14.6 weeks. Based on Cafcass filing times it was queried why proceedings could take up to 55 weeks to conclude. The MOJ representative confirmed that there were variations in court handling and the ordering of fact findings would increase the duration.

It was noted that the extension rate of Section 7 reports beyond the first agreed filing date was 29.8%. It was questioned what percentage of the extension rate was due to the late receipt of court orders, which impacted Cafcass' ability to complete work and adhere to the filing date. It was agreed that the Deputy Director for Operations and Improvement (GG) would investigate. It was suggested that a 'heat map' be provided to the Board which could visually map data across geographical areas to highlight regional variation.

The MOJ representative confirmed that the data dashboard was made available to all family justice partners. Administrative systems had been through a process of improvement to consolidate data sets, however it was recognised that further improvement was needed on the use of data.

Family Justice System Objective Two: Ensure the family justice system runs efficiently with the resources available

At the end of March 2025, the overall number of open children's cases had reduced by 9.0% compared to the end of March 2024. This represented a reduction of 7.0% for open public law children's cases and a reduction of 10.3% in private law children's cases. The turnover of social work staff was stable at 15.1%. Caseloads had reduced and only 4.3% of Family Court Advisers had over 25 children's cases but there was regional variation across the country.

Family Justice System Objective Three: Improve the experiences of children and families in proceedings

At the end of March 2025, 97% of eligible children had a completed child engagement record, with 93% seen in person. Personalised letters of introduction to children and the sharing of recommendations with children had increased across both public and private law. These were positive improvements that demonstrated respect for children involved in proceedings and Cafcass ensuring the child understood the decisions being made.

In the year to date Cafcass had received 5,211 reflections (feedback) from children and families through audit or the Digital Feedback system. 55.7% were positive. Feedback from families describing experiences that were less than good were shared with local managers for follow up. Learning from complaints and feedback often related to children's cases where domestic abuse was a factor.

London Family Strategy

The Deputy Director for Operations and Improvement (GG) shared Cafcass' proposals for the London Family Strategy with key priorities that focused on reducing delay for children; public law practice; private law practice; and workforce. Whilst these were Cafcass' priorities there would be a coordinated approach including the support from Local Family Justice Boards to assess the culture around repeat assessments. Children in London experienced the longest delay in the country, and this needed a specific and bespoke approach. It would then be assessed whether aspects of the approach could be replicated in other parts of England to assist with further reducing delay.

System wide issues were recognised and it was suggested that when identifying reasons for delay the quantity and quality of ineffective hearings should be investigated. It was noted that repeat assessments caused delay and the Board queried whether Cafcass were regularly undertaking repeat assessments and whether it challenged the local authority in this area. It was confirmed that Cafcass' worked to the Public Law Outline and that independent assessments should be undertaken by exception only. The Public Law Improvement Programme was focusing on this area and this would be made more transparent in the programme.

The MOJ representative confirmed that the local authorities were involved in developing the London Family strategy and that a further event was being planned to engage all partners. It was questioned whether the sharing of police information with local authorities and vice versa was also contributing to delay and that this should be considered in the London Strategy.

Action 2: The Deputy Director for Operations and Improvement (GG) to investigate the percentage of extension rates that are due to the late receipt of the court order.

Action 3: The Public Law Improvement Programme would be updated to ensure it was transparent on its focus on targeting unnecessary use of experts and that independent assessment should be undertaken by exception only.

Part 2: And in other news

Accountability - Review of annual performance board process

Revisions had been made to the Annual Regional Performance Board format and these would be implemented from July 2025 onwards. The purpose of the revised format was for regions to provide a clearer account of progress throughout the year and make more visible what isn't working in the region in order to set specific actions. The FJYPB representative supported the changes saying that currently Cafcass was stronger in setting out what was working rather than how it would do better and the changes would help demonstrate the latter.

Domestic abuse: Improvement priorities, partnership and practice expertise with survivors

Improvement objectives and improvement activities were presented which included the continuation of the dedicated Domestic Abuse Practice Reference Group and the secondment of SafeLives colleagues who brought essential expertise that helped shape the programme. It was confirmed that partners had contributed to the eight annual regional domestic abuse conferences.

The Board queried how Cafcass were working with partners to make sure recommendations on domestic abuse were understood. It was confirmed that there were various fora to meet with both national and local partners. The Chief Executive reported that Cafcass were focused on how to assist partners in becoming experts in Practice Direction 12J and were working with the judicial lead to develop training. However, due to limited resources Cafcass would not be delivering training to everyone across the family justice system.

Practice Quality Audit - the effectiveness of practice in public and private law proceedings

The National Improvement Service had undertaken an audit of 200 children's cases in December 2024. The audit had graded 72.5% (145 records) good or outstanding, 21.5% (43 records) requiring improvement and 6% (12 records) inadequate. Despite the continuing operational system challenges in many parts of England, the audit outcome was broadly stable with a small decrease of 1.5 percentage points (three records) in work being graded good or outstanding and a fall of 1 percentage point in the number of inadequately graded records (14 records). The next steps following the audit included a further specific local audit of work to first hearing cases in each of the 8 regions.

Part 3: People & Workforce

Workforce: overview and update Q4, 2024-25

The permanent headcount of employed staff had remained relatively static across the organisation, during quarter 4 of 2024 there had been a focused national campaign to attract candidates to the hardest to recruit areas in which over 60 offers of employment had been made. Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk had experienced the highest turnover of staff (28.2%, March 2025). Social work 3-month average working days lost (AWDL) due to sickness had further reduced to 12.1 days as of 31 March 2025, from 13.9 days (3-month AWDL) in March 2024.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Priorities 2025-26

The future Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy would be aligned to the development of the new Cafcass strategic plan for 2026/2029, so that the approach fully supported the Cafcass priorities for children and families, as well as the wider people agenda. The approach continued to incorporate all protected characteristics and would be complemented with nine specific priorities for 2025/2026. The plan was shared with all staff during a Leadership Live event that took place on 23 April 2025.

Colleague Survey Headlines

The focused colleague survey had completed in December 2024; there had been a 63.9% (1,416 colleagues) response rate which was lower than the previous year of 84% (1,782 colleagues) in 2023. A 'think in' session would take place with colleagues to better understand the barriers or challenges in responding to the survey. The survey had received mainly positive responses, the lower scoring themes were the pace of change and experiencing threatening behaviour from an adult or child involved with Cafcass. Four priorities for the year ahead had been identified: workloads and well-being; managing and leading change; responding to threatening or intimidating behaviour by

adults in family court proceedings; and connection in teams and the visibility of leaders and managers.

The response to unacceptable behaviour from the public towards staff was a prominent issue and being taken extremely seriously. New office posters had been developed and amendments made to the recorded message for the call centre as an initial step. Work was also taking place with the Ministry of Justice regarding the 'Potentially Violent Persons Protocol' and with HMCTS for training at court. The Board was pleased that Cafcass were taking the issues of unacceptable behaviour towards staff and the safety of staff seriously and supported the link between adult family member intimidation and the welfare of children who were in contact with this individual.

The Board asked for observations on the maturity and efficacy of development programmes to support leadership and managers and were informed that there was a comprehensive offer in place to attend to immediate challenges. However, looking further ahead there was a requirement to remap and ensure there was a simplified framework to support leadership development. The Chair agreed that there was a balance to ensuring that leaders and managers could balance emotional intelligence with securing assurance and compliance with policies. It was suggested that the Board return to the topic at a future meeting.

Part 4: Priorities in the next period

Improving children's experiences in private law proceedings – Pathfinder court update

The Pathfinder pilot would launch in West Yorkshire on 3 June 2025 with further expansion planned from Birmingham across the West Midlands and from Dorset to Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The pilot had launched in Birmingham on 27 May 2024 and since then 810 families had experienced the Pathfinder model. Key findings from the pilots so far were being analysed by the Cafcass project team, working closely with the Ministry of Justice. Learning was derived from child and family feedback, from operational teams and from Cafcass data which assisted in identifying the benefits and challenges of the model.

Guidance with local authorities

Cafcass had developed guidance with the Association of Directors of Children's Services on when the independent advice of the child's guardian and the assessment by the local authority about the safety and best interests of the child were fundamentally different. The guidance had been developed based on learning in Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews - to enable fundamental differences in care plans between a children's guardian and a local authority social worker to be explained to the court. It remained for the court to decide what was safe and in the best interests of the child. Once the guidance was approved this would be published on 2 June 2025 with a plan for shared promotion through Cafcass and Association of Directors of Children's Services networks.

Partner overview

Cafcass had hosted a webinar on 28 January 2025 to share the revised guidance on 'understanding why a child does not want to spend time with a parent' and the reissued Domestic Abuse Practice Policy. The revised guidance would be published in June 2025 once partner feedback had been completed. An evaluation of the revised Domestic Abuse Practice Policy (released in January 2025) would take place in July 2025. HMCT's private law portal had been extended to two further courts.

Ambitious for Children: Mid-way strategic plan review

The mid-way strategic plan report would be published at the end of May 2025 and focus on the priorities for year 3 of the strategic plan as well as what had been achieved in the first two years of the strategic plan. There were three priorities for each pillar of the strategic plan – practice, people and partners.

4. Reports from Committees

People Committee

The Committee had last met on 9 December 2024 and an update had been provided at the Board meeting held on 30 January 2025. The next scheduled People Committee meeting would take place on Thursday 15 May 2025 and an update provided at the Board meeting taking place on 17 July 2025.

Performance and Quality Committee.

The Committee had last met on 20 March 2025 and had discussed the Strategic Progress Report which included the highlight reports on the practice pillar, the practice reference group and the private and public law improvement programmes. The Committee also received a report on feedback and learning and the performance and quality data set. Discussion included the transfer of learning into practice and the importance of case recording.

Private Law Improvement Programme Sub-Committee

The Committee had last met on 3 April 2025 and discussed the progress report and a deep dive into workstream 2, 16A risk assessments. The next meeting would take place on 29 May 2025 and the deep dive topic would be on workstream 6, practice aids.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

The Committee had last met on 13 March 2025 and had discussed strategic risks and had received an update on the new strategic work programme for health, safety and security. An update on counter fraud had been received along with updates from GIAA on the internal audit programme.

5. Governance Reports

5.1. Finance Report

The Board noted the finance report and the provisional outturn for the financial year 2024-25. The Spending Review had not yet been confirmed.

5.2. Risk Report

There had been no substantial change to the risk environment which remained high with Pathfinder deemed a fundamental risk. Risk had been discussed throughout the meeting.

6. Close and any other business

The Chair thanked attendees and observers. The next meeting would take place on Thursday 1 May 2025.

Minutes approved by the Board Chair, Sally Cheshire, 17.07.2025

