



Cafcass Board, Open Meeting Minutes

Thursday 17 July 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
Catharine Seddon, Board member
Dal Babu, Board member (until 14.30)
Helen Jones, Board member
Mandy Jones, Board Member
Peter Fish, Board member
Rohan Sivanandan, Board member
Steven Cox, Board member

In attendance - Cafcass

Barry Tilzey, Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance)
Clare Mayne, Assistant Director
Dawn Goodwin, Assistant Director (Principal Social Worker)
Helen Johnston, Assistant Director (Policy)
Holly Earthey, Corporate Officer (Secretariat Services)
Jacky Tiotto, Chief Executive Officer
Jen Skila, Chief People Officer
Julia Dark, Head of CEO Office
Julie Brown, Director of Resources
Lisa Pascoe, Assistant Director
Nicola Blakebrough, Corporate Manager (Secretariat Services)
Sarah Parsons, Deputy Director Special Projects
Shabana Jaffar, Head of Legal Services
Sophie Kershaw, Assistant Director (Strategic Programme Development and Change)

In attendance Ministry of Justice (MoJ)

Luke Taylor, MoJ

Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB)

Chidinma, FJYPB representative
Leona, FJYPB support officer

Apologies

Gemma Gerrish, Deputy Director for Operations and Improvement
Keisha Wilson, Boardroom Apprentice
Merryn Hockaday, Head of Communications
Rehana Hanif, Deputy Director for Operations and Improvement
Theresa Leavy, National Director of Operations

1. Introduction from the Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged that there were stakeholders 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.

1.2 Declarations of interest

No new declarations of interest were received.

1.3 Minutes, actions and matters arising.

A Board member requested that a clarification was made to the minutes from the meeting held on Thursday 1 May 2025 to confirm whether the comparison of the social work 3-month average working days lost due to sickness between March 2024 and March 2025 reflected the rolling year or the three months. It was confirmed that the data reflected the annualised figure¹ and the minutes would be amended. The Board were satisfied with the completion/progress of actions. There were no matters arising.

Action 1: A correction to be made to the May minutes and the wording for average working days lost to reflect that data was for a rolling year not the last three months.

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 1 May 2025.

A more detailed breakdown of the membership of the FJYPB including equality, diversity and inclusion data and geographical location was provided as requested at the last Board meeting. The recent recruitment campaign had seen new members join who had public law experience and this would continue to be a focus in future recruitment campaigns.

Recent work included providing feedback to the Cafcass Pathfinder team on the letters and information packs that were to be shared with children and young people involved in the Pathfinder courts. Two members had assisted in creating a film with Adoption England, which highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships with birth families and significant others following adoption, as long as these relationships were safe and in the best interests of the child. The film had been launched in May 2025.

The annual Voice of the Child Conference would take place on Thursday 31 July 2025 and was titled 'Empowering Me for My Future'. Members of the FJYPB had met in Leeds in April to plan the event. So far 872 attendees had registered to attend and the Chief Executive would be one of the panel members attending the day. The agenda for the conference would be shared with the Board.

The planning event had also enabled new members to get to know each other and the 'buddy' system for newer members was welcomed. Whilst there were currently no plans for a follow up on the 'In My Shoes' book new members of the FJYPB continued to have opportunities to share their personal experiences at events such as the Voice of the Child Conference.

¹ The 3-month annual working days lost is the annualised working days lost due to sickness in the 3 month period divided by the average employed headcount in the 3 month period.

Members of the FJYPB would be providing the voiceover for the next film in the 'Taking Me Seriously' series. The animation was created alongside the voices of those from the FJYPB providing a personal and 'real' touch.

The work of the FJYPB was commended.

Action 2: The Voice of the Child Conference agenda to be shared with the Board.

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:

Performance – 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

The Chief Executive reported that there had been a decrease of 4,931 children in open proceedings to Cafcass during 2024-2025 but there had still been 132,416 children in open proceedings which was a significant number. 35% of these children were aged under 5 years old across public and private law and 1 in 5 children were aged under 1 years old in public law.

There had been 55,377 new children's cases featuring 85,272 children across private law and public law. On average Section 31 Care and Supervision proceedings in public law had a duration of 40 weeks. In private law Work To First Hearing average duration was 11 weeks and in private law Work After First Hearing it was 55 weeks. The Board were reminded that Cafcass were not involved in children's cases for the whole duration of proceedings and the average filing times were reported: 9.2 weeks in public law; 4.1 weeks to file a safeguarding letter in Work To First Hearing; and 14.5 weeks to file a Section 7 report in Work After First Hearing. There had been a 6.1% reduction from the previous year of Section 7 reports being extended beyond the first agreed filing date and this now stood at 29.8%.

On average 221 new children's cases were received per working day. The average social work caseload (adjusted for Full Time Equivalent) at the end of March 2025, was 18.2 for long-term teams (compared to 18.8 in March 2024). For Work To First Hearing teams in private law, the average was 32.4 (compared to 37.0 in March 2024).

Children with mixed heritage were 2.5 times more likely to be in public or private law proceedings than were represented in the national population (10.6% in proceedings compared to the population of 4.3%) and this needed further exploration and understanding. It was agreed that a further breakdown would be provided at the next Board meeting to include by region and census category.

Action 3: To provide further information about the heritage of children in proceedings to include by region and census category.

Quality and Impact

The Chief Executive informed the Board that three national Practice Quality Audits were undertaken annually and the audits that had taken place in 2024-25 were Public Law and commitments to Public Law Outline (June 2024); Public and Private Law (January 2025); and Domestic Abuse in Public and Private Law and the impact of the Domestic Abuse Practice Policy (March 2025). In addition, 8 Regional Performance Boards and a National Management Quality audit had taken place. Through these audits the National Improvement Service had judged that 73.1% of work was good or outstanding and 4.5% of work was inadequate which is a positive improvement, especially when set against the 15% turnover of staff. The figures reported were national figures and it was

acknowledged that regional variation existed. Themes in effective and inadequate work had been identified and concerted action was being taken.

Information received from local authorities and the police as well as 'reported' information including previous applications and proceedings had to be considered under policy. The policy also included information received from grandparents and wider family members. For adults applying for contact or having contact with a child when they had served a prison sentence, had a conviction or were currently being investigated for a violent or sexual offence this had to be considered within the assessment, and the adult was assumed to be a risk to the child. There would be mandatory training on Practice Direction 12J where domestic abuse was a factor as the complexity of assessments was recognised and the sensitivity required when approaching these types of assessments. The speediness in which proceedings took place under Pathfinder (40 days) and the complexity of cases meant this needed careful consideration. It was noted that not all agencies considered/understood domestic abuse and the impact it had to the same standard as Cafcass.

4,630 Quality and Impact Audits were completed by managers of which 56% were undertaken collaboratively (6% above Cafcass' required standard). Currently these audits were not graded unless the work was judged to be inadequate, however, local grading was being considered for reintroduction. Whilst regional variation existed there were overarching practice quality standards which practitioners were expected to follow with local leadership following up on those not adhering to the standards.

Learning from practice alerts

The Assistant Director (Principal Social Worker) advised that three practice alerts had been issued between March 2024 and March 2025. Practice alerts were shared with all social workers when there was learning from significant incidents involving children. The themes were: (1) The use in assessments of the background, records and reported behaviours of potential carers; (2) Domestic abuse practice in private law proceedings and application of Practice Direction 12J; and (3) Domestic Abuse Practice Policy and use of Section 16A of the Children Act 1989. Learning and the learning from feedback was shared with the Performance and Quality Committee at each quarterly meeting, the format of the report was currently under review to ensure this was succinct to highlight the most important learning.

National practice and leadership priorities

The Chief Executive advised that the 10 new/adjusted improvement priorities would be included in both the Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25 as well as the self-evaluation that had been submitted to Ofsted. There were 5 priorities for practice: (1) seeing and engaging with children; (2) the nature and impact of domestic abuse on children; (3) the impact of a child's uniqueness; (4) effective use of the Assessment and Child's Plan; and (5) reducing delay for children.

There was discussion around the use of court-appointed experts impacting on delay for children (when an expert was recommended, this increased the length of proceedings) and the usefulness of advice provided by experts especially when they were unregulated. It was acknowledged that the use of unregulated experts had reduced, however, the appropriateness of an expert being appointed still needed to be considered within proceedings due to the delay that could result.

There were also 5 priorities for leadership: (1) consistent use of 'Together with Children and Families'; (2) effective management support, supervision and oversight; (3) seeking and learning from feedback; (4) evidencing the positive impact of leaders on children and families; and (5) evidencing the understanding of performance and quality of practice.

London Family Strategy

The Chief Executive advised that the London Family Strategy was a response to the MoJ making London an area of focus due to the specific challenges in the area which were cross-system wide. Cafcass had outlined their own four priorities in relation to this. The first priority – reducing delay for children – included the launch of a case progression pilot, which would be expanded further if

successful. Priority 2 – public law – included the launch of joint guidance with the Association of Directors for Children Services (ADCS) for when there were fundamental differences between the views of the Children’s Guardian and the local authority social worker on the child’s care plan, which had been devised as a result from learning. Priority 3 – Private law – included the introduction of an additional Assistant Director in the area and reducing delay for children in Rule 16.4 appointments (where the child was joined to proceedings as a party), as they experienced the most significant delay. Priority 4 – Workforce – focused on recruitment and the significant number of vacancies within London teams. It was acknowledged that there were a significant number of vacancies across the family justice system and not just within Cafcass.

Part 2: And in other news

Domestic Abuse: Practice quality audit 2025

The Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) reported more detail on the fifth annual Domestic Abuse Practice Quality Audit, which had taken place in March 2025. The audit had considered 240 children’s records (407 children) where domestic abuse was a factor and the audit had included both private and public law cases. It was important to note that the work audited was after the initial release of the Domestic Abuse Practice Policy in November 2024 (later revised in January 2025) and therefore the early impact of the policy could be seen. Areas of strong practice identified in the audits included: engagement with children (through visits, personalised letters etc); assessments involving information from a range of professionals (in addition to the police and local authorities); appropriate use of trauma-informed language (using the victim’s own words); court reports describing children’s experiences; effective use of Practice Direction 12J and 16A risk assessments; and the appropriate use of safeguarding referrals to local authorities.

Areas of improvement identified included further sharing of information (including with local authorities); consideration of past histories and explaining recommendations to children where they differed with their wishes and feelings. Domestic abuse training had been widely rolled out across Cafcass and there would be further emphasis on this as well as strengthening the use of the Domestic Abuse Champions.

Reporting improvement: Corporate and Business Services

The Director of Resources advised the first Corporate and Business Services Performance Board had taken place on 10 June 2025 to align to the operational accountability cycle that was already in place. Due to the number of professions/functions within Corporate and Business Services the first Performance Board had specifically focused on the performance of IT, Policy, Research and Library and the National Commissioning Team. It was noted that each function had its own unique footprint of how quality and impact could be measured. The Performance Board had assessed the progress of the improvement priorities. The implementation of effective in-person working arrangements/requirements (office attendance) were still under consultation. The Board questioned the improvement priority that focused on innovation and whether this referred to the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). It was confirmed that the use of AI was being considered for practice staff as well as Corporate and Business Services staff and applications/programmes such as Scribe (which assisted with drawing out unique information about the child to help develop personalised letters) were underway. The format of the Corporate and Business Services Performance Board would be reviewed and developed further.

Annual Recognition Awards

The Chief People Officer advised that the third annual recognition awards event had taken place in June and had been hosted in person. There were 11 award categories which covered both individual and team awards. There had been 151 nominations, and 32 monthly nomination winners considered against the award categories. The Chair thanked Board member Rohan Sivanandan (Chair of the People Committee) for his involvement in the winner selections and Board member Dal Babu who had attended the event on behalf of the Board. The Chair congratulated both the nominees and awards winners.

Part 3: People and Workforce

Workforce priorities: Overview and update

The Chief People Officer reported that the permanent workforce count had remained static and the use of locum workers was stable, however, there was significant regional variation. The 12-month social work turnover (2024-25) remained similar year on year at 15.1%. Work was taking place to further understand the vacancy position and the baseline resourcing required across each of the 19 Operational Service Areas so that targeted recruitment campaigns could take place in the areas most in need. As of 30 June 2025, there had been a small increase in the 3-month average working days lost due to sickness which stood at 12.4 days. A Board member had submitted a written question (due to absence from the meeting) on how Cafcass ensured that managers were equipped to deal with supporting staff on short- and long-term absence. Actions to further strengthen the management of sickness absence were being implemented.

Workforce: Developing social work leaders

During 2023-2024, the social work manager headcount increased by 144 posts to 284 posts and during 2024-2025, it increased by a further 26 posts to 310 posts. This included the introduction of the Assistant Service Manager role that had come into effect in April 2023.

A key priority for 2025/2026 would be to embed the leadership and management quality standards to maximise the quality and effectiveness of leadership for the organisation. The annual leadership conference would take place in February 2026. Further leadership development activity was taking place including leadership/training programmes for new Assistant Directors in post and Heads of Practice aspiring to an Assistant Director role.

Part 4: Priorities in the next period

Improving children's experiences in private law proceedings: Challenges and opportunities in private law reform (pathfinder courts)

The Deputy Director Special Projects was leading the Pathfinder project and explained that a key change in the Pathfinder model affected Work To First Hearing teams in which a safeguarding letter would no longer be required as a Child Impact Report would be ordered instead. First Hearing Dispute Resolution Appointments (FHDRAs) would also no longer take place under the change.

Cafcass were working closely with the MoJ to highlight challenges for the organisation. If Cafcass were required to see up to 80% of children, then an additional 230 Family Court Advisers would be required. This would be in addition to the already existing and substantial vacancy rate and was a key concern for national implementation. There was further uncertainty in that a funding allocation for the further roll out of Pathfinder had not yet been decided and would not be advised until Spring 2026. A transformative capacity at senior/leadership level across the infrastructure of Cafcass would be required to implement the programme alongside Cafcass' continued commitments and improvement priorities. There were also concerns around consistency and the culture change required across the system as variations in different judicial areas had already been observed. This would make a national rollout with a consistent quality of practice extremely difficult to achieve.

The purpose of Pathfinder was to improve the experiences of children and adults who were victims of domestic abuse, however, a full understanding of the impact via evaluation had yet to take place. The opportunities/benefits of Pathfinder were recognised including that Pathfinder was reducing delay for children and families and there was more continuity for families. However, without the full understanding that risks and challenges fell disproportionately on Cafcass and without absolute clarity about the mitigations, Cafcass' reputation and its ability to deliver services to children were likely to be compromised. The Chair summarised that, whilst we were a proactive partner in family justice with regard to Pathfinder, there was uncertainty around the funding, the number of social workers required, the impact of judicial culture and that Cafcass held the greatest risk.

Ambitious for Children Week – our intentions

The Assistant Director (Principal Social Worker) advised that Ambitious for Children Week (previously known as Practice Week) would be taking place from 25 September to 1 October 2025 and was the fifth annual learning and development event for all colleagues across the organisation. There were 41 sessions for practice staff and 39 sessions for corporate and business services staff timetabled for the week. Themes of learning would cover: strengthening practice in safeguarding and the assessment of risk and harm, including domestic abuse; embedding quality and reflective practice; leadership for impact and accountability; and celebrating the voices and experiences of children. Board members were invited to attend sessions.

Training and development – Using practice direction 12J in family court proceedings

Specialist training on Practice Direction 12J was being developed externally. The purpose was to set out what the Family Court or the High Court were required to do in any case in which it was alleged or admitted, or there was other reason to believe, that the child or a party had experienced domestic abuse perpetrated by another party or that there was a risk of such abuse. There would be four modules as part of the training and this would be launched during Ambitious for Children Week.

4. Reports from Committees

Performance and Quality Committee

The Committee had last met on 12 June 2025 and received an update on Pathfinder but with specific reference to the quality of practice under the pilot and importance of consistency in practice. The Committee received and discussed the Strategic Progress Reports on the Practice pillar, Public Law Improvement Programme (PLIP), Private Law Improvement Programme (PrLIP) and the domestic abuse improvement programme. Following discussions the Feedback and Learning Report was in the process of being reviewed to be further streamlined for the Committee.

It was noted that the Private Law Improvement Programme sub-committee meeting, which was due to take place on 29 May 2025, had been cancelled due to staff absence. Questions had been submitted in advance of the meeting and a response shared.

People Committee

The Committee had last met on 9 June 2025 and had received an update on the year 3 people priorities for 2025-26 (under the strategic plan) as well as the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy. Health and safety was discussed including the updated guidance on managing unacceptable behaviour. The colleague survey results were also addressed with the four key priorities that had been identified.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

The Committee had last met on 5 June 2025. Items discussed included the risk report and risk in regard to the flexible workforce, and the annual business assurance report. The Annual Report and Accounts cycle for 2024-25 had begun and the Committee also received a presentation from the National Audit Office following the publication of their report on improving family court services for children.

5. Governance Reports

5.1 Finance

The Director of Resources advised that Cafcass were still awaiting the formal budget delegation but were proceeding under authority to spend. There had been an uplift in spending but this reflected the budget for the civil service pay award funding. An overspend was not currently forecast for the financial year.

5.2 Risk

The Chair noted that key risk headlines had been covered in the CEO presentation.

5.3 People

The Chair noted that key headlines had been covered in the CEO presentation.

6. Close and Any Other Business

The Chair informed the Board that there was an ongoing recruitment process to replace those Board members whose tenure would end in 2025/2026.

Board member Rohan Sivanandan was attending his last Board meeting in person as his appointment was due to end in December 2025. The Chair and Chief Executive thanked him for his contribution to the Board and Committees.

The Chair invited the FJYPB to provide feedback on their attendance at the meeting.

The Chair thanked attendees and observers. The next Board meeting would take place on Thursday 23 October 2025.

Action summary

- Action 1: A correction to be made to the May minutes and the wording for average working days lost to reflect that data was for a rolling year not the last three months.
- Action 2: The Voice of the Child Conference agenda to be shared with the Board
- Action 3: To provide further information about the heritage of children in proceedings to include by region and census category.

Minutes approved by the Board Chair, Sally Cheshire, 10.11.25

