



Cafcass Board Open Meeting Minutes
Thursday 30 April 2026, 13.30 to 15.30
70 Gray's Inn Road, London

Present

Sally Cheshire, Chair
Catherine Doran, Board member
Catharine Seddon, Board member
Dal Babu, Board member
Eileen Munro, Board member and Deputy Chair
Helen Jones, Board member
Helen Osborn, co-opted Board member
Jenny Coles, Board member
Mandy Jones, Board member (remotely)
Natalie Trentham, Board member
Peter Fish, Board member
Steven Cox, Board member

Cafcass in person

Barry Tilzey, Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance)
Clare Mayne, Assistant Director -with additional responsibilities
Gemma Hewison, National Director of Operations
Helen Lee, Head of Practice - FJYPB
Holly Earthey, Corporate Officer (Secretariat Services)
Jacky Tiotto, Chief Executive Officer
Julia Dark, Head of CEO Office
Julie Brown, Director of Resources
Michelle Evans, Assistant Director -with additional responsibilities
Nicola Blakebrough, Corporate Manager (Secretariat Services)
Rebecca Anderson, Head of Programmes and Change
Theresa Leavy, National Director Private Law Reform

FJYPB and Ministry of Justice (MoJ)

Nixie, FJYPB representative
Luke Taylor, MoJ representative

Cafcass - remote

Amanda Flower, Learning and Improvement Programme Lead
Dawn Goodwin, Assistant Director (Principal Social Worker)
Helen Johnston, Assistant Director (Policy)
Jen Skila, Chief People Officer
Merryn Hockaday, Head of Communications
Shabana Jaffar, Head of Legal Services

Apologies

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.

The Chair acknowledged that this was her last Board meeting as well as Board members Catherine Doran and Mandy Jones, and these appointments would end on 13 May 2026. Professor Eileen Munro was the current Deputy Chair and would cover Chair responsibilities whilst the recruitment campaign for a permanent Chair continued.

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

The minutes from the previous meeting held on 29 January 2026 were approved as an accurate record. There were no formal actions recorded at the previous meeting.

2. Family Justice Young People's Board update

The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) representative presented the update highlighting the current priorities. The new "In My Words" tool would replace "How It Looks to Me", with members taking part in workshops to shape how it looked and felt for children and young people. They also described thinking about where children were seen, including ideas for community settings rather than offices.

The FJYPB had begun reviewing their "top tip" guides for professionals to ensure they remained current, accurate and reflective of children and young people's experiences. Guides under review included working with siblings, guides for teachers and guides for sharing recommendations. Work had taken place on the complaints process to discuss clear language so that children's complaints responses used a tone and words that children could understand and engage with.

The recent FJYPB meeting had been attended by senior Cafcass colleagues and discussed delays in the family courts as well as exploring how children could be safe and understood during proceedings. Members had helped to define success measures for private law reforms. The FJYPB advised that members felt heard, included and supported, and that members had showcased the impact they had made. It was recognised that FJYPB insight helped to shape strategic priorities across Cafcass. The Chair noted that the FJYPB continued to play an active role across the organisation, including attending Assistant Director meetings, contributing to work on domestic abuse, regional performance boards and service improvements, and presenting to the Cafcass Board. The Chair said she was proud that the FJYPB were now "front and centre" in everything looked at in terms of policy or practice. There was discussion about recognising the work of FJYPB

members in references and applications. It was confirmed that members wrote about their work and skills and were supported by Cafcass in doing this.

The FJYPB had recently met with the Children's Social Care Advisory Board, and in February members had joined a Family Justice Strategy roundtable where they set out their 2025 challenge again and further questions such as "how can you know what is best for us if you do not ask, do not track, and do not follow us where we go".

The FJYPB had attended the Family Justice Council Conference, where they shared views on technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI). The key message was that technology, and AI should make the family justice system feel more human and not less human, and that every child deserved to understand what was happening, to feel seen, heard, listened to and supported and "not just processed".

It was advised that the FJYPB's Voice of the Child Conference 2025 challenge "why don't you know our whole journey" had been sent to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Department for Education (DfE), His Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS), Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru and the President of the Family Division, and responses were being received. Members had provided feedback on language and "word busting" work, focusing on kind and child-focused language across practice, complaints, reports and national guidance. FJYPB videos on "word busting" were introduced which explained in a very adult-centred system, technical or insensitive language can make children feel invisible, so changing how people speak and write can directly change children's experiences. The Chief Executive recognised the importance of this and Cafcass' commitment to child-focused language was a priority. The Chief Executive invited the FJYPB to bring suggested difficult words and proposed alternatives to the Corporate Management Team to discuss further.

The Chair thanked the FJYPB members and support team for their hard work. It was advised that the next Voice of the Child Conference would take place on Wednesday 29 July 2026 focusing on children's rights and planning had already commenced.

Action 1: The FJYPB to attend a Corporate Management Team meeting to further discuss 'word busting'.

3. Chief Executive Officer and Corporate Management Team Report

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

Part 1 – Demand, performance and operational practice

Demand and performance headlines – Overview 2025/2026

The Chief Executive reported that there had been an overall increase of 7.2% in demand from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. This equated to an additional 3,982 children's cases / 6,018 children compared to the previous year. Public law had seen a 4.7% increase in demand – 769 children's cases / 1,284 children - and private law had seen an 8.2% increase in demand – 3,213 children's cases / 4,734 children. There had been an increase of 22% in deprivation of liberty applications – 267 applications / 265 children - and these applications were some of the most complex. It was noted that the demand increases varied across the country/teams/individuals with the largest demand rises in A10 (Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Rutland) at 15.0% and A17

(Kent) at 13.4%. On average Cafcass received 234 new children's cases per day from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

As of 31 March 2026, Cafcass had 29,313 open children's cases featuring 46,501 children. Social work caseloads in longer term teams (public law and Work After First Hearing in private law) had reduced from 18 at the end of March 2025 to 17.6 at the end of March 2026. However, due to the increase in demand in private law this work currently sat with the Work To First Hearing teams whose caseloads had increased from 31.2 in March 2025 to 34.4 in March 2026. It was recognised that caseloads varied across the country.

Both national and local auditing of work took place. In the last 3 months, 1,063 local audits were completed with 91.1% of eligible Family Court Advisers (FCAs) having at least one local case file audit. 79.3% of the 876 national audits completed in the year were graded as good or better. 5,319 case file audits (comprising of national and local quality assurance audits) were completed in the year, of which 1.5% were graded as inadequate. This was an improved result on last year.

Domestic abuse had been identified as a factor in 25,042 (57%) (circa.38,000 children) private law children's cases (closed cases) and 14.5% of these had had a 16A risk assessment filed with the court. Child focused courts

Child Focused Courts

Since the last Board meeting in January 2026, it had been announced that Child Focused Courts would be implemented nationally. Currently 8.8% of all open private law proceedings (1,594 children's cases / 2,348 children) were under Child Focused Courts and approximately 18% of new private law demand was in Child Focused Court areas.

Between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026, the average filing time for a Child Impact Report (in cases where an assessment decision for a harm and/or welfare assessment of the child(ren) was ordered) was 8.3 weeks. The average duration for children's cases where there was no welfare assessment was 11.8 weeks and the average duration for children's cases where they were the subject of assessment advice for a harm and/or welfare assessment of the child(ren) was 21.1 weeks (cases closed between 1 October and 31 December 2025).

It was queried whether there were any challenges contributing to the difficulty of meeting the shorter timeframe, such as delays in receiving information. Under the model, police disclosures were required within 7 days however, it was noted that this timeframe was often not met. This raised the question of whether the protocol for obtaining information should be revisited. It was advised that the police check guidance was currently under review, and an update would be provided at the next Board meeting. It was acknowledged there was a need to balance the aim of reducing delays for children with maintaining the quality and sustainability of work for Family Court Advisers.

It was queried whether the number of hours it took to undertake a Child Impact Report was known. As the Child Focused Court model was being implemented one area at a time it was currently too early to provide a definitive figure. However, it was noted that practitioners were undertaking a greater volume of work and doing so at a faster pace.

Action 2: The review of police checks guidance to be added to the July Board meeting agenda.

Family Justice System objectives

The Chief Executive reported that there had been a significant reduction of children in long running open proceedings. In the last year there had been an overall decrease of 14.4% (1,174 fewer children) in proceedings lasting more than 52 weeks. In public law proceedings, there were 2,584 children (1,249 children's cases) whose proceedings had been open for 52 weeks or more, of whom 336 children (144 cases) had been open for 100 weeks or longer. This was a reduction of 8.6% (243) and 24.0% (106) children respectively. In private law proceedings, there were 4,385 children (2,883 cases) whose proceedings had been open for 52 weeks or more, of whom 1,333 children (872 cases) had been in proceedings for 100 weeks or longer. This was a reduction of 17.5% (931) and 24.0% (420) children respectively.

In children's cases closed 1 October to 31 December 2025, final decisions were reached in 37.3% of Section 31 care proceedings in public law in 26 weeks or less, an increase of 3.1% compared to the same period in the previous year. Overall, final decisions in Section 31 cases took on average 38 weeks – 2 weeks less than the same period in the previous year. 65% of Section 8 child arrangements proceedings in private law were closed in 26 weeks or less which was an increase of 7% compared to the same period in the previous year. Private law proceedings completing at the first hearing stage took an average of 10 weeks (no change compared to the previous year). Where further work was ordered at the first hearing, this took an average of 47 weeks (8 weeks less compared to the same period in the previous year).

From 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 the average filing time for final analysis reports in s31 care proceedings in public law was 34.3 weeks. In private law Work To First Hearing the average filing time for a safeguarding letter was 4.7 weeks. In private law Work After First Hearing the average filing time for a Section 7 report was 14.4 weeks. 29.6% of Section 7 reports were extended beyond the first agreed filing date.

It was highlighted that the objective to reduce the number of open children's cases was system wide and this had not been possible as demand had increased. At the end of March 2026, the overall number of open children's cases (29,313 cases and 46,501 children) had increased by 6.5%.

The 12-month social work turnover had reduced by 1.5% to 13.6% and Cafcass employed 1,709 social workers. On 31 March 2026, 32% of Family Court Advisers working in public law / private law work after the first hearing teams had caseloads of over 20 and this was a priority to reduce.

At the end of March 2026, 94% of children were seen in person. Personalised letters were recognised as an important tool for relationship building and made a difference for children – 74.5% of children in public law and 84% of children in private law had received a well-written personalised letter. Ensuring children understood the recommendations made about them was a national priority – at the end of March 2026 recommendations had been shared with 80.5% of children in public law proceedings and 77% in private law proceedings.

In the year to date (1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026), Cafcass received 6,004 reflections from children and families in audit or in the digital feedback system. 3,452 (57.5%) were positive. Communication, case management, and case recording are the three most commonly identified and repeat learning points from complaints, involving frustration about information not being shared, inaccurate information and/or a lack of understanding about what is happening. Evidence of how Cafcass used this feedback to drive improvement was set out in the Annual Report and Accounts.

Progress report: Ofsted focused visit October 2025: Private law proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

The National Director of Operations outlined actions taken following a recent inspection of private law cases involving domestic abuse. Cafcass identified key practice priorities, including improved training on domestic and sexual abuse, increased engagement with children, better understanding of cumulative risk, consistent use of the domestic abuse practice policy, and strengthened processes leading up to first hearings. Updates also included revised templates, improved protocols with local authorities, and mandatory training on Practice Direction 12J.

Corporate priorities focused on ensuring sufficient resourcing in high-demand areas, improving timeliness of court orders in collaboration with HMCTS, and reviewing processes to obtain police information more quickly.

Practice quality audit January 2026 – The quality and effectiveness of practice in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

The Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) presented the findings from the sixth annual audit of domestic abuse practice. This was the first audit to review a full year of practice since the introduction of the domestic abuse policy. Compared to the previous year, overall practice quality had improved by 13%.

It was queried how this positive culture could be sustained. It was suggested that this could be achieved through clear leadership of expectations, regular annual reviews of the policy, and continued scrutiny through audit activity. The strength of induction processes was also highlighted as a key contributing factor.

The audit identified strong practice where practitioners effectively saw, heard, and engaged with children, ensuring their lived experiences of domestic abuse were clearly reflected. Child engagement was consistent and effective, with established tools such as “*How it looks to me*” being used to support understanding. Where direct engagement was not possible, particularly with very young children, practitioners used observation to assess primary attachments and provide the court with an accurate representation of the child’s circumstances.

Practice aids from the domestic abuse practice pathway were widely used in good and outstanding work, supporting Family Court Advisers to explore risk, harm, and the impact on children. Practice Direction 12J was appropriately applied as a protective decision-making framework. The audit also evidenced effective information gathering from a range of professionals in line with policy, alongside timely safeguarding actions taken in partnership for children identified as most at risk.

The audit highlighted the need for more consistent recognition in records and reports that children were victims of domestic abuse in their own right. It also identified a need to improve both the frequency and quality of sharing recommendations with children, ensuring their views on those recommendations were captured and communicated to the court. Future plans included enhancing direct work materials for practitioners and continuing collaboration with specialist child-focused independent experts.

While Cafcass audits provided insight into domestic abuse practice, it was questioned how wider impact across the family justice system could be measured. It was acknowledged that audits did capture aspects of partnership working, although these relationships could be complex, particularly in understanding respective roles (for example, 16.4 appointments).

There was discussion about whether the proposed improvements were sufficient to address negative feedback. It was noted that feedback was more frequently received from adults than children and

was often linked to dissatisfaction with case outcomes. However, the domestic abuse practice policy was recognised as an example of responding to feedback, alongside learning identified through reviews. It was agreed that the FJYPB should be more routinely consulted, however, consideration was needed to ensure complex policies were presented in an accessible format to understand.

It was noted that the audit findings did not explicitly address equality, diversity, and inclusion. It was confirmed that these aspects had been considered through focus groups, with findings presented to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group. This included examining how children's individual experiences and uniqueness were reflected in recommendations to the court. A further update could be provided at the next Board meeting.

It was emphasised that, while children may be victims of domestic abuse, other factors must also be considered, including the impact of adult mental health issues and the additional pressures faced by children acting as young carers.

Action 3: The Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) to identify appropriate policies to be reviewed and considered by the FJYPB.

Action 4: The Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) to present the findings on equality, diversity and inclusion from the domestic abuse audit at the July Board meeting.

Part 2 – And in other news...

Learning from feedback and practice

The Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) emphasised the importance of bringing together learning from significant incidents, with a focus on fully understanding the range of harm experienced by children. This included recognising harm across multiple or repeated sets of proceedings, particularly where children had been involved in different cases or family contexts - all relevant information must be considered collectively, as the accumulation of experiences can in itself contribute to harm.

It was noted that in public law, many children remained living with their parents, which required complex and carefully balanced decision-making by children's guardians and local authority social workers. Cafcass supported this work by maintaining a strong focus on what constituted safety and how this could be evidenced over time. This included working closely with local authorities on care plans and ensuring robust scrutiny, alongside providing consistent and reflective supervision for practitioners.

The serious incidents discussed included cases involving suicide and murder-suicide, which highlighted the significant impact of parental mental health difficulties and domestic abuse, as well as the way court decisions can alter family dynamics and pressures.

Feedback from families had increased, and Cafcass viewed this as an opportunity for system-wide learning. It was emphasised that complaints were taken seriously, especially responding promptly to children. Children's feedback demonstrated that they valued being genuinely heard, feeling safe to speak openly, and seeing that their views had led to meaningful outcomes. There were new

processes in place to ensure that children were informed about how their complaints had been addressed.

Part 3 – People and workforce

Workforce: overview and update: Headlines

The Director of Resources advised that the workforce was split between approximately 75% qualified social workers and 25% corporate and business services colleagues. Turnover between these groups differed - 13.6% for social workers and 9.7% for corporate and business services staff. It was noted that local turnover ranged from 4%-28%, so national averages concealed significant local variation.

There had been a small improvement in wellbeing indicators. On 31 March 2026, average working days lost (AWDL) due to sickness was 14.9 days for social work colleagues and 10.8 days for corporate and business services. Work was ongoing to understand reasons for absence and to support routes back to work where possible.

Workforce: Colleague Survey 2026

The Director of Resources reported that the colleague survey had been completed in March 2026 and there had been a very strong overall response rate of 76% (1,674 colleagues). The Corporate Management Team would receive results shortly and an update would be provided at the July Board meeting.

Action 5: **The Chief People Officer to provide an update on the 2026 colleague survey results at the next Board meeting.**

Leadership priorities: Sickness absence, recruitment and retention

The Director of Resources reported that at the end of March 2026 Cafcass had 184.4 social work vacancies (full time equivalent (FTE)). Some of these vacancies (38) had locum cover in place, and there were 107 new joiners recruited against vacant positions who were due to start. It was queried whether there was a national plan to increase the pipeline of professionally qualified social workers and whether it was known if there were proposals for a national pay framework, similar to teachers, to reduce movement into large agencies. It was emphasised that Cafcass did not control the social worker pipeline but welcomed the DfE's variety of routes into social work. It was known that work had taken place to make agency work less attractive, which was creating opportunities to convert people to permanent roles.

Priority areas for recruitment and incentive activity included A7 (Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire), A16 (Surrey and Sussex), A15B (London Private Law) and Child Focused Court areas (specifically A12 Birmingham, Black Country and Staffordshire). Work included national campaigns, local events and targeted financial incentives.

It was advised that monthly sickness case reviews were now well established to ensure oversight of each absence. It was queried how the organisation balanced supporting staff, who were often exposed to traumatic cases. Cafcass had access to an employee assistance programme which provided one-to-one counselling, and trauma consultancy was available for very high-impact incidents. It was advised that there was a policy framework for managing absence, which involved

early, genuinely curious conversations when an absence started, and use of occupational health to understand what colleagues were experiencing and what adjustments might support a safe return to work. For colleagues who had enduring long-term health conditions clinical advice was followed when planning returns.

It was confirmed that there was a clear link between vacancies, higher caseloads and increased sickness. It was important to recruit ahead of departures so that replacements were in post before gaps appeared.

Health, safety and security: update

The Director of Resources advised that Cafcass was liaising with HMCTS to agree a protocol about potentially violent people, so that information about adults of concern in proceedings could be shared quickly and effectively. CCTV installation across offices was progressing well, and core offices had full weekly coverage from business services colleagues.

There had been an increased reporting of incidents related to unacceptable behaviour and lone working. Feedback from managers supporting colleagues through such incidents was being used to refine policies on unacceptable behaviour and lone working. It was suggested that a focused example showing how a specific incident of violence or threat towards a colleague had been escalated, managed and shared for organisational learning was shared at the next Board meeting.

Action 6: Senior leaders to provide an example at the next private Board meeting of how a specific incident or threat of violence towards a Cafcass colleague had been escalated, managed and shared for learning.

Annual recognition awards

The annual recognition event would be held on 25 June 2026. The award categories were mapped to the organisation's "Together" values framework and over 190 nominations had been received.

Part 4: Priorities in the next period...

Sustaining ambition for children, accelerating progress 2026 – 2029

The Chief Executive advised that the Cafcass Strategic Plan for 2026-2029 was due to be published in May 2026. Engagement with around 600 colleagues, both virtually and in person, to discuss strategic ideas and proposals for the next three years had taken place January - March 2026. Feedback from these discussions had influenced Cafcass' understanding of what was important for colleagues, children and families.

Child Focused courts – overview and update

The Director for Private Law Reform advised that the roll out of Child Focused Courts was a fundamental change across the family justice system. Some areas were already live and operating under the new approach, others were due to go live during 2026-2027, and final areas were being prepared to go live in the next two to three years.

The new model involved a more investigative, problem-solving approach, with much tighter timescales. Responding to the experiences and needs of child and adult victims of domestic abuse, including the provision of local input services was a priority. Cafcass was working intensively on

operational team processes and structures to reach a steady state in areas already live and to prepare the organisation for the different way of working.

The challenge and risk to Cafcass of implementing the new system whilst also still operating areas under the existing system (Child Arrangements Programme) was acknowledged. However, it was recognised that the Child Focused Courts model was a positive change for children and families.

Cafcass' 25th Anniversary Celebrations

Cafcass would be formally celebrating its 25th anniversary with two events on 16 June 2026.

4. Reports from Committees

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC)

The Committee had last met on 12 March 2026 and had reviewed the organisational risk profile, noting increased risk ratings around development, retention and attraction of staff, especially linked to the transition to Child Focused Courts and increased demand pressures. The Committee also reviewed the annual health, safety and security report, covering both buildings and staff, and an information assurance update. The Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) had provided a substantial assurance rating, which was celebrated.

Performance and Quality Committee

The Committee had last met on 19 March 2026 and reviewed the strategic plan practice pillar which incorporated three clear work areas: private law improvement, public law improvement and domestic abuse improvement work. The Committee used the measures in this pillar to review performance and identify next steps for improvement.

The Committee also discussed performance assurance, mid-year reviews and upcoming end-of-year reviews of operational service areas. It considered learning from various organisational learning sources and reviewed the latest performance data set.

Private Law Improvement Programme sub-Committee

The sub-Committee had its final meeting on 4 March 2026 and received a deep dive on workstream 3 - sharing recommendations. It was agreed that governance oversight for private law and domestic abuse improvement would transfer to the Performance and Quality Committee and the sub-Committee had been formally closed.

People Committee

The Committee had last met on 16 April 2026 and reviewed the workforce report with a focus on sickness and recruitment. The Committee received a report from the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group and considered extensive information on health, safety and security. It was noted that the People committee was moving to a quarterly reporting cycle, aligning with the other main Board committees.

5. Governance Reports

5.1 Finance

The Director of Resources advised that the organisation was preparing the 2025-2026 accounts for audit. The outturn on the revenue budget was broadly in line with forecast, with a small additional pressure related to funding the pay award. Capital spending was slightly above budget, but that this

had enabled completion of two office moves already in progress and the refurbishment of four long-term estate premises, which was reported as supporting a sense of investment and improvements in those offices.

5.2 Risk

The Director of Resources acknowledged that the financial position linked to risk, stating that there was an ongoing pressure in the outturn related to managing increased levels of case applications. The formal budget delegation should be confirmed shortly and would be advised at the next Board meeting once available.

The Board Chair advised that risks relating to Child Focused Courts, some associated with practice and some with people, would be reviewed within a new governance framework.

6. Close and any other business

The Chair reminded those observing the meeting that they could submit questions to the Cafcass Board. A stakeholder had submitted questions on Child Focused Courts and the Director of Private Law Reform would provide a written response after the meeting.

The Chair and departing Board members shared reflections of their time on the Cafcass Board. The Chair thanked social work, corporate and business services and Board support colleagues. The next Board meeting would take place on Thursday 16 July 2026.

Action summary

- Action 1: The FJYPB to attend a Corporate Management Team meeting to further discuss 'word busting'.
- Action 2: The review of police checks guidance to be added to the July Board meeting agenda.
- Action 3: The Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) to identify appropriate policies to be reviewed and considered by the FJYPB.
- Action 4: The Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance) to present the findings on equality, diversity and inclusion from the domestic abuse audit at the July Board meeting.
- Action 5: The Chief People Officer to provide an update on the 2026 colleague survey results at the next Board meeting.
- Action 6: Senior leaders to provide an example at the next private Board meeting of how a specific incident or threat of violence towards a Cafcass colleague had been escalated, managed and shared for learning.

Minutes approved by the Deputy Board Chair, Eileen Munro, 16.07.26

