



# Ambitious for children

Exceptional experiences,  
for every child, everywhere  
and every time

Cafcass Strategic Plan  
2023-2026

[www.cafcass.gov.uk](http://www.cafcass.gov.uk)



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# Foreword

## From our Chair & Chief Executive



**For children who find themselves in public or private law proceedings, regardless of the circumstances that result in an application to the family court about them, the experience at its best takes a long time and causes them to worry about what is going to happen.**

At its worst, children tell us that their lives are on hold, waiting to hear where and with whom they will live or whether they can see their other parent. They tell us that their friendships and schooling can suffer and other relationships with people important to them like parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters can be compromised. Worse still, their mental health can suffer from the uncertainty and worry.

It is our privilege at Cafcass to be asked to help these children and to try to achieve the safest and best outcome for them. Our committed and skilled colleagues work to develop trusted relationships with every child, so that they can understand what works and doesn't in their family life, what life is like for them on a day-to-day basis and what their wishes, feelings and hopes for the future are. We work to make sure that children and their families understand how we put all this information together to advise and make recommendations to the family court.

This work and our direct involvement with children and their families lasts for a relatively short time – though proceedings, as you will

read further on, take too long. The impact of our recommendations lasts for much longer and sometimes for life.

Over the next three years, we believe that we have the foundations to commit publicly to our stated ambition, that we intend to offer exceptional experiences for every child, wherever in England they engage with us and every time they engage with us.

We hope that in reading this strategic plan, you will understand our nine clear priorities that relate to our direct practice with children and their families, to our colleagues who work at Cafcass and to our partners. Success will only be achieved through positive relationships based on mutual respect and open communication. We want to share with you what we have achieved, together, over the three years since our last strategic plan was published, to show how this has made further improvement and higher expectations possible. And we want to show you what success might look like if we were to ask children and indeed as we monitor and assess our own performance.

Thank you for taking the time to read and to think about our plans. We welcome your observations and feedback.

If you would like to leave any feedback, please write to [CafcassComms@cafcass.gov.uk](mailto:CafcassComms@cafcass.gov.uk).



Sally Cheshire CBE  
Board Chair



Jacky Tiotto  
Chief Executive

# Foreword

## From the FJYPB

**The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) values our opportunities to support Cafcass' ambitions for children for 2023-26. We understand the importance of having ideas, planning, and taking action to continue good practice and make improvements for children and their families.**

The ambition to deliver an exceptional service to all children every time reflects the core values of the FJYPB. We are excited that Cafcass have found opportunities to support staff to communicate well and build relationships with children. Children will feel seen, heard, and understood because they have been kept informed and know how Cafcass is representing them in their family proceedings.

*"It is key that Cafcass are ambitious as it shows that they care about children. It helps us understand that they are doing their utmost for us. It matters and it highlights to us that they have our best interests at heart."*  
FJYPB member aged 16

The FJYPB are committed to supporting Cafcass to give children and young people many ways to share their experiences and ask questions when they don't understand. Cafcass' ambitions are important to us. We look forward to challenging the organisation on their progress.



# About Cafcass

Cafcass is the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. We work with more than 140,000 children each year, and independently advise the family courts in England about the welfare of children, what is safe for them and in their best interests.

## Our vision

“ For every child whose current and future living arrangements are decided by the family courts, we seek to provide an exceptional experience, everywhere, and every time. We prioritise their safety and welfare, their voices and their unique needs, taking full account of their families and those connected to them.”



# What we do

We were established by section 11 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 (the Act) and operate in accordance with the law set by Parliament and under the rules and directions of the family courts. Our principal functions, as set out in section 12 of the Act, relate to family proceedings where the welfare of children who are subject to family proceedings is or may be in question. They are to:

- Safeguard and promote the welfare of children;
- Give advice to the family courts;
- Make provision for children to be represented; and
- Provide information, advice and support to children and their families.

**We may be asked by the court to work with families in respect of:**

**Private law:** including arrangements for children when parents are divorcing or separating. In these children's cases, a Cafcass social worker will act as a family court adviser (FCA). Their job is to provide information to the court about what is needed for a safe decision to be made about arrangements for who the child lives with and spends time with and what is in their best future interests.

**Public law:** including care and supervision applications where a local authority has serious concerns about the safety or welfare of a child. In these children's cases, a Cafcass social worker will be appointed by the court to act as a children's guardian. Their job is to ensure that the plan for that child submitted by the local authority is in their best interests and will secure a safe and permanent outcome for them.

Cafcass is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Ministry of Justice, accountable to the Lord Chancellor, Secretary of State for Justice. As Principal Accounting Officer, our Chief Executive is responsible for advising on appropriate objectives and targets agreed with our sponsor department, making regular assessments on risks and progress, intervening where necessary and making an annual report to Parliament. She is responsible to the Cafcass Board on the effective discharge of our responsibilities, giving them assurances about performance, effectiveness and the management of public money.

Cafcass also has a responsibility to contribute to wider government objectives relating to children, working especially closely with the Department for Education.

## Our values

Our practice framework, **'Together with Children & Families'** sets out our values for working with children and families, with each other and with our partners:

- Holding children and families at the heart of our practice
- Believing in respectful relationships
- Decision-making is clear and reasoned
- Always looking for strengths and risks
- Wanting to know more about those with whom we work and what is important in their lives.



# Our ambitions for 2023-2026

## Building on our Strategy for Sustaining Excellence 2019-2023

Our Strategy for 2019-23 set out the work we needed to do to sustain and improve our effectiveness in respect of **our social work practice**, the professional environment for **our people** and in the collaboration and shared work with **our partners**. Our intentions were described in nine delivery priorities, which addressed the challenges we identified in 2019-20, and in the last two years we adjusted and extended the priorities to manage the pressure presented by the global Covid-19 pandemic.

### The issues we prioritised included:

- Continued increases in new applications, especially in private law, and increasing concerns raised by children and families about the impact of the resulting delays on their wellbeing.
- Rising demand for additional assessment, advice and input from Cafcass and other professionals, which resulted in our frontline practitioners carrying unsustainable caseloads.
- We wanted to improve the quality, impact and consistency of our work with children and families, including increasing the volume of practice that we judged to be good or better.
- We wanted to develop a single unifying model of social work practice, prioritising trusting relationships and respectful use of our authority, including a set of values that could apply to anyone working at Cafcass in any role. In other words, a change programme, highly ambitious about the importance of children's experiences of us, their best interests and both their and their families' need to understand our recommendations to the family court.

- We wanted to rebalance the raised expectations in practice, with more management capacity to oversee and provide more consistent supervision for our complex work.
- We were hearing feedback from children and families about their perceptions and experiences of an antiquated and adversarial family justice system in which they did not feel heard and which did not connect them to wider sources of advice and support that could help them.
- We were concerned about the regional variation in the experiences of children and families in local court areas in respect of public and private law proceedings.
- We were determined to make further improvements in our leadership, our frontline practice and in our business and corporate services arrangements in order to consolidate and stretch beyond the findings of the 2018 Ofsted inspection, which judged Cafcass to be outstanding.



Our strategic ambitions for the four years 2019 – 2023 were reframed significantly by the pandemic. Sustaining our effectiveness became the single priority so that we could continue to offer children and families the support of a family court adviser despite increasing case durations, record levels of open work and highly restricted arrangements to meet in person with families and children. The pressures of social distancing on face-to-face working and court hearings resulted in higher than ever numbers of open children’s cases in the family justice system. For Cafcass, this meant we were working with an additional 13,000 children when our open children’s cases peaked in April 2021.

Our focus over the last three years has therefore been to protect, sustain and build on the improvements we had made to practice prior to the pandemic.

During the first of those years, 2020-21, we prioritised organisational stability during a period that was the busiest in Cafcass’ history. We worked intensively and collaboratively with our family justice system partners to secure additional investment and develop new models of working – including the Prioritisation Protocol - to enable us to prioritise the safety and welfare of the most vulnerable children while protecting frontline caseloads.

In our second year, 2021-22, we were in a position to consider what recovery might need to look like as we committed to a significant culture change programme, made possible by the development of our new practice framework, ‘Together with Children and Families’. At the heart of this approach is a new relationship-based model of practice based on kindness, respect and trust. It prioritises listening and understanding children’s experience, using clear and respectful language, and providing opportunities for them to listen to, influence and understand the reasons for the recommendations we make to the family courts.

By the third year, 2022-23, we judged we were sufficiently resilient to further stretch and improve our frontline practice by increasing and strengthening our arrangements for the management oversight and supervision of practice. We had additionally set clearer expectations about what good looks like for children and families with the introduction of our Practice Quality Standards in public and private law and our management quality standards for use by all leaders and managers.

Ofsted has carried out two focused visits to Cafcass during the last strategic plan period: in April 2021 and January 2023. The theme of the most recent visit was ‘managing demand’, the preceding visit theme being, ‘the effectiveness of demand management and the effectiveness of practice in the context of the pandemic’.

In the most recent visit, Ofsted reported that the quality of social work practice remains strong and continues to improve. Senior leaders were said to know the service extremely well, evidenced in the comprehensive self-assessment submitted to them in accordance with the inspection framework for Cafcass.

In both inspections, despite the significant impact of the high demand, senior leaders were judged to have sustained and improved the focus on children’s safety and welfare. Ofsted reported that we had led and developed creative and highly effective strategies in collaboration with key national and regional partners to continue to deliver high-quality services to children, families and the family courts. They described senior leaders as having a comprehensive understanding of the pressures across the family justice system and the associated impact of delay for children. They found proactive leadership in respect of management oversight and supervision and were impressed with the commitment and drive at Cafcass to improve children’s experiences and lives.

Our priorities since both inspections have been reviewed and revised. Those for 2023-2026, that are at the heart of this document, incorporate the learning and action we are planning in response.

# How our progress has shaped our ambition for 2023-2026

**Despite the pressures of the last three years, we have made significant progress in reducing national average caseloads to levels lower than in March 2020 and improving our quality of practice. We have built firm foundations to raise our ambition for children as we commit to provide exceptional experiences for every child, everywhere and every time.**

In defining exceptional, we have listened to children and families about the basics they think everyone should expect from us and these are set out in each main section of our strategic plan – PRACTICE, PEOPLE and PARTNER.

We have been careful to balance the need to strive for the best and the need for a manageable pace so that our people can continue to work with kindness and compassion. We know that offering an exceptional experience is only possible when the fundamentals are in place. From our own assessments and feedback from Ofsted, we are confident that exceptional experiences are within reach.



## Our PRACTICE progress

- While the number of **new** children's cases is reducing (there were 10.9% fewer applications in the year 2022-23 compared to 2019-20), **the number of open children's cases has increased and they are taking longer to close**. At the end of March 2023, there were 32,904 open cases involving 53,463 children. This represents a 10.9% (5,250 children) increase when compared to the start of the pandemic in March 2020, **but is a substantial reduction compared to the peak in April 2021** when we were working with an additional 13,000 children in 38,185 open children's cases (61,096 children in total), a 26% increase on the pre-pandemic position.
- **Average caseloads are now lower than in March 2020:** 20.3 in work after first hearing teams; and 37.7 in work to first hearing teams (compared to 22.5 and 44.5 respectively pre-pandemic). However, there are operational service areas where family court advisers (FCAs) have not yet benefited from these reductions. 55% of our FCAs are still carrying 20+ open children's cases which is the level that will enable and promote the relationship-led practice that is a fundamental requirement of our practice framework.
- Despite these challenges, **we have maintained our performance against key national indicators**. This means that we are able to allocate the children at highest risk within the timescales required, and to file over 98% of reports to the courts in the timescales agreed. That said, there are challenges in some areas about how quickly we can allocate a child's case to an FCA, and this has resulted in an increase in the number of children waiting to meet their FCA for the first time. Those lower risk children's cases are held on duty or in an allocation hub (in areas where the Prioritisation Protocol is activated) overseen by a service manager. 7.1% of open children's cases are currently (by end March 2023) allocated held on duty or in a hub.
- **Our feedback strategy introduced more proactive approaches to seeking feedback from children and families**, developed in partnership with the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB). Our Family Forum, a group of parents and carers with experience of family court proceedings and who are wanting to work closely with us, give advice and feedback about how we can be more effective in making a positive difference. Both the FJYPB and the Family Forum played an active role in shaping our revised approach to handling complaints in 2022.
- **The quality and impact of practice with children and families has continued to improve**, evidenced in feedback, our cycle of practice quality audits and quality assurance data. In the practice quality audit undertaken in December 2022 the proportion of work judged good or outstanding was 73% compared to 63% in 2020. We have raised the bar for rating practice as good or outstanding, drawing on our learning from our best practice, research, and reviews of significant incidents. We aim to increase this further through our operational service area improvement programme led by the National Director and Deputy Director of Operations.

Our **Practice ambition** is therefore to provide all children with an exceptional experience of their engagement with us, everywhere and every time. We will do this by providing their family court advisers or children's guardians with the management support, supervision and oversight they need to make effective and consistent use of our practice framework, and associated practice aids and our practice quality standards.

## Our PEOPLE progress

- **We have prioritised improving the visibility, capacity and capability of our leaders and managers.** A significant review of social work management capacity in 2021 resulted in a reconfiguration of arrangements that was implemented in April 2023. All new managers are benefitting from mandatory training, mentoring and peer support.
- We have reviewed and **enhanced our wellbeing support arrangements and other employee benefits** to sustain and support our people. These now include four wellbeing days each year, and a network of 90 wellbeing champions who help to support colleagues and promote wellbeing in their areas.
- **We introduced a wider range of reward and recognition options to celebrate the exceptional work of our colleagues** – for example, through e-recognition cards and ‘employee of the month’ awards based around excellence in demonstrating our Together values and going the ‘extra mile’ at work. We also negotiated and promoted a range of pay and reward benefits and flexibilities – for example relating to expenses reimbursement, introducing a premium fuel allowance and early introduction of the National Living Wage, to help colleagues to manage the additional financial pressures associated with the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.
- We developed an **updated Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy with more explicit objectives**, each of which is owned by the Chief Executive or an Executive Director.
- **We have managed increasing staff turnover**, which for our social work colleagues is 15% and for our business and corporate services teams is 12%. While lower than the turnover in local authorities, it is higher than the Cafcass norm of 9%.
- **We improved our insight into what makes people come to us, stay with us or leave us** by widening our mechanisms for staff engagement and feedback. Securing the maximum pay award possible within the civil service pay rules and the business case for a career and learning development framework are urgent priorities for the first year of our new strategy.
- We have used these insights to develop **a more compelling identity – Be Their Voice – and to be an employer of choice for children’s social workers**. This new campaign is already in use in more targeted recruitment programmes and areas where we are finding it harder to recruit. This helped us maintain a social work vacancy rate (8.3%) that is lower than the average in local authorities (20%) and we ended the 2022-23 year with a similar level of employed social workers compared to the end of March 2022.
- We took the first steps in introducing **clearer opportunities for career progression by prioritising the creation of our Social Work Academy** to develop and retain our own talented social workers especially in harder-to-recruit areas; the introduction of increased capacity for social work management oversight and supervision; and through a new Talent Pathway for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic colleagues.

Our **People ambition** is therefore to provide the leadership, professional development and working environment our people need. We will invest in career and learning pathways, maximise our reward, recognition and wellbeing offer and build capability to drive efficiency, further improvement and system reform.

## Our PARTNER progress

- **Delay for children as a result of longer case durations is now the single most pressing issue for the family justice system.** The average length of Cafcass involvement in public law care and supervision proceedings is 46 weeks (+10 weeks compared to March 2020), and in private law work after first hearing is 61 weeks (+22 weeks compared to March 2020). This is clearly unsustainable for children and their families given the significant impact it has on their lives and planning for their futures. Delay therefore remains a priority in this strategy and urgent for at least the first year.
- **We have been developing our data on court outcomes**, starting with an analysis of what happens to children at the end of public law care proceedings. This work has identified that in just over a third of section 31 care proceedings, but with significant local variation, children remain or return to the care of their parents. The availability of this information will, we hope, enable family justice partners to examine together the nature and purpose of those proceedings and to consider the impact and benefit for children in respect of action intended to safeguard and promote their welfare.
- **We introduced and evaluated our Prioritisation Protocol** to maintain timely allocation of public law and high-risk private law children's cases, to maintain safe caseloads for FCAs and to restore capacity for management oversight and supervision of the quality of practice and ensure a contact point for families waiting to meet their FCA. This evaluation received very positive feedback and has enabled us to maintain this option for use in areas where the pressures in the family justice system locally or our own internal staffing capacity impact on Cafcass' ability to allocate public law and high-risk private law cases in accordance with required timescales and local social work caseloads.
- Following the report of the MoJ Expert Panel on Harm in the Family Courts, **we invited a range of partners to join our Learning and Improvement Board to develop and share in the oversight of our Domestic Abuse Action Plan.** Progress has been the subject of three annual case quality practice audits

and the board is due to conclude in June 2023, being replaced by a practice reference board whose function will be to continue to support our improvement planning and practice learning.

- We also worked with partners on the design and implementation of the **Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Private Law Pathfinder Courts** in Dorset and North Wales. This is testing an earlier offer of support to families in private law proceedings and where domestic abuse is known or alleged. In this model, Cafcass (and Cafcass Cymru) provide a more comprehensive approach to both initial information gathering and the provision of a fuller Child Impact Report earlier in proceedings. In this pilot, we are more likely to see children before the first hearing which will also help us with the design and thinking about our own internal private law change programme, prioritised in this new three-year strategy.
- On behalf of the MoJ, we **redesigned and commissioned a new 'Planning Together for Children' programme** and associated information resources (building on the previous Separated Parents Information Programme). This programme supports parents to think about the needs of their children first when they are working out how they can parent together when they are separating and/or they are living apart. Some 23,500 parents each year were referred or ordered by the family court to attend the previous programme, and our intention is that this new resource is offered to more parents and earlier in proceedings.

Our **Partner ambition** is therefore to continue to collaborate and to work together on system recovery, specifically delay for children in proceedings. We will also seek the views and perspectives of partners on improving children's and families' experiences of proceedings and associated support services.

# An overview of our new priorities

We have updated our nine priorities that are associated with the three practice, people and partner pillars of our strategy.

Our intention is that they now align with our revised ambitions and respond to the feedback we have received from children and families, our colleagues, and our partners.

PRACTICE	<b>Priority 1</b> Further improve the quality and impact of practice – narrow the gap	Because children everywhere should receive an exceptional service whether or not they have already met their family court advisor (FCA). 
	<b>Priority 2</b> Seek out and learn from feedback	Because more of our work will be good or better if we ask for and act on feedback. 
	<b>Priority 3</b> Enable Cafcass systems to support practice - targeted support	Because our practitioners need effective support so they can prioritise quality of practice and engagement with children. 
PEOPLE	<b>Priority 4</b> Attract, engage and retain people	Because children and families are best served by diverse, motivated and skilled people. 
	<b>Priority 5</b> Provide a modern child-focused working environment	Because modern offices and systems help us do better work with children and families. 
	<b>Priority 6</b> Lead and govern well	Because good leaders and strong decision-making are safer for children and families. 
PARTNERS	<b>Priority 7</b> Improve children's experience of private law proceedings	Because some children and families need more help more quickly. 
	<b>Priority 8</b> Use our information to reduce delays for all children in proceedings and understand outcomes	Because children need to be safe to get on with their lives. 
	<b>Priority 9</b> Work with others to improve family justice	Because the family justice system has to serve children better than it does now. 

# Our PRACTICE priorities



## Our ambition

Our **Practice ambition** is to provide all children with an exceptional experience of their engagement with us, everywhere and every time, by providing their family court advisers or children's guardians with the management support, supervision and oversight they need to make effective and consistent use of our practice framework and associated practice aids.



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## What success looks like to us

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# Priority programmes

## Priority 1:

Further improve the quality and impact of practice

We intend to narrow the gap in the experience of children because all children have the right to a good or better experience when they are involved with Cafcass.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Increase the effectiveness of our **management oversight and supervision arrangements**.
- Embed the consistent use of our **Together practice framework** materials and aids.
- **Improve consistency** of our arrangements for the oversight of children who have yet to meet their family court adviser.
- Take action to review and **protect family court adviser caseloads** to support the progress of children's cases to conclusion and reduce delays for children.
- As part of our National Practice Improvement Priorities (see p26) and Public and Private Law Practice Improvement Programmes (see p27) further strengthen the quality of our practice with children in families where **domestic abuse** is known or alleged.

## Priority 2:

Seek out and learn from feedback

We are confident that more of our practice will be rated good or better if we ask for, learn from and act on feedback.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Implement and evaluate our strategy for learning from **feedback**.
- **Act on learning** from complaints, compliments, significant incidents.



## Priority 3:

Enable Cafcass systems to support practice

While overall the quality of practice and performance continues to improve, we are focused on variations with the intention to narrow the gap.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Develop and implement **Operational Service Area improvement plans**, including targeted support plans for service areas struggling to make the intended progress.
- **Improve processes** for opening and closing children's cases.
- Embed the **performance, accountability, and quality assurance** cycles.

# What has changed from our last strategy and why

We are sustaining our ambition to keep improving the quality and impact of our practice in promoting and safeguarding the welfare of children through family law proceedings. We have retained our five practice and five leadership improvement priorities, with an increased emphasis on evidencing that we are doing everything we are able to do to reduce delay for children. We will maintain our focus on the effectiveness of management support, supervision, and oversight in the use of our practice framework materials and other practice aids. We have designed two practice improvement programmes for public and private law, overseen by sub-committees of our Cafcass Board.

In respect of the second priority – seeking out, learning from, and acting on feedback from children, their families, and carers – we expect that at least half of all local practice quality audits are collaborative with the practitioner and seek feedback from families on their experiences with us. Our focus on the revised complaints policy and its implementation are also prioritised, as is our ability to evidence that learning from complaints and serious incidents has led to positive adjustments in practice that benefit the experience and outcomes for children and families.

Our third priority involves a focus on variability in the quality of practice and performance with the aim of narrowing the gap at the local level of operations. This approach will include targeted support to operational service areas that are struggling to achieve the intended progress in making further improvements in the quality of practice. One of the factors that directly influences the rate of progress will be addressed through a dedicated programme to improve the processes and systems for supporting case progression, from application to closure. This priority will operate in parallel with our very significant development, testing and implementation over the next three years of the internal arrangements for managing demand and delay in private law children's cases.

## What we hope children will be able to say...



I know who is there to help me even when I am waiting to meet my FCA.

My FCA helps me to tell the court in my own words who and what is important to me and what I want.

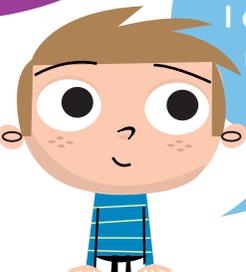


I understand what has been decided, why, and what it means for me.

Everything written about me in my case record is respectful, clear and easy to understand.



I am asked for feedback about how my experience of Cafcass was and if there is anything that could be done differently or better.



I know what to do if I am not happy with my experience at Cafcass.

## What success looks like to us

Our approach to measuring success in our Practice priorities will focus primarily on:

1

We will see an increase in the proportion of practice that is rated good or better at national and local level.

3

Audits will show evidence of effective management support, supervision and oversight.

5

We will see improved efficiency and consistency in the progression of a child's case from application to decision.

2

Audits will show more consistent application of the Together practice framework materials.

4

The volume of feedback received will increase, especially from children, and the proportion that is positive in respect of experiences with Cafcass will improve.



# Our PEOPLE priorities



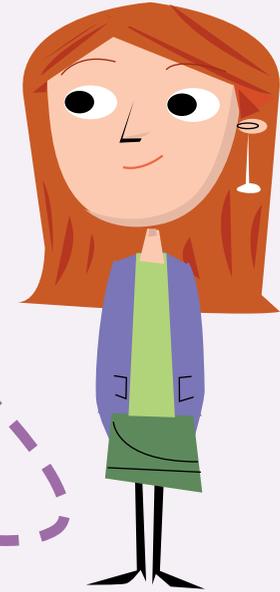
## Our ambition

Our **People ambition** is to provide the leadership, professional development and working environment our people need. We will invest in career and learning pathways, maximise our reward, recognition and wellbeing offer and build capability to drive efficiency, further improvement and system reform.



Priority programmes

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What has changed from our last strategy and why

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What success looks like to us

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# Priority programmes

## Priority 4:

### Attract, retain and engage people

We want children and families to be served by diverse, motivated and skilled people in every part of our organisation.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Prioritise our business case to government for Cafcass to have **flexibility to set an attractive and competitive pay offer**, recognising the social work profession as distinct from the civil service.
- Align our pay and grading structures with our new **Career and Learning Pathways** for social work and for corporate and business services professionals, which will attract and retain diverse talent, and equip our people to meet our enhanced expectations in delivering excellence for children.
- Revise our operating model in line with practice developments and to drive **efficiency, improvement and system reform**.

## Priority 5:

### Provide a modern child-focused work environment

We need modern offices and systems to enable our best work with children and families.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Prioritise **revisions to our ChildFirst case management system, supporting performance and management information and working practices** to enable exceptional work with families and children.
- Revise and implement an **estates strategy** that offers children, families and colleagues sufficient **in-person engagement and support and which promotes relationship-led work** alongside modern and efficient online connectivity.
- **Prioritise wellbeing, safety and productivity** in all our ways of working, policies and guidance, and ensure they are supported by modern technology and records management.

## Priority 6:

### Lead and govern well

Strong leadership and decision-making will help us to make the improvements we have identified that prioritise the safety and best interests of all children and families with whom we work.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Embed and evaluate our **leadership and management quality standards** to support and achieve our strategic and improvement priorities.
- Review and revise our **equality, diversity and inclusion strategy** following an evaluation of the first year so that we can demonstrate meaningful progress.
- Plan succession arrangements for our senior leaders with structures to support our **updated operating model** and to develop leaders who drive excellence for children and families.

# What has changed from our last strategy and why

Our People priorities will embed the additional capacity and strengthened expectations we have put in place for our leaders and managers to enable every Cafcass employee to do their best work for children. Feedback from our people tells us they are committed to Cafcass values and feel well supported by their leaders. They appreciate the action taken to protect them from increasing caseloads and to support their wellbeing. They want us to take action to remain competitive on pay and our opportunities for career progression so that we improve our retention of existing staff and attract top calibre candidates when we have vacancies.

As we continue to evaluate and assess our provision of the best flexible working environment in this strategic period, we intend to review our estates strategy and our ambition to make sure that our offices are efficiently used to promote seeing families and children in person and to enable relationship-led work whilst retaining the benefits and productivity of flexible working arrangements. We will continue to prioritise health and wellbeing programmes and the associated leadership required.

In respect of our leadership and governance, a review of our first equality, inclusion and diversity strategy will be undertaken to assess impact and to inform further improvement and change. The use of self-assessment and implementation of our leadership quality standards will be a priority in the first year of the strategy and in every year, we will continue to narrate our performance and accountability through our annual self – evaluation to Ofsted and in our annual report to Parliament.

## What we hope children will be able to say...

Children with whom we work will be able to say:

A cartoon illustration of a young girl with dark skin and hair, wearing a purple top and a red backpack. She is holding a camera and looking towards the viewer.

Each person I meet at Cafcass introduces themselves and makes me feel safe and comfortable talking to them.

A cartoon illustration of a young boy with dark skin, wearing glasses, a grey jacket, and a blue tie. He is holding a basketball and smiling.

Everyone I deal with at Cafcass respects my rights and promotes my safety and welfare.

A cartoon illustration of a young boy with dark skin and hair, wearing a yellow shirt and blue shorts. He is standing on a skateboard and smiling.

If I need to visit a Cafcass office or meet with Cafcass online, I am made to feel welcome and the environment meets my needs.

I am helped to understand what is happening in my proceedings and what will happen next.

Cafcass protects the information it holds about me and helps me if I want to see my records.

## What success looks like to us

Our approach to measuring success and reviewing our progress is set out in the last section of this report.

Our primary focus in our People priorities will be on:

1

We will reduce staff turnover.

3

We will optimise safe caseloads.

5

We will see improved employee feedback on Cafcass culture and environment, including their engagement in the staff survey.

2

We will attract, retain and develop diverse and talented people.

4

We will create improved opportunities for career progression at Cafcass.



# Our PARTNER priorities



## Our ambition

Our **Partner ambition** is to continue to collaborate and to work together on system recovery, specifically delay for children in proceedings. We will also seek the views and perspectives of partners on improving children's and families' experiences of proceedings and associated support services.



Priority programmes

See page 23



What has changed from our last strategy and why

See page 24

What we hope children will be able to say...

See page 24

What success looks like to us

See page 25



# Priority programmes

## Priority 7:

### Improve children's experiences of private law proceedings

Working with partners – including children and families - we are committed to a review of our private law arrangements so that they provide more timely and tailored assessment that is proportionate to the assessed risk of harm to children, reduces duplication, delay and conflict and achieves safe and sustainable arrangements for children.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Evaluate our learning from the Ministry of Justice **Private Law Pathfinder** in Dorset so that we can identify implications for our revised private law working arrangements.
- Develop and test a **revised model for effective information gathering and risk assessment** in work to first hearing in private law, with greater referral to the Planning Together for Children programme where this is safe.
- Delivery of our **Private Law Improvement Programme** to reduce delay and improve outcomes for children. This programme includes a focus on strengthened practice with children and families who are experiencing domestic abuse, and a more structured assessment and intervention model for children's cases where a r16.4 appointment is made.

## Priority 8:

### Use our information to reduce delays for all children in proceedings and understand outcomes

By working with partners to collate better information and insights about delay and children's outcomes at local as well as national level we can take better collective action to reduce delay so that children can get on with their lives.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Work to improve our ability to **record and report on outcomes for children** at the end of proceedings and use this to assess our own progress against our improvement plan and to stimulate joint action with partners.
- Use our enhanced recovery data – developed to support our recovery from the pandemic at national level and now complemented by local dashboards – to **support service managers in pinpointing the drivers of delay**, to identify consistency in practice and to develop solutions with partners where required.
- Evaluate the **impact of the Cafcass Recovery Board** in improving outcomes for children and organisational effectiveness.

## Priority 9:

### Work with others to improve family justice

The family justice system needs to work together to serve children better than it does now. We will keep our partner priorities under review so they align with and support the priorities of the national Family Justice Board.

We will lead workstreams to:

- Develop and implement a **new partners' strategy** to ensure our local and national partnership work delivers agreed improvement and change priorities as set out in the FJB priorities and this strategic plan.
- Take action with partners to **enable children to understand and participate in their proceedings**, in accordance with their age and stage of development.
- Collaborate with His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service on **improving information sharing with the courts**, including through the implementation of the new public law, private law and adoption portals.

# What has changed from our last strategy and why

Our partner priorities build on the closer working relationships we made and developed during the pandemic. They represent our (to be) agreed priorities with partners and partnership organisations.

The inclusion of a specific priority focused on private law reflects the growing recognition across the system that a fundamental change in approach is needed given that in comparison with public law, children in private law proceedings typically experience longer and more adversarial proceedings with more limited opportunity for participation in the decision-making process. This priority will also enable us to review and improve the early experiences of children and families in the first weeks and months of their work with us as well as offering more opportunities for efficiency, both internally and for testing externally in court test sites.

We included a focus on working with children and families experiencing domestic abuse as one of our five practice improvement priorities overseen by a new Learning Improvement Board with members drawn from the FJYPB, individuals with lived experience of domestic abuse and the family court, and professional partners. Our Domestic Abuse Practice Improvement Plan included a

new mandatory domestic abuse learning and development programme; an updated domestic abuse practice pathway and guidance; new Practice Quality and Management Quality Standards; a refreshed Supervision Policy which includes triggers for situational case supervision where a case outcome in court differs from the FCA's recommendations and there is a concern that the child remains at risk of harm.

Our second priority reflects our shared responsibility with partners to work to timetables in proceedings that are in children's best interests and to reduce delay and resolve uncertainty for them as quickly as can be safely done. We will continue to contribute our data and insights to build a shared system understanding of how children and families experience public and private law proceedings and the impact they have on their safety and welfare at the end of proceedings.

We will use this improved understanding to work with partners to test new approaches for delivering the Family Justice Board's priorities in the most efficient and effective way. We will develop more consistent mechanisms for sharing our learning, and eliciting partner feedback nationally and locally.

## What we hope children will be able to say...

Children with whom we work will be able to say:



Cafcass did all they could to work with the courts to progress my case quickly.



When Cafcass make changes to how they work, they involve children and families in the design.

Cafcass made sure everyone involved in my case was focused on what is best for me.

My file makes clear how the work Cafcass did will make my life better. I will be asked what I think about this if I am old enough.

## What success looks like to us

Our approach to measuring success and reviewing our progress is set out in the last section of this report.

Our primary focus in our Partner Delivery Priorities will be on:

1

We will engage with children earlier where they need to be seen in person.

2

Our reports will clearly set out the proposed arrangements for safe contact, especially where domestic abuse is known or alleged.

3

Our reports to court will set out recommendations for how children would like to be told the outcome of their proceedings.

4

We will see reductions in the number and proportion of children in proceedings lasting more than 26 weeks in public law and 52 weeks in private law.

5

We will make progress in expanding the Private Law Pathfinder (investigative approach) model to additional areas.



# How we will implement improvement

## National Improvement Plan

Our National Improvement Plan sets out the five practice priorities for improvement and five leadership priorities. These ten priorities form the central foundation of the areas of practice we are committed to improve - nationally and with reduced variation across our 19 operational service areas - building on the existing strong foundations. In addition, they inform all other activities and oversight of performance and our associated accountabilities.

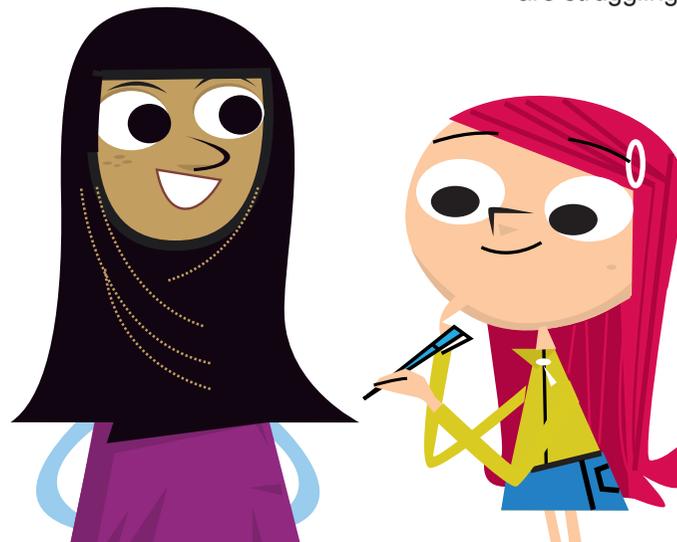
## Practice improvement priorities

1. Seeing and engaging with children.
2. Understanding the impact of domestic abuse on children.
3. Understanding the impact of the child's uniqueness on their life and future.
4. Implementing and embedding the effective use of the Assessment and Child's Plan.
5. Reducing delay for children.

## Leadership improvement priorities

1. Further increasing the proportion of practice rated good and outstanding by the increased, consistent and effective use of the 'Together with Children and Families' practice elements.
2. Further improving the effectiveness of management oversight and supervision, including self-assessment against the management quality standards.
3. Seeking, collating, analysing and learning from feedback – transferring learning into practice.
4. Maintaining a focus on impact, understanding and evidencing the difference we are making to the lives of children and families.
5. Maintaining an accurate grip on performance and accountability for the quality and impact of practice at individual, team, and operational service area levels.

The national level plan is supported at local level by operational service area improvement plans, with targeted support plans developed for those areas which are struggling to meet the required standards consistently.



# Public and Private law improvement plans

## Public law improvement programme

In 2022, we established a public law improvement programme, overseen by a time-limited subcommittee of the Cafcass Board. This implements our contribution to delivering the intended impact for children in public law proceedings, as set out in the final report of the President's Public Law Working Group.

## Private law improvement programme

A parallel improvement programme is being introduced in 2023. It will focus on tackling delay through a more structured approach to assessment and intervention in rule 16.4 cases and by working with partners to reduce the number of updated assessments (addendums) required; implementing a more consistent approach to analysis and reporting in section 7 reports; implementing the Private Law Practice Quality Standards and management quality standards and associated learning and development; improving the quality of our practice with children and families where domestic abuse is known or alleged; seeing and engaging with children, including sharing recommendations, enabling participation and evidencing the impact of our practice.

# Corporate and business services improvement priorities

Our corporate and business services professionals support and enable Cafcass to provide exceptional services to children and their families. Over the course of this strategic plan, leaders will be accountable for the following improvements:

1. **Implementing the Together Promise** setting out what children and families can expect from their interactions with corporate and business services.
2. Providing **clear and accessible information and resources for children and families** that help them engage effectively with their proceedings and understand how we have adapted our service in response to feedback about their experiences.
3. **New ways of working:** reviewing our physical estate and its relationship with our offer to families and children of an in-person experience in our work with them; and to offer flexibility and connectivity for all colleagues who work for the organisation.
4. **An outstanding induction experience** for new employees so they start work with the right information, connections and confidence to do their jobs well, with ambition to progress with us.
5. Strong leadership of our **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion** strategy so that every colleague working at Cafcass can demonstrate progress in meetings its objectives.



6. **Exceptional leadership and management** with management quality standards fully embedded, a culture which recognises and rewards excellence and takes swift and proportionate action to manage attendance, and address performance and conduct issues.
7. **A more efficient corporate centre:** with streamlined and digitised business services and sharing services with other arm's-length bodies where appropriate.
8. **Analytic capability:** A programme of work to provide colleagues with enhanced data and analysis to understand and improve performance.



# How we will deliver our strategy

## Our success measures

In this Strategic Plan we have been more explicit about what our ambitions are: the difference we want children to experience, what we are asking of ourselves and how we will measure success.

We set out below, our proposals for the success measures we have or are developing to assess our progress. These measures and the supporting indicators complement the Key Performance Indicators to which we already work and which describe our effectiveness in respect of our core statutory responsibilities – namely to allocate a family court adviser or a children’s

guardian to every case ordered by the court, to do this in a timescale which promotes the welfare of the child, safeguards them and means that we file a best interests report to the family court.

We continue to work with our sponsor department, the Ministry of Justice and with the Department of Education, to align with their policy priorities for the effective operation of the Family Justice System. A summary of our progress against these success measures will be published in our Annual Report and Accounts for reporting years 2023-24 onwards.

## PRACTICE success measures and indicators

Success measure	Proposed leading indicators
Audits show an increase in the proportion of practice that is rated good or better at national and local level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ % of audited work judged to be good or better.</li> <li>■ The variation between operational service areas in the % of audited practice that is judged to be good or better.</li> </ul>
Data and audits show an increase in the use of Together practice framework materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ % effective assessment of harm and risk of future harm.</li> <li>■ % children’s files showing recommendations shared with children.</li> </ul>
Effectiveness of management support, supervision and oversight evident in children’s files.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Number of local audits undertaken and % that are collaborative.</li> <li>■ % of Assessment &amp; Child’s Plans with a management review and update.</li> </ul>
The volume of feedback received will have increased, especially from children, and the proportion that is positive will have improved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Volume of feedback (including complaints) from children and the % positive.</li> <li>■ Volume of feedback (including complaints) from adults, and the % positive.</li> </ul>
Improved efficiency and consistency in progression of a child’s case from receipt of application to closure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ % of open public law children’s cases allocated to an appointed children’s guardian (KPI1).</li> <li>■ Average working days to allocate a s31 care case to a children’s guardian (KPI2).</li> <li>■ % of open private law children’s cases allocated to a family court adviser (KPI3).</li> <li>■ Proportion of section 7 reports that meet their agreed filing times (KPI4).</li> </ul>

## PEOPLE success measures and indicators

Success measure	Proposed leading indicators
Reduced staff turnover.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff turnover for social workers, and for corporate and business services professionals, relative to sector comparators.</li> </ul>
Attract, retain and develop talented and diverse people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retention rate for staff who have joined in last two years.</li> <li>% staff of Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic heritage.</li> </ul>
Optimise safe caseloads.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open children's cases in public and private law relative to pre-Covid baseline</li> <li>% employees agreeing with staff survey question "my workload is manageable".</li> </ul>
Provide our people with improved opportunities for career progression.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>% employees agreeing with staff survey question "Cafcass provides learning opportunities that support my professional development".</li> <li>Number of employees on talent programmes for all staff and for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic colleagues.</li> <li><i>Other indicators in development.</i></li> </ul>
Improve employee feedback on Cafcass culture and environment, including their engagement in the annual staff survey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mean for positive staff survey score for "How my work environment feels".</li> <li>% of staff engaging with the annual staff survey.</li> </ul>

## PARTNER success measures and indicators

Success measure	Proposed leading indicators
Reduced delay in private law proceedings and earlier engagement of children where they need to be seen in person.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Average period case open to Cafcass where work is ordered after first hearing.</li> <li>Safeguarding letters and section 7 reports filing times.</li> <li>Increasing % of children with at least one in person engagement.</li> <li>Increase referrals to Planning Together for Children.</li> </ul>
Our reports clearly set out the proposed arrangements for safe contact, especially where domestic abuse is known or alleged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>% applications where Domestic Abuse is known or alleged.</li> <li>% audits that confirm children feel safe in arrangements made for them.</li> </ul>
Our reports to court set out recommendations for how the outcomes of proceedings should be communicated to children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>% of audited work that include clear recommendations for how the outcome is to be communicated to children.</li> </ul>
Reduce the number of children in proceedings lasting more than 26 weeks in public law and 52 weeks in private law.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce number and % of children in public law proceedings longer than 26 weeks.</li> <li>Reduce the number and % of children in private law proceedings lasting more than 52 weeks.</li> </ul>
Progress in expanding the Private Law Pathfinder (investigative approach) model to additional areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of children's cases per year managed under the Pathfinder (or successor) model.</li> </ul>

# Delivery and review

Cafcass is an executive non-departmental body sponsored by the Ministry of Justice. Our Chief Executive and Accounting Officer is responsible and accountable to Parliament for the organisation and quality of work carried out by Cafcass, including our use of public money and the stewardship of assets.

Our strategic aims and objectives are established and overseen by the Cafcass Board. We agree an annual Delivery Plan with MoJ which reflects our statutory duties, our contribution to MoJ targets, and our plans to deliver efficiencies.

Each Executive Director leads the annual work programme in one of the three pillars of our strategy and is responsible for developing an annual work programme to deliver against the three strategic delivery priorities and associated workstreams:

- PRACTICE – National Director of Operations
- PEOPLE – Director of Resources
- PARTNER – Director of Strategy



As set out in our Performance & Accountability cycle, the Corporate Management Team oversees the delivery and monitor the impact of these delivery plans. Quarterly progress reports setting out what has been delivered nationally and plans for the next quarter are subject to review and challenge on a quarterly basis by the Corporate Management Team prior to scrutiny by the Cafcass Board in public session. A formal report on progress to Parliament is included in our Annual Report and Accounts.

A representative of the Family Justice Young People's Board attends each meeting of the Cafcass Board and their own work programme both shapes and is aligned to our strategic priorities, as is that of the Cafcass Family Forum. Other partners are updated through a regular bulletin.

In addition, each business area is responsible for ensuring their delivery plan sets out their contribution to the Strategic Plan and other improvement activity, including the National Improvement Plan. This – together with our twice-yearly Leadership Live sessions focusing on our improvement progress – ensures that each member of staff in Cafcass is connected to our strategy and how their day-to-day work contributes to achieving our ambition for children.

Comparative operational service area performance on practice priorities is reviewed monthly by the Operational Management Team, and on a quarterly basis by the Corporate Management Team and the Board's Performance & Quality sub-committee. An annual self-evaluation of our progress against our National Improvement Plan is submitted to Ofsted at the end of each financial year.

Progress against the Corporate and Business Services delivery plan is reviewed quarterly by the Directors of Resources and Strategy and reported to the Corporate Management Team.

# We welcome your feedback

[CafcassComms@Cafcass.gov.uk](mailto:CafcassComms@Cafcass.gov.uk)

