

Reporting to court policy

Introduction

This policy sets out:

- The standards to be met when attending court and reporting to court
- The implications of including information in a report to court
- Resolving differences of opinion about the contents of reports to the court
- Expectations for sharing court reports with parties.

1. Standards for reporting

- 1.1 Reports assist the judiciary by providing clear accounts of work undertaken, and by setting out analyses and recommendations, identifying a clear basis for any recommendations made. Reports should contain relevant, child-focussed information that evidences the child's voice and an evidence-base for the recommendation/s made.
- 1.2 In private law, it must be clear in each individual report what it is the court has asked Cafcass to do and what it is that Cafcass has done in fulfilment of each specific request. For more information [click here](#) to read the Child Arrangements Programme.
- 1.3 In public law, the case analysis must be produced on the revised PLO Cafcass case analysis, combined placement and care or placement order analysis template.
- 1.4 Templates have been created for use in private and public law cases, including adoption, and are designed for the most frequent case types, and should be accessed from ChildFirst. These templates are to be adapted for more infrequent case types using the closest possible template as a basis. There is a non-section 7 template that should be used for non-section 7 reports.
- 1.5 As well as being required to answer questions regarding a written report at court, practitioners may need to make their report orally at court. The below applies to both written and oral reports.
- 1.6 Written documents for the court should be reviewed in line with the Cafcass [quality assurance and impact framework](#).

Distinguishing fact from opinion

- 1.7 The information obtained by practitioners during their work includes both factual information and opinion. Practitioners may draw on training, professional experience, research and evidence-based tools to analyse this information. When a report is being filed with the court, tools are not to be attached to reports; instead the analysis should be incorporated into the content. Hearsay evidence is information given to the practitioner (or any other person) that has not been personally seen or heard by the practitioner. Hearsay evidence is permitted in family proceedings. A clear distinction should be made in court reports (as in other records) between verified facts, allegations made by the adults, hearsay evidence and the practitioner's assessment, analysis or opinion. When reporting hearsay, it should be clearly identified as such (as should the source of the evidence), as this will assist the court in determining the weight that should be attached to it.

Clarity of contents

- 1.8 The contents of reports should be written in plain English and be understandable both to their subjects and to the range of professionals who will read them.¹ The language used should be unambiguous, and reports should be succinct, relevant and non-repetitive; written reports should not repeat information held elsewhere, for example in respect of an expert's report, cross-references should be used and key points incorporated into the overall Cafcass analysis.

2. Diversity

- 2.1 When preparing a report for court it is important to consider the background of the relevant family members, including cultural background, language and any relevant factors such as disability or age. Under Section 1(3) of the Children Act 1989, which sets out the 'Welfare Checklist', the court must have regard in particular to: *[the child's] age, sex, background and any characteristics of his which the court considers relevant*.
- 2.2 Each report should consider and apply the relevant welfare checklist. Individual elements of the checklist must be covered when it is clear they are significant in the case. [Click here](#) to see the Welfare Checklist in full.

3. Significant disagreements between the reviewer/Service Manager and the Practitioner

- 3.1 There may occasionally be disagreements between the author of the report and the person who carries out the quality assurance and/or Service Manager (SM), in particular about recommendations. Where there is a conflict of opinion, the practitioner may be willing to include the reviewer/SM's opinion in the court report as an alternative view on what is in the best interests of the child for the court to consider. This eventuality will be extremely rare, as most such disagreements are resolved in situational supervision.

Dealing with differences of view between a reviewer/manager and author, where the author is a Children's Guardian appointed by the court, and is not willing to include an additional option

- 3.2 If this situation arises, the relevant manager must seek advice from Cafcass Legal.
- 3.3 The following position has been guided by the decision of Wall LJ in *A County Council v. K & Ors (By the Child's Guardian HT)*[2011] EWHC 1672 (Fam):²

"...the proper course, in the event of an irreconcilable difference of view is for Cafcass to apply to intervene, and for there to be placed transparently before the court the views of the guardian and the views of the manager, each explaining why the other is not to be preferred. The court will then decide."

¹ For more information please see the [house style handbook](#).

² <https://www.familylawweek.co.uk/site.aspx?i=ed84361>

- 3.4 When³ a Children's Guardian has been appointed by the Court and there are differences between a Children's Guardian and reviewer/SM which cannot be resolved on a consensual basis, Cafcass should apply to the court to be joined as an intervener to present alternative recommendations to the court. Where the Guardian's recommendation is considered unsafe, Cafcass should also apply to the court to terminate the appointment of the court appointed Guardian. The court would then be made aware of the alternative analysis and recommendations for the child and will make the decision. Any application to the court would be on notice to all parties.

4. Sharing a copy of the report with parties

- 4.1 When sharing the report with adult parties, information can be discussed with the party to whom it refers and with the judge concerned. It is also permitted and often necessary to discuss information relevant to the welfare of the child.
- 4.2 Safeguarding letters are shared with parties by verified email, if possible, three days before the first hearing or by the filing date if this is different, unless to do so would present a risk to either party or the child.⁴ Where sharing would present a risk it should be sent only to the court, with a request for the court to consider the issue of disclosure of some or all of its content to the parties and seeking directions. In addition to the safeguarding letter template, there is a template for a letter to be sent to parties ahead of the first hearing. This template should be amended to set out whether the letter has been sent to the parties.
- 4.3 Practitioners should only share with the court (in court reports or by way of disclosure), information they assess as relevant to the court proceedings. Information about non-parties should only ever be included in safeguarding letters when directly relevant as the third party will not have the opportunity to respond to any allegation or concern. If the information is relevant it may be included in investigations if a section 7 report is ordered. Where information is shared in a report about a non-party, the report should not be shared with the non-party referred to, as they are not a party to proceedings.
- 4.4 Section 7 reports are to be shared directly with parties on or before the filing date, with an accompanying cover letter containing information about what they should do if they are unhappy with the contents of a Cafcass report. For a section 7 report to be withheld from parties the court must make an order which will only be made in the most serious circumstances. It is not expected that children and families will always agree with the views of the practitioner as expressed in court reports. The report advises them that disagreements about professional opinions must be raised in court and that factual corrections should be requested before hearings. It is therefore vital that reports are shared with parties at a point which allows time for them to consider the report and, where applicable, to notify the author of any factual errors and for these to be corrected.
- 4.5 A copy of the section 7 report should also be emailed to the parties' solicitors, if they have them, using secure email.
- 4.6 Cafcass files reports to court in both public and private law cases. Reports prepared by the children's guardian will be served by the child's solicitor on the parties' solicitors or on the parties themselves if they are acting in person.

³ This includes public law care proceedings, and any other instance where the court appoints an Officer of the Service (e.g. 16.4 appointments).

⁴ See Subject Access Request Policy for further information of what is sensitive personal information.

5. Risk assessments undertaken under s16A

- 5.1 As outlined in the safeguarding and child protection policy and S16A guidance, a S16A risk assessment report should not be incorporated into a section 7 report due to the different rules on disclosing the reports to parties. The practitioner should state that the risk assessment has been undertaken in accordance with the requirements of section 16A Children Act 1989, clearly setting out what type of harm the child is at risk of suffering. The s16A risk assessment report should not be shared by Cafcass with the parties. The court will make such directions as it considers appropriate about the service of the report on the parties. The provision of the s16A report only to the court enables the practitioner to alert the court to any serious concerns, whilst ensuring the distribution of sensitive material does not place a child or vulnerable adult at risk.

6. Use of Position statements and Case Analysis in public law proceedings

- 6.1 A Position statement is a legal document prepared by the child's legal representative. Practice Direction 27A 4.3 (c) specifies that a position statement should be limited to 3 pages and should include a summary of the order or directions sought by that party (1) at that hearing and (2) at the final hearing. A guardian's Case Analysis and a position statement are different documents with different purposes. A position statement is not a substitute for a Guardian's expert analysis.
- 6.2 Whilst there may be occasions where a Guardian requests that the court direct a position statement to be filed in place of a Case Analysis, such requests should be the exception. Exceptions may include where there has been short or no notice applications allowing no time for initial analysis to be completed and where late filing of Local Authority or other evidence means that on balance it is preferable to proceed with an application to substitute a Position Statement in place of a Case Analysis, in order to avoid lengthy delay for the child and re timetabling.
- 6.3 It is important to note that a Children's Guardian cannot be easily cross-examined on the content of a position statement as a position statement does not have the same evidential status as a Case Analysis authored by the Children's Guardian themselves.
- 6.4 The Public Law Outline and relaunch specifies that the standard directions on Issue and Allocation in care proceedings include provision for the filing and service of a Case Analysis from the Children's Guardian in advance of the Case Management Hearing (CMH) which will be listed between day 12 and day 18. At the Issues Resolution Hearing (IRH) the court will consider whether a Case Analysis is required for the Final Hearing. Whilst local court practice may vary in terms of when in proceedings (or if at all) the court may order a Case Analysis, the expectation is that at least one Case Analysis should be prepared by the Guardian in each case.
- 6.5 The reason that the Children's Guardian is required to produce at least one Case Analysis for court (best practice is two: initial and final) is that this is the way in which a Children's Guardian provides their understanding of what life has been and is like for the child, the impact of the harm they have experienced, their wishes and feelings and best interests.
- 6.6 For short notice or non-PLO compliant applications an Initial Analysis may not be possible by the first hearing. It should be recognised that the child's case is disadvantaged by not presenting the guardian's early enquiries in a Case Analysis. It is therefore expected, and right for the child, that the initial analysis should be presented at repeat CMHs or the first available hearing.

6.7 Practice Direction 12A - **Care, Supervision and other Part 4 proceedings: Guide to case management** provides the following definition of a Case Analysis, *“Case Analysis’ means a written or, if there is insufficient time for a written, an oral outline of the case from the perspective of the child's best interests prepared by the children's guardian or Welsh family proceedings officer for the CMH or FCMH (where one is necessary) and IRH or as otherwise directed by the court, incorporating an analysis of the key issues that need to be resolved in the case including –*

(a) a threshold analysis;

(b) a case management analysis, including an analysis of the timetable for the proceedings, an analysis of the Timetable for the Child and the evidence which any party proposes is necessary to resolve the issues;

(c) a parenting capability analysis;

(d) a child impact analysis, including an analysis of the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child and the impact on the welfare of the child of any application to adjourn a hearing or extend the timetable for the proceedings;

(e) an early permanence analysis including an analysis of the proposed placements and contact framework; by reference to a welfare and proportionality analysis.

(f) whether and if so what communication it is proposed there should be during the proceedings with the child by the court”

6.8 Care proceedings should not be completed in the absence of a Guardian's Case Analysis which encompasses the key issues as set out in paragraph 6.7 above. This is at the heart of the creation of the role of guardian in public law proceedings. Evidence of social work analysis, judgement, and decision making must be present in all children's cases and especially in care proceedings where the court is potentially considering making orders which would permanently prevent a child from remaining within their birth family.

7. Attending court

7.1 All courts have some safety measures in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading, in line with government and public health guidance on living with COVID-19, and have [risk assessments completed by HMCTS](#) that staff can access.

7.2 The Family Procedure Rules require the children's guardian to attend final hearings and the authors of section 7 reports should attend if directed to do so. The court can direct that attendance may be by telephone or video link including the use of the Cloud Video Platform (or any other remote facility).

- 7.3 Since the start of the pandemic, a significant number of hearings have been held entirely remotely or as 'hybrid' hearings, where the parents or other family members attend in person together with their advocates, while the guardian, social workers and other experts attend remotely. This has helped make effective use of professional time in circumstances where the family justice system is dealing with more open cases than ever before. The decision whether to hold a hearing in person, remotely or as a hybrid hearing is one for the judge in each circumstance. The needs of the children Cafcass is working with may require that a hearing in person takes place. If not ordered to attend in person, and when the needs of the children allow, and as is the case for other experts, colleagues may request attendance of hearings remotely as this makes best use of professional time, especially in the context of persistently high caseloads and the cost of travel.
- 7.4 Cafcass can assist this decision in private law cases by including in the safeguarding letter any relevant information emerging during safeguarding enquiries about the likely ability of the parties to be able to engage remotely, and the prospect of meaningful dispute resolution. Although this information will typically reach the court after the decision about the type of hearing has already been taken, it may assist the court where there is a second gatekeeping meeting.
- 7.5 It should be a matter of discussion between the FCA and the court on the most effective way for an FCA to participate with an agreement reached in advance of a hearing. The default remains that Cafcass attendance will be remote on the basis that our evidence is akin to that of other experts which can be heard remotely. However, there will be cases and hearings where it may be necessary for the FCA or children's guardian to be present in court, **for example**:
- At FHDRA's where the safeguarding letter identifies realistic prospect of resolution at a first hearing, which could be facilitated by the Cafcass duty officer attending at court. This is only realistic at courts where the FHDRA lists are small enough to allow for dispute resolution, and where it has been agreed in advance that the duty officer will attend the list in person.
 - Contested interim and final hearings when the other parties are not represented
 - Final hearings where the court has determined that the evidence of the guardian should be heard in person, although it may also be possible to agree to attend remotely during the other evidence
- 7.6 If an FCA is only available to attend court remotely then they, or their manager, must raise this with the court as soon as possible and in advance of the court hearing date.
- 7.7 If for any reason the FCA is not able to attend despite being directed to attend, then a formal approach needs to be made to the court and the parties informed. The risk of wasted costs and avoidance of these is a primary consideration.

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