



Cafcass Board Meeting Minutes
Wednesday 8 November 2023, 12:40-14:40
Cafcass, 70 Gray's Inn Road, London, WC1X 8NH
APPROVED

Present

Sally Cheshire, Chair
Eileen Munro, Board member and Deputy Chair
Catherine Doran, Board member and Chair of the People Committee
Catharine Seddon, Board member
Dalwardin Babu, Board member
Helen Jones, Board member and Chair of ARAC
Joanna Nicolas, Board member (Co-opted)
Mandy Jones, Board Member
Peter Fish, Board member and Chair of the PLIP Committee
Rohan Sivanandan, Board member
Steven Cox, Board member

In attendance - Cafcass

Jacky Tiotto, Chief Executive Officer
Julie Brown, Director of Resources
Teresa Williams, Director of Strategy
Sarah Parsons, Deputy Director for Improvement and Principal Social Worker
Adam Bowles, Chief People Officer (attended virtually)
Merryn Hockaday, Head of Communications
Shabana Jaffar, Head of Legal Services
Rebecca Anderson, Model Office Programme Manager
Maria Kavanagh, Head of CEO Office
Nicola Blakebrough, Corporate Manager (Secretariat Services)
Fiona Mulheron, Corporate Officer (Secretariat Services)
Ashleigh Marshall, Corporate Officer (Secretariat Services)

In attendance – MoJ/FJYPB

Olivia, FJYPB representative
Imogen, FJYPB representative
Luke Taylor, Ministry of Justice representative

Apologies

Jack Cordery, National Director of Operations
Marie Gittins, Deputy Director of Operations
Neal Barcoe, Ministry of Justice representative

1. Welcome from the Chair

1.1 Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Board meeting and noted apologies. She welcomed stakeholders and members of the public who were observing the meeting by Zoom.

1.2 Declarations of interest

No new declarations were made.

1.3 Minutes, actions, and matters arising

Minutes from the previous meeting held on 13 July 2023 were approved as an accurate record. The Board noted the progress of actions.

2. Family Justice Young People's Board Report

The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) representatives reported on the FJYPB work programme and recent work undertaken.

Positive feedback was reported from the Voice of the Child Conference held on 27 July 2023, noting that there had been a high level of attendance. The FJYPB had been awarded the Partnership Working Award at the National Children & Young People Awards in recognition of their work with Cafcass and across the family justice sector.

The FJYPB reported a number of achievements with partners including speaking with the Judicial College to share the importance of using clear language for children and young people involved in proceedings. They had been commissioned by Durham Police to support development of a training resource for Police on the impact of domestic abuse and they had received an invitation to deliver a presentation at the judicial conference in Svendborg Denmark, in March 2024.

The Board noted the positive influence that the FJYPB's work was having within the family justice sector and encouraged continued thinking about how this could be extended further afield.

3. Reports from Committees

Committee Chairs were invited to provide a brief overview of recent discussions at Committee meetings held since the last Board meeting to support the respective draft minutes circulated with meeting papers.

Performance and Quality Committee

The Committee last met on 18 September 2023 which had been the Chair of the Committee's last meeting. The Board were informed that the Cafcass Deputy Chair would chair the next two meetings of the Committee (in December 2023 and March 2024) following which a new P&Q Chair would be appointed.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

The Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee reported that they had last met on 11 September 2023 and had reviewed the risk report and had agreed the release of the draft annual report and accounts to audit, which was currently ongoing. The Committee also noted the substantial assurance audit opinion on the audit of business continuity management.

People Committee

The Chair of the People Committee reported that the Committee had last met on 22 May 2023 and had reviewed the workforce report, which included staff turnover and sickness levels. The Committee were due to meet again on 20 November 2023 and would review the detailed results from the recent staff survey.

The Chief Executive Officer reported that 3 talent development programmes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic colleagues, which were commissioned under the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy as a leadership commitment, were nearing completion. Work was ongoing to review participants' feedback to assess the programme's impact and to build learning into subsequent

programmes. The findings would be presented to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group and then shared with the People Committee for information.

4. Governance Reports

4.1. Finance

The Director of Resources reported that Cafcass' financial position remained steady. Funding had now been confirmed for the refurbishment of the new London practice office and family hub. Additional cash flow had also been provided by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to cover the payment of the additional £1,500 to eligible staff following the recent government announcement on pay. The Board noted some pressure in the end of year position and that they would receive a further update at the next Board meeting in January 2024.

4.2. Performance – Progress and Improvement

The Board were presented with a new strategic report setting out the progress made against the five practice and five leadership improvement priorities as at the end of quarter two. The Chief Executive Officer noted that the priorities reflect the actions believed to make the most positive difference to children. It was highlighted that good progress had been made in seeing and engaging with children and reviewing the impact of domestic abuse on children. The quality of practice in understanding the child's uniqueness had been judged as good in 96% of cases although not always seen to be carried through into recommendations. The Chief Executive Officer explained that this judgement was an example of where Cafcass was pushing itself hard to ensure that all children received an exceptional service and that children's case reports not only bring the uniqueness of the child to the attention of the court but also consider what the recommendations would mean to the life of the child and the practicality of proposed arrangements. There had been an increase in management oversight and supervision identified through audit and there was evidence of this having a positive impact on practice. Work continued to ensure the appropriate balance between allowing professional independence and management oversight and supervision.

The Board noted that audit leads were increasingly finding evidence of family court advisers recording the impact of delay on children within children's case records and that focused action to reduce delay was having a positive impact on the longest-running proceedings.

The Board suggested that, for the benefit of partners who did not attend the meeting, future reports include the latest comparator data so that the scale of progress can be demonstrated.

The MOJ representative reported on work that was underway with system partners. It was noted that the Family Justice Board had prioritised work to address delay in public and private law and there were some positive signs of progress including a reduction in the level of open children's cases.

5. Strategic Plan 2023-26 Launch

The Director of Strategy reported that the Strategic Plan 2023-26, "Ambitious for children: exceptional experiences, for every child, everywhere and every time" was being formally launched externally today and a partners event was being held later that day. The draft Strategic Plan had been reviewed and approved by the Board at its meeting in July 2023 and had been shared internally. A key change from the previous strategic plan was more specificity on what exceptional means for children, and success measures were now included which would be used to report progress.

The Board noted that a key focus of the plan was the emphasis on delay and understanding the particular circumstances of children in delayed cases.

The Board noted the work under the Partners pillar and the challenges involved. The Director of Strategy noted that improvement in partnership working was located both at a local level as well as national.

The Chair and Board endorsed the Strategic Plan and thanked all those involved in its production.

6. Chief Executive Officer's Report

The Chief Executive Officer and members of the Corporate Management Team provided key updates from the accompanying presentation covering demand, performance and operational practice; updates on significant successes; people and workforce; and highlights of improvements planned in the next period.

Part 1: Demand, Performance and Operational Practice

The Chief Executive Officer reported that an average of 219 new applications were being received every working day, which was a reduction of 1.2% compared to the same period in the previous year. The reduction in new applications was in both private and public law proceedings, however there had been a 9% increase in section 7 orders in private law. It was also noted that there was variation across the country and some areas were dealing with increased demand. The current number of children in open proceedings was 50,000 and c12,000 children had been in proceedings for over a year with these children remaining a key focus for Cafcass.

It was reported that prioritisation was being de-activated in Greater Manchester (A3) and Norfolk/Norwich (A14), but would remain active in Suffolk/Essex (A14) due to challenges in demand, the additional work generated by delay and ongoing capacity challenges in the area. Prioritisation had been activated in Greater London private law (A15b) due to an increase in demand and significant challenges in capacity across the local system.

The Board were informed that a case progression programme for private law children's cases had been implemented. The rationale for the programme was to ensure that children were not involved in family court proceedings longer than they needed to be.

The Deputy Director for Improvement and Principal Social Worker reported on quality assuring practice and that at the end of quarter two, national audits had judged practice in 73% of cases to be good or better. Alongside this, 1,274 local audits had been carried out, which were completed collaboratively with Family Court Advisors.

The Chair noted the operational context and continuing pressure and that Cafcass was increasingly embedding learning from significant incidents, complaints and feedback into practice. The MOJ representative noted that the Department and Family Justice Board were carrying out scenario based assessments of the trajectory of demand, however this was at an early stage.

Part 2: And in other news

The Director of Strategy presented key successes in the period and reported that positive feedback had been received on the new Cafcass website, which had been launched in September 2023. The website improved the quality and accessibility of information for both families and new social work recruits and included more videos and interactive child-friendly content.

Cafcass had opened its new London practice office and family hub in September 2023 and feedback had been overwhelmingly positive with much praise for the new child-friendly space.

The Board were informed about ongoing work on both the Cafcass internal private law change programme and the next cross-system pilot phase on private law improvement, which would launch in June 2024. The MOJ representative added that MOJ were supporting the expansion of the existing pathfinder pilot and there had been a recommendation to launch additional pilots in Birmingham and Cardiff in the next financial year. The Board asked whether Cafcass had enough capacity to assist with running and participating in pilots alongside business as usual. It was reported that this would remain under review and any unsustainable pressures would be reported to the Board as necessary.

Cafcass had held its third successful annual Practice Week in October 2023, which aimed to bring staff together to reflect on social work practice achievements over the previous year and work towards further improvement in the year ahead.

A Domestic Abuse Practice Reference Group was being created to follow on the successful work of the externally-chaired Learning and Improvement Board, set up by Cafcass to respond to the issues raised in the Government's Harm Panel Report. The DA Practice Reference Group will be similarly co-chaired externally by SafeLives and a member of the FJYPB and will oversee continued learning and improvement on domestic abuse.

The Chair praised management and staff on the achievements reported.

Part 3: People & Workforce

The Chief People Officer reported that a business case for the maximum pay award achievable under the Civil Service Pay Remit Guidance had been approved in August 2023 and the baseline award of 4% would be made to staff in November 2023.

The Board noted that there had been a high level of engagement with the staff survey with 84% of staff completing the survey and overall, the scores were positive and improved from last year. The feedback was shared with managers and would be used to create local action plans which would align with national priorities.

Challenges in recruitment and retention remained at the end of quarter two and overall staff turnover for social workers remained on an upward trend. In April to September 2023 sickness absence in social workers had continued to increase with over 80% due to long term sickness absences.

Cafcass had been awarded the Employer of the Year Award and the FJYPB had received the Partnership Working Award, at the Children & Young People Awards in October 2023. Cafcass had also won a number of gold and silver awards at the Social Worker of the Year Awards in November 2023 including the Lifetime Achievement Award awarded to Sarah Parsons, the Director for Improvement and Principal Social Worker, the Newly Qualified Social Worker of the Year, (Clare Burnett), the Student Social Worker of the Year (Lloyd Haskins) and Employer of the Year. Further nominations included the Public Sector Children's Team Award and Family Law Workplace of the Year, these events being held in late November 2023. The Board recognised that the awards reflect the hard work, professionalism and dedication from Cafcass and staff members.

The Director of Resources highlighted key updates under the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and noted that level 2 accreditation had been achieved with Carers UK and the positive action talent pathway was now complete for its first year with evaluation to be reported in the Autumn.

Part 4: Improvement in the Next Period

The Chief Executive Officer highlighted three improvement programmes. It was noted that five workstreams in the Public Law Improvement Programme had been moved to 'business as usual' and would be under the governance of the Performance and Quality Committee. A Private Law Improvement Programme was being set up in respect of aspects of private law to be prioritised and would be overseen by a committee of the Board. The Board noted Cafcass' six commitments adopted as part of the relaunched Public Law Outline.

7. Close and Any Other Business

The Chair closed the meeting and thanked all those who attended.

Minutes approved by the Board Chair, Sally Cheshire, 29.02.24

