



## **Cafcass Board, Open Meeting Minutes**

**Thursday 11 July 2024, 13.30 – 15.30**

**70 Gray's Inn Road, London**

### **Present**

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

### **In attendance - Cafcass**

Dawn Goodwin, Head of Practice, NIS  
Jacky Tiotto, Chief Executive Officer  
Julie Brown, Director of Resources  
Jack Cordery, National Director of Operations  
Sarah Parsons, Deputy Director for Improvement and Principal Social Worker  
Marie Gittins, Deputy Director of Operations  
Adam Bowles, Chief People Officer  
Shabana Jaffar, Head of Legal Services  
Merryn Hockaday, Head of Communications  
Nicola Blakebrough, Corporate Manager (Secretariat Services)  
Julia Dark, Head of CEO Office  
Peter Mitchell, Executive Assistant

### **In attendance MoJ/FJYPB**

Luke Taylor, MoJ  
Lucia, FJYPB  
Olivia, FJYPB

## **1. Welcome from the Chair**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting including those who were observing the meeting via Zoom and reiterated that questions could be submitted in advance and following the meeting.

### **1.1 Welcome and apologies**

No apologies were received.

## **1.2 Declarations of interest**

No new declarations of interest were received.

## **1.3 Minutes, actions and matters arising.**

The minutes from the previous meeting held on 24 April 2024 were approved as an accurate record. There were no matters arising.

## **2. Family Justice Young People's Board Report**

The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) representatives provided an update on the work of the FJYPB highlighting the priorities to improve children and young people's participation in and experience of their proceedings; the focus on the impact of domestic abuse to children and young people, expanding the focus to include all types of abuse and harmful parenting; and reducing delay in the family courts.

Planning was ongoing for the Voice of the Child Conference 2024 which was being held on 25 July 2024. The newly created Top Tips for working with children and young people who are neurodiverse, would be launched at the conference.

FJYPB members had been working with the Cafcass National Improvement Service (NIS) and animators to create the script and content for the second video being produced for children and young people. The video would be the second in a series of engagement to help explain to families, children and Cafcass partners, how young people can best be supported through their proceedings. The animated video 'Taking me Seriously' would be launched soon.

Future priorities would continue to focus on the impact of domestic abuse to children and young people, expanding the focus to include all types of abuse and harmful parenting.

The FJYPB had worked with Department for Education and the PSHE Association to help develop a school lesson plan, to help teachers explore with children the impact of changes in families' circumstances.

The Board noted that the FJYPB had been working on 'busting words' in Court orders. Alternative words had not been suggested but it was highlighted that these words should be more accessible, and language needed to be considered for those who were new to proceedings.

The Chief Executive Officer would speak to the FJYPB team to clarify the request related to developing Family Time guidance. The Chief Executive Officer also suggested that some younger children may struggle with some of the words in the Top Tips and this would be reviewed.

The Board thanked the FJYPB for their continued support and work.

## **3. Chief Executive Officer's Report**

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

### **Part 1: Demand, performance and operational practice:**

#### *Q1 2024 Demand and performance headlines*

New demand was 12% higher in the first quarter compared to the same period in 2023 and represented an equal rise for public and private law children's cases. On average 223 new children's cases were received per working day. The average social work caseload had, however, reduced further and the average for long-term teams was 19.0 children's cases per social worker. At the end

of May 2024, 4,331 private law children's cases (6,821 children) were 'court ready', meaning Cafcass had a report ready, and a hearing was scheduled in the next 6 weeks.

The Chief Executive Officer reported against the Family Justice Board's 3 priority areas for family justice and noted her thanks to the MOJ representative for assisting Cafcass in clarifying the right reporting mechanism.

It was reported that there had been a 21% decrease in children in proceedings lasting more than 52 weeks, however as of May 2024 there were still 10,628 children (6,216 cases) that had been open for 52 weeks and 3,356 children (1,996 cases) that had been open for 100 weeks or longer. Whilst the direction of travel was in the right direction there were still too many children in delayed proceedings. There had been some decrease in the average number of weeks to conclude cases. There had been a slight uptick in Cafcass filing time for public law but some decrease for private law.

There were currently 48,000 children open to Cafcass, however throughput was good and there were less children's cases open this year than last year. 98% of children had been seen and 95% with an in-person record. There had been an increase in the number of personalised letters of introduction sent to children. It was confirmed that there was no age limit for personalised letters, and these would be sent to parents or carers to hold on behalf of the child. The Board were informed that the personalised letters set out who Cafcass was and why the child was involved in proceedings and how recommendations made to the court would be shared at the end of the proceedings. The Chief Executive agreed to discuss concerns about the potential for misuse of letters and to ensure that foster carers were receiving letters on behalf of the children they foster. The intention was that personalised letters were sent to children in secure accommodation however that the high number of short notice applications in public law meant this was not always possible. Around 7 in 10 applications were short notice. This wasn't a new trend but an area that was under review within the system and the Department for Education were leading a study in this area.

In the last three months Cafcass had received 1,150 items of feedback from children and families from audit or digital feedback systems. 786 of these (68.3%) were positive. The Board were assured that there was a robust mechanism in place to triangulate learning from children and families. The Board noted that a large amount of feedback was negative due to the type of work, however the children's feedback received was normally positive.

### *London Prioritisation*

The National Director of Operations reminded colleagues about the need for prioritisation, which arose from an imbalance in demand and capacity and was necessary to allocate children's cases effectively. There were three areas where prioritisation was currently active – Essex, Suffolk and London. It was reported that prioritisation had been triggered in London in September 2023 due to a combination of increased demand, the additional work arising from delay, and reduced staffing capacity. The deactivation of prioritisation would require a systemic rebalance of demand, increased and stabilised staffing capacity, and a reduction in the additional work required because of delays. Meetings with senior judiciary and HMCTS were being planned to review prioritisation in London and to agree a partnership response and plan of action to move towards deactivation.

In London there were currently 529 children waiting for their first meeting with a Family Court Advisor and these cases were held within the allocation hub. It was noted that at any one time there were around 1,000 children's cases where the Family Court Advisor had completed work and was awaiting a hearing date.

The Board queried whether there was a strong argument for additional resource and working to remove delay for children in London. The Board discussed the successes seen so far in the Pathfinder Pilot in terms of closing cases and how this could be replicated in other areas. The MOJ representative noted that the challenges in London were long standing and known across the system. Two of the three London DFJ areas had been selected by the National Family Justice Board as areas where there was national co-ordination across partners to put in extra focus and support.

Learning from the Pathfinder pilot would be considered in London together with the potential for additional sitting days. The Board acknowledged that London was impacted by system issues which needed to be solved in collaboration with partners within the family justice system.

#### *End of year practice reset*

The Deputy Director for Improvement and Principal Social Worker reported that the National Practice Quality Audit undertaken in December 2023 had shown a year-on-year improvement with 78.5% of audited practice being assessed as Good or Outstanding. The Practice Reviews of the 122 children's cases scrutinised by Ofsted inspectors found 84% of practice was assessed as Good or Outstanding.

The Chair thanked members of the Corporate Management Team for the report and summarized that it may not feel like progress was as fast as we would like for children, but things were moving in the right direction in terms of quality and timeliness, and there was a lot of effort into this from Cafcass and partners.

## **Part 2: And in other news**

#### *Learning from practice*

The Deputy Director for Improvement and Principal Social Worker reported on learning from practice. Learning themes had been identified from the 80 significant incidents reported between 1 January and 30 March 2024 and actions in response had been identified. Feedback continued to be received digitally and through audits. The Board noted that there was more negative feedback from fathers than from mothers. There had also been positive feedback from fathers where we surpassed their expectations in feeling they were being treated fairly.

#### *Improving practice in proceedings where domestic abuse is known or alleged – policy and programme update*

Work focusing on improving practice in proceedings where domestic abuse was known or alleged was continuing. The fourth annual domestic abuse audit had been carried out and identified that although good progress had been made there was still further improvement needed. The results had been moderated by volunteer members of the Domestic Abuse Practice Reference Group, (including people with expertise by experience, a representative of the Domestic Abuse Commissioners Office, academics, a magistrate and a lawyer). The domestic abuse improvement plan would be adjusted and developed in response to insights and learning.

## **Part 3: People & Workforce**

#### *Workforce overview and update report Q1*

The Chief People Officer reported that turnover for social workers remained high at 15%, down from a peak of 15.7% in Sept 2023 and a little lower than the Local Authority average of 16%. Challenges to recruit and retain people remained in specific parts of the country. In the 12 months to May 2024, sickness absence for social workers was 5.9%, which was a slight increase from March 2024. Positively, the first in-person Annual Recognition celebratory event took place on 4 July 2024.

#### *Health and safety strategic priority*

Work was ongoing to prioritise the safety of staff, children and families, contractors and visitors. The guidance on managing unacceptable behaviour and lone working was being reviewed and would be relaunched in October 2024.

#### *Equality, diversity and inclusion*

The Board were updated that the leadership and commitment objective within the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy was due to be reviewed. New guidance on working with young people and their gender identity was being finalised. This would be followed by the launch of the 'Getting to know

me' spinner - a practice aid to support Family Court Advisors in understanding the uniqueness of children.

#### *Leadership conference 2024*

The Board were updated on the Leadership Conference - Ambitious Leadership – exceptional experiences for children and families' that was held in June 2024.

#### **Part 4: Priorities in the next period**

The Board noted the priorities in the next period including delivery and learning from the Pathfinder pilot in Birmingham, and fully understanding the risks for Cafcass and the system. Practice week would take place from 26 September to 2 October 2024.

#### **4. Reports from Committees**

##### *People Committee*

The People Committee last met on 31 May 2024, and it was the first meeting for Rohan Sivanandan as Chair, and Dal Babu as a member of the Committee. It was agreed to amend the quoracy arrangements within the Committee's Terms of Reference. The current People and Organisational Development Strategy was due to expire at the end of 2024; the current strategy would be reviewed with outstanding actions carried forward and the plan realigned to the People Pillar as part of the overall strategy for 2024-26. The Committee had received standing items covering the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group report and the workforce report including updates on recruitment, staff turnover and sickness absence. The Committee also received updates on the Career and Learning Pathway for Corporate and Business Services including a suite of products to support career development and a streamlined induction process.

##### *Audit and Risk Assurance Committee*

The Committee had last met on 6 June 2024. The Committee noted that the GIAA annual audit opinion for 2023-24 on the overall level of assurance had been assessed as substantial, which was a positive achievement. The audit reports for managing absence and the net zero management letter were noted. The current risk environment was discussed, and the annual Information Assurance Report and Pension Assumptions Report were received.

##### *Performance and Quality Committee.*

The Committee had last met on 13 June 2024 under a new Board member chair, Peter Fish. The Committee discussed the changes to the agenda to ensure that the Committee maintained a strategic focus and received the first of the highlight reports from the 3 improvement programmes (public law, private law and domestic abuse practice) along with the Strategic Plan Practice Pillar progress report. The Committee received the performance and quality dataset and the Learning and Feedback report.

#### **5. Governance Reports**

##### *Finance Report*

The Board noted that Cafcass were still operating under authority to spend pending receipt of the final grant allocation and letters of delegation from the MOJ. There had been an increase in both revenue and capital allocations, but some uncertainty remained regarding the timing of the announcement of the civil service pay award and the affordability of that in the context of the funding allocated.

*People Report*

The Board noted the summary of the 6-month workforce data.

*Risk Report*

The Board noted that there had been no change in the risk environment, which remained at a high level.

**6. Close and any other Business**

The Chair expressed thanks to Sarah Parsons, the Deputy Director for Improvement and Principal Social Worker and the Adam Bowles, Chief People Officer, who were retiring in September 2024.

**Minutes approved by the Board Chair, Sally Cheshire, 17.10.24**

*S Cheshire*