



Ambitious for children

Listening to them -
lighting the way

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Introduction

In 2023, we set out a renewed ambition for children, their families and carers who find themselves in family court proceedings. Expressed as a vision, our hope is that every child, in any engagement with Cafcass, has an exceptional experience, every time and in every place that we offer help.

Our strategic plan, '[Ambitious for children 2023 – 2026](#)', described how we intended to succeed through nine important programme priorities. Fast forward two years, as we review our progress and begin to think about our next strategic plan, this short report is an account of our achievements so far, the adjustments we have made and our intentions for the final year of the current strategy.

Everyone at Cafcass, our people, our board, our partners remain ambitious for children. What this means is that we work hard for them, we want to succeed for them and so we are continually looking to learn from what is going well and to improve where this is needed.

In our practice and engagements with families, we are prioritising our relationships, making sure they are respectful and focused directly on learning what life is like for every child. We are supporting family court advisers and children's guardians to undertake effective assessments of harm and risk, to set out clear reasons for their advice to the court, to explain and share their understanding with families and to be the strongest representatives of children's uniqueness, safety and best interests.

Those reading this review will know from experience, from the experiences of others or through their profession, that our work in family justice is hard. It takes skill, commitment and courage to advise on life-lasting decisions for children in situations where the facts are most often disputed, harm may be hidden, conflict is ever present, and parents and carers have different perspectives about the right outcome for their children. One of our key priorities has been and still is to attract, retain, enable and support social workers. We are doing well in that we are an employer of choice, though we want to continue to prioritise offering an even better work environment that sustains people, protects them when they experience aggression and threats from those they try to help, that connects them in person regularly, enables work and life to be proportionately balanced, as well as offers opportunities for professional growth. We want people who work at Cafcass to say that they are well led and supported, the priorities for children are the right ones, they understand how they are held accountable for the highest of professional standards and that this is prioritised in kind and consistent teams.



Being ambitious for children in family court proceedings and offering exceptional experiences isn't something we can achieve alone. Our strategy sets out that with our partners, we will collaborate, work on system recovery (with the effects of the pandemic still being felt) and very specifically share in the responsibility for reducing delay for children and families as well as improving their experiences. At this review point, we will report positive progress as well as an unwavering intention to continue with the shared endeavours on reducing delay and promoting children's voices in their proceedings. This means supporting the national programme that is driving consistency with the Public Law Outline requirement that proceedings conclude within 26 weeks. It also means continuing to test new ways of working in private law proceedings such as the pathfinder courts in Dorset, in Birmingham and in West Yorkshire, where the needs of children are assessed much earlier, decisions should be made by the court in a single hearing and the impact on children of the conflict between their parents is the central focus of family court advisers and the court.

Since our strategy was published in June 2023, our commitment to improve the experiences of child and adult victims in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor has hardened. Almost two thirds of private law proceedings require the harm children have experienced as victims of domestic abuse to be assessed and advice given accordingly to the court. Both they and their protective adults need ever more thought and understanding given to the impact of this violence on them. The arrangements for children to spend time with family members needs to be safe, it needs to be in their best interests and proceedings need to be ceased when they are being

used as means of further control and harm. We have and continue to be in strong partnership with SafeLives – the national charity supporting survivors of domestic abuse whose specialist expertise we utilise to set out further practice improvement we need to make. In this third year of the strategy, our partnership and practice programmes in respect of domestic abuse will be central to the ambition we have to improve both child and adult experiences of family court proceedings.

The [Ofsted inspection](#) in January 2024 reported on the dedication and commitment of all of our people. The impact of their work in all roles and capacities was recognised and described. The intention of leaders at Cafcass to secure children at the heart of everything was reported as being exceptional. The judgement of 'outstanding' is a testimony that we make a serious and sustained positive difference to the lives of many children.

But we are an organisation wanting to do more – more for the children who are not offered an exceptional experience yet, more for the children in the regions and teams where outstanding work isn't sustained all of the time. 'Listening to children – lighting the way' was the title of the 2024 Bridget Lindley lecture, given by our Chief Executive in March 2024. Its relevance to Cafcass' strategic ambition is simple: regardless of the complexity, regardless of the parental conflict that obscures the children, regardless of how much improvement we need to make and regardless of how right we think we are as adults, it is the children alone whose experiences should guide us and whose voices are the light to follow. This is what the enhancements to this third year ahead will intend.




PRACTICE: Year 1 and year 2 progress

Priority 1

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).



Priority 2

Seek out and learn from feedback


Because more of our work will be good or better if we ask for and act on feedback.



Priority 3

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.



The work we have been doing and why we have been doing it

Introduced a private law improvement programme and private law practice quality standards – to provide clear expectations about practice effectiveness and professional standards

Established a Domestic Abuse Practice Reference Group and introduced a new Domestic Abuse Practice policy – to further improve our work with children and families where domestic abuse is a factor

Introduced and reviewed our management oversight and supervision arrangements – so there are clearer expectations about when the advice of a manager should be sought and recorded

Increased the proportion of children receiving a personalised introduction and goodbye letter – so the work with children is relationship led and they are able to describe their experiences and feel safer to do so

Increased opportunities for children and families to provide feedback through QR codes, online surveys and in local audits – so children and families can tell us about their experiences and we learn alongside

Established a new Complaints and Correspondence function and appointed a dedicated Children’s Complaint’s Manager – to encourage feedback from children, to respond to them quickly, to learn from them and to listen to everyone’s experiences more carefully when they complain

Introduced a new learning framework – to formalise how we learn and change when children are harmed or killed and have been or are involved in family law proceedings

Introduced improvement plans for each Operational Service area with progress reviewed every six months and annually through performance boards – so we have assurance that every team in every area is prioritising ways of working that help us to offer exceptional experiences to children and families

Initiated a case progression and closure programme – to reduce delay for children and ensure they remain involved with Cafcass for only as long as they need to be

Developed our Ofsted inspection improvement plan – *Listening to Children – Lighting the Way* – to build on the improvements we have made in the last three years and continue to narrow the gap between the best performers and those falling behind on our ‘best for children’ measures

What has changed for children?

“% of our work assessed in audit as ‘good’ or ‘better’ has reduced from 78.5% in December 2023 to 72.5% in December 2024. In the 2024-25 practice quality audit, a higher % of work to first hearing in private law proceedings was judged to require improvement. Specifically, this means that auditors found that some safeguarding letters needed to be clearer about the safety of children in existing or proposed contact arrangements. It also means that there is not enough improvement against our ambition that all children everywhere have a good or better experience with Cafcass which is why we retain a national improvement plan and three targeted programmes for public and private law and proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

Family court advisers and children’s guardians **recognise adult and child victims of domestic abuse** and assess harm and risk through this reported and lived experience

Increase in the % of assessment and child’s plans with a management review in public law but a reduction in private law – 92.7% public law and 88.9% private law from April – Jan 2024/25 (from 91.8% and 91.4% in the same period 2023/24). Management reviews of children’s plans are a fundamental safeguard and are required in accordance with practice quality standards. This is why they remain as an improvement priority to enable more consistency in practice and the advice given to the family court

9 in 10 children are seen in person and they receive better accounts of what has happened in their proceedings and why

We are receiving more feedback in public and private law proceedings – 788 records in public law in 2023/24 (up 58% from 2022/23) and 1,744 in private law (up 47% since 2022/23). 80.3% positive feedback in public law and 66.3% positive feedback in private law

Increased the number of children’s complaints as part of our active seeking out of children’s feedback – up from 12 to 24 complaints. We uphold all children’s complaints and explain our learning points in letters to them


National learning is more consistent – we convene learning reviews and issue practice alerts that relate directly to children’s cases and we host a national internal learning conference

Reduction in the number of children in open public law proceedings – 3,058 children open 52+ weeks as of 1st February 2025 (907 children/22.9% reduction when compared to the same time last year)

Reduction in the average duration of closed children’s cases – S31 Care and Supervision cases took on average 39 weeks in Q3 2024/25 (5 week reduction compared to Q3 2023/24) and in private law where further work is ordered after the first hearing, work took on average 55 weeks (down by 4 weeks)

Reduction in the number of children in open private law proceedings – 5,701 children open 52+ weeks as of 1st February 2025 (1,522 children/21.1% reduction when compared to the same time last year)

Introduced a new internal process for writing personalised letters to children and independent reviewing officers to help adults who are important to children, explain safely and respectfully what has and will be happening to them and why



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PEOPLE: Year 1 and year 2 progress

Priority 4

Attract, engage and retain people

Because children and families are best served by diverse, motivated and skilled people.



Priority 5

Provide a modern child-focused working environment

Because modern offices and systems help us do better work with children and families.



Priority 6

Lead and govern well

Because good leaders and strong decision-making are safer for children and families.



The work we have been doing and why we have been doing it

Developed career and learning pathways – to retain colleagues and improve personal and professional development. Specifically, we have introduced new roles of consultant family court advisers, assistant service managers and senior service managers

Hosted our second and third annual colleague surveys – to engage our people, to take their feedback on how well we are doing as an employer and to prioritise what makes for a happier and more productive place where we can support children and their families

For our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategy, we have continued to host the Brilliant Leaders programmes – to promote and support Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic colleagues in their leadership and management development

Opened our third regional child and family hub, our London Gray’s Inn office – to provide a modern, effective and safe work environment for colleagues so that the best work can go on in child-centred family rooms and in a place where children feel looked after and secure

Continued improvement of our case management system, ChildFirst – to enable good access and accurate recording of children’s records

Launched the new Cafcass website – to make it easier for children, adults and professionals to access information about Cafcass and our services

Reviewed and relaunched the induction process – so that new colleagues feel well supported and equipped to fulfil their roles

Introduced new Management Quality Standards – to provide clear expectations about how leaders and managers are expected to work and requiring an annual self-assessment against the standards to support personal objectives and development

Updated our Performance and Learning Review system – to support effective conversations between managers and colleagues about their wellbeing, their effectiveness, work objectives and development opportunities

Reviewed and reissued our performance and accountability framework – with a new local accountability cycle to strengthen the local leadership and reporting of learning, improving and leading well. The Cafcass recovery board now also oversees improvement progress regionally as well as nationally

What has changed for children?

12-month turnover for social work workforce has stabilised nationally – 15.4% compared to 17% for the local authority children’s social work force, though some areas of the country remain under pressure because they cannot recruit. This means directly that children will wait longer to meet their family court adviser

Corporate and Professional 12-month turnover has improved – 8.5% which is 0.6% lower than last year and means that the people who help provide an environment for the best social work to happen are staying longer and children benefit alongside

35 colleagues have taken part in the Brilliant leaders programme since its inception in May 2023. Children are benefitting from stronger understanding about their uniqueness that is being clearly reported to the court

High-quality rooms for children and families to engage with Cafcass colleagues – children say they love them! We have also improved the working environment to support colleagues to connect together and for leaders to be visible and available

Improvements in recording, case management and oversight – we have a much greater range of insight and management information into how well children are doing in proceedings and the quality and effectiveness of practice, including capturing reason for delay, and the inclusion of child(ren)’s diversity information on the Child’s Plan



Clearer information for parents in particular at a very stressful time in their lives as well as easier access for everyone to our published policies and statistics

Induction mandatory requirements are clear and feedback from new starters is good. This means children benefit from well equipped and motivated colleagues

Managers are clear about what is expected, their work and the consistency with which this is undertaken is improving

Performance and Learning Reviews are completed in 97% of instances where they are required and objectives are clearer – including the follow up about work that has been found to be inadequate for children

Mid and end year reviews of progress clearly describe improvement that is formally reported. Corporate management team reviews on a quarterly basis, operational service area progress with improvement plans and priorities




PARTNERS: Year 1 and year 2 progress

Priority
7

Improve children's experience of private law proceedings


Because some children and families need more help more quickly.



Priority
8

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.



Priority
9

Work with others to improve family justice

Because the family justice system has to serve children better than it does now.



The work we have been doing and why we have been doing it

Established with partners, a new Private law pathfinder site in Birmingham – to continue trialling a model for strengthening children's voices and providing earlier advice to the court in private law proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

Contributed to the external evaluation of the Dorset private law pathfinder court – to understand benefits and areas for improvement of seeing children earlier in private law proceedings

Commenced the national implementation of a new practice model in private law where a Rule 16.4 guardian is appointed for children – to reduce delay in the most complex private law proceedings

Revised the terms of reference for the internal Recovery and Improvement Board – to enable closer oversight by senior leaders of regional variation, improvement priorities and operational service areas where prioritisation is activated

Completed a review of the children who are subject to deprivation of liberty orders – to support policy and practice discussions with Ofsted and the Department for Education about the experiences of and provision for these children

Regular monitoring of our progress against six national commitments to support the relaunch of the Public Law Outline – to renew focus on the legal requirement to conclude proceedings for children in 26 weeks

Published a second animation in our 'Taking me seriously' film series developed in collaboration with members of the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) – to help children understand what recommendations are and why it is important they are clearly understood

Developed a new partners strategy – to enable more consistent engagement with our strategic priorities

Developed a new success measures framework aligned to the national family justice board priorities – to support timely outcomes and improved experiences for children and families in the family justice system

What has changed for children?

Proceedings appear shorter under the pathfinder pilot – early evidence based on a small cohort indicates that for pathfinder court cases in Birmingham, it took an average of 16.4 weeks to reach a final decision for children where Cafcass filed a Child Impact Report in private law cases closed in Q3 2024/25. In comparison, for the same period it took an average of 55 weeks nationally in cases where Cafcass is ordered to do work after the first hearing under the Child Arrangements Programme model

Changes to the recovery board have been made at the end of year two of this plan and so it is too early to report progress. Data domains are now clearer with reports taken on operations and the resources functions so that the whole organisation commitment to improvement is overseen


Analysis of 180 children subject to deprivation of liberty applications – showed that many of the children had significant childhood trauma, additional needs, very specifically those relating to autistic spectrum disorders. The report influenced the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill in respect of prospective accommodation provision

35% S31 (care and supervision) proceedings closed in 26 weeks or less for Q3 2024/25 – an improvement of 5% compared to the same quarter in 2023/24. Alongside this, there is a **reduction in the number of children in long running public and private law proceedings over 100 weeks** – 2,604 children in January 2025 compared to 3,573 children in January 2024

This film series is a central part of our commitment to improving information and engagement with children and young people so that they can influence and be less intimidated by their own court proceedings

Our engagement with partners is improving and we are able to ask on behalf of children, what difference an initiative or a change will make for them. It is becoming more important that we represent their voices and experiences in national system change and specifically the voices of children and their protective adults who are victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Data is published quarterly in the Cafcass open public board, reporting on our contribution to the national family justice priorities. In addition, we provide a quarterly detailed report on progress against Public Law Outline commitments at the family justice board



Priorities for Year 3 of Ambitious for Children 2023 – 2026

PRACTICE: WHAT ARE WE GOING TO PRIORITISE FOR YEAR 3 OF THIS STRATEGIC PLAN AND WHY?

Priority 1

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)

Prioritise targeted improvement programmes for public and private law and further improving practice where domestic abuse is a factor in proceedings – including increased review of all previous proceedings, criminal histories and police information in advice and reports to the family court. Understanding harm and the risk of further harm to children and adults in their context as victims of domestic abuse

Review and protect family court adviser caseloads – so they can work effectively with children to reduce delays by progressing cases effectively and reviewing the arrangements for children who have yet to meet their family court adviser (duty and post assessment hub priorities)

Enhance the use of our Together practice framework materials and aids – so that our in-person work with children is well supported and innovative

Further increase the effectiveness of management oversight and supervision arrangements – targeting teams where this is less consistent and revise the management quality standard, applying formal performance improvement action when practice and/or leadership is not at the required standard

Priority 2

Seek out and learn from feedback
Because more of our work will be good or better if we ask for and act on feedback

Review and evaluate our strategy for learning from feedback – to enhance learning in operational service areas, to start a monthly ‘listen and learn’ conversation in all teams and to require annual ‘evidence in a learning summary’ at annual regional performance boards

Act on learning from complaints, compliments and significant incidents – by continuing to review learning from complaints and significant incidents alongside the practice alerts and changes we are requiring

Priority 3

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

Further embed the use and oversight of operational service area improvement plans, including those with targeted support – to prioritise consistent good practice and to do this by formalising twice yearly progress reports to corporate management team in addition to revised expectations at annual performance boards

Improve the efficiency of closing children’s cases – by establishing a formal case progression programme and working with HMCTS to secure the swift and effective sharing of court orders

Embed the performance, accountability and quality assurance frameworks – by reviewing the implementation and effectiveness of the new local Performance and Practice quarterly reviews and extending performance boards to the National Improvement Service and Corporate and Business Services functions



Priorities for Year 3 of Ambitious for Children 2023 – 2026

PEOPLE: WHAT ARE WE GOING TO PRIORITISE FOR YEAR 3 OF THIS STRATEGIC PLAN AND WHY?

Priority 4

Attract, engage and retain people
Because children and families are best served by diverse, motivated and skilled people

Prioritise wellbeing, reward and recognition – including strengthening the immediate support available to practitioners and managers affected by death or serious injury to children with whom they are working through a new wellbeing and reflective practice programme. Additionally, implement a revised process for reviewing and reducing sickness absence and embed our internal recognition programme to celebrate and notice success

Implement the next phase of the Cafcass social work academy – to increase the intake of newly qualified social workers and to work in partnership with the Judiciary and Social Work England to develop a new mandatory training module for Cafcass practitioners on domestic abuse in family court proceedings, specifically addressing the requirements of Practice Direction 12J

Develop a targeted attraction and retention offer for operational service areas where it is needed – to enable sustained allocation of all existing and new casework and a reduction in turnover of family court advisers, as well as developing a workforce readiness assessment in respect of the anticipated further implementation of private law reform associated with the pathfinder courts

Priority 5

Provide a modern child-focused working environment
Because modern offices and systems help us do better work with children and families

Implement a new health, safety and security priority – to set out our response to and action that will be taken when colleagues are threatened by adult parties and/or their family members in proceedings, alongside guidance for managers on follow up actions, a management information report to catalogue trends and frequency of threats, and a quarterly report to the corporate management team and Cafcass Audit and Risk Committee

Continue with improvements to the ChildFirst case management system – to support effective recording and reporting of our work in children’s cases, including engagement and work with independent reviewing officers from local authorities and the facility to record and report the extent to which the courts accept the advice given in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

Further implement the Cafcass Estates strategy – to reinforce relationship-led practice in new or existing offices and reviewing all 33 existing Cafcass offices to determine the extent to which they enable the effective engagement with children and offer a safe, welcoming and secure space for our colleagues

Priority 6

Lead and govern well
Because good leaders and strong decision-making are safer for children and families

Embed our leadership and management quality standards – adding a leadership development objective to be reviewed twice yearly in Performance and Learning Review meetings as well as continuing with the offer of an annual leadership conference for all managers

Revise our equality, diversity and inclusion strategy – including the commission of a new inclusive leaders programme, new insights into the heritage of adults in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor and seeking to achieve advanced accreditation as an employer supporting colleagues who are carers

Continue to review and plan for the succession of leaders with the Cafcass Board – and specifically to secure the appointment of a new National Director of Operations and an established senior team for operations

Priorities for Year 3 of Ambitious for Children 2023 – 2026

PARTNERS: WHAT ARE WE GOING TO PRIORITISE FOR YEAR 3 OF THIS STRATEGIC PLAN AND WHY?

Priority 7

Improve children’s experience of private law proceedings

Because some children and families need more help more quickly

Evaluate our learning from the private law pathfinder courts – and work with Ministry of Justice to fully evaluate the effectiveness of the reforms, to understand the caseload and throughput efficiencies for Cafcass when compared to the Child Arrangements Programme, the resourcing requirements associated with seeing all children in private law proceedings and the extent of improved experiences for adult and child victims in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

Determine the requirements of new commission for the Improving Child and Family Arrangements programme – in partnership with Ministry of Justice, prepare and tender for a new contract that prioritises support for parents to make and sustain safe family time arrangements that are in children’s best interests

Prioritise the partnership aspect of the targeted improvement programmes for private law and domestic abuse – in partnership with the Judiciary, the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, SafeLives and the Cafcass practice expert group, monitor and review the effective implementation of the new Domestic Abuse Practice policy specifically as it relates to the safety of family time arrangements for children as well as implementing new arrangements for r16.4 proceedings to reduce delay and prioritise the welfare and safety of children

Priority 8

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

Record and report on the extent to which Cafcass advice influences outcomes for children – to enable tracking and reporting of court order outcomes against Cafcass advice and recommendations through updates to our case management system, ChildFirst

Increase our understanding of and influence on regional variation in public and private law proceedings – to work with local family justice boards to improve regional consistency and compliance with the Public Law Outline for public law proceedings

Priority 9

Work with others to improve family justice

Because the family justice system has to serve children better than it does now

Continue to enhance our work with partners – working with Ministry of Justice, the Judiciary and the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner to engage in strategic planning associated with private law reforms and to partner with SafeLives and the Cafcass Domestic Abuse Practice Reference Group to improve practice in proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

Further enable children to understand and participate in their proceedings – to continue to support and lead the practice principles and learning associated with the Department for Education pilot of a protocol before the first case management hearing. The key practice change is for children’s guardians and local authority social workers to agree a timetable and review care plans early so that this work does not take up valuable court hearing time

Continue to improve processes to share information efficiently and effectively – in partnership with HMCTS, support testing and implementation of the private law portal, and develop a timescale for inclusion on C100 application of information regarding heritage and faith

National Family Justice System (FJS) Success Measures: Summary data

FJS Objective 1: TIMELINESS

Ensure children and families have timely outcomes

The number of children on open cases running over 52 weeks has decreased as of 31 January 2025 – by 907 children/22.9% to 3,058 children in public law (compared to 3,965 on 31 Jan 2024), and by 1,522 children/21.1% to 5,701 children in private law (compared to 7,223 on 31 Jan 2024)

More children’s cases are closing within 26 weeks – between October and December 2024, there was a 5% increase to 35.1% in S31 Care and Supervision cases closing in 26 weeks or less (compared to 30.1% in October – December 2023), and a 3.0% increase to 59.2% in section 8 cases closing in this period (compared to 56.2% in October – December 2023)

FJS Objective 2: EFFICIENCY

Ensure the family justice system runs efficiently with the resources available

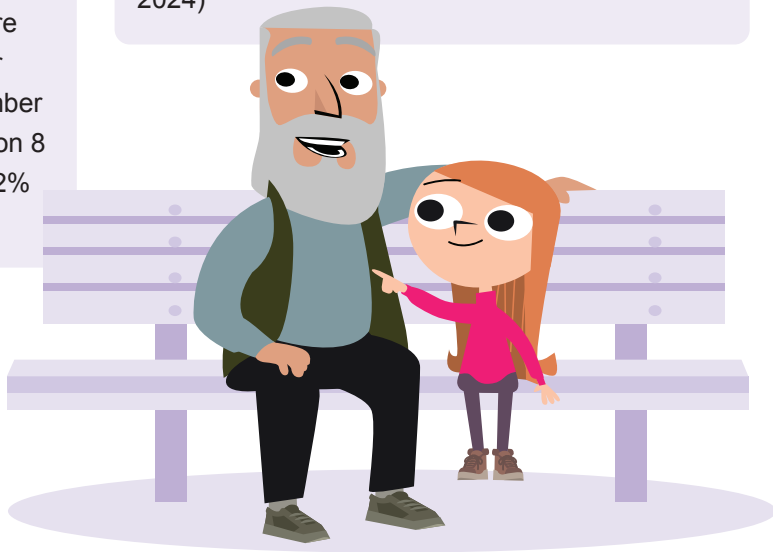
Open children’s cases are reducing as of 31 January 2025 – there was a 6.8% decline to 19,496 children/11,136 cases on open public law children’s cases (compared to 20,929 children/11,852 cases on 31 January 2024), and a 11.3% decline to 24,658 children/16,406 cases on open private law children’s cases (compared to 27,792 children/18,244 cases on 31 January 2024)

FJS Objective 3: EXPERIENCE

Improve the experiences of children and families in proceedings

The number of children with a recorded child engagement on eligible cases has increased – as of 31 January 2025, 97% (24,527) children on eligible cases had child engagement recorded in line with expectations (an increase of 0.5% compared to 31 January 2024), with 92.7% (23,447) having at least one ‘in-person’ engagement recorded (an increase of 2% compared to 31 January 2024)

Continued improvements in the percentage of audited practice with all personalised letters and explanatory notes present and appropriate at the time of audit – in public law practice, there was a significant increase to 60.6% for cases audited between 1 April 2024 to 31 January 2025 (compared to 45.6% for cases audited 1 April 2023 to 31 January 2024). In private law practice, the percentage of cases with all personalised letters and explanatory notes present and appropriate at the time of audit increased to 78.7% for the same period (compared to 68.4% for the previous corresponding period)



We welcome your feedback

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