



Summary report following the court reviews undertaken by the Family Justice Young People's board during 2017.

Background

In 2015, the FJYPB have completed 12 court reviews across England and 4 across Wales. The President of the Family Division, Sir James Munby, further commissioned the FJYPB to review a further nine family courts areas across DFJ areas in England.

Purpose

Visiting the court presented an opportunity for members of the FJYPB to undertake a review of court facilities and services in a DFJ area and to share findings and recommendations in a report. The main areas of the court buildings that members have reviewed are the security area, the waiting/reception area, the court room, judge's chambers and the toilet facilities. The reviews also considered how child-friendly the court staff presented. During the review and, at the judge's discretion, FJYPB members met with the judge(s) to discuss how judges hear the views of children and young people and the barriers that judges think prevent this.

The court reviews are part of a much larger commitment of the FJYPB to develop and promote a more child-inclusive family justice system amongst key agencies. Their aspirations are laid out in the FJYPB [National Charter](#).

Identified judicial areas

The nine judicial areas reviewed by the FJYPB were:

1. Central Family Court (London)
2. West London
3. Gloucester
4. Stoke-on-Trent
5. Nottingham
6. Teesside
7. Kent
8. Cumbria
9. Plymouth

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Key Findings

SECURITY	The FJYPB recognise that security is essential in all court buildings to protect professional staff, children and families.
1	FJYPB members found the security guards were friendly and the process was very quick but some members found the security experience slightly intimidating and not entirely child-friendly as the process was not always explained and members did not know what to expect. Specifically, when items were taken from members and not explained as to why.
2	In 2015, the FJYPB devised an e-learning training module with HMCTS that is aimed at all court staff including the security staff to increase their awareness of the needs of children and young people in the court arena.
COMMENTS:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HMCTS are yet to finalise the e-learning training module and it is suggested that this be completed and delivered as a priority.</i> 	

Waiting Areas, Private rooms and Family Rooms	The FJYPB are aware that children and young people attend court daily to either; visit the judge or magistrate, attend a criminal court or more commonly attend with a family member who is due in court.
1	The FJYPB found that all the courts visited do take great care to offer as much support as possible to children, young people and vulnerable adults. These individuals can access the building via a separate entrance/exit and a separate waiting area is also made available to them. However, it is not ideal that in some of the court visited the routes in which people need to take to access these private rooms can require them to walk escorted through staff offices. This may cause people to feel intimidated.
2	In the waiting area for family matters at Carlisle Combined Court In the corner was a small table with some crayons, with chairs suitable for pre-school children. The FJYPB were informed that children can ask the court usher for a colouring in sheet and were pleased to see that some of the completed pictures from children were displayed on the wall. This is very important for attending children and young people as it provides reassurance to them that other children and young people have been to court.
3	Gloucester and Cheltenham Family Court Hearing Centre does not offer a video link room and along with Kent they do not offer a designated family rooms. Children and Young people are offered consultation rooms which are simple rooms with table and chairs. The FJYPB members were disappointed by this considering that many court are closing and as a result children and young people have little or no resources and “safe spaces” available to them.
4	The FJYPB noted that there were lots of notice boards in the main public waiting areas. The leaflets and forms were tidy and well-organised, however most of the information posters were aimed at adults with no information for children or young people.

5	The FJYPB have devised an example notice that hosts important information for children and young people about what they can expect when meeting with a judge, feedback form, FJYPB glossary of terms and details about key services for children and young people, such as; ChildLine, NYAS and Young Minds.
6	Most of the courts visited provided toys and resources suitable and young people of all ages. The courts are reliant on donations of toys and as a result some of the courts did not have a variety of resources available.
7	Teesside Combined Court has an agreement with a local sandwich shop that provides reasonably priced hot and cold food and refreshments during set hours of each day. People using the court are informed of the café and are invited to use it. Also, if people are using the witness suite the volunteers will support people to make an order and they will collect food on their behalf. Kent also offers a café, however the FJYPB found this to be expensive and it did not offer a children's menu.
8	Some of the courts buildings host a pray room and a breastfeeding room. The FJYPB were encouraged by this and felt that both would provide a good service to members of the public should they require it.

COMMENTS:

- *Members of the FJYPB felt that by asking the usher for a colouring in sheet may be intimidating for some children, especially if the usher looks 'busy' they may not wish to ask them directly. It is recommended that a few colouring sheets are always available on the small table and the usher can replenish them when needed. Additional to colouring in sheets the FJYPB would suggest that puzzles are made available such as: word searches, sudoku's and crosswords etc. Puzzle books and colouring in books can be sourced very cheaply and then photocopied endlessly and provided to children and young people.*
- *HMCTS have agreed to the notice board and are due to send out the resources for this notice board in the coming weeks to all courts in England and Wales.*
- *The FJYPB actively encourage services to obtain feedback from adults, children and young people. The FJYPB recommend that a mechanism for adults, children and young people to feedback is provided. The FJYPB have produced a feedback form for courts which is part of the notice board resource to be distributed by HMCTS.*
- *It is also suggested that a "You Said, We Did" board could be produced and displayed in the public areas to show to visitors of the court that their feedback about the court is taken on board.*
- *The FJYPB felt that the Café in Teesside Combined Court is a great local service and one that offers very good value good and refreshments for waiting families.*

- The FJYPB strongly advice that each court provides a family waiting room or at the very least an area within the public waiting area that could be designated for children and young people that provides some toys, resources and the FJYPB notice Board.
- It is the view of the FJYPB that all courts should have video link facilities available, especially for those who are required to give evidence.



****Additional information****

Following the FJYPB court review undertaken at the Manchester Civil Justice Centre in 2015, the court begun offering Court Access Days for young people who have been or who are currently subject to Care Proceedings to visit the court and offers the opportunity to speak to a judge and to ask questions. This was intended to show how different a family court is to the way images are portrayed on the TV. This also showed how parents have their say when they are at court. Additionally, in recognition of those children and young people who maybe too anxious to visit court but want to visualise the environment, Manchester CJC have worked with the University of Salford and devised a virtual reality experience of the building, court room and includes an introduction for HHJ Newton.

Judges meeting children and young people

The FJYPB acknowledge that judges meeting with children and people may not always be appropriate perhaps due to a child's age or understanding, nevertheless the Board does encourage that judicial members remain open-minded on this issue and endeavour to meet with a child or young person who has submitted a request.

1	The FJYPB were given the opportunity to see inside some of the different types of court rooms, all of which seemed appropriate and would not be found to be too intimidating for children and young people. Most of the court rooms also had video links for those who required it.
2	The majority of the DFJ's that the FJYPB spoke to acknowledge the significance for children and young people to meet with them during their proceedings. Many of the DFJ's spoke of enjoying meeting with children and young people and have an understanding that most judges now meet with children and young people when a request is submitted.
3	Judges have stated that they do not get many requests to meet directly with children and young people.
4	It was found that magistrates very rarely meet with children and young people it is felt that this is due to not receiving requests to do so.

COMMENTS:

- The FJYPB support children and young people having the opportunity to meet with the judge. It is recognised that there are financial implications for all organisations involved with this.
- HHJ Forrester at Carlisle Combined Court commented that she writes back to the children and young from whom she has received a letter from. This practice is one that the FJYPB very much welcome and hope that more judges and magistrates are encouraged by and will endorse.

Summary

The FJYPB members have been welcomed at each of the courts visited and they have found that the staff have been encouraged by the individual recommendations in specific areas within each court building. A significant improvement found by the FJYPB members since the last review undertaken in 2015 is that many more judges are willing to and have met with children and young people. There does however, appear to be a continued gap regarding magistrates meeting with children and young people.

Key Recommendations:

1. Each court to host an allocated space or family room.
2. Route for people to access video link rooms or private waiting areas are in some courts not ideal and can mean that they must walk through staff areas.
3. Video link room to be installed at Gloucester and Cheltenham Family Hearing centre.
4. The FJYPB encourage HMCTS to distribute the Children and Young People's notice board as a priority.
5. HMCTS to complete and disseminate the e-learning training module for court staff and security guards.
6. The FJYPB would recommend that feedback forms are developed as an effective method for children and young people to feedback about the court building, meeting the staff and their general overall experience.

Please note: that Key Recommendations **4, 5** and **6** were originally listed in the 2015 Court Overview report. The FJYPB hope that these recommendations can be implemented as a priority.

