



Cafcass Board Meeting Minutes
Thursday 29 January 2026, 13.30 to 15.30
70 Gray's Inn Road, London

Present

Sally Cheshire, Chair
Catherine Doran, Board member
Catharine Seddon, Board member
Dal Babu, Board member
Eileen Munro, Board member and Deputy Chair
Helen Jones, Board member
Mandy Jones, Board member
Peter Fish, Board member
Steven Cox, Board member
Keisha Wilson, Boardroom Apprentice

In attendance - Cafcass

Chris O'Brien, Head of Resourcing
Dawn Goodwin, Assistant Director (Principal Social Worker)
Gemma Hewison, National Director of Operations
Helen Johnston, Assistant Director (Policy)
Holly Earthey, Corporate Officer (Secretariat Services)
Jacky Tiotto, Chief Executive Officer
Jen Skila, Chief People Officer
Julia Dark, Head of CEO Office
Julie Brown, Director of Resources
Merryn Hockaday, Head of Communications
Nicola Blakebrough, Corporate Manager (Secretariat Services)
Rebecca Anderson, Head of Programmes and Change
Shabana Jaffar, Head of Legal Services
Sophie Kershaw, Assistant Director (Strategic Programme Development and Change)
Theresa Leavy, National Director Private Law Reform

FJYPB and Ministry of Justice (MoJ)

Luke Taylor, MoJ representative
Shreya, FJYPB representative (attending remotely)

Apologies

Barry Tilzey, Assistant Director (Performance and Quality Assurance)
Clare Mayne, Assistant Director -with additional responsibilities
Michelle Evans, Assistant Director -with additional responsibilities
Sarah Parsons, Deputy Director Special Projects

1. Introduction from the Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged that there were stakeholders and members of the public observing the meeting via Zoom. No questions had been received in advance of the meeting. Questions could be submitted after the meeting, and these would receive a written response.

1.1 Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed the new National Director of Operations who had commenced the role in January 2026 and was attending her first meeting. The previous National Director of Operations was transitioning to the role of Director for Private Law Reform.

The Deputy Director Special Projects (Sarah Parsons) would retire at the end of March 2026, and she was thanked for her contribution to the organisation. Apologies were noted.

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 Monday 3 November 2025 were approved as an accurate record.

It was noted that Board member, Helen Jones, was the Board lead for the HMCTS private law portal. The rollout of the portal had been delayed and a new date was yet to be confirmed.

2. Family Justice Young People's Board update

The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) representative presented the update. 12 new members had joined the FJYPB since April 2025. The FJYPB had received 325 commissions in 2025 which was a 21% increase in commissions compared to the previous year. 80% of commissions were received from Cafcass. It was questioned which other organisations could/should be commissioning work from the FJYPB such as the Department for Education (DfE) and MPs.

Highlights of work that had taken place this year included recording the third animation film in the 'taking me seriously' series – 'meeting my Cafcass worker'; and meeting with the DfE, the President of the Family Division and the Chief Executive of Cafcass to discuss delays in the family courts. The 2026 Voice of the Child (VOTC) Conference would take place on Wednesday 29 July 2026 and a planning meeting would take place in April to discuss ideas and topics for the event.

The FJYPB representative advised on the priorities for 2025-28 and the linked work programmes, for example as part of seeing and engaging with children the FJYPB had been helping create a new app called 'In My Words' and also contributed to the Ambitious for Children Week events by sharing their lived experiences.

The end of year FJYPB meeting had taken place on 6 December 2025 to reflect on achievements and to celebrate members by presenting awards. Award categories included: feedback champion; influence in action; and supportive ally award.

The FJYPB and the representative were thanked for their hard work and contribution as well as the FJYPB support team.

3. Chief Executive Officer and Corporate Management Team Overview

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

Part 1 – Demand, performance and operational practice

Demand and performance headlines – quarter 3 2025/2026

The Chief Executive reported that there had been a significant rise in demand from 1 April to 30 November 2025. There had been 38,813 new children's cases which was an increase of 4.7%. Private law had experienced the biggest increase of 5.3% (1,376 children's cases) whilst public law had seen a 3.3% increase (361 children's cases). There had been an increase in Deprivation of Liberty Applications of 15.9% (+133 applications/ +138 children) compared to the same period last year.

Pathfinder courts were now active in the Dorset, Birmingham, Stoke, Worcester, Wolverhampton, West Yorkshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight court areas. On 1 December 2025 there were 1,567 children (1,051 cases) in Pathfinder proceedings (6.2% of all children in open private law proceedings). For children's cases closed between 1 July and 30 September 2025 under Pathfinder, the average duration in which Cafcass delivered an assessment decision for information, advice, and guidance sharing, and filed a Child Impact Report was 9.1 weeks. When Cafcass had provided a Child Impact Report for an assessment decision for a harm and/or welfare assessment of the child(ren) the average duration was 23.1 weeks.

The average number of open children's cases for social workers at end of November 2025, was 18.4 for long-term teams (compared to 18.6 in November 2024). For Work To First Hearing teams in private law, the average was 34.5 (32.6 in November 2024).

In the last 3 months, 1,154 local audits were completed with an additional 302 local audits undertaken as part of the national quality assurance. 70.0% of work assessed in the National Domestic Abuse Practice Quality Audit (February 2025) was graded as Good or Outstanding.

It was noted that there was disparity between Cafcass data on closed private law children's cases where domestic abuse was identified, to that reported in the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report on Family Court Reviewing and Reporting Mechanism. Cafcass reported that a total of 16,547 (c 26,500 children) private law children's cases were closed where domestic abuse was identified, representing 56.6% of all closures compared to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report which reported approximately 80%. The Cafcass data was new data and included all private law work, not just private law work under the Child Arrangements Programme. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner Report included public law work as well as private law work in their figures. It was recognised that a consistent measure was required.

There was discussion around the extent of Cafcass's ability to influence partners around domestic abuse practice, for example the police and local authorities. It was noted that Private Law Reform (Pathfinder) was aimed at improving the experiences of child victims of domestic abuse. The importance of data sharing with other organisations and agencies, for example, community safety units, in a safe manner to enable the courts to have all the information to make a decision was highlighted along with the importance of attending Local Family Justice Boards (LFJBs) and working together with Local Safeguarding Partnerships.

Family Justice System Objectives

The Chief Executive provided an update on the progress against the Family Justice System objectives. In the last 12 months there had been a 20.7% decrease, (1,878 fewer children), in proceedings lasting more than 52 weeks. However, at the end of November 2025, there were still 7,182 children (4,263 children's cases) whose cases had been open for 52 weeks and of these 1,781 children (1,082 cases) had been open for 100 weeks or longer.

The importance of sending personalised letters to children was recognised. 75.5% of audited work showed personalised introduction letters in public law (an increase of 15.7% from the previous year). In private law 84.2% of audited files showed personalised introduction letters (an increase of 5.5% from the previous year). Children's responses to Cafcass' recommendations being included in reports was a priority.

In the year to date, (1 April to 30 November 2025) Cafcass had received 4,204 reflections (feedback) from children and families from audits and Digital Feedback systems. 2,393 of these (57%) were positive and there was a focus to increase the amount of positive feedback received.

Adjusted national improvement plan priorities 2025/2026 following Ofsted focused visit - private law proceedings where domestic abuse is a factor

The national improvement plan priorities had been adjusted and updated, incorporating the response to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Family Court Reporting and Review Mechanism report and actions from the Ofsted focused visit. Actions included the review of safeguarding interviews, letters and attendance at dispute resolution appointments; further improvement work on reviewing criminal histories of adults applying for contact with children; and the reissue of the Domestic Abuse Practice Policy.

Reissue of Domestic Abuse Practice Policy

The Domestic Abuse Practice Policy had been reissued on 10 December 2025 following a review with feedback from Cafcass practitioners and partners including the judiciary, legal professionals, local family justice boards, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and Cafcass' Domestic Abuse Practice Reference Group. Learning was also identified from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Family Court Reporting and Review Mechanism report, published in October 2025. 10 amendments had been made to the policy and two annexes added: 1) Cafcass' position following the Government's announcement to repeal the presumption of parental involvement, and 2) guidance on the identification and analysis of sexually harmful adult behaviour. The next review of the policy would take place in 6 months (June 2026).

Part 2 – And in other news...

Learning: mid-year reviews for all 8 Cafcass regions

The Director for Private Law Reform advised that the mid-year reviews had taken place October to November 2025 and that 5 practice priorities, learning and areas of focus had been identified: seeing and engaging with every child; domestic abuse - risk analysis and practice quality; analysis and using the assessment and child's plan; reducing delay for children; effective management support, supervision, and oversight. The Chair acknowledged the consistent progress and improvement that had been made across the priorities.

Justice Select Committee

The Director of Resources advised that a session had taken place on 28 October 2025 on Reform of the Family Courts. In addition to the Chief Executive of Cafcass, the other witnesses that attended were the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Director of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The themes discussed included the current state of the family justice system and the pressures it's facing and family justice performance in which the Public Accounts Committee had recommended joint family justice data. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) representative commented that the system was working together to deliver change safely.

Part 3 – People and workforce

Workforce: Overview and update Quarter 3 2025-26

The Chief People Officer reported that as of 30 November 2025, the organisation employed 2,347 employees and locums (1,764 social workers and 583 business and corporate services staff). The turnover of social work staff was 14.2%, a reduction of 1.1% compared to last year,

however, regional variation across the country remained. As of 30 November 2025, the social work 3-month Average Working Days Lost (AWDL) due to sickness was 15.1 days – an increase of 4 days compared to the same period last year. The 3-month AWDL for Corporate and Business Services teams was 11.7 days. The main reason for sickness absence continued to be non-work-related mental ill health.

Leadership priorities: Sickness absence, recruitment and retention

The Chief People Officer reported that as of end of November 2025, there were 139.9 FTE social work vacancies. In addition, there were 75.8 FTE vacancies pending confirmed new starters. A successful Head of Practice campaign was completed in November 2025 with all roles filled and a further targeted recruitment campaign for Family Court Advisers was underway.

There was discussion around whether there was sufficient capacity across the current candidate pipeline to implement reforms whilst maintaining child protection responsibilities, and whether a more constant recruitment pipeline was required. The Chief People Officer advised that forward recruitment was taking place in the areas in most need and work was underway to expand this further. It was questioned whether there was a known figure for the number of social workers required across the sector nationally, and how the promotion of studying social work could be achieved. It was advised that DfE were responsible for social work education.

Health, safety and security: Court and Office Security

The Director of Resources provided an update on physical security both in offices and courts. The Cafcass Health, Safety and Security Policy; Managing Unacceptable Behaviour Guidance; and Lone Working Guidance had been updated. Better safety for staff on the use of social media was recognised as a need. The interface between the courts and Cafcass was queried. Whilst protocols existed and were in place the Director of Resources was taking forward how these protocols were used in practice.

Part 4 – Priorities in the next period

Developing a new strategic plan – Sustaining ambition for children, accelerating progress 2026 – 2029

The Head of Programmes and Change advised that the development of the Strategic Plan and associated work programmes for 2026-2029 were underway. The title of the Strategic Plan would remain 'Ambitious for Children'. Staff engagement events would take place from January through to March 2026 and a partners' engagement event had taken place on Wednesday 28 January 2026. The finalised plan was due to be published in May 2026.

Improving children's experiences in Private Law proceedings - progress

The Director for Private Law Reform updated the Board on the current position of Pathfinder and highlighted that feedback provided from FCAs indicated they preferred the model (compared to the Child Arrangements Programme) as it enabled them to see children earlier and improved their assessments. As the number of hearings reduced under the Pathfinder model, additional space to list public law hearings in courts had been observed.

It was acknowledged that the implementation of the Pathfinder model required Cafcass to transform its organisational structures operationally and corporately, as well as its strategic and workforce plans. Whilst it was known that Cafcass would need to recruit a significant number of additional social workers it was queried whether local authorities would be in a similar position as they were directed to complete more assessments under the model. To

mitigate the risk relating to the recruitment of social workers, 'alternatively qualified professionals' were being scoped as a potential option to maximise the available social work capacity. Reassurance on the delegation of work and the intended training and support for these staff was provided. It was clarified that only the court could order social work/assessments to be completed so there would be a limit on the number of tasks and type of work that alternatively qualified professionals could undertake, the idea was to free up social work capacity to complete social work. The weighting and role of the Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) assessment was queried. It advised that the IDVA assessment would not shape the Cafcass assessment as the independence of the FCA remained, the court would be provided with all the information to make a decision.

The MoJ representative highlighted that fidelity to the model was key and that a Target Operating Model was being developed. A business case was also in progress to identify further funding for Cafcass to implement the model. It was queried whether 'Target Operating Model' was the appropriate language for a child focused system. Whilst fidelity to the model was appreciated it was highlighted that within this a certain degree of flexibility needed to remain as there would be regional nuances and therefore a strict standardisation across the country may not always be appropriate.

Taking Me Seriously Film 3 – Meeting your Cafcass Worker

The Chief Executive introduced the third film in the 'taking me seriously' series – 'meeting your Cafcass worker'.

The two previous films in the series – 'letting you know how we help' and 'sharing recommendations with you' were available to watch on the Cafcass website.

4. Reports from Committees

Performance and Quality Committee

The Committee had last met on 8 January 2026 and received and discussed the Strategic Progress Reports on the Practice pillar, Public Law Improvement Programme (PLIP), Private Law Improvement Programme (PrLIP) and the domestic abuse improvement programme. The Committee also received an update on the learning themes identified in the mid-year reviews and improvement journey updates for specific Operational Service Areas. The benefits and risks of the Pathfinder model were also discussed.

Private Law Improvement Programme sub-Committee

The sub-Committee had last met on 27 November 2025 and had explored a deep dive into Workstream 1 – Reduce delay for all children in private law: Reduce to zero all private law proceedings over 100 weeks.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee

The Committee had last met on 4 December 2025 and formally signed off on the Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25 prior to it being laid before Parliament. The Chair thanked all practice, corporate and business services staff for their contribution. The Committee had received an update on information assurance and business continuity plans.

People Committee

The People Committee had last met on 20 November 2025. Updates were provided to the Committee on workforce measures including discussions around recruitment and sickness absence. An update on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion priorities and Health, Safety and Security were provided. Arrangements would be made for the People Committee to meet quarterly (currently meets twice a year).

5. Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25

The Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25 had been laid before Parliament on 11 December 2025. The reporting process for 2025-26 would commence shortly.

6. Governance Reports

6.1 Finance

The Director of Resources advised that the current forecasting picture was steady. It was confirmed that the pay award had been processed in January 2026 payroll and backdated to April 2025 – this had not disrupted the forecasted position. Capital expenditure had been used within estates for office moves and refurbishments.

6.2 Risk

There were no additional risks to highlight than those that had been discussed.

7. Close

The Chair thanked presenters and attendees. The next Board meeting would take place on Thursday 30 April 2026.

Minutes approved by the Board Chair, Sally Cheshire, 30.04.26

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'S Cheshire', in dark ink.