



Ministry
of Justice



Department
for Education

Family Justice Board Meeting 25 March 2025

Attendees

Members

Lord Ponsonby (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Ministry of Justice) Co-Chair
 Janet Daby MP (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Education) Co-Chair
 Frances Oram (Portfolio Director, Children's Social Care Reform, DfE)
 Gemma Hewison (Director, Civil, Family, Tribunals and Administration of Justice, MOJ)
 Isabelle Trowler, (Chief Social Worker for Children and Families)
 Jacky Tiotto (Chief Executive, Cafcass)
 Nigel Brown, (Chief Executive, Cafcass Cymru)
 Sarah Johal (National Adoption Lead)
 Helen Lincoln (Executive Director for Children, Families & Education, Essex County Council)
 Albert Heaney (Director, Social Services, Welsh Government)

Apologies

Nick Goodwin (CEO, HM Courts and Tribunals Service) – covered by Jason Latham.
 Yvette Stanley, (National Director for Social Care, Ofsted) – covered by Jeremy Gleaden

Observers

Sir Andrew McFarlane (President of the Family Division)
 Representatives of the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB)
 Rebecca Roberts, (Chair of West Yorkshire Local Family Justice Board)

Meeting

Item 1: Co-Chairs' Introduction and Opening Remarks

1. Janet Daby MP (JD) welcomed members to the meeting, introduced herself as co-chair and outlined the agenda. During her introduction JD provided an overview of her background in children's social care and highlighted DfE priority areas across family justice, which included early intervention measures and the Children's Social Care Prevention Grant as part of direct investment into wider reforms.

Item 2: Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) Presentation

2. JD invited representatives from the FJYPB to discuss their recent work.
3. The FJYPB presented several recent achievements. This included successful recruitment of new members, with a focus on members with public law experience and from different parts of the UK, including Wales.

4. The FJYPB outlined work with Local Family Justice Boards (LFJBs) and their Chairs, encouraging the voice of the child to be a key focus in Board meetings. Other work covered included the 'Writing to children' toolkit supporting judges writing to children, and the development of Safe Family Time Guide for practitioners. The FJYPB highlighted that the next Voice of the Child Conference would be held on July 31st and that a film would be launched in May that had been produced with Adoption England highlighting the importance of maintaining relationships with birth families following adoption.
5. JD thanked the FJYPB for their presentation and ongoing work, including the recruitment of new members. Responding to a question from Board members, the FJYPB noted that members join from the ages of 7 to 25 and often stay for several years.

Item 3: National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: Intra-familial child sexual abuse

6. Members of the Panel introduced themselves and outlined the context for their review into child sexual abuse within the family environment, noting they had observed patterns of failures in multi-agency working, including barriers to talking about abuse and a reduced focus in this area leading to a loss of skills and experience in practice.
7. The Panel noted as overarching themes within the review an overrepresentation of black and minoritised communities, the prevalence of neglect in sexual abuse cases, and the link to prior histories of sexual offences. Key findings from fieldwork were presented and included: not hearing children's voices or understanding their needs, challenges in identifying signs of abuse, and challenges with raising and responding to concerns of intrafamilial child sexual abuse.
8. Recommendation 8 (see Annex A) was presented for consideration, with the Panel noting 10% of cases had involved the family court with a lack of appropriate information sharing flagged as a concern.
9. JD thanked the Panel for their presentation and noted that the introduction of a 'single unique identifier' for children as provided for in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill may help support multi-agency information sharing and risk assessment.
10. The Board discussed the review, including social work practice and the links to responses to domestic abuse. The Board noted risk to children in private law proceedings who are often less visible to statutory partners. Challenges related to fact-finding and evidence were discussed, including the merits of ensuring experienced social work practitioners were able to build a relationship and trust with a child to provide the right conditions for disclosure. JD noted the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse and the timeline to take forward remaining recommendations by Easter.
11. Members noted that the review's findings were sobering, agreeing there had been a lack of attention in this area in recent years. The need for renewed judicial training and improved system-wide responses to intra-familial sexual abuse were discussed. It was agreed that the findings of the review and implications for family justice practitioners should be proactively shared with Local Family Justice Boards so they could ensure this was factored into local programmes and action plans.

Item 4: Family Justice System Priorities for 2025-2026

12. MoJ officials noted headline progress against 2024/2025 priorities and briefly recapped the Board's steers from December's meeting ahead of introducing the recommended priorities for 2025/2026.
13. Four priorities, including national targets underpinned by regional improvement goals, were presented as outlined in Annex B.
14. Officials noted national targets were data informed with projections based on actual performance over the 12-24 months, except for Priority 1 which has been based on more limited data given the lag required to report the percentage of case closures within 26-weeks. Granular reporting on the age of the open caseload was noted as providing additional insight into progress towards this target.
15. The national target for Priority 2, to close the longest running public law cases, was set at 90+ weeks, with the introduction of local banded targets for areas who were already below this threshold. It was agreed that the introduction of local targets would be of particular importance for this priority given the significant variation.
16. For Priority 3, closure of the longest running private law cases, the 2024-2025 target of no cases over 100 weeks was retained, and as with Priority 2 the introduction of specific measures at a DFJ level will be important to drive progress.
17. Priority 4 was retained at the request of Policy Delivery Group, noting the importance of continued ambition to reduce the national private law caseload. It was noted that progress this year may be more challenging, as reductions during 2024-2025 were likely driven in part by case administration closures and a strong sitting position.
18. Priority areas for development were raised as a further strand to this year's approach, seeking to better understand drivers and issues considered important given their impact on outcomes and/or system performance. It was agreed this should include continued work to develop measures on improving experiences for children and families who experience domestic abuse, in addition to further areas for development; for example, Rule 16.4 private law cases and short notice public law applications.
19. The Board formally agreed these were the right set of priorities for the system. Members noted the need for a clear plan to communicate the priorities to local areas and the importance of avoiding negative messaging given the system is moving in a positive direction, with some regions significantly improving performance over the year. Officials noted there are launch events planned for April and May.
20. The Board discussed issues that impact timeliness – including regional variance in volume and type of public law application, police disclosure and payments for this by litigants in person, safety plans for the release of babies from NHS trusts. Officials noted the priority areas for development will consider a number of these issues and that there is learning from DfE and Mutual Ventures' work that can support this. Rule 16.4 variance was touched on, with an offer to share protocols given by members.
21. Members noted the potential positive impact of improved private law performance on public law performance as has been seen in Pathfinder areas. Pockets of specific and persistent challenge across the country were also noted – London

and the South East in particular. The Board requested Pathfinder is tabled as a future agenda item for more detailed discussion on impacts, alongside plans for regions of focus including the South-East. The public law working group's work on adoption and the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill were also requested by members as future agenda items.

Annex A:**Recommendation 8: Family courts.**

The Panel invites the President of the Family Division to consider the findings of this review and determine what actions are needed to support judicial decision making when children may have been sexually abused. Additionally, the learning from this report should be considered by the Family Justice Board, so that they can review its findings and determine what arrangements should be put in place to ensure that all reports in public and private proceedings include all relevant information held by police, on any current or past intelligence, investigations or convictions, for any sexual crime, committed by any party.

Annex B:

Priority	National target	Regional improvement goals
1	75% new care and supervision cases to conclude within 26 weeks	Improvement goals range from 50% to >80%
2	National - no open public law cases over 90 weeks	Improvement goals range from no open 52+ to no open 90+ week cases
3	No open private law cases over 100 weeks	Improvement goals range from no open 52+ to no open 100+ week cases
4	12% reduction in private law caseload = 32,000 by March 2026	Tracked at 1% reduction per month compared to respective regional baselines