



**Family Justice Board Meeting  
04 December 2025**

**Attendees**

*Members*

Baroness Levitt KC (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lords Minister at the Ministry of Justice) Co-Chair

Josh MacAlister MP (Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing at the Department for Education) Co-Chair

Emma Churchill (Director General, Policy Group, MoJ)

Neal Barcoe (Interim Director, Civil, Family, Tribunals and Administration of Justice, MoJ)

Isabelle Trowler (Chief Social Worker for Children and Families)

Yvette Stanley (National Director for Social Care, Ofsted)

Nigel Brown (Chief Executive, Cafcass Cymru)

Sarah Johal (National Adoption Lead)

Barbara Mills KC (Chair of the Bar Council)

Helen Lincoln (Executive Director for Children, Families & Education, Essex County Council)

*Apologies*

Nick Goodwin (CEO, HM Courts and Tribunals Service) – covered by Anabel Burns

Albert Heaney (Director, Social Services, Welsh Government), covered by Meg Colley

Jacky Tiotto (Chief Executive, Cafcass) covered by Julie Brown)

Helen Waite (Director, Children's Social Care - Practice and Workforce, DfE) covered by Emma Davies)

Yvette Stanley (Ofsted) covered by Nick McMullen

Fon Roberts (Head of Children's Services Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru, ADSS Cymru) covered by Alistair Davey

*Observers*

Sir Andrew McFarlane (President of the Family Division)

Representatives of the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB)

Helen Marie Osborn (Co-Chair of Kent Local Family Justice Board)

Dame Nicole Jacobs (Domestic Abuse Commissioner)

**Meeting**

**Item 1: Co-Chairs' Introduction and Opening Remarks**

1. Baroness Levitt (BL) and Josh MacAlister (JM) opened the meeting and introduced themselves to the Board as co-chairs, outlining their prior experience of working in the justice system and on children's social care respectively. They welcomed Emma Churchill as a new member.

**Item 2: Actions**

2. MoJ officials briefly outlined progress against actions, noting that a scheduled discussion on the private law Pathfinder model will be postponed until the point the MoJ's allocations picture is clear. Officials noted that work on the Family Justice Strategy, which had been discussed at the September meeting as part of a package of responses to the recent respective NAO/PAC recommendations was progressing but was subject to steers from the Deputy Prime Minister, whose advice had been sought on scope and direction.

### **Item 3: Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) Presentation**

3. The FJYPB shared highlights of the year so far, noting the 325 commissions they have fulfilled for family system partners within the year along with key events such as the Voice of the Child conference 2025, which recorded the largest number of participants to date, presenting at the Family Justice Council Conference, the Local Family Justice Board conference and their ongoing support for the FJB.
4. FJYPB members discussed the products they have made available to Family professionals including 'In Our Shoes' and the Safe Family Time resource. The FJYPB members further reflected on work this year to drive change for children and young people of different backgrounds, noting work on Black History Month and a benchmarking session with Cafcass.
5. The FJYPB concluded by presenting their new priorities for the year ahead.
  - 1: Improving children and young people's participation in proceedings.
  - 2: Helping understand how domestic abuse affects children and making sure all types of abuse and harmful parenting are thought about.
  - 3: Making sure children know their rights and helping create spaces which keep a focus on them growing up safe and happy.
  - 4: Keeping the focus on reducing delays across the family courts because children need quick decisions.
6. JM and BL thanked the FJYPB for presenting and for the continued value of their output. The President of the Family Division (PFD) and Domestic Abuse Commissioner (NJ) emphasised the value of FJYPB materials, observing the use of plain language by the young people cuts through and genuinely makes a difference.

### **Item 4: Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report: Family Court Review and Reporting Mechanism (FCRRM)**

7. NJ opened the item, noting the report's roots as a recommendation in the 2020 'Harm Panel Report'. NJ emphasised the time taken to ensure absolute credibility of the evidence base used in the FCRRM pilots and the accompanying report, and noted support from the PFD, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru and several academics.
8. The FCRRM was piloted in three private law non-Pathfinder courts in England and Wales, examining the everyday business taking place within courts utilising the Child Arrangement Programme (CAP) private law process. It captured just under 300 case files, interviews with judges, magistrates, family court advisors and survivors of domestic abuse. For this round of the pilot NJ's office were unable to speak to children.
9. Domestic abuse was found in most cases examined: 73% of hearings and 87% of case file reviews. Despite this significant prevalence, the FCRRM found very

- little had changed since the Harm Panel Report in these CAP courts, where an adversarial approach, siloed work and a pro-contact culture remained common.
10. Recommendations have been issued to relevant stakeholders from the FCRRM report, with an agreed timetable to respond. These are geared towards improvements including data as well as judges being more receptive to the use of barring orders to stop repeatedly dragging survivors into family court as another form of abuse.
  11. NJ noted areas where she would wish her office to expand this work, including testing FCRRM methodology within a Pathfinder court and comparing against the baseline collected in this report. She noted an overlap in interests with the present members of the FJYPB in exploring the intersection of different groups' experiences within the Family Court.
  12. BL thanked NJ for the work on FCRRM, raising her dismay at the findings. The PFD shared his view that ultimately should CAP continue to be used, in another five years he would expect many of the same problems to remain. He noted the Harm Panel recommendation for a problem-solving approach, and that in the areas where it has been launched Pathfinder delivers this and requires further rollout.
  13. Members reflected on the Crown Prosecution Service VAWG strategy and lessons learnt for their own organisations to implement, including significant culture change to avoid traumatising and the need to have greater insight from survivors as a system. The FJYPB members thanked NJ for not treating marginalised groups as an add-on, reflecting that targeted work could help alleviate broader issues. NJ offered to update at the next meeting of the board on the commitments set with partner organisations.

#### **Item 5: Public Law Demand.**

14. JM opened this item, sharing that he did not agree wholly with the hypothesis in the paper presented as many of the issues highlighted were longstanding and therefore do not explain the recent spike in applications since April, and more analysis was therefore needed. He noted that ongoing system reform work, including the Families First Partnership Programme will bring down public law demand in time, but local authorities are still working to implement the reforms and so we are not yet observing this impact.
15. DfE officials discussed the paper further, noting that this year's spike in demand is not wholly understood, and that while reforms to children's social care in the longer term will reduce demand and better support Local Authorities, they may in the short term increase it through better detecting new cases, and this is something officials will continue to monitor, including to ensure support and mitigations are in place. However, it was noted that officials do not think the current spike is due to CSC reform, given most local authorities haven't yet implemented the reforms. It was also noted that private law demand had increased during the same period by an even larger proportion and therefore needs to be examined alongside the public law work. DfE concluded by flagging two wider points for Board discussion – what trends are members observing within their jurisdictions, and where do we need to work further with other partners – with the impact of increased international cases cited as an example. JM noted the impact of the upcoming strategy in supporting work in this space.

16. Members flagged the need for shorter-term action to address this and separately discussed that while measures to manage case duration like the Public Law Outline (PLO), practice guidance and Family Group Decision Making meetings help, this may not be the right care plan for the family in question. The need to explore the impact of repeat care proceedings was flagged, along with the pressing need for proper case analysis through to outcome, including exploration of whether some cases started off as private law applications for Special Guardianship Orders and then went into the care proceedings pipeline.
17. The link between Covid and its longer-term impacts on families was made, along with the cumulative pressures it caused, and it was suggested that data on children’s age ranges was reviewed to see if a link could be drawn. One attendee flagged that it is now easier to develop a court application via AI, which is potentially increasing private law demand.
18. Some members pointed to similarities with the 2014-15 challenges in care, which partly reflected a tightening of resources both for families and local authorities because of austerity measures. This led to local authorities holding less risk in the community and pushing cases to courts, and this view is further supported by the types of cases coming through which revolved around poverty and neglect. The positives in the current situation vs 2014 were noted, included earlier recognition of the trend of increasing demand. Members expressed frustrations at the impact on previous gains made on timeliness and flagged that short-notice applications can mean that PLO or early intervention cannot be effectively applied.
19. PFD urged the need to maintain quality practice in pre-proceedings work, early intervention, some greater resource and following the PLO in managing the current spike – noting that while it is tempting to dispense with these when overwhelmed with cases these measures have proven that they help manage demand.
20. JM asked the group to take an action to conduct additional analysis on demand and noted that wider government initiatives to bring half a million children out of poverty will also help in this space.

**Item 6: Priorities 2026-2027**

21. MoJ officials summarised the work done in producing this set of priorities with the Policy and Delivery Group and noted that the shifting picture on demand means that final decisions on 2026-27 targets will need to be taken in early 2026 so they can take account of the latest data on both demand and capacity.

<b>Priority 1 - Care &amp; Supervision receipts closed with 26 weeks of receipt</b>	<b>Priority 2 - No Public Law case open over 90 weeks</b>	<b>Priority 3 - No Private Law case open over 100 weeks</b>	<b>Priority 4 - Private Law receipts closed with 26 weeks of receipt</b>
National target 47%	National target: 48	National target: 490	National target: 60%
3 year ambition: 75%	3 year ambition: 0	3 year ambition: 0	3 year ambition: 78%

22. The distinctions between this year’s priorities and targets and the previous year’s set were noted. Priority four has been re-written to be more relevant, and more ambitious three-year goals have been introduced to provide a more ambitious

counter to more achievable in-year targets, and to interface with the system strategy which will cover the same period. Members asked about visibility of the targets, what happens if they are not met and the methodology in setting them. Officials confirmed the intent to make the priorities and targets public, and to communicate within the system our expectations on trajectories and wider context before the start of the next financial year.

23. Members agreed with the priorities and provisional targets presented while noting that the in-year targets reflected incremental improvement against a challenging delivery context, observing the ambitious nature of the three-year goals and the new priority four. It was noted the introduction of action plans for local areas have been well received, and combined with the goal, targets and reporting back on progress there is a better framework for incentivising and reporting local performance improvement.

### **Item 7: Problem Solving Approaches**

24. MoJ officials discussed learning lessons from problem solving approaches and applying them within public law in a sustainable and integrated manner, aligned with wider reforms to private law through the Pathfinder model and Children's Social Care. They flagged early conversations with colleagues in Wales to test this in a place where some capacity has been carved out by Pathfinder and other successful initiatives.
25. JM shared his view that problem solving elements of Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) should be mainstreamed across family courts, noting the core principle of them is intensive work with families to better support them. He suggested this approach should be the 'bread and butter' of our children's social care system, and previous levels of reliance on FDACs to make up for this not happening are in a sense an admission of failure, as Local Authorities should be doing much of this work in the pre-court space. Some members agreed that much of this work should be addressed within the child protection space to avoid repeating matters at court.
26. Members noted how FDACs expose domestic abuse and longer-term victimisation, and how these elements must be dealt with to provide a better opportunity to solve substance issues. It was noted that multi-agency problem-solving approaches deployed within public law remain haphazard, and how utilised properly these can change the course of lives. Members and BL flagged the potential for wider cross-government interest in this matter, especially from the Home Office.
27. Welsh colleagues endorsed the issue and set out a need to be radical in this space in a similar way to the rollout of Pathfinder in private law in reducing traumatisation and an adversarial approach, while noting potential devolution issues. It was agreed that Welsh Board members and officials will work to examine this further, scope the shape of potential work in this space and return with a paper next year.