



**Family Justice Board Meeting
3 March 2026**

Attendees

Members

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

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

Jacky Tiotto (Chief Executive, Cafcass)

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)

Kirsty Brimelow KC (Chair of the Bar Council)

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

Apologies

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

Emma Churchill (Director General, Policy Group, MoJ)

Nick Goodwin (CEO, HM Courts and Tribunals Service) – covered by Adam Lennon

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

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

Observers

Sir Andrew McFarlane (President of the Family Division)

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

Hayley Binley (Chair of Leicester & Leicestershire Local Family Justice Board)

Meeting

Item 1: Chair's Introduction and Opening Remarks

1. Baroness Levitt KC (BL) opened the meeting, sharing apologies for Minister MacAlister who was called into Parliament at short notice. She welcomed Kirsty Brimelow KC as the new Bar Council chair, along with Hayley Binley the Local Family Justice Board chair observing this board meeting.

Item 2: Actions

2. MoJ officials briefly outlined progress against actions, closing several of the longest running, most of which were addressed within the agenda for this meeting of the Board.

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

3. The FJYPB opened their presentation by sharing their strategic priorities for 2025-28 and some of the initiatives supporting them. The priorities included:
 - i. Improving children and young people's participation in proceedings
 - ii. Helping professionals understand how domestic abuse affects children and making sure all types of abuse and harmful parenting are thought about.
 - iii. Making sure children know their rights and keeping a focus on them growing up safe and happy.
 - iv. Keeping the focus on reducing delays across family courts because children need certainty and safe final decisions.
4. Key workstreams they outlined in relation to the strategic priorities included development of a new app 'In My Words' (replacing the 'How It Looks to Me' tool), along with a further animation for the 'Taking Me Seriously' film series.
5. The FJYPB discussed internal initiatives in train, including their development roadmap, peer support and buddy system and the creation of standardised guides to support with different types of commitments. Feedback is also being further explored across several different fronts. The introduction of the FJYPB Lived Experience Policy and Support Plan are safeguarding tools that protect members and set out clear boundaries in their participation, with FJYPB Practice Standards to follow.
6. The FJYPB concluded by inviting attendees to the next Voice of the Child Conference on 29 July 2026, then discussing the challenge they set at last year's conference on understanding the whole journey of a child, asking about their needs, and using experiences and data to prevent repeat harm.
7. BL thanked the FJYPB for presenting and for the continued value of their output, inviting them to contribute to the other items on the agenda should they wish to. The President (PFD) noted that each presentation the FJYPB delivers is fresh and engaging, even though the challenge to partners in the system remains constant.
8. Members reflected on the clarity of the challenge provided, noting connections to Children's Social Care reforms, and **taking as an action the need for a children and young person's version of the forthcoming family justice strategy.**

Item 4: System Performance and Trends

9. MoJ officials opened this item, noting the stabilisation of public law performance owing in part to public law demand steadying across most parts of the system. Open caseload remains broadly stable at around 10,000 children's cases. However national stability can mask local pressures and there is a continued need to monitor regional/DFJ indicators closely.
10. Conversely, private law demand has been elevated since March 2025 and the open caseload has risen by 6% since March 2025 to around 39,000 children's cases. This increase is evident across regions and officials noted that sustained private law pressure can have knock-on impacts across the wider family justice system, including public law. Drivers for this including the use of AI in bringing cases to court were discussed following on from December's meeting, as was the similar demand picture for other jurisdictions.
11. Officials noted positive progress against agreed priority measures compared to the same period last year despite this challenging demand picture, with marked regional improvements, notably in London. Officials further noted the need for

more work on the drivers feeding into data (including AI), and early resolution to avoid cases coming to court which didn't need to.

12. Members noted the success on timeliness but agreed on the need to now prioritise exploring the management of private law demand.

Item 5: Child Focused Courts

13. MoJ officials introduced the paper and set out that Ministers had agreed funding to support the national roll out of the Private Law Pathfinder model, following the success of the early pilots and subsequent expansion to 10 DFJ areas across England the whole of Wales. The model would be renamed as the Child Focused Model, with a planned roll out over the next three years as part of a national transformation programme. The next court areas identified for roll out in 26/27 had already been identified, and Ministers would be making a public announcement and formally writing to key stakeholders later in March to confirm the plans.
14. Officials explained the key differences the model introduces, including a streamlined process that frontloads social work assessments, the availability of domestic abuse support workers and ensuring the focus on the child throughout proceedings. They noted that the improvements in timeliness and outcomes that were being seen as a result of the model are potentially transformative for the system.
15. Officials flagged that the model required improved multi-agency working but was a significant change and challenge for how Cafcass/Cafcass Cymru and local authorities operate, requiring a shift in resources across the system to support more front-loaded social worker assessments. While flagging the opportunities the reform presents, officials asked the Board to consider challenges the programme faces in being able to implement significant changes concurrent with other planned changes and pressures on partners such as local authorities, how to ensure consistency in implementation and delivery nationally, and the impact on courts and relationship to resourcing considerations, sitting day requirements, and efficiencies.
16. The Board welcomed this news, noting that, given tight public finances, putting significant resource into this reform represents a real commitment from government. They noted judicial work to prepare areas for their eventual rollout of the reform and sounded a note of caution in terms of the phases of rollout, noting the high number of court areas currently planned to go live in the final year of the phased approach. The need for adequate funding for Domestic Abuse support workers and trauma resources both within court rooms and for legal professionals was also flagged.
17. Pressures on Cafcass social workers and its wider workforce was discussed, and **members asked for individual items on this at the Board and its subgroups to help manage risks as work moving the system towards the rollout of the courts progresses.** Officials noted these concerns were shared across the programme, and agreed the need to ensure alignment where possible with relevant wider work programmes, such as work within DfE on social worker workforce improvements.
18. Members discussed the challenges local authority social workers are also operating within, and that the model does not plan for additional social worker resource. The need to ensure alignment of Child Focused courts with the

implementation of the Families First (FFP) was discussed, and officials confirmed this issue was being actively addressed. Proactive engagement is happening with local authorities as part of preparation for implementation. Officials noted the involvement of LA and ADCS in relevant governance, and the work planned in the framework of meetings directly supporting the model, while noting the role of FJB in supporting culture change, system preparation and other strategic issues.

19. Wider system challenges raised included legal aid, sitting days and promoting join-up with other systems.

Item 6: Family Justice Strategy

20. Officials outlined progress since initial plans for the strategy were presented at the December 2025 FJB. This progress update included feedback from wide-ranging engagement, the vision statement for the document and the outline structure of the strategy. Officials explained that the strategy is centred on children and aligned with the 1989 Children Act and emphasised the need for whole system participation.
21. Members commented on the need for a more positive reframing of the draft vision statement, more emphasis on public law and proper consideration of children who were harmed in proceedings. The opportunity of engaging with other departments who may be able to combine funding was flagged, with Baroness Levitt noting this is something the Prime Minister has raised as important.
22. The Board agreed to the creation of a new data subgroup, bringing together system leaders, including senior data professionals. The Board noted the link to the challenge raised earlier in the meeting by the FJYPB and agreed that this new group would be a useful forum where more time can be spent on exploring issues such as capturing data on long-term outcomes.

Item 7: President of the Family Division

23. The President marked his last meeting of the FJB by sharing reflections from his tenure as President. He reflected on the founding of the family court in 2014, and the significance of the jurisdiction to people's lives, noting the relative parity of its sitting days compared to the criminal jurisdiction, which was more prominent in the public's conception of the justice system.
24. The President reflected on system achievements over recent years, including boosting transparency, recovery from Covid, the Pathfinder pilots and the relaunch of the Public Law Outline. Members and colleagues from across the system concluded the meeting by thanking the President for his tenure.