



**Family Justice Board Meeting
7 July 2026**

Attendees

Members

Josh MacAlister MP (Minister for Children and Families at the Department for Education) Chair
Baroness Levitt KC (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lords Minister at the Ministry of Justice) Co-Chair
Neal Barcoe (Interim Director, Civil, Family, Tribunals and Administration of Justice, MoJ)
Helen Waite (Director, Children's Social Care - Practice and Workforce, DfE)
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

Jacky Tiotto (Chief Executive, Cafcass), covered by Claire Mayne
Emma Churchill (Director General, Policy Group, MoJ)
Nick Goodwin (CEO, HM Courts and Tribunals Service) – covered by Annabel Burns
Albert Heaney (Director, Social Services, Welsh Government), covered by Megan Colley
Kirsty Brimelow KC (Chair of the Bar Council), covered by Leslie Samuels and Lucy Reed KC
Sharon Powell (Head of Children's Service, Powys County Council)
Chris Frey Davis (Head of Children's Services, Pembrokeshire County Council)
Laura Scales (Chair of South-East Wales Local Family Justice Board)

Observers

Sir Stephen Cobb, President of the Family Division)
Representatives of the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB)

Meeting

Item 1: Chair's Introduction and Opening Remarks

1. Josh MacAlister MP (JM) opened the meeting and covered the minutes and actions.

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

2. The FJYPB opened their presentation by covering progress made against four priorities that ensure children's voices are heard and acted on:
 - i. seeing and engaging with children

- ii. domestic abuse
 - iii. children's rights
 - iv. delays in the family courts.
3. Key workstreams outlined included 'In My Words' (replacing the 'How It Looks to Me' tool), along with developing work on 'where are children are seen', which considers use of community facilities to make children feel more comfortable. The system for reviewing children's complaints has led to action being taken by operational partners in several cases.
 4. Other issues raised included the impact the 2025 Voice of The Child challenge has had more widely on the system, including on the drafting of the family justice strategy and development of success measures. The Board were again reminded to never normalise delay.
 5. The FJYPB reported on their wider engagement activity, including presenting at the recent Local Family Justice Board conference and advocating for 'voice of the child' subgroups with LFJB chairs, their work at Cafcass's 25th Anniversary Event and meetings with Baroness Levitt KC (BL). Welsh colleagues thanked the FJYPB for their contribution to the first Welsh National LFJB shared learning event in March.
 6. The FJYPB concluded by reminding the Board of the next 'Voice of the Child' conference on 29 July 2026, sharing its overall theme: 'knowing our rights in family justice, growing up safe and happy'.
 7. JM and BL thanked the FJYPB for presenting, BL noting how much she enjoyed the recent meetings with the FJYPB and the challenges and insights these provided.

Item 4: System Performance and Trends

8. MoJ officials opened this item, noting this was the first Board of the 2026-27 year that is examining progress against this year's priorities, owing to the inherent lag in quality assuring and publishing performance data.
9. The Board noted the progress made against the priorities and longer-term trends. Performance in London has notably improved but it remains the region with the longest-running private law and care and supervision cases.
10. The latest position on private law demand was discussed. Demand continues to rise across all regions, with March the busiest month on record for the number of receipts recorded, which was beginning to feed through into an increase in outstanding caseloads. Demand has remained above forecast levels for a year, with the South-East the most affected region, experiencing notably sharp increases.
11. Previous hypotheses on the drivers for demand were discussed in light of the best data and research currently available. Deprivation pressures were particularly noted, with DWP data indicating a large rise of children in relative low-income families over both a one and a four-year period. JM commented that the removal of the two-child benefit cap should reduce the number of children in poverty going forward.
12. The related driver of increasingly complex family vulnerabilities was discussed, with ONS data corroborating rising levels of substance misuse. Other factors identified as potential drivers for increased demand included limited early legal support, the impact of increasing availability of AI in supporting applications to court, and the otherwise positive impacts of the Child Focused Courts (CFC) rollout and the system's improved approach to domestic abuse support access.

Members welcomed the presentation, the judiciary offering to explore how more effective case management can support managing increased demand. **JM and officials noted departments can assist with this work which should be part of a whole system approach.** BL raised the value of regional performance and consistency, the variability of types of orders and understanding the outcomes of children of different heritages for children in public law proceedings as valuable areas for consideration.

13. It was suggested that a root and branch review should be undertaken of the pre-court space, to understand the actual impact of ongoing work, including mediation and available early advice. BL raised the importance of search engine optimisation, to avoid internet searches advising people to apply directly to the court where that isn't the best solution. The potential use of online tools and AI in managing demand was discussed. BL confirmed officials were developing several products, including a child arrangements tool, and confirmed she was due to meet the relevant teams to discuss progress. HMCTS officials noted the use of AI in criminal justice to support judges sifting cases.
14. The Family Solutions Group was raised as an important stakeholder, and officials confirmed they had recently engaged with them on the strategy. The FJYPB and members discussed the benefit of young people's being able to engage in pre-proceedings work and increasing access to support services, including child-inclusive mediation. **Reflecting on the discussion JM requested the family justice strategy should include a detailed set of proposals for improving early resolution, and that discussion on the approach, including the role of online tools and AI should be brought back to the FJB in the Autumn.**
15. JM asked about the stabilisation of public law performance and the drivers behind this improvement. Officials noted this national stability can mask local pressures, that improvement has become static and that regional variance is present. Attendees from HMCTS flagged the demand in private law could also have an adverse effect on public law. It was noted LFJBs are doing much of the work in understanding this variance. The PFD noted that targeted regional work will also be a focus for his office.

Item 5: Problem Solving Approaches

16. MoJ officials set out their proposed vision and direction for creating a problem-solving public law system, with parallels to the directional change in private law introduced by Child Focused Courts. They requested the Board agree to the establishment of a new subgroup to oversee its delivery. The PFD expressed a desire for judicial involvement in this new group, and it was agreed the group would benefit from the engagement of judges with experience of FDAC and other problem-solving models.
17. Officials explained this group should not be duplicative and should link to other forums. They flagged the importance of lived experience to the development of problem-solving approaches.

Item 6: Family Justice Strategy

18. Officials outlined progress, including the circulation of a complete draft of the main chapters to Board members before this meeting.

19. JM noted that the revised publication schedule should allow for more time for stakeholder engagement and for proposals to be more fully formed. JM welcomed further views on the strategy from Board members, noting the intention for the document to be published shortly after the Parliamentary summer recess. **It was agreed as an action that members would come back with comments on the full draft shared for this Board over the summer.**