Department for Education

Designated Family Judge Trailblazer

Evaluation of pilots to reduce unnecessary family court delays

Research report

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Government Social Research

Preface

We would like to thank all those who gave their time to take part in the interviews and survey for sharing their experiences openly. Their contributions were essential in shaping the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

We would also like to thank colleagues at DfE for their valuable input, guidance, and support throughout the research. We are also grateful to delivery partners, Mutual Ventures, Gate One and Mott MacDonald for their input and support across the evaluation. Finally, we would like to thank our colleagues and associates at Verian, NCB, and Alma Economics for their work in delivering this evaluation: Ramla Attah, Frances Hansford, Ruth Atkinson , Nathan Turner, Emma MacKay, Ellinor Ottosson, Michael Ratajczak, Peter Mathews, Oriol Bosh, Alex Hurrell, Elisabetta Pasini, Lawrence Newland, Lucille McKnight, Dustin Hutchinson, and Jemima Colahan.

It is with great sadness that we acknowledge the significant professional contribution of our colleague, Phoebe Penfold to this evaluation and to her wider work at Verian. Her insight and commitment were highly valued, and she will be greatly missed.

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Abbreviations

BCR	Benefit Cost Ratio
CBA	Cost-benefit Analysis
CCD	Core Case Data
CMH	Case Management Hearing
DfE	Department for Education
DFJ	Designated Family Judge
DP	Delivery Partner
ESST	Essex, Suffolk, Southend and Thurrock
FSW	Family Support Worker
HMCTS	His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service
IMD	Index of Multiple Deprivation
LFJB	Local Family Justice Board
MDT	Multi-disciplinary Team
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MV	Mutual Ventures
NCB	National Children's Bureau
NHS	National Health Service
PLO	Public Law Outline
QED	Quasi-Experimental Design
ToC	Theory of Change
SIHIS	Suspected Inflicted Head Injury Service
SGO	Special Guardianship Order
VFM	Value for Money

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Verian and partners (Alma Economics and National Children's Bureau) to deliver an independent evaluation of three pilot interventions, delivered between April 2024 and March 2025, that were designed to reduce unnecessary family court delays:

Pilot 1: The Designated Family Judge (DFJ) Trailblazers pilot aimed to identify local causes of delays and implement targeted interventions in response to the issues identified.

Pilot 2: Introduced a consistent approach to conducting pre–Case Management Hearing (CMH) meetings, to take place before the first CMH.

Pilot 3: Introduced a new multi-disciplinary Suspected Inflicted Head Injury Service (SIHIS) in three National Health Service (NHS) Trusts with the aim of providing faster assessments to courts.

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the DFJ Trailblazer pilot.

Context

The Trailblazer pilot was delivered in five DFJ areas: Central London; Cheshire and Merseyside; Essex, Suffolk, Southend and Thurrock (ESST); Guildford; and Wolverhampton and Telford. A specialist Delivery Partner, Mutual Ventures, worked with each area to develop 'solutions blueprint' research and stakeholder engagement. Mutual Ventures created a context-specific delivery plan for each area and supported implementation from April 2024 to March 2025. While the combination of solutions varied between DFJ areas, they broadly focused on:(i) project leadership/management and coordination (ii) workforce and skills development (iii) data system initiatives (iv) family engagement and targeted support and (v) multi- agency collaboration:

A theory of change (ToC) was developed in collaboration with DfE, the Expert Panel and key stakeholders, at the start of the evaluation. It demonstrated the multiple pathways by which the pilot was expected to help reduce unnecessary delays in the family courts, while also reducing costs for courts and local authorities, improving family experience of the court system, and learning about different solutions to improve rollout. The ToC was tested and refined during the evaluation.

Evaluation methodology and implementation

This evaluation has three objectives, organised as three types of evaluation:

1. To understand how the pilot interventions were designed and implemented, and how acceptable they were to key stakeholders (process evaluation).
2. To assess whether, how, and why the expected pilot outcomes outlined in the pilot theories of change (ToCs) were achieved (impact evaluation).
3. To evaluate the pilots' likely value for money (VfM) through a comprehensive, ex-post cost-benefit analysis (economic evaluation).

The evaluation spanned two years (April 2024 – May 2026), and used a rigorous mixed-methods, theory-based approach. It triangulated primary and secondary, quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources to provide a comprehensive response to nine Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs). Secondary data included monitoring data provided by the delivery partner on implementation and outputs, and information from relevant documents and literature. Primary data was collected via in-depth interviews with 35 stakeholders. They included local authority social workers and managers, Cafcass guardians and managers, and Local Family Justice Board (LFJB) representatives and a judge.

A panel of experts in the family justice system contributed to our evaluation design and ToC, reviewed and commented on our evaluation findings, and worked closely with us on the final evaluation outputs.

Findings for the DFJ Trailblazers pilot

Process evaluation findings

KEQ1: How were the pilot solutions designed and implemented?

Senior staff from local authorities and relevant agencies were involved in design discussions, and the delivery partner helped to streamline designs and support development of costed workplans. All DFJ areas adapted their plans during implementation due to recruitment difficulties, adaptation to local realities, data revealing new needs, difficulties getting agreement from relevant agencies, and staffing constraints.

KEQ2: What were the barriers and facilitators to implementation of the pilot solutions?

The main facilitators to implementation of the pilot solutions were:

- strong senior leadership,
- strong communications and collaboration across local authorities in DFJ areas,
- strong engagement from agencies outside the local authorities,
- support from the delivery partner.

The main barriers to implementation of the pilot solutions were:

- the short pilot timeframe,
- varying capabilities among local authorities within DFJ areas,
- limited engagement among some agencies outside the local authorities,
- challenges with technology.

KEQ3: Are the pilot solutions acceptable to stakeholders (implementers, families, other organisations affected by the pilots)?

Overall, evidence on the acceptability of the solution was mixed. Interviewees felt the solutions were a good fit and were in support of them. However, there were concerns about whether implementation of the solutions could be sustained in practice. Interviewees felt that solutions were coherent with local authority services , and that they had the potential to contribute to reducing unnecessary delays. However, staffing emerged as a consistent challenge across DFJ areas. As a result, views on continued implementation of the solutions were mixed across DFJ areas. Limited information on family experience of the pilot suggests that some of the interventions have been positively received, although the evidence is not sufficient to make an overall judgement.

Impact evaluation findings

KEQ4: What (if any) is the impact of the pilot on the primary outcome, the length of court proceedings?

The quantitative analysis compared case resolution in pilot areas after implementation with an estimated counterfactual, representing what would have been expected in the absence of the pilot. The analysis provides some indication that the DFJ Trailblazers pilot may have been associated with slightly faster case resolution at longer follow-up horizons, but the estimated effects were small and not statistically significant. At 182 days after submission, there was no observed difference between the observed and estimated counterfactual proportion of cases disposed. At 365 and 547 days, the observed proportion of cases disposed in pilot areas was modestly higher than the

estimated counterfactual. However, the analysis does not provide strong evidence of a clear average effect on the length of court proceedings.

KEQ5: What (if any) are the early outcomes of the pilot?

The pilot was expected to improve and speed up case management decisions in local authorities by strengthening data availability, data quality, and case tracking. We assessed changes in the speed of case management decision using the number of days between case submission and the first Case Management Hearing (CMH). The quantitative analyses found no clear evidence that the DFJ Trailblazers pilot changed the number of days from case submission to the first CMH.

We assessed the improved case management decisions using the number of case management hearings recorded. The analysis indicates that the DFJ Trailblazers pilot led to a statistically significant 8.3% reduction in the number of case management hearings, on average across all pilot areas.

We also looked at the effect of the pilot on the number of cases diverted from court, which was assessed by looking at the number of cases entering the court system. We found no evidence that the pilot led to changes in the number of cases diverted from court.

KEQ6: What do key stakeholders (e.g. leaders, practitioners, and families) perceive as outcomes of the pilot solutions? How do they believe the outcomes came about?

Interviewees reported that several intermediate outcomes had been achieved to some extent. In particular, the workforce training appeared to have increased social workers confidence, improving the quality and consistency of their assessments. This in turn led to strengthened trust in social workers assessments, and reduced need for reassessments. There was also strong evidence that the pilot led to improved collaboration between local authorities and other actors within the family justice system.

However, a number of intended intermediate outcomes were not evident by the end of the pilot period. Interviewees reported limited improvements in workforce retention, data-driven time savings, faster case management decision-making, cases diverted from courts, and earlier presentation of relatives for caring responsibilities. Evidence was also mixed on whether the pilot led to reductions in Independent Social Workers (ISWs) and agency staff use, and wider efficiency gains from enhanced collaboration, had occurred.

Interviewed stakeholders reported that some pilot solutions could improve families experience of the system, but the evaluation gathered limited direct evidence from families. There is stronger evidence that the pilot supported learning about different solutions for potential rollout. However, evidence on cost reductions for courts and local authorities, and on the length of proceedings, remains limited and inconclusive

In terms of long-term impacts, some interviewees believed that the pilot had the potential to contribute to improved practice in the family justice system and improved care outcomes for children although there was limited evidence to substantiate this.

Outcomes were enabled by contextual factors, including strong judicial leadership, pre-existing cross-agency relationships, and local authority capacity. Broader system pressures and concurrent reforms also shaped the extent to which outcomes could be realised and attributed. No unexpected outcomes were identified. Interviewees reported that changes broadly aligned with the pilots intended outcomes.

KEQ7: What does a refined ToC look like?

We refined the original ToC based on our evaluation findings. A few changes are for clarity of expression. Stakeholders' perceptions suggest that some intermediate outcomes especially with the data workstream were not realised as expected indicating areas of theory failure. Additionally, one pilot and long-term outcome did not materialise .

KEQ8: What, if any, were the unintended consequences (positive and negative)? Who did the negative or positive unintended consequences affect?

Most of the stakeholders did not mention unintended consequences[1] within the pilot. A positive unintended consequence noted was support for post care proceedings. Negative unintended consequences included additional time commitment required, and challenges in engaging some local authorities and external stakeholders.

Economic evaluation

KEQ9: To what extent does Pilot 1 represent value for money?

The quantitative impact analysis found that the pilot had a statistically significant impact on the number of case management hearings per case. We therefore conclude there is weak evidence the pilot represented value for money. A reduction of 8.3% case management hearings per case generates a Benefit Cost Ratio of approximately 1.09, indicating £1.09 of benefits for every £1 invested in the pilot.

KEQ10: How do cost reductions caused by this pilot vary by group, e.g. between court costs and costs faced by local authorities and households?

Under an 8.3% reduction in case management hearings per case, operational savings to local authorities make up 67% of total cost savings, while savings to courts make up 33% of the total. A small proportion of cost savings also accrue to households and families

[1] Unintended positive consequences are different to unexpected outcomes. The latter are any outcomes or effects from the pilot which were not included on the ToC but can be seen as contributing to the primary aim of reducing unnecessary delays. The former are effects generated by the pilot which, although positive, would not directly contribute to the primary aim of the pilot.

(1%), driven by a reduction in foregone labour income due to a reduction in the number of hearings.

Summative KEQ

KEQ11: What have we learned across the DFJ area pilot sites that can help to guide rollout of some or all of the piloted solutions to other DFJ areas?

Our findings suggest that further rollout of this pilot would require a longer implementation period to help embed practice. The findings also point to the need for engagement from senior leadership and wider engagement across the family justice space. Stakeholders also emphasised the need for adequate investment for any future scale up.

Limitations to the evaluation

The evaluation faced some limitations. First, there were fewer interviews than was aimed for despite comprehensive recruitment efforts. There were no interviews held with staff working in the family courts and we only engaged one DFJ in our sample. Second, families were not directly involved in the evaluation due to ethical concerns around re-traumatisation, and insights into family experiences were limited as most interviewees had minimal contact with families. Third**,** the Quasi Experimental Design (QED) relied on His Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service Core Case Dataset (HMCTS CCD) administrative data, which included limited information about cases and raised some concerns about data quality. The data did not include detailed information on the characteristics of children or on case type, which limited the extent to which differences between pilot and comparison areas could be adjusted for in the quantitative analysis. In addition, some variables had substantial missingness or data errors. Finally, Core Case Data (CDD) coverage in the early period (including 2021) was incomplete because courts migrated onto the Reform system gradually over time.

Conclusions

There was strong buy-in for the Trailblazer pilot in two of the three sampled DFJs. The solutions were generally seen as well aligned with existing services and did not duplicate ongoing activity. The workforce development workstream was consistently identified as the most effective solution in all sampled DFJ areas. It led to improvements in the quality and consistency of social work assessments, which in turn strengthened confidence in social workers' professional judgement, especially among the judiciary. Another consistent finding across areas was improved cross-agency collaboration. However, there is limited evidence of wider workforce impacts, such as improved wellbeing or retention, which interviewees felt were more strongly influenced by external factors.

There is limited evidence that the data workstream led to its intended outcomes within the pilot period. Evidence on whether the pilot reduced the length of court proceedings is weak and inconclusive and quantitative findings indicated no clear overall effect on the length of proceedings. Stakeholders also consistently emphasised that it was too early to determine whether changes in case duration had occurred, largely because the pilot had been operating for only around a year. This limited the extent to which downstream impacts such as measurable shifts in court duration could reasonably be observed within the evaluation timeframe.

Interviewees also noted it was too soon to observe cost reductions for local authorities and courts from the pilot. The economic evaluation shows that the pilot represented low value for money. Under an 8.3% reduction in the number of case management hearings and no overall reduction in overall case lengths, the benefit to cost ratio is approximately 1.09, indicating that every £1 invested in the pilot generates £1.09 in benefits.

1. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Verian and a consortium of partners (Alma Economics and National Children's Bureau) to deliver an independent evaluation of the following three pilot interventions, designed to reduce unnecessary family court delays:

- Pilot 1: Designated Family Judge (DFJ) Trailblazers
- Pilot 2: Pre-Case Management Hearing (pre-CMH) meetings
- Pilot 3: Suspected Inflicted Head Injury Service (SIHIS)

The pilots were delivered over a 12-month period between April 2024 and March 2025. The evaluation ran in parallel, spanning two years (April 2024 – May 2026), and used a mixed-methods, theory-based approach. It included three key components: a process evaluation, an impact evaluation, and an economic evaluation.

This is the final report of the evaluation of the Designated Family Judge Trailblazer pilot (pilot 1)[2]. The Department for Education (DfE) is the primary user of this evaluation. The evaluation will support DfE's Family Justice Policy team's decisions on how to embed good practice across the system. Further users of the evaluation include pilot implementers (agencies and stakeholders directly involved in delivery), alongside other agencies in the family court system, including non-pilot local authorities. The evaluation provides learning and insight to support future delivery of interventions designed to reduce unnecessary delays and may inform decision making within the wider system.

Structure of this report

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 presents an overview of the pilot;
- Section 3 presents details on the evaluation methodology, fieldwork implementation and analysis;
- Sections 4 presents the evaluation findings, structured around the Key Evaluation Questions;
- Section 5 contains our conclusions.

[2] The Verian consortium also produced final reports for the other two pilots: Verian Alma Economics and NCB (2026). Evaluation of pilots to reduce unnecessary family court delays – Pre-Case Management Hearing Meetings Final Report; and Verian, Alma Economics and NCB (2026) Evaluation of pilots to reduce unnecessary family court delays - Suspected Inflicted Head Injury Service (SIHIS) Final Report.

A separate technical annex accompanies this document. It includes

- Annex A: KEQs and sub-questions
- Annex B: Evaluation matrix
- Annex C: Documents reviewed for this report
- Annex D: Monitoring data
- Annex E: Technical detail on primary data collection for the process and impact evaluations
- Annex F: Technical detail on the quantitative impact evaluation
- Annex G: Sensitivity analyses
- Annex H: Technical detail on cost benefit analysis
- Annex I: Expert panel composition
- Annex J: Decision not to interview families for this evaluation

2. Context: The Designated Family Judge (DFJ) Trailblazer pilot

This section provides an overview of the pilot evaluated in this report: the Designated Family Judge Trailblazers pilot (Pilot 1). The pilot was developed and funded by the DfE. The pilot was created to reduce unnecessary delays in court proceedings. It aimed to identify local causes of delays and implement targeted interventions to address them.

Lengthy case durations for public law cases are a serious problem in the family courts system. Longer cases mean increased risk of physical and emotional harm to children, and higher costs for the taxpayer (Mutual Ventures, (2022), p4[3]. In 2014, a statutory 26-week time limit was introduced for care and supervision proceedings to encourage reduction in case durations – this is called the Public Law Outline (PLO). However, the average case duration remains consistently high, at 36 weeks in 2024, with significant regional and local variation. For example, in December 2024, the average duration ranged from 24 weeks in Wales to 53 weeks in London (National Audit Office (2025), p6). The DfE and others have undertaken work[4] to identify the causes of unnecessary delays in the system, and this pilot, along with others funded by the DfE, is aimed at reducing some of those causes.

In the remainder of this section, we describe how the DFJ Trailblazer pilot was intended to work, and how it was expected to contribute to the aim of reducing unnecessary delays in the courts.

The pilot was delivered in five DFJ areas, chosen to deliver a diverse range of tailored, context-specific solutions. The five DFJ areas - Central London; Cheshire and Merseyside; Essex, Suffolk, Southend and Thurrock (ESST); Guildford; and Wolverhampton and Telford - were selected through a competitive bidding process. DfE provided £2,219,142 in funding across the five DFJ areas.

A specialist Delivery Partner – Mutual Ventures – supported DFJ areas by conducting research to create a ‘solutions blueprint’ for each area, creating context-specific delivery plans with DFJ areas, and supporting delivery of funded interventions from April 2024 to March 2025. DfE provided Mutual Ventures with £1,441,566 in funding.

The combination of solutions varied between DFJ areas but fell into the following categories (See Table 2 below).

[3] Recent modelling suggests that each one-week reduction in average proceedings duration could generate a financial cost avoidance of approximately £24 million across all English local authorities.
[4] For example, in 2023, DfE commissioned Mutual Ventures to undertake this study: https://www.mutualventures.co.uk/care-proceedings.

- Project leadership/management and coordination: All DFJ areas recruited dedicated project managers/leads to ensure effective implementation and learning.
- Workforce skills: All DFJ areas provided training and professional development opportunities for staff working in courts and social work teams.
- Data system initiatives: Four DFJ areas initiated work to improve regional availability and quality of data, as well as case tracking and data analysis.
- Family engagement and targeted support: Four areas developed work to improve family engagement and support, such as employing family support workers, commissioning external family advocates, and/or providing resources to improve family understanding and trust of pre-proceedings and court.
- Multi-agency collaboration: Four DFJ areas established cross system commitments to improve multi-agency communication and practice.

Table 1: Solution type implemented by each DFJ area

Solution type	Central London	Cheshire and Merseyside	Essex	Guildford	Wolverhampton and Telford	Number of areas implementing solution
Project leadership /management	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5
Workforce skills	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	5
Data systems and initiatives	Yes	**No**	Yes	Yes	Yes	4
Family engagement /targeted support	Yes	Yes	Yes	**No**	Yes	4
Multi agency collaboration	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	**No**	4

Source: Monitoring Data collated by Delivery Partner.

Alongside the solution development and implementation within the DFJ areas, the delivery partner also led guided learning activities and produced good practice guides to support learning within the wider family justice system.

A theory of change (ToC) demonstrating how the pilot was expected to help reduce unnecessary delays in family court proceedings was developed in collaboration with DfE,

the Expert Panel and key stakeholders, at the start of the evaluation. This original ToC, developed before pilot implementation, can be seen below in Figure 1. The ToC was tested and refined over the course of the evaluation.

The ToC posits that workforce development would enable social workers to apply new knowledge with greater confidence in court-related work, improving the quality and timeliness of assessments. This would reduce the need for repeat or additional assessments and strengthen trust in local authority social workers across partner agencies. Collectively, these changes would contribute to improved workforce welfare, reduced reliance on agency staff, and early signs of improved social worker retention.

It was expected that the pilot would enhance data systems, particularly through automated processes would generate time savings. These would support faster and more informed case management and decision-making within local authorities, as well as enabling the diversion of some cases from court.

According to the ToC, improved collaboration across agencies would foster a shared ‘one-system’ mindset, leading to stronger coordination, improved cross-agency working, and more effective communication. This would reduce duplication and support more efficient use of resources. At the same time, clearer and more consistent engagement with families would help them better understand and navigate the system, supporting earlier identification of potential carers and more informed participation in proceedings.

Pilot outcomes arise over time from the interaction of these pathways rather than any single intervention in isolation. Together, these intermediate changes were expected to reduce unnecessary delays, reduce cost across local authorities and the courts, and enhance families’ experience through earlier, clearer and more consistent support. The pilot would also generate learning by testing locally developed solutions across different contexts and delivery models.

Over the longer term, the pilot was expected to contribute to improved outcomes for children (e.g. fewer placement moves) by enabling more timely, well-informed and stable decisions about their care, alongside improved practice across the family justice system.

Figure 1: Original ToC guiding the evaluation

<table>
<tr><th>Activities</th><th>Change mechanisms</th><th>Intermediate outcomes</th><th>Pilot outcomes</th><th>Impact</th></tr>
<tr><td>Workforce skills e.g. training, professional development for social work teams, regional assessment hub</td><td><u>PATHWAY 1: Workforce and skills</u>
SWs apply new knowledge and skills and feel more confident to take on court-related work; Upskilled SWs in regional hub provide specialised assessment service across local authorities (Cheshire only)</td><td>PATHWAY 1

Improved quality and timeliness of SW assessments; reduced need for additional (re) assessments; enhanced trust in SWs across agencies in FC system; reduced reliance on agency staff/ISWs; improved local authority workforce welfare; improved SW retention</td><td rowspan="3">Reduced costs for courts and local authorities.

Reduction in unnecessary delays in family court proceedings.</td><td rowspan="3">Improved care outcomes for children, e.g. fewer placement moves

Improved practice in family justice system.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Data system initiatives e.g.data availability and quality, case tracking, data analysis</td><td><u>PATHWAY 2: Data system</u>

Local authority staff/managers increase their understanding of local causes of delay, and improve case progression, based on better quality data; automated systems enhanced operations in local authorities.</td><td>PATHWAY 2
Time savings in local authorities from automated data systems; more cases diverted from court; improved and faster case management decisions in local authorities</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Activities	Change mechanisms	Intermediate outcomes	Pilot outcomes	Impact
Multi-agency collaboration e.g. cross system commitments, communications and coordination	**PATHWAY 3: Multi-agency collaboration** Staff across relevant agencies develop a 'one-system' mindset and commit to, and use, cross-agency guidelines for best practice	**PATHWAY 3:** Improved cross-agency coordination, collaboration and communications; streamlined processes and pooled resources across agencies create efficiencies in local authorities.	Improved family experience of the system.	
Family engagement & support e.g. family support workers, support with system navigation	**PATHWAY 4: Family experience** Families better able to understand and navigate the system as a result of better, earlier, and more consistent support at PLO and court stages	**PATHWAY 4** Earlier presentation of relatives for caring responsibilities		
Project leadership & coordination Bespoke support and learning activities by delivery partner	**PATHWAY 5: Pilot model** Staff and Delivery Partner (DP) apply learning from across pilot DFJ areas to strengthen pilot implementation and generate learning for potential rollout		**PATHWAY 5** Learning about different solutions for potential rollout	

3. Evaluation methodology and implementation

Evaluation objectives and approach

In line with client requirements, this evaluation had three main objectives:

1. To understand how the pilot was designed and implemented, and how acceptable it was to key stakeholders.
2. To assess whether, how, and why the expected outcomes outlined in the ToC were achieved.
3. To evaluate the pilot's likely value for money (VfM) through a comprehensive, ex-post cost-benefit analysis.

As agreed with DfE, to meet these objectives we designed and employed a rigorous theory-based, mixed methods approach. At the core of this approach was the pilot ToC, which outlined how stakeholders expected the pilot to generate change. The ToC guided our data collection and shaped our analysis of how activities led to outcomes. It set out expected outcomes, mechanisms of change (the pathways linking activities to outcomes), and contextual factors that enabled or hindered progress.

Over the course of the evaluation, the ToC was tested and refined to reflect how the pilot worked in practice. Evidence was gathered on:

- Activities delivered by the pilot.
- Outcomes triggered by the activities, including the changes perceived by interviewees, and the change in key variables in administrative data.
- Mechanisms of change, including the shifts in knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and processes which underpinned outcomes.
- Contextual factors, including factors such as organisational culture, inter-agency relationships, workforce stability, and system constraints (e.g. judge availability) which affected pilot delivery and outcomes.

Our mixed methods approach allowed us to triangulate primary and secondary, quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources and build a credible narrative. We used statistical quasi-experimental methods where appropriate, complemented by interviewee perspectives. This approach enabled both breadth and depth of insight, supporting robust evaluation findings.

The evaluation comprised three interlinked components:

- The process evaluation focused on how the pilot was designed, implemented, and accepted by key stakeholders, drawing on staff perceptions in interviews.
- The impact evaluation examined whether and how expected outcomes were achieved, using administrative data for quasi-experimental design (QED) analysis, alongside interview data capturing perceptions of outcomes, causal mechanisms and contextual factors.
- The economic evaluation assessed whether the pilot offered value for money, through cost-benefit analysis, by analysing pilot cost data and projected benefits identified through the impact evaluation and wider literature.

Evaluation questions

The overarching key evaluation questions (KEQs) are shown below. They are organised by the evaluation components outlined above, followed by a summative KEQ on what we have learnt that can guide possible rollout of the pilot. The detailed sub-questions for each KEQ are shown in Annex A.

Process evaluation

1. Was the pilot implemented as set out in guidance provided by the DfE?
2. What were the barriers and facilitators to implementation of the pilot solutions?
3. Are the pilot solutions acceptable to key stakeholders (implementers, families, other organisations affected by the pilots)?

Impact evaluation

4. What (if any) is the impact of the pilot on the primary outcome, the length of court proceedings (using administrative data)?
5. What (if any) are the early outcomes of the pilot (using administrative data)?
6. What do key stakeholders (e.g. leaders, practitioners, and families) perceive as outcomes of the pilot? How do they believe the outcomes came about?
7. What does the refined pilot ToC look like?
8. What, if any, are the unintended consequences of the pilot (positive and negative)?

Economic evaluation

9. To what extent does the pilot represent value for money?
10. How do cost reductions caused by the pilot vary by group, e.g. between court costs and costs faced by local authorities and households?

Summative KEQ

11. What have we learned across the DFJ area pilot sites that can help to guide rollout of some or all of the piloted solutions to other DFJ areas?

Data sources

The evaluation drew on a range of secondary and primary data sources, described below, to answer the KEQs and test the ToC. The evaluation matrix in Annex B shows which sources were used to respond to each KEQ.

Secondary data

Secondary data were central to all three evaluation components. These included pilot documents, monitoring and administrative data, and published evidence. Each type of data provided a different lens through which pilot design, implementation, and outcomes could be understood.

Pilot documents

Pilot documents provided insight into the design and delivery of the pilot. We mostly analysed these documents to identify implementation fidelity of the pilot. Annex C provides a summary of pilot documents reviewed for the evaluation.

Monitoring data

Monitoring data from implementers and the delivery partner provided insights into pilot activities, outputs, the roles of the delivery partner, and associated learning and support activities. Monitoring data used in the evaluation are shown in Annex D.

Administrative data

To analyse the pilot's impacts on key outcomes, we used anonymised administrative data from HMCTS Core Case Data (CCD). This supports robust econometric analysis of pilot effects and the economic evaluation by quantifying key benefits, such as reductions in case management hearings.

Evidence from literature

For the economic evaluation, we used evidence from the literature (see Annex C) to estimate potential long-term and indirect benefits such as cost savings to the public sector and families, and improvements in child wellbeing associated with reduced delays in family court proceedings.

Primary data

Primary data played a key role in generating rich, contextualised insights into how the pilot was implemented and perceived, as well as capturing perceived outcomes not available through secondary data.

In depth interviews

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with pilot implementers in sampled locations. The interviews explored individual and organisational implementation experiences, acceptability, perceived outcomes and unintended consequences, mechanisms and contextual factors underpinning outcomes, and learning for potential rollout.

Evaluation implementation

This section summarises the research activities that were implemented to generate and analyse the evidence we used to address the key evaluation questions. This is in line with the final approach developed and formally agreed with DfE in the extensive design phase. Where the approach has evolved since the sign-off of the inception report, this is explicitly flagged in the final sub-section.

Primary data collection for the process and impact evaluations

Primary data for the process and impact evaluations was collected via interviews between February - April 2025, and a second round of interviews in November-February 2026. The first round of data collection focused on issues related to pilot design and implementation, facilitators and barriers to implementation, and pilot acceptability, alongside some preliminary data on outcomes. The second round of data collection focused on outcomes and mechanisms, unintended consequences, and learning for rollout.

We conducted interviews in three of the five pilot DFJ areas. Within each DFJ area we purposively sampled local authorities. These locations were selected in consultation with DfE and the DPs. The selected locations were:

- Central London DFJ
    - Kensington and Chelsea (lead local authority[5])
    - Camden
- Cheshire and Merseyside DFJ
    - Cheshire West and Chester (lead local authority)
    - Chester
- Wolverhampton
    - Walsall (lead local authority)
    - Telford and Wrekin

Details on the location sampling criteria and processes are set out in detail in Annex E.

In total we interviewed 35 respondents (six respondents were interviewed twice). Respondents included local authority social workers and managers, Cafcass guardians and managers, and LFJB representatives and a judge**.** Details on the identification and recruitment of respondents for interviews, the number and categories of interviewees are set out in detail in Annex E.

Primary data for the process and impact evaluations were triangulated across sources and stakeholders to capture multiple perspectives. The monitoring data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis via a Framework Approach, mapping and summarizing data from across interviews in line with the KEQs. Our data analysis followed an iterative process. The evaluation team engaged in weekly post-fieldwork debriefs during the fieldwork process and participated in an analysis workshop at the end of each stage of fieldwork.

Impact evaluation quasi-experimental design (QED) (KEQs 4 and 5)

The impact evaluation assessed whether the pilot was associated with changes in key court process outcomes using HMCTS Core Case Data (CCD). The quantitative impact analysis was pre-specified in a statistical analysis plan.

The primary outcome (for KEQ4) was the length of court proceedings, measured as the number of days from case submission to case disposal.

[5] Lead local authorities oversaw the delivery of the separate workstreams within the other local authorities in their DFJ area. They managed the project budget and ensured that the implementation of the workstreams met the agreed key performance indicators (KPIs). The strategic leads for the pilot would be based out of the lead local authority and manage the other workstream leads to deliver pilot activities.

Secondary outcomes (for KEQ5) were selected to capture earlier changes in court processes that might plausibly arise if the pilot improved case preparation and the effectiveness of the first CMH. These were:

(1) the number of case management hearings recorded per case,

(2) the number of days from case submission to the first CMH, and

(3) the overall number of cases entering the court system in each local authority.

The number of days from case submission to the first CMH was included as an additional indicator of early court process timing, although it was recognised that this measure is strongly influenced by court listing practices and therefore may be less directly affected by the pilot than other outcomes. The number of expert assessments was originally included as a key outcome under KEQ5 but was later excluded from the final impact analysis because the HMCTS field had substantial missing data and showed evidence of changes in recording practice over time, meaning it could not be interpreted robustly.

Across outcomes, the evaluation used a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences design. This compared changes over time in pilot areas against changes over time in non-pilot areas, to assess whether outcomes changed differently in areas participating in the pilot after implementation began. The analysis was based on two cohorts of cases: a pre-pilot baseline cohort comprising cases submitted between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, and a post-pilot cohort comprising cases submitted from 1 April 2024 onwards.

Cases were classified as treated if they were issued in local authorities participating in the DFJ Trailblazers pilot, and as comparison cases if they were issued in areas not participating in that pilot. To maximise comparability between pilot and comparison groups, the main analysis used a matched and weighted sample based on area-level and case-level characteristics for both primary and secondary outcomes (Index of Multiple Deprivation, % of renters, % of carers). In other words, the comparison cases were defined based on statistical analysis to ensure comparability across these area-level and case-level characteristics. Unweighted models and additional sensitivity analyses were undertaken separately and are reported in Annex G.

The primary outcome required a slightly different modelling approach from the secondary outcomes because many cases submitted after the start of the pilot had not yet reached disposal by the end of the observation window. To account for this, the primary outcome was analysed using a survival-based difference-in-differences approach. Survival analysis is used to model the time until an event occurs (i.e., the disposal of a case) and it allows all cases to be included in the analysis, including those that were still open when the data extract ended. Cases that were still ongoing were treated as right-censored, meaning that they contributed information up to the last date on which they were observed, even though their final duration was not yet known. The difference-in-

differences element of the approach then compared how the pattern of case disposal over time changed in pilot areas relative to how it changed in non-pilot areas, before and after implementation. In other words, it estimated whether cases in pilot areas were being disposed more quickly than would have been expected based on pre-pilot differences and the changes over time seen in comparison areas. This avoids bias that would arise if the analysis included only completed cases, which would tend to over-represent shorter proceedings. The impact of the pilot on case duration is presented using summary measures derived from these models, including differences in the proportion of cases disposed by selected time points and estimates of average days saved.

The secondary outcomes were analysed using weighted difference-in-differences regression models, using the same treatment and cohort definitions as for the primary outcome. The number of case management hearings was analysed using a weighted negative binomial model, and the number of days from case submission to the first CMH was analysed using a weighted linear model with standard errors clustered at local authority level. The overall number of cases was analysed differently, because this outcome relates to the volume of cases entering the court system in each area rather than to outcomes for individual cases. For this reason, it was analysed at local authority-quarter level using all available submitted cases and a Poisson fixed-effects difference-in-differences model. This compared quarterly changes in case volumes in pilot and non-pilot areas before and after implementation, while accounting for differences between areas and common quarterly trends.

Further detail on data cleaning, construction of analysis samples, matching and weighting, model specification, and estimation of confidence intervals is provided in Annex F. Results from the sensitivity analyses are reported in Annex G.

Economic evaluation

In line with HM Treasury's Green Book guidance, the evaluation centres on the development of a social cost-benefit analysis (CBA) model. Using data from the impact evaluation, we estimate the benefits associated with the reduction in court lengths, weighing these against the costs of delivery. The primary benefits monetised in the model were operational savings caused by a reduction in court running costs. The original business case has not been made available so there is no comparison in the economic evaluation to the original assessment of costs and benefits

Further detail on methodology, assumptions and modelling decisions is discussed in Annex H. This includes methods for estimating programme costs (both direct and indirect), and financial savings from reduced court time. The Annex also includes a discussion of additional benefits that were not monetised due to a lack of robust evidence.

Expert Panel

We worked closely with an expert panel composed of five senior figures involved in family courts work and related areas. They included a barrister; a Senior Advocate; a children and family's social worker; an NHS Safeguarding Deputy Director; and an Assistant Director from Research in Practice, a leading research and evaluation provider in Children's and Adults Services. Short biographies of the expert panel members are provided in Annex I.

Expert panel members contributed to our evaluation design and ToC, reviewed and commented on our evaluation findings, and worked closely with us on the final evaluation outputs.

Limitations

This evaluation faced several limitations.

First, participation in interviews was lower than we aimed for**,** and we had no interviews with staff working in the family courts and only one DFJ in our sample. As a result, our findings primarily reflect the perspectives of staff in local authorities, a smaller number of Cafcass staff, and Local Family Justice Board (LFJB) members. This has limited our ability to understand legal sector professional perspectives on implementation, acceptability and outcomes (KEQs 1-3 and 6-8), and led to inconclusive findings on a small number of outcomes. It may have introduced bias into our findings, as it is possible that court-related staff would have had a materially different view on the pilot.

These gaps occurred despite a comprehensive recruitment effort. With support from DfE, we developed a contact list of possible interviewees in each selected area. We started recruitment early, four weeks before the planned start of data collection. We also extended data collection beyond the initial end date in order to accommodate scheduling difficulties. Potential participants were contacted across two recruitment rounds, with each round including up to three follow-up emails. We also liaised with Cafcass leadership to help facilitate recruitment and encourage participation. To increase the likelihood of engagement, we offered flexible interview times, and used a snowball sampling approach, asking participants to suggest additional contacts who may be able to contribute. After several weeks of recruitment activity, we sought further support from HMCTS to identify additional potential participants. The limited response to our efforts may reflect limited awareness or involvement in the pilot among some local stakeholders.

Second, families were not directly involved in the evaluation. Following discussions with DfE and experienced professionals, we chose not to interview families due to ethical concerns around re-traumatisation. This decision, outlined in Annex J, reflected a shared judgment that the potential harm outweighed the likely benefit, given the limited number

of families involved and the potential sensitivity of their experiences. Indirect insights into family experiences were also limited as few interviewees had had contact with families. This has limited our ability to understand families' experiences of key elements of the pilot such as assessments and engagement activities, particularly whether these were acceptable to them (KEQ3), and whether the pilot made any difference to their experience of the court system (KEQ6).

Third**,** the QED relied on HMCTS CCD administrative data, which included limited information about cases and raised some concerns about data quality. The data did not include detailed information on the characteristics of children or on case type, which limited the extent to which differences between pilot and comparison areas could be adjusted for in the quantitative analysis. In addition, some variables had substantial missingness or data errors. For example, some records had implausible date values and had to be excluded from the analysis. Furthermore, the expert reports variable had around 50% missingness, which meant it could not be used as a reliable outcome measure.

Finally, CCD coverage in the early period (including 2021) is incomplete because courts migrated onto the Reform system gradually over time[6]. The number of cases captured in CCD increased through 2021 and then became much more stable once coverage is broader. However, this means that for 2021, the first year used to build the baseline, 12,477 cases are missing from the dataset used for the analyses. While DfE provided access to the legacy dataset, local authority information is missing from the dataset, preventing us from assessing how this missingness might have impacted the impact evaluation findings. The evaluation had originally planned to supplement the HMCTS data with Cafcass administrative data, which would have provided richer case-level information and could have helped mitigate some of these limitations, particularly in relation to case characteristics and model adjustment. However, it was not possible to secure access to Cafcass data within the timeframe of the evaluation, and it was therefore agreed with DfE that the quantitative impact analysis would rely on HMCTS data only. While the main impact analysis used matching, weighting and fixed effects to improve comparability between pilot and comparison groups, it remains a QED and so cannot rule out all unobserved differences between areas or other concurrent changes in the wider system.

Fourth, 10,154 post-pilot cases (40.7%) were still ongoing at the end of the observation period. For the primary outcome, this was addressed using survival analysis methods that account for right-censoring. However, this means that the findings on case duration

[6] In 2016, HMCTS launched a reform programme to bring modern technology and new ways of working to the courts and tribunals system to better ensure it is just, proportionate and accessible. The reform included digitalisation of a number of services, with the aim of enabling public users and legal professionals to start and manage cases digitally, reducing time, effort and cost, and leading to improved access to justice. Core Case Data (CCD) is the reformed case management system.

should still be interpreted as estimates based on the follow-up available at the time of analysis, rather than as complete lifetime observations for all post-pilot cases.

Changes to original design agreed with DfE

The following changes were made:

- We did not interview families who were affected by the pilots (see Annex J for a full explanation).
- Some modifications to the selection criteria used for sampling locations were made during meetings with DfE and the DPs (see Annex E).
- The approach for the primary outcome (case durations) in the QED was refined during the evaluation. Rather than relying only on completed cases, we used a survival-based difference-in-differences approach for case duration, which allowed us to include cases that were still ongoing at the end of the observation period.
- The main QED analyses reported for KEQs 4 and 5 improved on the original methodology by including matching and weighting to improve comparability between pilot and comparison groups. Technical detail on the final quantitative approach is reported in Annex F, and unweighted models and additional sensitivity analyses are reported in Annex G.
- We added time from case submission to the first CMH as an additional secondary outcome because it provides an early indicator of whether the pilot was associated with changes in early case progression and hearing readiness; although it was not one of the original sub-questions, it was judged analytically useful for KEQ5 given the pilot's intended focus on improving preparation before the first CMH.
- The final QED analysis could not assess the impact of the pilot on the number of expert reports produced (one of the key outcome objectives) because of data quality issues, including substantial missingness and evidence of changes in recording over time. This meant that the results could not be relied on.

4. Evaluation findings

Introduction

This section presents the findings from the evaluation, structured around the three core workstreams: process, impact, and economic evaluation. Together, these strands provide a comprehensive assessment of how the pilot was implemented, what it achieved, and the value it represents. In this findings section we present our evidence against each KEQ in turn. We then interpret the evidence from across the KEQs in the conclusion.

Process evaluation findings

The process evaluation findings are structured around three key evaluation questions:

- KEQ1: How was the pilot designed and implemented?
- KEQ2: What were the barriers and facilitators to implementation of the pilot solutions?
- KEQ3: Are the pilot solutions acceptable to stakeholders (implementers, families, other organisations affected by the pilots)?

KEQ1: How were the pilot solutions designed and implemented?

KEQ1 Summary

- Senior local authority staff and key relevant agencies were involved in design discussions. The delivery partner played a key role, streamlining designs and supporting the development of costed workplans.
- All areas adapted plans during implementation due to recruitment difficulties, adaptation to local realities, data revealing new needs, difficulties getting agreement from relevant agencies, and staffing challenges.

Who was involved in the design of the solutions and what processes were used?

While the design process was adapted to local context, the pilot followed a common three stage design:

- The local authorities within DFJ areas worked together to provide a plan for their proposed solutions in their pilot applications.
- Once the five DFJ areas had been selected, Mutual Ventures reviewed the application forms and conducted ‘deep dive’ research through stakeholder interviews, data analysis and solutions workshops. This deep-dive analysis aimed

to diagnose the causes of delays within each DFJ area to inform the co-design of solutions.

- Based on the findings from each DFJ 'deep dive', Mutual Ventures worked with stakeholders to create a 'solutions blueprint' for each DFJ area. The 'solutions blueprints' summarised proposed solutions, governance arrangements and overall costs. After DfE approved the blueprints, Mutual Ventures worked with DFJ areas to write costed workplans, which were approved by DfE.

Design discussions were driven by directors within local authorities and predominantly involved senior staff. While this helped with decision-making, it meant that time was required to bring operational staff on board after the blueprints and costs had been approved by DfE.

DFJ areas engaged with key relevant agencies, including Cafcass, HMCTS, the judiciary and the private legal sector. Cafcass were consistently involved in the design stage across our three sampled DFJ areas. The need to involve other agencies depended on the combination of solutions in each DFJ area. For example, in Guildford, the local authority needed to engage HMCTS for case progression tracking.

Mutual Ventures staff played a critical role during the design phase. They played an important role in focusing design discussions and helping areas to prioritise solutions. They adapted the design process according to characteristics of each DFJ area, such as the number of local authorities involved, and the types of stakeholders that needed to engage.

Interviewees involved in the design process commented on the short timeframe for the design period. Due to time constraints on the Shared Outcomes Fund[7] project as a whole, the timespan to write and submit the pilot applications was two weeks and the design stage was seven weeks. This had a practical impact on design discussions. For example, while some DFJ areas were able to hold multiple workshops in the 7-week design stage, Cheshire and Merseyside could only hold one because of diary constraints. The short timeframe created particular difficulties in Central London, due to the large number of local authorities involved and different ideas about the causes of court delays and potential solutions across the twelve local authorities. This was eventually overcome in collaboration with the Mutual Ventures coach.

[7] The Shared Outcomes Fund (SOF) Round 3 was a UK government cross-departmental funding programme. It was led by HM Treasury and supported short-term pilot projects jointly delivered by multiple departments to tackle complex, cross-cutting policy challenges. Round 3 had a very tight timeframe because it was time-limited to the end of the Spending Review period (March 2025) and designed as a short, intensive pilot fund, not long-term programme funding. As the final round of the Fund, projects were expected to mobilise quickly, deliver at pace, and generate evaluative learning within 2023–25, creating significant pressure on delivery and evaluation timelines.

The short timeframes also limited the ability of some DFJ areas to engage external stakeholders in their designs**,** which in some instances had negative consequences during implementation. For example, one DFJ area team had not been able to consult the judiciary in the two-week application period, and consequently, support from the judiciary was limited.

DfE did not provide funding at the design stage. This meant that some key stakeholders dedicated time to the design without any additional funding to free up their time. Some interviewees described the difficulties of managing solution development on top of their usual busy roles.

To what extent were the solutions implemented as proposed? How and why did they differ from the original proposals in each DFJ area?

Given the short timeframe of the design phase, DfE agreed that the plans signed off in April 2024 could be further developed and adapted as needed during implementation.

> "All the areas met that deadline...but it was with the caveat, and we had discussed this with the DfE…[that] what was ultimately designed in a very compressed timeline would probably be subject to a little bit of variation once delivery started because of how quick [the design phase was]*." - Delivery Partner*

All areas adapted their plans to some extent during implementation. Key changes included:

- Central London: The data workstream was led by Data to Insight, a specialist consultancy, instead of a contracted Data Lead and Analyst, due to recruitment difficulties. The focus shifted from broad family engagement to improving practice in pre-proceedings and proceedings, mainly through workforce training, while limited direct family support continued through advocacy and a court process explainer video
- Cheshire and Merseyside: The Project Lead and the Hub QA and Impact Lead positions were not filled, with duties taken on by a Service Manager and a Senior Officer. The Hub was set up later than planned with secondees from four local authorities instead of nine, and with resulting savings redirected into additional training and funding for family support advocates.
- ESST: Four Family Support Workers (FSWs) were hired instead of five, due to difficulties hiring. The Training Review Lead was appointed later than planned, reducing time for system-wide training development. ESST continued some training beyond the pilot and commissioned video guides to widen access, while underspend from recruitment delays was redirected to the data workstream and additional training outputs.

- Guildford: Late appointment of the Strategic Social Worker and lack of HMCTS buy-in constrained practice improvement and cross-system work, leading to scaled-back system commitments but continued engagement through existing multi-agency forums.
- Wolverhampton: Several planned roles could not be filled, including the project lead, participation lead, and data analyst. These responsibilities were instead shared by strategic leads or delivered through external support. The planned regional participation board was also not established and instead resources were developed for regional use and a conference was held to support local authorities in developing their own participation offer post-pilot.

The tables in Annex D show what was planned at the Blueprints stage, and what had been delivered by the end of the pilot, by DFJ area. The tables highlight that all DFJ areas implemented most of their plans as originally intended, and made significant progress in delivery across all solution areas.

Separate tables in Annex D show the training delivered in each DFJ area. They show that, while workforce skills development started late in several DFJ areas, all delivered multiple training courses or sessions with high attendance numbers from social workers and legal staff at a range of career levels. All DFJ areas delivered ParentAssess[8] training to social workers, managers and family support workers, as well as training on topics such as domestic violence, sexual offences, sibling assessments, kinship care and court skills. Other training included a specific Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (AYSE)[9] programme for newly accredited social workers and 'BiteSize'[10] legal training for a variety of roles.

The main reason for changes to plans was the difficulty recruiting for key roles – project leads in all DFJ areas, and workstream leads in some areas. In these cases, roles were contracted out to agencies or consultants, or posts were merged, or positions were eventually filled but with delays (see tables in Annex J for recruitment dates for key roles in each DFJ area). These delays were often quite significant, especially given the short timeframe for implementation. While Mutual Ventures stepped in to fulfil some essential functions of the project leads until these positions were filled, much of the core work could not start until positions were filled or alternative arrangement made. This shortened the already-brief 12-month implementation timeline even further, sometimes to just 7-8 months for some solutions. This limited time available for solutions to embed and generate observable outcomes.

[8] ParentAssess is a specialist social work parenting assessment framework used in family court and pre-proceedings to assess parents with learning disabilities and/or additional needs
[9] Assessed and Supported Year in Employment training for newly-qualified social workers.
[10] 'Bitesize' refers to "a way of teaching and learning where information is broken down into small, manageable chunks…..making it easier for students to understand and retain the information (https://www.teachfloor.com/elearning-glossary/what-is-bitesize-learning. Accessed 14th May 2025).

Other reasons for changes to plans included:

- adaptation to local realities (for example, where mapping highlighted the different capabilities across local authorities in a given region),
- needs that became apparent after analysis of new data,
- difficulties getting agreement from agencies outside the local authorities, staffing challenges (such as shortages or high turnover),
- workload constraints.

KEQ2: What were the barriers and facilitators to implementation of the pilot solutions?

KEQ2 summary

- The main facilitators were strong senior-level leadership and engagement, strong communications and collaboration across local authorities within DFJ areas, strong engagement from relevant agencies outside the local authorities, and support from the delivery partner.
- The main barriers were the short pilot timeframe, varying capabilities among local authorities within DFJ areas, limited engagement among some agencies outside the local authorities, and challenges with technology.

What factors facilitated implementation, and how (including DP support activities)?

Interviewees identified the following key facilitators to implementation:

- Strong leadership and good engagement among senior staff
- Strong communications and collaboration across local authorities within DFJ areas
- Strong engagement from relevant agencies outside the local authorities
- Support from the delivery partner

One of the most important facilitators was strong leadership. This took several different forms. Firstly, interviewees in all sampled areas noted that having a competent project lead to drive the pilot forward, with that person in post as early as possible, was critical. It was also noted as helpful when the project lead had personal knowledge of social work as well as strong practical skills.

> "It was important to have someone really strong driving, especially in such a short time frame." – *Delivery Partner*

Secondly, the engagement and availability of senior local authority staff was an important facilitator. Some interviewees explicitly valued the role of a director-level individual in

creating a shared regional understanding of the pilot in a short space of time. In Central London, local authority directors recognised that part of the value they brought was through their experience of previous initiatives, which enabled them to apply institutional learning to this pilot.

> "I think something like this needs that leadership drive, if you hope to have impact on the ground, people are looking for leaders in this space." – *Cafcass*

Thirdly, those most closely involved in implementation – such as DFJ area leads, and workstream leads – observed that having senior engagement from across local authorities through a steering group facilitated timely decision-making both in formal steering group meetings and through ad hoc meetings or communications.

> "When we needed some issues addressing about the recruitment right at the beginning, we [didn't] need to wait for the quarterly meetings…they've been able to do that outside of the usual arrangements." – *Local authority Public Law Outline subgroup*

Strong communications and collaboration across local authorities in a region were vital for pilot implementation. Clear communication of the aims of the pilot, and the requirements for delivering different solutions, were key to ensuring that staff from different local authorities collaborated to deliver solutions requiring input from multiple local authorities, such as parenting or kinship assessments in Cheshire and Merseyside's Hub, or the creation of a shared dataset.

> "Where you're doing the [kinship or parenting] assessment for the local authority… the responsiveness from them helps, because otherwise…we can't access their systems, we don't know who to speak to when we need a piece of information" – *Local authority social workers*

> "I found all of the analysts that I was working with who are providing data to be excellent, they were really involved in the initial stages when we were…designing that advanced data set. We had really good buy in from the local authorities…which is always really important when you're asking for data that isn't routinely collected." – *Data Manager, Data to Insight*

Strong engagement from relevant agencies outside the local authorities was another important facilitator. Key agencies whose support was necessary included Cafcass, HMCTS, the judiciary, and the private legal sector. Interviewees across DFJ areas highlighted that pre-existing strong relationships facilitated engagement. This was the case, for example, between the local authority social work department and Cafcass directors in Central London. Support from the judiciary was highlighted as especially helpful for facilitating implementation.

> "So that's [supportive judiciary] been really helpful because it's given social workers direct access to the lead judge to know what they need to be doing, what's expected in court from them, from the point that they first come to court right till the end, which I think again has been really helpful. It just sets the standard basically." – *Local authority coordinator post*

Support from the delivery partner, Mutual Ventures, was considered to be a key facilitator for implementation. Mutual Ventures provided support to DFJ areas through learning and support activities (10 peer learning groups and 10 learning subgroups) and regular coaching support (between 31-77 hours of support for each DFJ area). They supported DFJ areas to synthesise and share their learnings with each other in recorded spotlight events and at a conference. They also synthesised learning in other outputs for local authorities and central government. The nature and volume of support provided is summarised in the tables in Annex J.

DFJ area interviewees valued support from Mutual Ventures in terms of helping them to focus discussions during the design phase, adapting plans during implementation, and support with monitoring data and working with DfE.

> "Small example, but it made such a difference…we'd get so lost in each meeting and they [Mutual Ventures] allowed us to focus on things in our control, we were quite overwhelmed by the complexity of the problem." – *Local authority leadership post*

Interviewees also observed that the peer learning opportunities facilitated by Mutual Ventures helped to improve the solutions in some areas. For instance, ESST adopted bite-sized training from Guildford, which they learned about in peer learning groups. The regular and frequent contact with the Mutual Ventures coaches was found to be helpful, especially when pilot staff were recruited late or left midway through the pilot.

> "[The coach] from Mutual Ventures has been the golden thread really. She was there from the beginning, which has been very helpful when there's been a handover." – *Local authority leadership post*

What difficulties/barriers did implementers face, were they overcome, and if so, how?

Interviewees identified the following barriers to implementation:

- Short timeframe for implementation.
- Varying capabilities and challenges across the local authorities within each DFJ area.
- Limited engagement among some agencies outside the local authorities.
- Challenges with technology.

The main barrier described by interviewees in all sampled DFJ areas was the short timeframe for implementation**.** As discussed in KEQ1, there were significant delays in recruiting some key posts in some DFJ areas, shortening the time for implementation. The short-term nature of the posts was also problematic, as it made them less attractive to potential candidates.

> "...everyone was spending three or four months recruiting into those posts because we actually wrote job descriptions, we had to work out HR procedures, all those sorts of things. So, there was a lot of complicated things to work out*."* – *Local authority Manager*

These difficulties were overcome in various ways in different DFJ areas, including reducing the number of roles recruited for, contracting roles to specialised agencies (such as 'Dandelions' in Wolverhampton or 'Data to Insight' in Central London), and, in the case of the Cheshire and Merseyside Assessment Hub, setting up memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between local authorities, which were quicker to negotiate than a full secondment contract. Mutual Ventures helped to mitigate the effect of recruitment delays by facilitating communications, keeping LFJBs updated, starting peer learning groups straight away to maintain momentum, and, at times, stepping in to fulfil various roles within the different DFJ areas.

As a knock-on effect, the compressed timelines for delivery created information overload and training fatigue among some participants who attended multiple training courses in a short space of time. This was partially mitigated by creating repositories of training resources to allow staff to revisit training content if they did not fully digest it during the pilot.

> "…the more training that someone's attending over a short period of time, the more fatigue they're going to get and the less they're going to take away from trainings as they go along. And so that's been a challenge for us." – *Local authority leadership post*

Interviewees in all sampled DFJ areas felt that the 12-month implementation period limited what they could achieve, and their ability to demonstrate impact. In Cheshire and Merseyside those implementing the pilot felt that their solutions needed more time to prove their value, and without evidence of impact, other local authorities in the DFJ area refused to provide funding for the Hub after March 2025.

> "…actually a 12-month period to mobilise, to then provide some evidence of impact and change is such a limited time period*."* – *Local authority leadership post*

Varying capabilities and challenges among the local authorities within each DFJ area also created difficulties during implementation. For example, while the local authorities in

the one of the DFJ areas were initially united on the need for an Assessment Hub, only four of the nine local authorities were able to release social workers to the Hub due to staffing challenges and, in one local authority, because of staff turnover following a negative Ofsted report. This was overcome to a degree by adapting staffing arrangements. However, this created tensions among the local authorities, as some local authorities released some of their best social workers to the hub, while other local authorities did not release workers but still benefitted from the Hub. This, in turn, limited buy-in to continuation of the Assessment Hub (see KEQ3).

> "How unhappy some of those authorities have ended up being, who have released a social worker, because I think they have just been…focused on, 'we're the only ones' and they've seen it as 'all the other authorities have not bothered'." – *Local authority manager*

One interviewee highlighted that varying staffing challenges across different local authorities impacted how each local authority could engage with the pilot.

> "I think the challenges that each of the local authorities are all at different points. So they have individual challenges. For instance, you know, staffing, retention, things like that…we know that that creates a barrier in terms of the churn and change of social workers, but that isn't something that necessarily we'd be able to address through Trailblazer." – *Local authority leadership post*

While strong engagement of relevant agencies outside the local authorities was a facilitator, where there were difficulties engaging these agencies, this became a hindrance to implementation. For example, several areas reported challenged in securing consistent engagement from key partners including the Judiciary, Cafcass, and HMCTS which limited collaboration in implementation and data solutions work. Sometimes this was related to early delays in staff recruitment, with some DFJ area leads coming into post late and finding they needed to re-engage stakeholders. In other cases, it was because other agencies had their own set of priorities. To help overcome these issues, pilot staff made repeated requests for assistance to the agencies they were trying to engage, escalated requests via the LFJB, or asked for assistance from Mutual Ventures.

> "...when I first took over in September, you know you never have the same person twice at a meeting, which was a challenge*."* – *Local authority leadership post*

Technology was also mentioned as a barrier to smooth implementation. In some areas, local authority IT systems limited or even prohibited information sharing and communications, hindering regional collaborations. local authority staff overcame the challenge using 'workarounds' such as sharing information by email rather than using shared drives or chat functions.

> "We've had to have individual authorities actually identify somebody who can complete returns for us to be able to produce a regional data set, because none of the systems actually talk to each other." – *Local authority leadership post*

KEQ3: Are the pilot solutions acceptable to stakeholders (implementers, families, other organisations affected by the pilots)?

KEQ3 has multiple sub-questions which together illustrate acceptability of the pilot solutions to stakeholders. These sub-questions address issues of:

- relevance (whether each solution type can help to address the problem of unnecessary delays in the family courts);
- coherence of the solutions with existing organisational processes and systems;
- resourcing for the solutions;
- the level of buy-in to the solutions among stakeholders;
- and family perspectives on the family-related interventions.

KEQ3 Summary

- Relevance: Interviewees felt that the solutions could contribute to reducing unnecessary delays, although many also pointed to broader systemic reasons for delays.
- Coherence: Interviewees reported that the solutions were coherent with existing services in local authorities and often built on these activities.
- Resources: Interviewees were positive about guidance from Mutual Ventures and financial support from DfE. Staffing emerged as a consistent challenge across all three sampled DFJ areas.
- Buy-in and continuation: Interviewees in Central London and Wolverhampton were generally supportive of the continued implementation of the solutions. In Cheshire and Merseyside, interviewee perspectives were more mixed.
- Family perspectives: The limited information on family experience of the pilot suggests that some of the solutions have been positively received.

Are the pilot solutions perceived to be relevant to the problems being addressed?

Sampled DFJ interviewees broadly agreed that the solutions are relevant and well-targeted to help reduce unnecessary delays in family court proceedings. While they expressed strong confidence in the solutions, they also noted that delays arise from broader systemic issues beyond local authorities. The summary below outlines interviewee perceptions of the relevance of the pilot solutions as solutions to the core problem of unnecessary delays in the family courts. It covers the intervention areas

shown on the ToC: workforce development, data systems, family engagement and support, and multi-agency collaboration.

Workforce development

A persistent challenge across all five DFJ areas which contributed to unnecessary delays was the lack of social worker capacity, reflected in poor quality assessments, lack of trust in social worker assessments among court and Cafcass staff, and a growing reliance on external experts. These capacity issues also impacted the timely completion of specialist assessments. Early diagnostic analysis by the Delivery Partner in ESST highlighted that overly complex letters before proceedings created limited parent engagement and contributed to delays. In this context, the focus on improving the quality and credibility of social work assessments through training was seen as highly relevant. All five areas delivered ParentAssess training alongside training in specialist risk assessments (e.g. domestic violence, sexual abuse, sibling assessments) and court-related skills, to address this challenge.

Interviewees in the sampled DFJ areas viewed these activities as directly addressing key causes of delay, particularly poor evidence quality and a lack of confidence in local authority assessments. They also mentioned that the trainings responded to known areas of weakness in their local authorities such as the inexperience of many social workers in court work. In Wolverhampton for example, local authority staff mentioned that training was strategically targeted to reduce dependence on independent social worker assessments by upskilling their internal workforce.

> "There's lots of inexperienced or newly qualified staff that were within the …core system and trying to do that work so...it was an absolute priority for us all in making sure that we would upskill our workers." – *Local authority PLO subgroup*

Interviewees also believed the toolkits, practice standards, and additional resources developed through the programme would be helpful in reducing delays, as they would help to improve consistency in social work both within and across local authorities.

Regional Assessment Hub (Cheshire and Merseyside only)

Cheshire and Merseyside created an Assessment Hub for court-ordered assessments (ParentAssess, fostering/Special Guardianship Order assessments, and viability assessments) to be completed by social workers seconded from local authorities in the region. This was a tailored approach to the problem of social worker assessment quality and timeliness. The seconded social workers had access to substantial additional training beyond that offered to social workers in the local authorities.

Interviewees in Cheshire and Merseyside saw this as a relevant approach to reducing delays**.** They considered that the dedicated focus on completion of court-ordered assessments by social workers with additional training would help to improve the quality of assessments, while also reducing the time taken to produce assessments.

Data systems

Across the four DFJ areas that prioritised data system initiatives, several issues contributing to unnecessary delays were identified. There was a shared recognition of the need for more consistent, high-quality regional data collection and management as limited data availability and low data reliability were barriers to effective case tracking and decision-making. Additionally, the limited use of data to support early intervention was seen as contributing to unnecessary court involvement in some cases, and poorer outcomes for children and families.

Local authority interviewees broadly found the activities within the data workstreams to be highly relevant to tackling these issues and the resulting unnecessary delays. They highlighted that improvements in data collection processes would provide them with an increasingly granular understanding of local challenges, allowing them to observe and discuss trends and improve decision-making. For example, local authority interviewees in Central London reported that improved data enabled them to quantify issues that were previously discussed only anecdotally, leading to more informed discussions.

> "The value comes from them turning [improved data] into an understanding of what [it] means at a practice level and then being able to communicate that to judges [and] to local authorities." - *DFJ area Manager*

> "The narrative that's beginning to form around the cause of delays is not anecdotal anymore. There's proof via the clear data sets which enables us to identify where the problem really does lie, that wasn't in existence beforehand…" – *DFJ area strategic Lead*

Similarly, local authority interviewees in Wolverhampton emphasised the potential for more consistent data to drive change. For example, they stated that through the development of more consistent data outputs across local authorities in the Wolverhampton area, local authorities would be able to compare themselves to each other and to other regions more readily, providing opportunities for learning within and between areas. The sustainable nature of improvements to data systems was seen as enhancing their relevance as a solution to unnecessary delays. For example, interviewees in Wolverhampton expected to be able to maintain data collection at a low cost after pilot end using the templates developed during the pilot. Interviewees outlined plans to encourage ongoing use by showcasing best practice at quarterly subgroup meetings with local authority leaders.

Family engagement

Evidence shows that when families are not supported to understand court pre-proceedings, delays can result, for example, due to the time taken to present relatives who can take on caring responsibilities during court proceedings. Similarly, without early intervention work with families, more cases may end up in court than would otherwise need to, contributing to overall delays in the system by creating unnecessary work for the courts.

The activities focused on family engagement and support were considered relevant by interviewees. Many felt that some of the interventions – such as accessible guidance on pre-proceedings, an animated information video for parents, and a parent advocacy service – could help families to understand the pre-proceedings process, thereby keeping cases moving through the system and helping families to consider relatives to take on caring responsibilities at an earlier stage.

Similarly, in Wolverhampton, interviewees felt that the development of information resources for parents/carers with the participation of parents/carers with lived experience of the family courts – based on Telford and Wrekin's participatory 'Dandelions' model - could help to give parents and carers a better understanding of the pre-proceedings process. This could, in turn, contribute to reducing delays by ensuring a more efficient pre-proceedings process.

> "In terms of the participation elements, if parent carers are really clear on what we're doing, and we're really clear with them on what we do and why we do it, and we work alongside them, we might be able to make pre proceedings work even more effectively and reduce the need to put as many children before the court or if they do go before the court we have front loaded, a lot of that work." - *Local authority manager*

An important part of this work in Wolverhampton was about extending the Telford and Wrekin approach to local authorities which, prior to the pilot, offered more limited support to families.

> "The participation is a really interesting one because I think different authorities have been doing it differently...we needed a consistent approach of trying to learn from the children and families that have gone through this court process to make sure that we take that into account when we're shaping our services and the support that we offer." – *Local authority PLO subgroup*

Multi-agency collaboration

Inadequate communication, coordination and collaboration across the various agencies involved in the family courts system create inefficient and ineffective processes, and contribute to delays in court cases. These functions needed to improve in order to accelerate individual cases and facilitate system-wide improvement. As some local authority interviewees pointed out, the complexity of the system means that the actions of one stakeholder can have knock-on effects for other stakeholders in the system. For example, while local authorities can influence their own practice, they share court systems with other local authorities, meaning one area's delays can affect other areas.

Across all DFJ areas, multi-agency collaboration to create shared commitments and ways of working was felt to be relevant to addressing unnecessary delays. For example, in Central London, collaboration across local authorities and Cafcass produced an agreement that was seen as relevant to reducing delays by reducing the use of expert assessments; the updated policy meant that Cafcass guardians had to outline directly why an expert assessment was needed before being able to request one.

In Central London, Project Leads felt that their partnership as 12 local authorities working together produced opportunities for richer ongoing collaboration with other relevant agencies that could help to reduce delays in the future, and helped to elevate the voice of the local authorities. They highlighted that these meetings were important to understand what different stakeholders within the system were doing to tackle unnecessary delays and allow for better partnership working going forward. For example, they were invited to meetings with MoJ in which each side's perspectives on the causes of delays in care proceedings were discussed. The Project Leads emphasised that before the Pilot MoJ would not have considered inviting stakeholders from local authorities to these meetings.

> "We're getting invites to meetings that…individual local authorities wouldn't be getting. But because there's one person representing [all 12] local authorities, it's kind of quite easy to invite that project lead…it's also important to evidence to our judicial colleagues that we are doing what we can to address the delays. I think [it's] always important to show that."
> – *Local authority leadership post*

In Wolverhampton, collaboration with the local DFJ led to the DFJ delivering training on court skills to around 400 social workers in the region. The training was seen as having the potential to improve the quality of social work related to court proceedings, thereby helping to reduce delays.

Some local authority interviewees felt that more multi-agency collaboration would have enhanced the relevance of this workstream**.** For example, one interviewee in Central London said that engaging private solicitors representing parents in pilot work could have helped to build their trust in social worker assessments, thereby reducing requests for

repeat assessments. They were not engaged because they were viewed as out of scope at design stage.

Systemic reasons for delays beyond the reach of the pilot interventions

Despite the broad support among interviewees for the pilot solutions, many felt that a bigger scheme of work is needed to reform family court proceedings and address unnecessary delays. These interviewees shared the view that while the solutions they implemented as part of the pilot were relevant, they did not fully address all the reasons for delays in the family court system. They outlined other factors that they felt also needed to be addressed to tackle unnecessary delays, factors that were outside the control of the local authorities and beyond the reach of the Trailblazer pilot.

Interviewees from Central London highlighted that the findings from their data workstream showed that the main causes of delay were related to capacity within the courts. One interviewee in Central London described a process of the solutions producing incremental refinements to the family court system without tackling the "systemic issues of not having enough judges".

In Wolverhampton, one local authority level interviewee felt that social work education needs to improve so that social workers come into the sector with the right knowledge and skills to conduct quality assessments and sound work in court. Again, this lies beyond the control of local authorities, and beyond the reach of the workforce development part of the Trailblazer pilot.

> "I think it goes right back to social work education. We're not getting social work education right. And that's having a knock-on effect." – *Local authority leadership post*

Are the pilot solutions coherent with existing services and operations?

Interviewees across the three sampled DFJ areas generally agreed that the pilot solutions were well-aligned with existing services and activities and did not contradict ongoing work. Some reiterated that the design process actively involved stakeholders from across the different local authorities, which ensured that the solutions were aligned and coherent with existing services. They pointed to ways in which the solutions represented a natural evolution of their work and built on existing learning about best practice.

For example, in Central London interviewees involved in the data solution described building the regional data template based on a template already in place in the South London Partnership. These interviewees consulted with the other local authorities in their DFJ area, with close support from the steering group, to make edits to the template while

ensuring that the regional data collection process remained coherent with existing data collection processes in local authorities.

In Wolverhampton, interviewees indicated that the Dandelions forum had been demonstrated to work well in Telford and Wrekin, so it made sense to extend it to other local authorities in the region during the pilot, albeit with adjustments to suit the needs of different local authorities. Also in Wolverhampton, interviewees indicated that protocols on PLO/pre-proceedings work were developed based on previous best practice in the region.

In Cheshire and Merseyside, some interviewees saw the collaboration between different local authorities within the Assessment Hub as a natural evolution of a regional approach that was already emerging in the region, which emphasises collaboration across multiple agencies for the delivery of different interventions.

Is there sufficient resourcing for implementation of the pilot solutions (staffing, budget, guidance etc)

While there was no over-arching guidance from DfE for this pilot – because the solutions were tailored to local contexts – Mutual Ventures provided guidance and information to each DFJ area for their specific solutions. In Wolverhampton, strategic interviewees found the resources shared by Mutual Ventures to be helpful. For instance, they used the bitesize guides on best practice within care proceedings provided by Mutual Ventures to design their own toolkits for social workers. In Cheshire and Merseyside, interviewees used guidance from Mutual Ventures on how a hub system had been set up successfully elsewhere to adapt the hub model to their own circumstances.

Interviewees indicated that the financial resources provided by DfE were sufficient for implementation of the solutions. This was largely because the solutions were carefully tailored to the available budget from the start, which helped to avoid major financial issues during implementation.

However, staffing emerged as a consistent challenge across all three sampled DFJ areas. In Wolverhampton and Cheshire and Merseyside, interviewees mentioned needing additional project and business management support, not covered by the DfE funding, to assist with invoicing and other tasks. One local authority interviewee in Wolverhampton reported that there was no funding for local authority leadership time spent on the project**,** such that Service Managers in local authorities often worked additional unpaid hours, which was stressful and depended on the good will of the individual staff members.

> "I think that part of the challenge with some of these projects...includ[ing] this one, is that the funding goes into the set-up costs and to the people delivering the projects…It is to my service manager's credit that they have juggled their work time and work[ed] the additional hours to make up the [work for the] rest of their post." – *Local authority director post*

Is there broad buy-in to the pilot solutions across stakeholders? Are there any objections to continuing with implementation of some or all of the solutions after the pilot ends and without pilot funding?

Across Central London and Wolverhampton, there was broad buy-in to the pilot solutions, with interviewees generally supportive of continuing implementation. They pointed to clear benefits such as improved social worker capacity, stronger data systems, and more consistent practice standards. For example, local authority interviewees in Wolverhampton emphasised that they were keen to sustain data work, noting it would not make sense to develop new systems and not continue to use them in the long term. Some interviewees in Wolverhampton and Central London felt that there was no need to sustain the high level of workforce training after the pilot, as identified gaps in social worker skills had been addressed, and online training resources and videos created during the pilot will remain accessible to social workers.

> "We've put on a lot of training and there isn't anything else that we have identified currently that that we could put on. We've put on so much and social workers have attended an awful lot already." – *Local authority leadership post*

> "[I] probably wouldn't focus anymore on training because I just think there are other things that you could make more progress on, and I think you've got to let that bed in and see how it's panning out and what the quality of the work looks like after." – *Local authority leadership post*

Buy-in to the pilot was nevertheless observed to be lower among some stakeholder groups in these DFJ areas**.** In one DFJ area, local authority interviewees felt that lack of buy-in from the DFJ at the start of the pilot reduced buy-in among court staff generally. In one DFJ area, local authority interviewees thought that there was 'variable buy-in' from Cafcass throughout the Pilot. As one interviewee noted

> "The local authorities are really clear in areas they need to improve; the judiciary are very reflective and clear on where they can do things better. But we've not seen that from Cafcass. I don't feel that they have seen that they are part of the problem." – *DFJ area leadership post*

In Cheshire and Merseyside, interviewee views on the continued implementation of the solutions were mixed. The Assessment Hub trialled during the pilot could only continue

after the pilot if all local authorities agreed to fund it. Some interviewees were positive about the contribution of the Hub to social worker skills, and noted positive feedback from solicitors and parents. However, by the end of the pilot, not all local authorities had agreed to provide funding, and so the decision was taken to close the Hub. The lack of buy-in to continue the Hub in some local authorities was for various reasons. These included limited evidence of impact given the short timeframe of the pilot, and tensions among local authorities as some local authorities had not released a social worker to the Hub as per the original agreement. Although funding was provided for local authorities to hire replacement agency workers, interviewees reported feeling that an agency worker could often not provide the same quality of work as a permanent social worker.

> "How unhappy some of those authorities have ended up being, who have released a social worker…it's affected how they viewed the trailblazer because they've just seen it as…we would have preferred to have not given you our best worker." – *Local authority manager*

Alongside the hub, Cheshire and Merseyside delivered a training programme for all social workers in the region. Interviewees were largely positive about this training offer, although interviewees in one local authority felt they could have delivered the training themselves without the pilot. The training programme was a one-off event, so there was no question of buy-in to its continued implementation.

Some interviewees flagged concerns about continuing some solutions without additional funding. For example, local authority interviewees in Central London described how the local authorities in the DFJ area were not a "natural cluster" that would engage regularly without the pilot, which meant that mobilising the group would probably need additional resources to fund a project manager role.

> "A central element to the success of this has been the project leads to…manage across 12 authorities. So those two being firmly in control and…coordinating…and reporting into the Family Justice Board were really important elements of this whole pilot, so I would like to think that the funding could be found into the future." – *Cafcass*

Interviewees in Central London felt that region-wide training across the twelve local authorities would be difficult to continue without additional funding and that if any of the training continued, it would likely be delivered at the local authority level. This perspective was shared by interviewees in Wolverhampton.

In relation to family engagement work, interviewees in Wolverhampton emphasised that they would need additional funding to create a regional participation forum, as was initially planned, but hoped to be able to organise ad-hoc regional gatherings on family engagement.

Interviewees in Central London and Wolverhampton felt that the work to improve data systems could be continued and sustained without further funding. For example, the Data Lead in Wolverhampton emphasised that they have done as much as possible to ensure that their data collection process was fully automated to ensure that it can be used in the long-term.

For families: has the family engagement and support introduced by the pilot been helpful during their contact with the local authority, courts etc? Do they have any objections to ongoing implementation of the engagement and support interventions beyond the pilot?

We have limited information regarding family perspectives on the pilot. The information below is based on a small number of interviewees who had direct contact with families affected by pilot activities or who heard feedback indirectly through colleagues with direct family contact, and on a family/carer survey conducted by Cheshire and Merseyside. Interviewees emphasised that many family engagement and support activities took place towards the end of the pilot so there had been limited time to capture family views.

In Cheshire and Merseyside, families provided positive feedback about the hub in a family/carer survey conducted by the DFJ area. Feedback from some families suggested that the longer period of engagement with families through the hub was helpful in building stronger relationships between social workers and families than would be possible without the hub. One interviewee reported that families were positive about the hub as it allowed them to get to know social workers in a more informal way. One parent in the survey[11] commented on the positive relationship with a social worker in the hub.

> "I can't thank [Social worker name] enough for all her hard work, from start to finish she made me feel at ease and comfortable. We got on so well, she understood me and listened to everything I told her. For once I felt listened to and understood. She was extremely professional; [she] is such a nice person and so I'm thankful I had her doing my assessment." – *Family/carer survey feedback conducted by Cheshire and Merseyside*

In Wolverhampton, local authority interviewees reported anecdotal feedback that families had welcomed briefing sessions between families and judges. These aimed to help families to better understand the court process.

[11] Family/carer survey conducted by Cheshire and Merseyside, March 2025, Form 2, p2.

Impact evaluation findings

The impact evaluation findings are structured around five pilot-specific key evaluation questions:

- KEQ4: What (if any) is the impact of the pilot on the primary outcome, the length of court proceedings?
- KEQ5: What (if any) are the early outcomes of the pilot?
- KEQ6: What do key stakeholders (e.g. leaders, practitioners, and families) perceive as likely outcomes of the pilot solutions?
- KEQ7: What does the refined pilot ToC look like?
- KEQ8: What, if any, are the unintended consequences of the pilot (positive and negative)?

KEQs 4 and 5 are based on analysis of administrative data using the methods described in section 3 (methodology). KEQs 6, 7, and 8 are based on stakeholder perceptions collected during interviews, in line with the theory-based evaluation approach described in section 3.

KEQ4: What (if any) is the impact of the pilot on the primary outcome, the length of court proceedings? To what extent does the impact on the length of proceedings vary between areas?

KEQ4 summary

- Analysis suggests that the length of court proceedings in DFJ Trailblazers pilot areas might have been slightly longer, but the estimated effects were small in magnitude and not statistically significant.
- At shorter follow-up horizons (182 and 365 days), the estimated proportion of cases disposed was slightly lower in pilot areas than in the counterfactual, consistent with somewhat longer case duration. By 547 days, this pattern was no longer evident. However, confidence intervals included zero at all reported time points, meaning the analysis does not provide strong evidence of a clear average pilot effect on the length of court proceedings.
- Sensitivity analyses produced a similar overall pattern and did not materially change the conclusion that there is no clear evidence of a statistically significant average effect on case duration.

To assess the pilot's impact on the length of proceedings, we analysed the number of days from case submission to case disposal using a weighted survival difference-in-differences approach. This compared the observed trajectory for cases in pilot areas after

implementation with a counterfactual trajectory estimated from trends in comparison areas and from the pre-pilot period.

Overall, the findings suggest that the pilot had little or no meaningful impact on the length of proceedings. When results are expressed in terms of the average change in days open by selected follow-up points, Table 2 shows that at 182 days, the estimated effect was close to zero, at 0.9 more days open on average. At 365 and 547 days, the point estimates suggest that cases in pilot areas remained open for slightly more days on average than would have been expected in the absence of the pilot, equivalent to 4.9 and 2.0 more days open, respectively. However, these estimates were small and not statistically significant with confidence intervals that were consistent with both a modest improvement and no effect.

Similar patterns appear when results are expressed in terms of the proportion of cases disposed by selected follow-up points. In that case, the analysis provides some indication of slightly slower case progression at 182 and 365 days, and a marginally faster one after 547 days. Nonetheless the estimated effects were small and not statistically significant. At 182 days after submission, the proportion of cases disposed was estimated to be the smaller in pilot areas than in the counterfactual scenario (36.4% compared to 39.7%). At 365 days, the percentage of cases disposed was 73.7% in pilot areas, compared with an estimated counterfactual of 74.3%, a difference of 0.6 percentage points. At 547 days, 88.4% of cases were disposed in pilot areas, compared with 85.3% in the counterfactual, a difference of 3.1 percentage points. However, for all three time points the confidence intervals included zero, meaning the analysis does not provide clear evidence of an effect on average case durations.

Sensitivity analyses did not materially change this overall conclusion. Unweighted models and models excluding local authorities that overlapped with another pilot produced a similar substantive pattern, with no clear evidence of a statistically significant effect on average case durations. However, the heterogeneous-effects analysis showed that this overall average masked important variation across DFJ areas: some areas, particularly Cheshire and Merseyside, showed a statistically significant reduction in shorter case durations, while others, especially Central London and ESST, showed a statistically significant increase in case durations. Full sensitivity results are reported in Annex G, and further detail on the survival-based estimation approach is provided in Annex F.

Table 2: Impact of the DFJ Trailblazers pilot on the proportion of cases disposed by selected time points

Time from submission	% Disposed in Comparison areas	% Disposed in P1 areas	Difference in % disposed (% points)	Estimated change in case durations
182 days	39.7%	36.4%	-3.3 p.p (-6.8, +0.5)	+0.9 (-2.9, +4.3)
365 days	74.3%	73.7%	-0.6 p.p (-4.8, +3.0)	+4.9 (-3.7, +13.0)
547 days	85.3%	88.4%	+3.1 p.p (-1.3, +7.6)	+2.0 (-12.1, +14.5)

Note: "Estimated change in case durations" shows the estimated change in the average number of days a case remained open in pilot areas, comparing what was observed with what would have been expected in the absence of the pilot. It is calculated separately for each time horizon and only counts days up to that horizon. Positive values indicate that cases remained open for more days on average within that time window; negative values indicate that they remained open for fewer days.

KEQ5: What (if any) are the early outcomes of the pilot?

KEQ5 summary

- There was no evidence of impact on the speed of case management decisions and the number of cases diverted from court. This is broadly consistent with the findings for the primary outcome, which suggest at most a modest effect on overall case duration.
- However, impact analysis indicates that the DFJ Trailblazers pilot led to a statistically significant 8.3% reduction in the number of case management hearings on average across all pilot areas. This indicates a positive effect on case management decisions.
- These findings were robust to our sensitivity analyses.
- We found no evidence that the pilot led to changes in the number of cases diverted from court.

As well as examining overall case durations, we assessed whether the pilot was associated with earlier changes in court processes that might plausibly arise if cases were better prepared ahead of the first case management hearing (CMH). Further detail on model specification is provided in Annex F.

What is the effect of the pilot on the faster and improved of case management decisions?

The pilot was expected to lead to faster and improved of case management decisions in local authorities by strengthening data availability, data quality, and case tracking. Through improved access to timely and reliable information, the pilot aimed to support a clearer understanding of the local drivers of delay and patterns of case progression. In turn, this was expected to support faster and better-informed case management decisions.

We assessed the changes in speed of case management decision using the number of days between case submission and the first CMH. The logic here is that, if earlier preparation and coordination improved, this might be reflected in cases reaching the first CMH more quickly. The analysis found no clear evidence that the pilot changed this measure. The estimated effect was an increase of 3.0 days, but the confidence interval included no effect, meaning the finding was not statistically significant (see Table 3).

We also assessed the effect of the pilot on improved of case management decisions using the number of case management hearings recorded. The logic here is that, if cases are better prepared and decisions made earlier in the process are more effective, there may be less need for further case management hearings later on. The analysis found a statistically significant reduction in the number of case management hearings in pilot areas relative to the counterfactual. The estimated effect was an 8.3% decrease, with the 95% confidence interval ranging from a decrease of 14.0% to 2.3%. This suggests that the pilot was associated with improved case management decisions, in line with the theory of change.

Table 3: Impact of the DFJ Trailblazers pilot on secondary outcomes, across all pilot areas

Outcome	Results
Number of case management hearings	-8.3% (-14.0, -2.3%)
Days from submission to first CMH	+3.0 days (-0.7, +6.7)
Number of cases entering the system	+9.1% (-3.5, +23.4%)

What is the effect of the pilot on the number of cases diverted from court?

The pilot was also expected, in principle, to support earlier identification of cases that could be resolved appropriately before proceedings, which could contribute to fewer cases entering the court system. We assessed this indirectly by examining changes in

the number of cases entering the court system at local authority level over time. This is not a direct measure of diversion from court, but it provides an indication of whether the overall volume of incoming cases changed in pilot areas relative to comparison areas after implementation.

The analysis found no clear evidence that the pilot changed the number of cases entering the court system. The estimated effect was a 9.1% increase in case volumes in pilot areas relative to comparison areas, but the confidence interval included no effect, so was not statistically significant (95% confidence interval: -3.5% to +23.4%)[12]. This suggests that, although the point estimate was positive, the evaluation did not detect a statistically clear change in case volumes associated with the pilot over the period observed. The findings therefore do not provide clear evidence that the pilot changed the number of cases entering court.

Sensitivity analysis

Sensitivity analyses for the secondary outcomes, including unweighted models, models excluding overlapping local authorities, and heterogeneous-effects analyses by DFJ area, are reported in Annex G. These analyses broadly supported the main findings for the average pilot effect, while also indicating that patterns varied across DFJ areas.

In particular, reductions in the number of case management hearings were concentrated in some areas, while delays to first CMH were more evident in others. Sensitivity analysis of the case-volume outcome, including models using matched local authority samples and models excluding overlapping local authorities, did not materially change the substantive conclusion that there was no clear evidence of an effect on the overall number of cases.

This suggests that the pilot's average effects should be interpreted alongside evidence of meaningful local variation in impacts. Some DFJ areas showed reductions in case management hearings, some showed longer times to first CMH, and the direction of the estimated effect on case volumes also differed across areas, which is likely to reflect differences in local implementation, context, and the mix of activities delivered.

[12] An additional analysis using the legacy HMCTS dataset, which covers a larger number of cases but contains less detailed information, which does not allow for weighting to be applied, produced an estimated effect in the opposite direction (-6.5%, 95% confidence interval: -12.5% to 0.1%). However, this estimate was also not statistically distinguishable from no effect. Taken together, the two datasets therefore provide consistent evidence that the pilot was not associated with a clear change in the overall volume of cases

KEQ6: What do key stakeholders (e.g. leaders, practitioners, and families) perceive as outcomes of the pilot solutions? How do they believe the outcomes came about?

KEQ6 summary

- Interviewees reported that several intermediate outcomes had been achieved to some extent. This included improved assessment quality and stronger cross-agency collaboration.
- A number of intended intermediate outcomes were not reported by interviewees. This included workforce retention, data-driven time savings, faster case management decision-making, cases diverted from courts, and earlier presentation of relatives for caring responsibilities. There was mixed evidence on whether reductions in ISW and agency staff use, and wider efficiency gains from enhanced collaboration, had occurred.
- In terms of expected pilot outcomes, the pilot was perceived to have improved families' experience of the system and supported learning about different solutions for potential rollout. However, evidence on reductions in costs for courts and local authorities, and on the length of proceedings, remains limited and inconclusive.
- In terms of long-term impacts, some interviewees believed that the pilot had the potential to contribute to improved practice in the family justice system, although stakeholders had limited evidence to back this up. While research participants also recognised the potential for improved care outcomes for children, they emphasised it was too early to determine if such impacts had been realised especially given the wider system factors at play.
- No unexpected outcomes were identified. Interviewees reported that changes broadly aligned with the pilots intended outcomes.
- Outcomes were enabled by contextual factors, including strong judicial leadership, pre-existing cross-agency relationships, and local authority capacity. Broader system pressures and concurrent reforms also shaped the extent to which outcomes could be realised and attributed.
- The workforce development strand was most commonly perceived as the most effective workstream, although (in general) outcomes were reported to be shaped by interactions across strands, rather than a single solution

KEQ6 has multiple sub-questions which together illustrate stakeholder perceptions of the changes which came about due to the pilot:

- To what degree do stakeholders perceive that the intermediate outcomes on the ToC were achieved?
- Were any intermediate outcomes not realised, if so, why?

- How did the pilot generate the changes needed to these outcomes (mechanisms[13])?
- Under what conditions did the pilot solutions lead to the intended, or other unexpected, outcomes (contextual enablers)?
- To what degree do stakeholders believe that the intermediate outcomes on the ToC were achieved? Were any intermediate outcomes not realised, if so, why? How did the pilot generate the changes needed to reach the intended outcomes (mechanisms)?
- To what degree do stakeholders perceive that the pilot outcomes on the ToC were achieved? Were any not realised, and if so, why?
- Do stakeholders perceive that the solutions are likely to contribute to the long-term impacts on the ToC, or other long-term impacts?
- Were there other unexpected outcomes?
- Under what conditions did the pilot lead to the intended, or other unexpected, outcomes (contextual enablers)?
- Which solutions do stakeholders perceive as being the most effective?

Across all intermediate, pilot, and long-term outcomes, we also look key contextual enablers. The changes examined correspond to the outcomes and impacts shown on the refined ToC in Figure 2.

Intermediate outcomes, mechanisms and contextual enablers

For this question, we explore mechanisms and intermediate outcomes along five pathways on the ToC. The pathways represent clusters of linked mechanisms and outcomes. Each pathway is shown in a different coloured frame on the ToC in Figure 2. The five pathways are:

- Pathway 1: Workforce development
- Pathway 2: Data quality
- Pathway 3: Multi agency collaboration
- Pathway 4: Family experience
- Pathway 5: Pilot model[14]

[13] These are the behaviour and practice changes incentivised by the pilot. We examine whether interviewees believe these came about and led to the expected outcomes on the ToC.
[14] As this pathway is not expected to lead to intermediate outcomes, but rather directly to pilot outcomes, it is not considered under this sub-question. Instead, it is addressed in the section on pilot outcomes.

Pathway 1: Workforce development

The ToC hypothesises that the following mechanisms/behaviour and practice changes:

- Social workers apply new knowledge and skills and feel more confident to take on court-related work; upskilled social workers in regional hub provide specialised assessment service across local authorities (Cheshire and Merseyside only)

will lead to the following outcomes:

- Improved quality and timeliness of social worker assessments
- Enhanced trust in social workers across agencies in Family Court system
- Reduced need for additional (re) assessments
- Reduced reliance on agency staff/ISWs
- Improved local authority workforce welfare
- Improved social worker retention

Improved quality and timeliness of social worker assessments

As noted in KEQ 3 above, across all DFJ areas, the pilot delivered a range of workforce training which covered statutory assessment skills, risk management, therapeutic practice, and court readiness. The most widely delivered component was the various ParentAssess courses, offered at scale to practitioners, managers, and support workers.

Interviewees across all DFJ areas unanimously reported that social workers were able to apply the learning from the trainings in their day-to-day practice. For example, in Cheshire and Merseyside, interviewees highlighted that those working within the hubs had greater "*headspace*" to absorb and apply the training, as they were temporarily freed from their regular caseloads. This enabled them to consolidate learning and begin conducting ParentAssess assessments shortly after completing the training.

The training also appeared to have increased social workers confidence in doing and defending their assessments**.** It was noted that presenting evidence in court can be a daunting experience, especially for newly qualified social workers, but interviewees reported that training helped social workers feel better prepared to meet expectations and respond to scrutiny from judges and guardians. This increased confidence enabled better quality assessments and greater willingness to stand behind their own judgements.

> “Giving confidence for the social workers, particularly newly qualified social workers who are going into court, it's a very scary situation. And so, we have people that leave and go on to into different areas because they don't want to do court work. Any skills and support that could improve their confidence is hopefully going to prevent some of that movement”. – *Local authority leadership post*

Across interviewees there was a widespread perception that the quality of social workers assessments had improved as a result of workforce development activities**.** Assessments were described as more “comprehensive”, “balanced” and” “insightful” than previously. In Central London, for example, one Cafcass interviewee reported that the standard of assessments had improved since the pilot began, which helped judges and children’s guardians reach conclusions more effectively.

A key indicator of improved quality was the greater consistency in how assessments were structured and presented. Interviewees across all areas noted that ParentAssess training provided social workers with a clear framework and practical tools, helping to standardise the way evidence was gathered, analysed and written up.

In Cheshire and Merseyside, a local authority lawyer observed that prior to the pilot, there was significant variation in practice: not all social workers had received formal training in parenting assessment approaches, they had different levels of experience, and some reports were produced by agency staff. Multiple approaches were used across the system with limited agreement about best practice. The introduction of a shared assessment model was therefore seen as strengthening the quality of assessments, supporting social workers to produce more robust and comparable assessments. As one interviewee noted:

> “[Previously] nobody agreed on what the best parenting assessment model should be or is…[the pilot] brought us together to look at what's available to us what is the best results that we've had with the different models….now let's pick one*”* – *Cafcass*

In Central London and Wolverhampton, training was delivered not only to social workers but also to judges and guardians. This meant that different parts of the system were working from a shared framework, which helped to align expectations on how assessments should be structured. As one Cafcass staff in Central London explained, *“everyone was speaking the same language,”* which helped align expectations about what a good assessment should look like.

Further evidence of improved quality was the reduced need for expert assessments and addendums, suggesting that social work assessments were viewed as more robust and sufficient at first instance. It was also noted that quality improvements showed in the fact

that there were fewer challenges from judges and guardians regarding the adequacy of assessments.

In Cheshire and Merseyside, the evidence on whether workforce training led to improved quality was more mixed, largely due to the short implementation period. Here the pilot operated for only around three months. Some interviewees noted that the short timeframe meant it was too early to observe measurable changes in practice.

However, several interviewees highlighted that the pilot had strong support from the regional judiciary, reflecting longstanding concerns about the quality of some local authority assessments. These concerns had previously led to requests for additional assessments. Within this context, some early positive perceptions emerged. For example, a legal stakeholder noted that the hub model was also seen as providing a mechanism for quality control, and centralising assessment made it easier to monitor. Despite these early indications, interviewees emphasised that the short time frame of the pilot meant that anticipated benefits such as higher quality reports could not be fully tested.

The ToC also suggested that workforce development could improve timeliness by enabling social workers to complete parenting assessments more quickly. Across the three DFJ areas, interviewees did not report clear evidence that assessments were being completed more quickly in practice. Instead, interviewees noted that stronger initial assessments could reduce the need for repeat or additional expert assessments (see below on 'reduced need for additional (re) assessments'), suggesting that any potential time saving may arise from reducing further assessments rather than completing the initial assessment more quickly.

However, in Central London, a representative from Cafcass reported that the pilot facilitated a shift towards completing assessments earlier in the process, particularly during the pre-proceedings stage or early within PLO processes. Completing assessments earlier was seen as helping ensure that key evidence was available sooner, potentially reducing delays later in proceedings.

Enhanced trust in social workers across agencies in family court system

Interviewees across all three DFJs reported that improvements in the quality of social work assessments had contributed to increased trust in local authority social workers among other agencies within the family justice system, particularly among members of the judiciary. Interviewees described a broader shift in court culture, with greater confidence in the professional judgement of local authority social workers and increased judicial support for their assessments. As one interviewee explained:

> […courts increasingly recognised that] "social workers are the experts and should be the ones carrying out assessments, with external experts only required in exceptional circumstances*." – DFJ area leadership post*

In Central London, one interviewee reported that following conversations with the DFJ, they organised a presentation for other judges in which they shared knowledge on parenting assessments and highlighted the distressing impact that multiple assessments can have on families. This engagement provided an opportunity to present the *"social worker perspective"* and emphasise that social workers were *"experienced, knowledgeable, and best placed to do the assessments".* Interviewees reported that these interactions helped to strengthen confidence among members of the judiciary in the ability of social workers to deliver assessments.

Interviewees also pointed to changes in professional relationships across the family justice system as further indications of increased trust. In Cheshire and Merseyside and Central London, judges were described as more responsive to communication from local authority practitioners and more willing to engage in discussions about assessment approaches and social work practice.

Reduced need for additional (re)assessments

Improvement in quality of assessments, along with increased trust in social workers, were reported by interviewees to reduce the need for additional or external expert assessments**.** In Central London, for example, interviewees reported a perception of reduction in Part 25 applications for expert evidence, as well as fewer requests for addendum reports. Similarly, in Cheshire & Merseyside participants suggested that repeat assessments and addendums were now less common in care proceedings. However, participants emphasised that this was based on professional perception rather than verified monitoring data. Many interviewees felt that such changes might take longer to come through.

Interviewees linked this change primarily to improvements in the quality of social workers assessments. Participants noted that, because assessments were of a higher quality, courts were more likely to accept the conclusions presented by social workers. It is true that assessments could still be challenged by parents or legal representatives, however, interviewees reported that judges were less inclined to commission additional expert assessments if they were satisfied that the initial social worker assessment was of good quality.

In Central London, interviewees also identified additional factors that may have facilitated this shift. In particular, some reported that additional assessments were increasingly requested only where strictly necessary. This reflected agreements at the DFJ level, described by one interviewee as *"our one big thing",* in which Cafcass and other system partners had to justify when further expert assessments should be commissioned.

> "… the number of experts did drop. Cafcass's one big thing was that children's guardians would not support or apply for experts unless they were absolutely necessary...in the rarest of occasions… so we certainly did see Part 25 applications for experts dropping…we also saw the need for addendums from experts dropping" - *Cafcass*

Interviewees in Wolverhampton also emphasised that broader communication across the system helped to reinforce confidence among partner agencies, including Cafcass and the judiciary, that social workers assessments were sufficiently robust, and that additional expert evidence should only be sought where clearly justified.

Reduced reliance on agency staff/ISWs

Improved assessment quality and increased trust in social workers were expected to reduce reliance on agency staff and ISWs. However, interviewees were generally unable to provide definitive evidence of changes in their use during the pilot.
Some interviewees in Central London and Wolverhampton reported anecdotal indications of the use of fewer ISWs. In Wolverhampton, interviewees noted that Cafcass were aware that social workers involved in the pilot had received ParentAssess training, which appeared to contribute to fewer requests for ISW assessments.

> "We are seeing a reduction in the use of independent social workers. I think what's helpful is that the court is commenting on the quality of the parenting assessments that we're doing, as well as our partners who have given good feedback about the quality of the parenting assessments that we're doing and some of the independent work is not holding up to that quality kind of standard. I think that that's helpful in terms of backing the kind of social work skill and knowledge of the profession". – *Local authority manager*

However, in Cheshire and Merseyside, the reliance on ISWs and agency staff remained high due to workforce pressures. Interviewees reported continued reliance on external staff because of internal churn within social work teams, which limited the extent to which training opportunities were taken up by permanent staff. However, it was suggested that that wider implementation of the hub model could potentially reduce reliance on ISWs over time.

Improved local authority workforce welfare

Most interviewees across all DFJ areas were cautious about drawing firm conclusions regarding impacts of workforce development activities on local authority staff welfare. While there were some perceived potential benefits, participants generally felt there was insufficient evidence to determine whether the training had led to measurable improvements. However, some interviewees highlighted aspects of the pilot that may support a more positive staff experience. For example, some guardians (who are

themselves qualified social workers) reported that the clearer analytical structure provided by the ParentAssess model made assessments easier to interpret and engage with. They added that by providing social workers with the relevant skills and tools, they were less likely to experience criticism or challenge, which may contribute positively to staff welfare.

In Wolverhampton, an interviewee also highlighted the role of judicial leadership in shaping the social workers experience of proceedings. As a result of the pilot, the DFJ was seen to have strengthened gatekeeping around urgent hearings. Previously, many cases were listed as urgent, often leaving social workers insufficient time to prepare evidence. Greater scrutiny of what constitutes an urgent case was perceived to have improved case planning and encouraged more issues to be addressed outside court before hearings, which may in turn improve the experience of social workers involved in proceedings.

In Cheshire and Merseyside, one interviewee suggested that, in theory, the hub model could support staff welfare by reducing duplication of work. For example, if assessments are undertaken through an independent hub, social workers may be less likely to carry out multiple assessments simultaneously or repeat work unnecessarily.

Improved social worker retention

Across all sampled DFJ areas, interviewees held the view that the workforce development activities did not have a major impact on staff retention. This was because social worker retention is a very complicated issue that would often be influenced by the broader concerns of the individual social worker, such as the general cost of living, their wages, the long hours of work, and the pressures of the profession. As a result, interviewees generally felt it was not possible to identify a clear impact of the pilot on retention within the timeframe of the evaluation.

That said, some participants suggested that initiatives such as ParentAssess training may contribute to workforce stability. Interviewees noted that when practitioners feel supported, equipped with appropriate tools and training, and recognised for their professional expertise, they are more likely to feel valued in their role. This can contribute positively to morale and may support longer term retention.

In Cheshire and Merseyside, some social workers felt that their specialised training and focus on assessments in the hub opened up options to them outside of traditional social work. local authority interviewees feared that this meant that they may not want to return to their previous roles. However, this was discussed as being hypothetical rather than something that they had witnessed in practice.

Pathway 2: Data system initiatives

The ToC hypothesises that the following mechanisms/behaviour and practice changes:

- local authority staff/managers increase their understanding of local causes of delay, and improve case progression based in better quality data, automated systems, and enhanced operations in local authority

will lead to the following outcomes:

- Time savings in local authorities from automated data systems
- Improved and faster case management decisions in local authorities
- More cases diverted from court

Across the two sampled DFJ areas that implemented the data system initiatives (Central London and Wolverhampton), there was no clear evidence that the data systems initiative had generated time savings for local authority staff through automation. Some interviewees suggested that efficiencies may emerge over time, particularly in local authorities that previously made limited use of data but noted that it was too early to evidence these benefits. Instead, the main perceived impact of the data workstream related to improvements in the quality, availability and consistency of data across local authorities. Interviewees felt that this strengthened understanding of performance of the court system and the causes of delay. local authority interviewees noted that more consistent datasets enabled clearer comparisons across local authorities and helped identify patterns within and across areas. In Wolverhampton, interviewees highlighted the value of having a regional dataset for the first time. While the data did not support decisions about individual families, it has helped provide an overview of system performance and identify areas that needed attention. One interviewee noted:

> "We never had it [the dataset] previously, so it's amazing to have a collective dataset…it helps us understand our performance…we can troubleshoot where we need to focus." – *Local authority manager*

Similarly, interviewees in Central London reported that the work of the pilot had helped establish greater consistency in definitions and data collection across HMCTS, Cafcass and local authorities. By focusing on core data and removing inconsistent or spurious information across the 12 local authorities, interviewees felt the initiative had created greater clarity about what data was most important to collect and monitor.

We found limited evidence that the data workstream directly supported faster case management decisions. Interviewees generally perceived that the pilot had not led to more timely decision-making in individual cases. This reflects the fact that the workstream was primarily designed to provide strategic management information, which would improve understanding of the drivers of delay at a system level rather than to inform day-to-day case management within local authorities.

Nevertheless, there was some evidence that it supported clearer and better evidenced strategic decisions at local authority level. In Central London and Wolverhampton

interviewees noted that the overall case management is largely influenced by decision-making within the courts, limiting the extent to which changes within local authorities alone could accelerate timelines. In Central London, a Cafcass interviewee emphasised that while the data had not sped up decisions, it had helped ensure that local authority decisions were clearer and more firmly grounded in evidence.

As set out under KEQ5 above, the quantitative impact evaluation analysis assessed changes in case management decision-making by examining the number of case management hearings recorded per case. One indicator of improved decision-making could be fewer additional hearings. The findings show a decrease in the number of CMHs per case in pilot areas relative to comparison areas, suggesting some improvement in case management decision-making. The analysis also examined whether case progression had become faster by analysing the time between case submission and the first CMH. However, there was no clear evidence that the pilot affected the time taken to reach the first hearing.

There was no clear evidence that the data workstream directly contributed to increased diversion of cases away from court. However, interviewees noted that the analytics developed through the pilot had made patterns of diversion more visible within the data. In Central London, for example, interviewees reported that the dataset demonstrated that some cases were being diverted away from court, although this was not attributed to the data initiative itself. Rather, the data helped highlight these patterns and made them more visible to partners across the system.

The QED also looked at whether the pilot was associated with changes in the number of cases diverted from court. This was assessed indirectly by examining changes in the number of cases entering the court system at local authority level over time. The analysis found no clear evidence that the pilot changed the number of cases entering the court system.

Interviewees emphasised that influencing diversion was not the primary aim of the data workstream. Instead, the dataset was intended to provide a clearer picture of system performance. Some noted that the data could still support learning across areas, for example by identifying local authorities with shorter case durations or higher diversion rates and exploring the practices or local initiatives that might explain these differences.

Pathway 3: Multi-agency collaboration and project leadership

The ToC hypothesises that the following mechanisms/behaviour and practice changes:

- Staff across relevant agencies develop a one system mindset and commit to , and use cross agency guidelines for best practice

will lead to the following outcome:

- Improved cross agency coordination and collaboration and communications
- Streamlined processes and pooled resources across agencies create efficiencies in local authorities

Interviewees across the DFJ areas reported that the pilot contributed to improved collaboration between local authorities and other actors within the family justice system, including Cafcass and the judiciary. This took two main forms: the establishment of cross-agency working groups and stronger linkages between individual actors across agencies.

Across all three sampled DFJ areas, the pilot created or strengthened forums and working groups that brought together stakeholders from multiple local authorities and partner organisations. These groups provided opportunities for partners to share experiences, coordinate approaches and identify ways to address common challenges within care proceedings.

For example, in Cheshire and Merseyside, an interviewee described how collaboration between the nine local authorities supported the development of shared regional policies and pathways. Before the pilot, local authorities were described as largely working independently, with each developing their own processes. Through the working groups, partners were able to exchange learning and identify examples of effective practice. One example was the development of the New Baby Protocol, which was refined through collaboration with other local authorities and partner agencies. Interviewees described this process as enabling authorities to build on existing practice rather than “reinventing the wheel”.

In Wolverhampton, a local authority interviewee noted that collaboration was sustained through structures linked to the LFJB, including sub-groups that brought together representatives from across agencies. These forums supported the development of new initiatives, such as work on the regional kinship offer and supervision arrangements.

In Central London, interviewees noted that some collaborative forums already existed prior to the pilot, such as pan-London case progression meetings. However, respondents emphasised that the pilot facilitated additional opportunities for engagement across agencies. For example, a coordination group linked to the LFJB became an important forum for communication between partners. Through this group, agencies collectively agreed to prioritise a small number of shared objectives for improving care proceedings, including commitments from local authorities to submit evidence on time and from Cafcass to reduce requests for additional assessments.

Alongside collaboration between local authorities, some interviewees reported improvements in relationships between individual actors within the family justice system. Some interviewees also reported a shift in relationships away from an “*us and them”* dynamic towards more collaborative working across agencies.

> "Towards the end of the project, we had much more easy open conversations with the judiciary which we didn't have at the beginning. They were just more responsive to emails. We had regular meetings, they were able to share a kind of state of play for them, a bit more openly, less defensive, I'd say. I wouldn't say we were all one big team by the end of it, but we were definitely making strides towards it" – *Local authority leadership post*

In particular, several local authorities described stronger working relationships with Cafcass and the judiciary. For example, in Central London, local authority interviewees highlighted the improvements made to working with Cafcass through the pilot. These interviewees highlighted that this improved relationship allowed them to deliver training sessions to Cafcass guardians. These sessions were well received and further increased alignment between local authority and Cafcass stakeholders in the region.

Similarly, interviewees in Wolverhampton described increased engagement with the DFJ. Through this collaboration, the judiciary delivered training sessions for social workers and participated in activities such as podcasts produced as part of the participation workstream.

> "I talked earlier about the new DFJ being in post, she's really committed and is incredibly keen on engagement with local authorities. So, we've already had in her first five months a number of group meetings and then one-to-one meetings with her as well. And I think that's the first time since I've been in this role that we've had that sort of engagement with the DFJ for our court area on a consistent basis… We've been able to e-mail her directly and say judge, can you have a look at this?" – *Local authority manager*

Interviewees identified several factors that helped facilitate collaboration during the pilot. One commonly mentioned facilitator was the presence of dedicated project leads. Here, interviewees highlighted the ability of these project leads to 'refresh relationships' and engage with external stakeholders

> "Having dedicated project leads across the region there was almost someone who had the permission to go to the judiciary and go this is the training we'd like to do… and it's been a success…. Hopefully, the knock-on effect will be to increase the confidence of social workers". – *Delivery Partner*

In addition, pre-existing relationships between authorities supported collaboration in some areas. In Central London an interviewee referred to earlier joint working arrangements dating back to the "Tri-borough" period more than a decade earlier. These prior relationships meant that many stakeholders were already familiar with one another

and had experience of working together on system improvement initiatives, which helped establish collaborative working during the pilot.

Finally, interviewees emphasised the importance of focusing on clear shared priorities. In Central London, partners agreed to concentrate on a single key issue referred to as the "one big thing" rather than attempting to address multiple challenges simultaneously. Interviewees suggested that this focus helped align efforts across agencies and made collaboration.

Interviewees identified some early examples of processes being streamlined and resources being shared across local authorities, although the evidence on resulting efficiencies was more limited and less consistent than for improvements in collaboration more broadly. In Central London, some interviewees felt that collaboration with Cafcass through the pilot helped establish shared principles around the use of expert assessments, with the intention that assessments would be used less routinely and only in more exceptional cases. This was seen as helping to streamline aspects of the court process.

There was also some evidence of resource sharing across areas. In Wolverhampton, interviewees stated that the collaboration between local authorities as part of the workforce development strand provided an opportunity for them to pool resources together. For example, they described sharing resources (training videos, podcasts, toolkits) through a website.

> "It's all of the training guides, all of the bite sized guides, all of the podcasts, all of that will be on the website. So that is a massive sharing, pooling of resources again within the toolkit. We've agreed upon regional pre proceedings documents we've agreed upon regional care plan." – *Local authority Manager*

Pathway 4: Family engagement and support

The ToC hypothesises that the following mechanisms/behaviour and practice changes:

- Families are better able to understand and navigate the system as a result of better, earlier and more consistent support at PLO and court stages

will lead to the following outcome:

- Earlier presentation of relatives for caring responsibilities

The family engagement and support workstream aimed to help families better understand and navigate the system.

Interviewees reported anecdotal feedback from families suggesting that these pilot activities improved their understanding of court proceedings. In Central London, for example, animated explainer videos were used, and this received positive feedback from

both families and practitioners. Families reported that the videos helped them understand what was happening in court.

Across all the areas, interviewees suggested that the main outcome of these activities was improved engagement with families, particularly in the pre-proceedings stage. In Wolverhampton, one local authority interviewee noted that the family engagement activities helped families to better understand process and expectations earlier enabling parents to engage meaningfully before cases progressed to court.

The ToC suggested that improved understanding of the process might also encourage earlier identification and presentation of relatives who could potentially care for the child**.** However, across areas there was limited evidence that the pilot had led to earlier presentation of relatives. Several interviewees noted that it was still too early to determine whether such changes were occurring, while others emphasised that identifying relatives often depends on factors outside the control of the pilot, including families' willingness to disclose information and the complexity of family networks.

In Central London, interviewees also highlighted that the international composition of the local population created additional challenges. Across the London boroughs there are large numbers of families with international connections, making it more difficult to identify and assess them quickly.

In Cheshire & Merseyside and Central London, interviewees also noted that earlier identification of relatives was more commonly facilitated by family group conferences rather than the specific family engagement activities introduced through the pilot.

In Cheshire & Merseyside, the Hub also facilitated more timely viability assessments for relatives who came forward as potential carers. A local authority interviewee noted that responding quickly to these requests helped relatives understand earlier whether they would be able to care for a child and what this role would involve. Although viability assessment may confirm that relatives were not suitable carers, completing them quickly was seen as beneficial in reducing uncertainty for families and enabling courts to reach decisions without unnecessary delay.

Pilot outcomes

The ToC hypothesises that the pilot may contribute to the following pilot outcomes:

- Reduction in unnecessary delays in family court proceedings
- Improved family experience of the system
- Reduced costs for courts and local authorities
- Learning about different solutions for potential rollout

When considering the broader pilot outcome of a reduction in unnecessary delays in family court proceedings interviewees across all areas often stated that they felt it was too early to be sure on whether changes had occurred. Even in cases where there was

some hard data on reductions in delays, interviewees were often cautious about attributing changes directly to the pilot.

For example, in Central London one strategic interviewee[15] reported that they had seen around a 5% reduction in delays in the region. However, this interviewee still emphasised that it is difficult to attribute any of these changes to the work on the pilot.

Similarly, one interviewee from Wolverhampton noted that recent data suggested reductions in the average duration of proceedings from around 40 weeks to approximately 25 weeks. Another interviewee in the same DFJ confirmed this but added that that many of the cases contributing to these figures would have entered the system before the pilot began, making it difficult to assess the pilot's role in any improvements.

The quantitative impact evaluation analysis (reported under KEQ4) suggests that the pilot had no detectable impact on length of court proceedings, overall (i.e., across all pilot areas). However, sub-group analyses by DFJ area demonstrate substantial variation between DFJ areas (Annex G). For example, Cheshire and Merseyside showed a statistically significant reduction in case durations compared to the counterfactual whereas the other DFJ areas showed lack of evidence of impact or evidence in the wrong direction (e.g., a statistically significant increase in average case duration in Central London, one year after pilot implementation).

Across several DFJ areas, interviewees reported that aspects of the pilot may have contributed to improvements in the experience of families involved in pre-proceedings and care proceedings**.** However, most emphasised that evidence was largely anecdotal at this stage and that more time and data would be required to assess these changes robustly.

In Central London, interviewees reported receiving some positive feedback from families suggesting that shorter proceedings could improve their experience of the court process. In Chesire and Merseyside, interviewees highlighted the role of the specialist assessment hub in improving both the consistency and responsiveness of assessments. A local authority manager noted that the hub model also enabled greater flexibility in working with families. Because practitioners were dedicated to undertaking assessments and had smaller caseloads than local authority social workers, they were able to respond more quickly to requests and visit families more frequently, including evenings and weekends where needed. Interviewees felt this provided more time and space to explain the assessment process to families and support their engagement, which could lead to a positive experience.

In Wolverhampton, interviewees described a more explicit focus within the pilot on improving family experience through a trauma-informed approach to pre-proceedings and

[15]Interviewed in March 2025

care proceedings. This included emphasising supportive language, transparency in communication and clearer explanations of the process.

The evidence provides some support for the learning outcome in the ToC, particularly in relation to cross-area knowledge exchange. For example, one interviewee from Wolverhampton described how Mutual Ventures connected them with colleagues in Central London who shared approaches to tracking outcomes through the data strand, which informed the development of their own work. Interviewees also described the national peer learning sessions as valuable opportunities to share experiences and reflect on approaches being tested in other pilot areas. These sessions primarily created opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange rather than clear examples of learning being systematically applied to strengthen implementation or inform decisions about future rollout. Nevertheless, stakeholders were able to reflect on their implementation experiences and identify lessons that may inform the potential rollout of different solutions. Further detail on these learnings is provided in KEQ 11.

Regarding reductions in costs for local authorities and courts resulting from the pilot, interviewees often expressed that it was too early to see any impacts. Interviewees often discussed hypothetical changes in costs based on the possible impacts of the different activities of the pilot. For example, some local authority interviewees highlighted the potential for the workforce development strand to reduce costs for example, through fewer placements, reduced use of ISW, fewer reassessments, and shorter involvement of legal representatives due to more efficient processes. Some also suggested that efficiency gains at the local authority level could lead to fewer hearings and reduced demand on judicial time, generating potential cost savings for the courts.

However, interviewees emphasised that there was insufficient evidence to determine whether any cost reductions had been realised in practice. For example, one interviewee in Wolverhampton noted that it was difficult to attribute changes in court costs to the pilot, given that other reforms had been implemented concurrently by the DFJ. Another interviewee in Central London noted:

> I think emphasising that your social workers are your experts and therefore their evidence being seen in a different light. I think will reduce cost, but I think it's all too early to say this for this particular project. – *Local authority leadership post*

Long-term impacts

The ToC hypothesises that the pilot may, if implemented consistently over time, contribute to the following long-term impacts:

- Improved care outcomes for children, e.g. fewer placement moves
- Improved practice in family justice system

Overall, interviewees suggested that while the pilot may have the potential to contribute to improved outcomes for children in the longer term, the limited duration of the pilot and the small number of cases involved meant that such impacts could not yet be evidenced.

While some participants felt that aspect of the pilot such as improvements in assessment quality could theoretically contribute to better outcomes, they emphasised that it was too early to determine whether the pilot had led to measurable changes.

In Central London and Cheshire and Merseyside, interviewees highlighted wider structural constraints within the care system, such as shortages of suitable foster placements, which limit the extent to which improvements in assessment processes alone can influence long-term outcomes.

Some interviewees suggested that the pilot had the potential to support improvements in practice within the family justice system, particularly in terms of creating a more child-focused and participatory approach to care proceedings. In Wolverhampton, for example, one interviewee reflected that if the pilot were extended, they would hope to see families experiencing a more consistent approach to proceedings that prioritises children's needs while enabling the development of high-quality care plans and holding local authorities accountable for delivery.

Unexpected outcomes?[16]

Interviewees did not identify any unexpected outcomes arising from the pilot. Most participants indicated that the changes they observed aligned broadly with what had been anticipated on the ToC.

Perceived most effective solutions

In the Wolverhampton DFJ area, the majority of interviewees expressed that the workforce development workstream was the most effective solution. They were able to clearly link intermediate and pilot outcomes to higher quality assessments. By contrast, interviewees here noted that the data strand required more preparatory work and longer lead time, meaning that outcomes were not fully observable. A similar pattern was reported for the family engagement strand. Interviewees were of the view that activities here were implemented later in the pilot, and as such, associated outcomes are expected to emerge over time. In addition, the impact of this strand was perceived as more difficult to quantify, with limited feedback collected to date.

[16] Unexpected outcomes are any outcomes or effects from the pilot which were not included on the ToC, but can be seen as contributing to the primary aim of reducing unnecessary delays.

> "Participation that's around good practice and ensuring that parents and children have a good experience in difficult circumstances. So, I think it's less quantifiable, but certainly all the regions have indicated that the quality of work has improved [as a result of the training]" – *Local authority leadership post*

In the Central London DFJ area, perspectives on the most effective solution were more mixed. Here, some interviewees emphasised that the impact of the workforce development strand was the most visible. local authority interviewees particularly highlighted the potential for the workforce development strand to reduce costs by lowering reliance on external experts and to improve perceptions of local authority social work within the wider family justice system, including among Cafcass and the judiciary.

However, other interviewees in Central London placed greater emphasis on the data workstream, noting that it enabled more informed discussions with external partners about the underlying drivers of delay in the family court system. In addition, one local authority interviewee identified collaboration with Cafcass as particularly influential. They highlighted that a shared commitment to minimise further assessments and reduce reliance on ISWs was a key factor that could contribute to reducing delays. This was seen as closely linked to workforce development, as improvements in the quality of social work assessments helped build confidence among Cafcass to support this approach.

More broadly, it is also important to note that interviewees in Central London consistently highlighted challenges around attribution, noting the difficulty of disentangling the relative contribution of different pilot strands to observed or anticipated outcomes.

Finally, in Cheshire and Merseyside, the evidence around the most effective solution was more limited. This was because the conversations often focused on the hub, which made broader comparisons between the solutions more difficult.

KEQ7: What does a refined ToC look like?

KEQ7 summary

- We have refined the mechanisms under Pathway 1 and Pathway 5.
- Stakeholders' perceptions suggest that some intermediate outcomes, especially within the data workstream, were not realised as expected indicating areas of theory failure. In these cases, the assumed outcomes did not align closely with stakeholders understanding of what the solutions were intended to directly influence.

Figure 2 presents a modified, post-evaluation version of the pilot ToC. The original ToC is shown in Figure 1. A brief explanation of the modifications follows the diagram. The full evidence underpinning these changes has been presented under KEQ6.

Our evidence points to the need for us modify the mechanism under Pathway 1 and Pathway 5

- Pathway 1: We suggest the refined ToC incorporates the *use of a shared assessment model* (ParentAssess) as a key enabling mechanism. We have ample evidence that indicates that the adoption of a common model contributed to consistency in assessments. In this context, the shared framework did not directly drive outcomes, but enabled them by structuring how social workers applied their newly acquired knowledge and skills in practice and supporting more quality assessments
- Pathway 5: Evidence from the evaluation suggests that cross-area engagement mainly created opportunities for stakeholders to share experiences and reflect on different approaches rather than systematically applying learning to modify implementation at this stage. The mechanism has therefore been refined to emphasise *cross-area knowledge exchange and reflection*, which contributed to learning about potential solutions for future rollout.

Interviewee perceptions suggest that some intermediate outcomes, one pilot outcome, and one long-term impact, did not come about, or requires refinement. This was because the premise on which they appeared in the ToC did not hold, rather than due to insufficient implementation time or shortcomings in implementation (i.e., theory failure rather than implementation failure).

- Improved quality and *timeliness* of SW assessments: We suggest removing *timeliness*. Evidence shows that assessments were not done more quickly. Rather a stronger initial assessment may reduce the need for repeat or additional expert assessments. We suggest adding *consistency.* By introducing a shared framework and tools through ParentAssess, training helped bring greater consistency to how assessments were conducted
- Time savings in local authority from automated data systems**:** We have no clear evidence that automated data processes led to measurable time savings for local authority staff.
- Improved and faster case management decisions in local authority: We have some evidence that that improved data systems helped stakeholders better understand *system* performance. The quantitative evidence also points to improved case management decisions. However, the evidence does not demonstrate that case decision-making were faster.
- More cases diverted from court: Some interviewees observed patterns in the data showing diversion, but there was little evidence that the data initiative itself caused more cases to be diverted. This analysis of the QED also confirms this. Instead, the data helped stakeholders see patterns that were already occurring
- Earlier presentation of relatives for caring responsibilities: The evidence indicates that family support and engagement activities help families better understand court processes and engage more meaningfully. We have limited evidence that this in

turn leads to earlier presentation of relatives, as this outcome was often influenced by factors outside the intervention, such as families' willingness to disclose relatives and the complexity of family networks. We propose that the ToC is refined to improved family engagement and cooperation with assessments and pre-proceedings processes.

- Reduced cost for courts and local authorities: Interviewees consistently noted that time frame was too short for this outcome to me realised in practice. As such it was not yet possible to conclude whether any cost savings had been achieved.
- Improved care outcomes for children, e.g. fewer placement moves: Most interviewees felt that the pilot was too small a piece in the system to make a difference to care outcomes such as placement moves, which can be due to many factors beyond the control of local authorities such as suitable foster place

Figure 2: Refined pilot ToC for the DFJ Trailblazer pilot

Activities	Change mechanisms	Intermediate outcomes	Pilot outcomes	Impact
Workforce skills e.g. training, professional development for social work teams, regional assessment hub	**PATHWAY 1: Workforce and skills** SWs use a shared assessment model and apply new knowledge and skills and feel more confident to take on court-related work; Upskilled SWs in regional hub provide specialised assessment service across local authorities [AMENDED]	**PATHWAY 1** Improved quality and consistency of SW assessments; reduced need for additional (re) assessments ;enhanced trust in SWs across agencies in FC system; reduced reliance on agency staff/ISWs; improved local authorities workforce welfare; improved SW retention [AMENDED]	OUTCOME REMOVED	OUTCOME REMOVED
Data system initiatives e.g.data availability and quality, case tracking, data analysis	**PATHWAY 2: Data system** local authority staff/managers increase their understanding of local causes of delay, and improve case progression**,** based on better quality data; automated systems enhanced operations in local authorities	**PATHWAY 2** Improved case management decision making [AMENDED]	Reduction in unnecessary delays in family court proceedings.	Improved practice in family justice system.

Activities	Change mechanisms	Intermediate outcomes	Pilot outcomes	Impact
Multi-agency collaboration e.g. cross system commitments, communications and coordination	**PATHWAY 3: Multi-agency collaboration** Staff across relevant agencies develop a 'one-system' mindset and commit to, and use, cross-agency guidelines for best practice	**PATHWAY 3** Improved cross-agency coordination, collaboration and communications; streamlined processes and pooled resources across agencies create efficiencies in local authorities.	Improved family experience of the system.	
Family engagement & support e.g. family support workers, support with system navigation	**PATHWAY 4: Family experience** Families better able to understand and navigate the system as a result of better, earlier, and more consistent support at PLO and court stages	**PATHWAY 4** Improved family engagement and cooperation with assessment and pre proceedings processes [AMENDED]		

Activities	Change mechanisms	Intermediate outcomes	Pilot outcomes	Impact
Project leadership & coordination Bespoke support and learning activities by delivery partner	**PATHWAY 5: Pilot model** Staff and DP engage in knowledge exchange and reflection and apply learning from across pilot areas to strengthen pilot implementation and generate learning for potential rollout [AMENDED]		**PATHWAY 5** Learning about different solutions for potential rollout	

KEQ8: What, if any, were the unintended consequences (positive[17] and negative)? Who did the negative or positive unintended consequences affect?

KEQ8 summary

- Most of the stakeholders did not mention unintended consequences within the pilot.
- Where this was noted, positive unintended consequences included support to post-care proceedings.
- Negative unintended consequences were limited and mainly related to additional time commitment requires, alongside challenges in engaging certain local authorities and external stakeholders.

Most interviewees did not report any unintended consequences of the pilot**.** Where unintended consequences were identified, these tended to be isolated points raised by individual interviewees rather than recurring themes across the evidence base. This section summarises the positive and negative unintended consequences that were reported.

One positive unintended consequence was identified by a local authority interviewee in Wolverhampton, who noted that the pilot had extended beyond its original focus on reducing court delays to influence post-care proceedings, particularly adoption processes. The interviewee described how senior leads involved in the Trailblazers pilot became engaged in addressing delays in adoption, which were linked to a backlog of applications. Trailblazer senior leads investigated whether those delays were due to the pre-proceedings and court processes. As part of this work, a group focused on adoption reform was established, despite this sitting outside the pilot's original scope. The interviewee perceived that these activities had led to improvements in processes within their local authority.

The main unintended negative consequence identified by interviewees across DFJ areas was that there was greater time commitment required to deliver the pilot than initially anticipated. Several local authority interviewees reported that the level of input needed particularly in the early stages had not been fully reflected in initial planning or costings.

In Central London, one local authority interviewee described significant involvement in activities such as recruiting a case progression officer, developing guidance for social workers, and shaping early solution design. This additional workload was reported to be difficult to balance alongside existing responsibilities. Similarly, a local authority interviewee in Wolverhampton highlighted the ongoing burden of providing project

[17] Positive unintended consequences are effects generated by the pilot which, although positive, would not directly contribute to the primary aim of the pilot, to reduce unnecessary delays

management support, including coordinating training, collating data, and organising meetings.

An interviewee in one DFJ area mentioned that they did not anticipate the amount of time it would take to negotiate their relationship with the DFJ, particularly where the DFJ had not been fully engaged in initial planning. Another interviewee here suggested that the time required for workforce training may have been underestimated, although they did not identify clear downstream consequences of this.

Beyond time pressures, some interviewees raised challenges related to perceived inequities in resource contributions. In Cheshire and Merseyside, an interviewee reported dissatisfaction among local authorities where only four of nine authorities seconded social workers into the hub model. These local authorities felt they had disproportionately contributed high-performing staff while others benefitted without input. This tension became a recurring issue within steering group discussions and was perceived to have negatively affected longer-term buy-in to the hub model.

Economic evaluation findings

The economic evaluation findings are structured around two key evaluation questions:

- KEQ 9: To what extent does the pilot represent value for money?
- KEQ10: How do cost reductions caused by this pilot vary by group, e.g. between court costs and costs faced by local authorities and households?

KEQ9: To what extent does the represent value for money?

KEQ9 Summary

- Based on the results of the quantitative impact analysis, there is weak evidence that the pilot represents value for money.
- A reduction of 8.3% case management hearings per case generates a BCR of approximately 1.09, indicating £1.09 of benefits for every £1 invested in the pilot.

What are the social and economic costs of the pilot? What are the social and economic benefits of the pilot? What is the estimated benefit cost-ratio for the pilot? What might the costs look like if the solutions are pilot is rolled out?

The quantitative impact analysis found that the pilot had a statistically significant impact on the number of case management hearings per case, resulting in an 8.3% reduction in the number of case management hearings. Assuming an average of 5 hearings per case,

this results in a reduction of approximately 0.4 case management hearings per case[18]. The quantitative impact analysis also found some indication that the pilot may have been associated with an increase in the average number of days that cases remained open compared with the counterfactual. However, these estimates were small and statistically insignificant.

Under the assumption of 0.4 fewer hearings per case with no reduction in case lengths, this generates a benefit to cost ratio (BCR) of approximately 1.09. Therefore, every £1 of invested in the pilot, generates approximately £1.09 in benefits, with a net benefit of £0.09. Therefore, at this BCR, we conclude that this pilot represents low value for money, as the BCR is marginally above 1. Further, the results are sensitive to measurement error, indicating that even small changes in the estimated impact could generate changes in the BCR. In our conclusion, we explore the VfM implications if the pilot was to be rolled out to other DFJ areas.

Costs associated with the pilot

The programme costs associated with the pilot are a mix of costs for the delivery partner, and implementation costs across the five DFJ areas. The total programme costs in the pilot year expressed in 24/25 prices were £3.67 million. The costs associated with the pilot are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4: Costs associated with the pilot

Cost category	Amount (£) in 24/25 prices
Delivery partner 23/24 (in 24/25 prices)	248,400
Delivery partner 24/25	1,201,566
DFJ areas costs	2,219,142
Total	3,669,108

Benefits associated with the pilot

As noted above, the pilot represents low value for money. Under an 8.3% reduction in hearings and no reduction in overall case lengths, there are two primary benefit streams: (i) savings due to a reduction in local authority and court costs from running fewer

[18]Based on evidence from Beckett et al. (2014), we assume that each affected case consists of 5 hearings in our central scenario. However, the BCR is highly sensitive to this assumption. Given the significant cost of each hearing, assuming one fewer hearing per case reduces the BCR to 0.87, while assuming one additional hearing per case increases it to 1.31.

hearings, and (ii) a reduction in foregone labour income for families attending hearings. Table 5 outlines the benefits associated with the pilot.

Table 5: Benefits associated with the pilot

Benefit Category	Costs per hearing (£)	Number of cases	Assumed reduction in hearings	Discount factor Year 1	Total Benefits (£)
Legal staffing cost savings (due to fewer hearings)	3,581	1,856	0.4	96.5%	2,661,691
Running cost court savings (due to fewer hearings)	1,760	1,856	0.4	96.5%	1,308,176
Reduced foregone labour income	28	1,856	0.4	96.5%	20,471
Total					3,990,338

Additional benefits

In addition to the benefits quantified and monetised in the model, there were other benefits of the pilot that have been excluded due to a lack of robust evidence. These could include improved assessment quality, improved experience of the court processes, improved cross-agency working, and improved welfare of local authority staff.

What might the costs look like if the solutions are rolled out?

There are two costs associated with the pilot: (i) DFJ area costs in the five pilot areas; and (ii) delivery partner costs, including the development of the "solutions blueprint" for each area. For future rollout, ongoing costs would include DFJ area costs for any new areas involved in the programme. There would also likely be further delivery partner spend on providing support to newly implementing DFJs areas. The exact nature and extent of these future costs is difficult to assess, due to the range of activities delivered across DFJ areas. However, it is plausible to assume that rollout costs may be lower than original pilot costs because some aspects of the pilot would not need to be repeated from scratch. As mentioned above, interviewees were able to reflect on their implementation experiences and identify lessons that could inform future rollout. This suggests that learning from the pilot could be reused during rollout, reducing the need for the same

level of external support. For example, learning from the pilot such as how you effectively engage specific stakeholder groups, existing materials, and implementation experience could be reused. The role of the DP may also reduce over time as DFJ areas and local authorities build their own implementation and learn from each other. However, rollout would still require ongoing investment to sustain delivery, maintain quality, and ensure the solutions are embedded across DFJ areas. These costs would likely include staff time for local coordination and governance, training and continued cross area learning. This means while rollout costs may reduce over time, they are unlikely to disappear altogether.

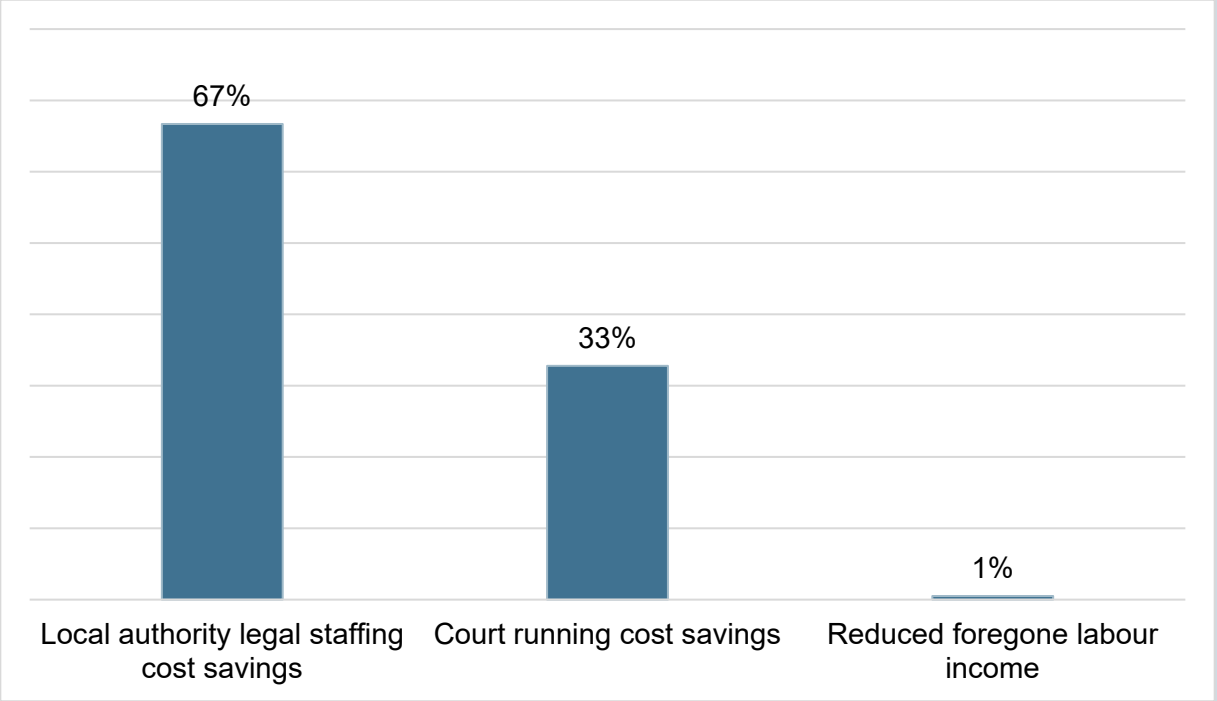
KEQ10: How do cost reductions caused by this pilot vary by group, e.g. between court costs and costs faced by local authorities and households?

KEQ10 Summary

- Under an 8.3% reduction in case management hearings per case, operational savings to local authorities make up 67% of total cost savings, while savings to courts make up 33% of the total.
- A small proportion of cost savings also accrue to households and families (1%), driven by a reduction in foregone labour income due to a reduction in the number of hearings.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of total cost savings attributable to courts, local authorities and households and families under an 8.3% reduction in case management hearings per case.

Figure 3: Share of total cost savings attributable to each category under an 8.3% reduction per case



Operational savings to the local authority make up 67% (£2,661,691) of total cost savings associated with an 8.3% reduction in case management hearings, while savings to courts make up 33% (£1,308,176) of total cost savings. Under an 8.3% reduction in hearings per case and no overall reduction in case lengths, benefits to households make up approximately 1% (£20,471) of total benefits. Specifically, this consists of a reduction in foregone labour income, due to a reduction in the total number of hearings.

Summative question: learning across pilot sites

KEQ11: What have we learned across the DFJ area pilot sites that can help to guide rollout of some or all of the piloted solutions to other DFJ areas?

KEQ11 Summary

- Our findings suggest that further rollout of this pilot would require a longer implementation period to help embed practice.
- The findings also point to the need for engagement from senior leadership and wider engagement across the family justice space. Stakeholders also emphasised the need for adequate investment for any future scale up.

In this section, we summarise interviewee views on possible modifications to implementation, and important considerations for rollout, should the decision be taken to do so.

A key lesson from the pilot was that implementation timelines were too short to embed behavioural and practice changes fully. Although there were indications of change as seen in KEQ6, without adequate time, this was difficult to evidence. One Cafcass interviewee in Central London was of the view that that without adequate time for implementation, practice may revert to previous way of working and gains could diminish over time:

> *"* You don't change behaviours and sustain them into the future with really short period of time…things revert to type really quickly. It's going to fail really, really quickly*" Cafcass*

Interviewees also highlighted strong senior leadership and buy in as a key learning for potential rollout. As outlined in the findings under KEQ2, early outcomes were facilitated where senior leaders were actively engaged. Interviewees suggested that, to achieve buy-in across the family justice system, any future rollout would require visible sponsorship from senior national leaders, including the judiciary, rather than being perceived as a purely local or isolated initiative.

A related lesson is that future rollout must extend engagement beyond local authority-led change to include legal sector stakeholders. Interviewees from Cheshire and Merseyside noted that the pilot did not sufficiently engage with the Bar and private solicitors, which led to elements of the pilot being viewed with caution and may have undermined some intermediate outcomes. Similarly in Wolverhampton, interviewees noted that some parts of the wider legal system, particularly private solicitors representing parents, were not sufficiently involved. It was noted that earlier engagement with legal representatives may help improve the trajectory of cases before they reach court and strengthen the consistency of decision-making across the system. The role of this stakeholder group should therefore be acknowledged as an important factor in reducing court delays.

Another learning for rollout was around the need for adequate delivery capacity and resourcing. In particular given that the pilot required coordination beyond local authority stakeholders, rollout should include explicit resource for coordination, document production, and practical delivery support rather than relying solely on goodwill of local authority staff. An important learning was ensuring that pilots designated specific budget for the administrative and support work conducted by individual local authorities. This could be in the form of additional budget for a project finance role to support DFJ area-level strategic leads with procurement and other financial tasks.

Related to the issue of resourcing, in Cheshire and Merseyside one interviewee was of the view that expecting local authorities to absorb pilot costs within already constrained

budgets was unrealistic. It was felt that future rollout should therefore be accompanied by more adequate central funding.

In Cheshire and Merseyside, one interviewee stated that for the potential rollout of a hub system, it would be important to be clear on the purpose of the hub beforehand. Without this clarity, there was a concern that the hub could be primarily used by local authorities that lack the capacity or expertise to undertake assessments in-house, rather than operating as a specialist resource intended to enhance assessment quality across the system.

5. Conclusion

There was strong buy-in for the Trailblazer pilot in two of the three sampled DFJs. In general, many interviewees felt the solutions had the potential to contribute to reducing unnecessary delays, although they also acknowledged that delays are driven by broader systemic factors beyond the pilot. The solutions were also generally seen as well aligned with existing services and did not duplicate ongoing activity.

The workforce development workstream was consistently identified as the most effective solution in all sampled DFJ areas. It led to improvements in the quality and consistency of social work assessments, which in turn strengthened confidence in social workers' professional judgement, especially among the judiciary. It also contributed to greater trust and more collaborative, less adversarial relationships across the system. There are early indications of reduced reliance on additional expert assessments, linked to improved quality of the initial assessment. Another consistent finding across areas was improved cross - agency collaboration**,** in the form of the establishment of cross-agency working groups, and improved working relationships. However, there is limited evidence of wider workforce impacts, such as improved wellbeing or retention, which interviewees felt were more strongly influenced by external factors.

In contrast, there was limited evidence that the data workstream led to its some intended outcomes within the pilot period. Expected benefits like time savings and faster case management or case diversion were not seen in the primary or administrative data. However, quantitative analysis showed improved decision-making, as reflected by fewer case management hearings. One possible explanation is that better quality assessments earlier in the process as mentioned by interviewees reduced the need for additional hearings. Evidence showed that improved and better-quality assessments increased judicial confidence reducing the need for further hearings to test the evidence. It is also possible that stronger relationships particularly between Cafcass and social workers improved information sharing before hearing. This increased collaboration may have reduced uncertainty leading to fewer follow up cases.

While pilot activities supported improved engagement and understanding of the court process among families, there was little evidence that this led to earlier identification or presentation of family members.

The qualitative evidence on whether the pilot reduced the length of court proceedings is weak and inconclusive. The quantitative impact analysis was also inconclusive, suggesting no meaningful impact on the length of proceedings, although patterns in Cheshire and Merseyside were consistent with shorter case durations. Interviewees consistently reported that it was too early to determine whether changes in case duration had occurred. This was mostly because the pilot had only been in place for about a year, limiting the extent downstream impacts like changes in court duration could be observed.

Interviewees also emphasised that length of court proceedings are often driven by broader system wide factors beyond local authority control such as judge availability and listing practices.

Interviewees noted it was too soon to observe cost reductions for local authorities and courts from the pilot. Many discussed possible cost changes based on anticipated impacts, such as workforce development potentially lowering expenses through fewer placements, less ISW use, fewer reassessments, and shorter legal involvement due to improved processes.

The evaluation provides some support for the pilot's learning objectives, particularly through cross-area knowledge exchange. There were also early indications of improved family experience, although evidence remains limited.

The economic evaluation shows that the pilot represented low value for money. Under an 8.3% reduction in the number of case management hearings and no overall reduction in overall case lengths, the benefit to cost ratio is approximately 1.09, indicating that every £1 invested in the pilot generates £1.09 in benefits. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution as at this BCR, very small levels of measurement error can change the conclusion. Additionally, there are other benefits that have not been monetised due to a lack of robust evidence, including improved assessment quality and improved experience of the court system. If these benefits could be included within the model, the BCR of the Pilot could also increase. The pilot could represent better value for money over time if rolled out, if the solutions become more embedded, generate stronger and more sustained benefits, and require less intensive implementation support than during the pilot phase. The pilot required upfront investment in design, mobilisation, delivery partner support, training and stakeholder engagement. These costs may reduce in any future rollout because experience and learning materials can be reused. If the solutions continue to improve assessment quality, strengthen professional confidence, reduce duplication, improve cross- agency working and support more efficient case management, then the benefits may further outweigh the ongoing costs of delivery.

Implications for rollout

Based on the evaluation findings, the following considerations may help, should the DfE decide to rollout the Trailblazer to all DFJ areas.

Scope and design of pilot

- Our evidence suggests that not all elements of the pilot contributed equally to intended outcomes. In particular, the workforce development workstream implemented mainly through a shared assessment model (ParentAssess) was consistently identified as the primary driver of change. Rollout should therefore

prioritise this as the core of the intervention. To support effective rollout, the DfE should embed the ParentAssess model (or whatever shared model is decided on) consistently across participating areas and set clear expectations for using it in assessment processes. This will help improvements in quality to be sustained and recognised across the wider system.

- The short duration of the pilot limited the extent to which outcomes, particularly system level impacts, could be observed. This suggests that future rollout should be longer and approached as a phased programme. An initial phase should focus on establishing core enablers, such as solution development, stakeholder consultation and setting up and governance arrangements. This should be followed by a period of embedding practice change and strengthening system alignment, before one can expect measurable impacts on system level outcomes like changes in length of court proceedings.
- DfE should retain the bottom-up solution development to allow tailoring to local context, ownership and relevance.
- Adequate resourcing will also be critical, as the findings highlight that the time and capacity required for delivery were greater than initially anticipated.

Stakeholder engagement

- The evaluation shows that the effectiveness of the pilot was closely linked to the extent of system wide engagement. Outcomes were reported to be strongest where there was active collaboration between local authorities, Cafcass, and the judiciary, and where this collaboration is supported by shared governance structures and regular communication. Rollout should therefore place early emphasis on securing buy-in from all key stakeholders, especially the judiciary.
- The findings also highlight the value of cross-area learning suggesting that structured peer learning mechanisms should be retained and strengthened as part of rollout. A delivery partner could continue to convene peer forums, thematic learning sessions, routinely capture and disseminate lessons learnt.

Monitoring, learning and evaluability

- Our evidence shows that limitations in MI data meant that interviewees often relied on anecdotal evidence as evidence of change. The existing monitoring data captured activities and outputs rather than changes in outcomes. Future rollout should strengthen use of HMCTS and local authority data to capture changes in practice and case progression. This will support both local learning, reflection and decision-making, and ongoing evaluation. At the same time, it will be important to

ensure that data collection is proportionate and does not place additional burden on delivery teams.

- A key limitation of the evaluation was the reliance on HMCTS data. This contained limited case level detail and raised concerns about data quality. To support robust evaluation of future reforms, ensuring the accuracy of readily accessible administrative data should be treated as a core design requirement. It will also be important to improve greater linkage with local authority data to allow more reliable assessment of outcomes such as timeliness and case progression. Without these improvements, the ability to generate robust evidence on impact will continue to be limited.

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