



Ministry
of Justice

Child Focused Courts

**An update on the implementation and
national rollout of the Government's
Child Focused Courts programme**

October 2026

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1. Ministerial Foreword

Following the Government's announcement of national rollout in March, I am pleased to introduce this update on the Child Focused Courts programme alongside the newly published target operating model.

We are now six years on from the Ministry of Justice publishing the Expert Panel Report on 'Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases', commonly known as the 'Harm Panel Report'. The report set out a vision for an approach to private law based on a culture of safety and protection from harm. By providing more support to families and enabling safe decisions without delay, the national rollout of the Child Focused Model is helping us deliver on that vision and on the Government's commitment to halve Violence Against Women and Girls within a decade.

The former President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, described the national rollout of Child Focused Courts as the 'biggest change to family courts in 30 years'. That change is only possible because of the hard work and dedication of so many involved in the planning and delivery of Child Focused Courts in each local area. The target operating model, published alongside this update, sets out the importance of partnership working between all professionals to deliver not just process changes, but also the much-needed cultural change in the family courts.

The data, including the management information published alongside this update, continues to show strong performance on timeliness and reduction of outstanding caseload. However, we recognise the importance of the model in improving the experience of children and families involved in private law proceedings, and crucially, delivering better outcomes. As national rollout progresses, we will continue to take a collaborative approach, using the feedback and experiences from children, families and practitioners to ensure that the model works effectively in practice.

The Government has committed £17m of funding to support the expansion of Child Focused Courts in 11 new court areas in 2026/2027, more than doubling the number of areas operating the model. Details of the funding for the remaining 21 court areas is subject to final confirmation, but we are confident the model will be in place across England and Wales by the end of this Spending Review period.

Beyond Child Focused Courts, we are also taking forward a wider programme of reform including repealing the presumption of parental involvement, implementing Jade's Law, and reforming the rights of cohabiting couples. Together, these measures, alongside other programmes of work to be laid out in our forthcoming family justice strategy, will help make the family justice system safer, fairer and more

efficient. The next few years will be demanding but present a significant opportunity to deliver lasting change for families.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jake Richards', with a long, sweeping underline.

Jake Richards MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and Minister responsible for Family Justice

2. Background

In March 2026, the Government confirmed that the Child Focused Model, formerly known as the Private Law Pathfinder, will be expanded across the entirety of England and Wales by the end of this Spending Review period. This means the model will be operating in all family court areas by March 2029.

The Child Focused Model is designed to improve experiences and outcomes for families, particularly adult and child victims of domestic abuse. It focuses on early identification of risk, increased engagement with children and bespoke support for victims, all within a streamlined court process. Where it operates, the model replaces the previous Child Arrangements Programme for relevant private law proceedings.

The Child Focused Model was implemented as a key element of the Ministry of Justice's response to the Harm Panel report. Since publication of the Harm Panel report, other reports on the family court from Women's Aid, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office have reinforced the need for a reformed approach to private law proceedings.

Further details on the model, why it has been introduced, when it applies, how it is delivered, and its benefits can be found in the [Child Focused Courts target operating model](#) which was published alongside this delivery update.

We have also published the third iteration of [Child Focused Courts ad hoc management information](#). This covers case duration and caseload in exiting sites and we anticipate this will be the final ad hoc publication, with future data on Child Focused Courts to be covered through regular reporting from His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service.

3. Delivery update

3.1 Expansion:

Since the programme's last delivery update in March 2025, the Child Focused Model has been successfully expanded to five more court areas. In June 2025, the model was expanded to West Yorkshire, this was followed in November by three areas in the West Midlands: Wolverhampton, Telford and the Black Country; Herefordshire and Worcestershire; and Staffordshire. Most recently, the model was expanded to Hampshire and the Isle of Wight in January 2026. This means the model now accounts for approximately a quarter of relevant receipts for private law children proceedings across England and Wales. The full list of areas delivering the model is included in the annex.

Successful implementation across these five areas provided valuable insight that has supported the decision to roll out Child Focused Courts nationally. West Yorkshire represents the largest court area, by private law receipts, to implement the model so far. Management information shows that cases in West Yorkshire are resolved in 19.6 weeks on average, 12 weeks faster than before implementation, and the outstanding caseload has reduced by more than 25% in the 3 months to June 2026 compared to the same period in 2025.

The expansion to three areas in the West Midlands was the first time multiple court areas started the model at the same time. We took a regional approach to this expansion, as the three West Midlands areas and Hampshire and the Isle of Wight are adjacent to Birmingham and Dorset respectively, where the Child Focused Model had already been implemented. This approach has proven to be effective by enabling shared learning and leadership within regions, including aligning with Cafcass operational service areas which are made up of more than one family court areas.

As more areas have begun delivering the Child Focused Model, we have worked to standardise the process through which an area transitions from implementation to steady-state delivery. This transition should happen no more than 12 months after an area starts the model and is dependent on sufficiently reducing the number of outstanding "legacy" Child Arrangements Programme cases. Steady-state delivery means the temporary additional capacity required to manage both the Child Focused Model and legacy cases at the same time is no longer needed. We are separately considering with partners the increased steady state delivery requirements – in particular for Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru and specialist domestic abuse services introduced under the model.

The expansion of the Child Focused Model is happening against a backdrop of rising demand for family courts. The number of private law cases started increased by 11%

(to 14,833) in April to June 2026 compared to the equivalent quarter in 2025. This increases pressure on court areas preparing to implement the Child Focused Model whilst managing down the number of outstanding cases. The increase in demand varies across regions and we will ensure that our approach to national rollout factors in local challenges. Despite increasing demand, the areas currently operating the Child Focused Model continue to be among the best performing areas across England and Wales. This demonstrates the importance of delivering national rollout as one of the ways to support longer term resilience and efficiency within the family justice system.

Crucially, areas delivering the Child Focused Model are also ensuring a greater number of children are engaged within proceedings. Across England and Wales respectively an average of 82% and 87% of cases allocated to Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru under the model included direct engagement with children, compared to 30-37% across both regions under the Child Arrangements Programme. This represents a step change in the approach to private law and delivers on the ambition to ensure children are heard and can meaningfully participate in proceedings that have a significant impact on their lives.

3.2 Target operating model and design work

To fully realise the benefits of the Child Focused Model it is important that we enable and ensure consistency, transparency, and accountability. This will help us deliver on the system-wide ambition for the future of private law proceedings that improves both the experience and outcomes for children and families. Over the past year we have worked closely with all partners involved in delivery to develop [the Child Focused Courts target operating model](#). Published alongside this update, the target operating model sets out the case for change, the process, the multi-agency approach, and the delivery requirements of the Child Focused Courts model. Having a clear and agreed model will support us to deliver in a transparent and financially sustainable way while maintaining consistently high standards.

Alongside developing the target operating model, we have worked with partners to agree standardised templates for orders and reports, practice materials to support engagement with children and their participation in proceedings, and protocols to facilitate effective collaboration between agencies. This will embed consistent practice and help us deliver national rollout at scale, allowing future sites to adopt and effectively implement the good practice from initial areas.

The Child Focused Model represents significant transformation and, together with partners, we will continue to identify opportunities to refine the model further. This will include exploration of the implications of the Model for wider, ongoing policy and operational considerations within private law proceedings. One example of future policy thinking and design work is that which relates to applications made by non-parent parties. Research from the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory estimates

non-parent parties account for 10% of child private law applications. We are working with relevant partners, including local authorities, to better understand the experiences of this group within the model and expect there will be future iterations of the target operating model following further work on this and other issues.

3.3 Programme governance and collaborative working

Central to the Child Focused Model is the principle that better outcomes for children and families depend on multi-agency working, both in individual cases and in relation to the broader culture and approach to private law proceedings. As the scale and pace of expansion has increased, we have sought to strengthen the programme's structure so that a multi-agency approach is facilitated and adopted at both a national and local level.

At a national level, we have strengthened engagement with delivery partners and wider interested stakeholders. This includes providing forums for legal practitioners, the domestic abuse sector, and others less directly involved in implementation, to share feedback on how the model is working in practice. We are also working with the colleagues in the Department for Education and with the Association of Directors of Children's Services to understand and manage the interaction between Child Focused Courts and wider reforms to children's social care. Alongside this, we are engaging with police colleagues to support consistent understanding of local police force roles within the model and how processed for checks and disclosure, where required, supports risk identification and safer decisions.

At a local level, the increased multi-agency working and problem-solving established through the temporary local implementation group should be maintained beyond transition to steady state. This enables a swift response when local risks or pressures emerge. Alongside partners, we are developing a process through which an area facing sustained demand or capacity pressure can agree short-term local contingency arrangements to manage delivery whilst being supported at national level to resolve the pressure. Beyond contingency arrangements, we will continue to work with partners to ensure local areas have the right arrangements to enable collective problem solving and the continuous improvement of practice.

3.4 Research, learning and monitoring

In January 2026, the MoJ released a report on ["Understanding the Experience of Children and Families"](#). The report was based on research conducted with children and families in the early adopter sites of Dorset and North Wales. It found positive progress towards creating a more child centred, less adversarial process with improved support for domestic abuse survivors. The report also made recommendations on ways to improve practice, much of which have been addressed in the years since Dorset and North Wales started the model.

To support national rollout, we have established a research, learning and monitoring strategy to better understand how the model is working in practice and make timely improvements through national rollout. This strategy brings together improved qualitative and quantitative data, rapid practice learning, and targeted external research.

The rollout of Child Focused Courts, alongside HMCTS's new private law portal, creates an opportunity to improve the data available across the family justice system. We have worked with partners to consider the gaps in existing reporting and prioritise new metrics related to the Child Focused Model. This includes more data on child engagement, hearings, and the risk assessment and support offered by domestic abuse specialists. We will combine management information from across delivery partners to create a full picture of performance. Our broader ambitions for data beyond the scope of the Child Focused Courts Programme will be set out in the upcoming Family Justice Strategy.

As the model has expanded into more areas, partners are collectively growing an evidence base of feedback from children, families and frontline practitioners. This insight will support the practice learning workstream, allowing us to examine how different parts of the model are being delivered and the associated impact. For example, the domestic abuse services network established for providers has highlighted important professional insight, including that many referrals are first-time disclosures, where victim-survivors have not previously disclosed the abuse they have experienced. Insight like this will help strengthen practice, inform delivery decisions, and support a sustainable learning culture as the model expands nationally.

Alongside data improvements and practice learning, we have committed £500,000 to support the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office to lead a second phase of their Family Court Reporting and Review Mechanism. This mixed-methods research will consider three Child Focused Court areas through court observations, engagement with children and survivors of domestic abuse, practitioner interviews and case file analysis. Taken together, these outputs will support continuous improvement and help refine the model throughout national rollout.

4. National Rollout

The Child Focused Model currently operates in 10 of 42 family court areas across England and Wales. We will expand the model to 11 more areas by early 2027. In November 2026, eight court areas across the north-east, north-west and midlands will start the model. This will be followed by another three areas across the midlands and south-east in January 2027. This expansion means that half of all family court areas will be operating the Child Focused Model by the end of the 2026/2027 financial year. We continue to take a phased approach to expansion and decisions on rollout are taken by the cross-system Programme Board on an area-by-area basis by considering readiness of all delivery partners. We have a dynamic readiness criteria which takes account of a wide range of factors to ensure implementation is managed in a way which all system partners have capacity to support.

Looking ahead, we have set indicative start dates in April 2027 for a further 5 court areas and initial preparation in these areas is underway. As with readiness, areas have been selected on a broad range of criteria, including social work resource, judicial and court capacity, and proximity to areas already operating the model. We have agreed with partners that the approach to rollout across England will be aligned with the boundaries of Cafcass operational service areas. This means that all family court areas within the same Cafcass operational service area will start operating the model on the same day. This coordinated approach will support consistent change management and sequencing of training, simplify communications, and support organisations that span family court boundaries.

We plan to implement the model in London – subject to assessment of capacity and readiness – by the end of 2027. We know that a high number of open cases under the Child Arrangements Programme creates significant challenge for the system at the point the Child Focused Model starts due to professionals needing to manage two separate processes. London has some of the highest outstanding caseloads in the country, and to ensure a successful start we have planned a longer preparation period across the region. Work to reduce legacy cases and engage all system partners has already begun in London and we aim to have local implementation groups in place by early 2027.

We will expand to remaining areas of the south-east and south-west by March 2029. To support effective preparation, partners are already implementing practice and process changes which better align ways of working with the Child Focused Model and will help support the culture change required to embed successful reform that delivers on the ambition of the programme. This will be particularly important as demand for private law continues to rise and as we learn from good practice in existing areas.

5. Next Steps

As national rollout progresses, our focus will be on delivering in line with the target operating model and understanding the impact the model is having on children and families. We will use learning from existing areas and continue to work with partners and stakeholders across the family justice system to respond to feedback and improve practice.

This work will include collective effort to ensure specialist domestic abuse services introduced through Child Focused Courts are fully integrated into local multi-agency working arrangements and are able to provide effective support for victim-survivors. We will also consider how domestic abuse services should be commissioned and sustained in the longer term, following the Government's decision to abolish Police and Crime Commissioners. This will be important in ensuring the support offer remains stable, effective and aligned with the needs of children and families.

The Harm Panel report called for much more than changes to procedure and processes. As we implement the model, we will continue to consider how multi-agency training and ways of working, strong communities of practice, and cross-system leadership, can help embed the wider cultural change required to deliver on the ambition of the Child Focused Courts Programme. We remain committed to reform that enables early identification of risk, embeds specialist domestic abuse support, and ensures timely decision making with a clear and unwavering focus on both welfare and protection from harm for children and families.

Through collective effort across all parts of the family justice system, the pace of national rollout has accelerated significantly since the last published update. The coming year will see many more areas operating under the Child Focused Model and as such, we anticipate publication of a further delivery update by the end of 2027.

6 Annex

Designated Family Judge areas and implementation dates

The Government has set out its ambition to achieve national rollout within the current Spending Review period, by 2029. We intend to continue the phased approach to national rollout, supporting early preparation across all regions and assessing readiness of individual areas through programme governance which includes representation from all operational delivery partners. For dates beyond November 2026, discussions are ongoing and formal decisions on launch dates are taken by the Programme Board and agreed by the responsible minister at the Ministry of Justice ahead of announcing final dates.

Designated Family Judge area	Implementation date
Dorset	21 February 2022
North Wales	21 February 2022
South East Wales	29 April 2024
Birmingham	28 May 2024
Mid and West Wales	3 March 2025
West Yorkshire	3 June 2025
Wolverhampton	11 November 2025
Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire	11 November 2025
Herefordshire and Worcestershire	11 November 2025
Hampshire and the Isle of Wight	6 January 2026
Coventry and Warwickshire	17 November 2026
Northamptonshire	17 November 2026
Cheshire and Merseyside	17 November 2026
Lancashire	17 November 2026
Cumbria	17 November 2026
North Yorkshire	17 November 2026
Cleveland and South Durham	17 November 2026
Northumbria and North Durham	17 November 2026
Leicestershire	January 2027 TBC
Lincolnshire	January 2027 TBC
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	January 2027 TBC
Greater Manchester	Q1 2027/2028 TBC
Hull and Humberside	Q1 2027/2028 TBC
South Yorkshire	Q1 2027/2028 TBC

Designated Family Judge area	Implementation date
Derby Nottingham	Q1 2027/2028 TBC Q1 2027/2028 TBC
East London West London Central London	Q3 2027/2028 TBC Q3 2027/2028 TBC Q3 2027/2028 TBC
Cornwall Devon Bristol Swindon Taunton Kent Surrey and Sussex Essex Norfolk Milton Keynes Watford Luton Reading	Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC Q1 2028/2029 TBC