

Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Improvement Plan

In September 2020, Cafcass established a [Learning and Improvement Board](#) to steer the development of an improvement plan to strengthen Cafcass' work with children and families in family proceedings (Private law initially) who have experienced domestic abuse. The Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Improvement Plan has been developed drawing on:

- A case file audit that was moderated by volunteer members of the Learning and Improvement Board.
- Feedback from Learning and Improvement Board members, including those with lived experience of domestic abuse.
- Four separate focus improvement groups with the Family Justice Young People's Board, Women's Aid and MATCH Mothers, Families Need Fathers, and Family Court Advisers.
- Findings from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Expert Panel on Harm in the Family Courts.

Cafcass defines domestic abuse as provided in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, being any incident or pattern of incidents that can encompass but is not limited to: physical or sexual abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, controlling or coercive behaviour, economic abuse and psychological and emotional abuse. Victims and perpetrators are not confined to one gender or ethnic group. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 explicitly recognises children as victims of domestic abuse if they see, hear or experience the effects of abuse.

The plan refers to the Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Development Programme which has been developed using feedback from the Learning and Improvement Board, families, practitioners, the Family Justice Young People's Board, family justice partners, and findings from Cafcass practice audits. The programme is implementing the updated Cafcass Domestic Abuse Practice Pathway, the content for which has been significantly revised and expanded. The programme is not a one-off training event and includes a range of materials and events over a number of months to embed learning. The programme went live in May 2021 and is mandatory for all Cafcass staff. Completion rates will be monitored as well as the impact of the training on our practice and improvement priorities.

Process for monitoring progress: Progress against the Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Improvement Plan will be provided to the Learning and Improvement Board to review at each Board meeting and Cafcass Assistant Directors will attend to report on progress in their area. A further case file audit will be concluded in 2021 to measure progress.

The Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Improvement Plan is specific to Cafcass' work with families in family proceedings who have experienced domestic abuse and reflects where we can learn from good practice as well as areas to strengthen and improve.

Improve the effectiveness of management oversight

Ref	What will we do?	How will we do it?	Who will do it?	When will we do it by?	How will we know that we have done it?
1.	Improve the effectiveness of management oversight. <i>Learning areas identified from the learning review audit.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update the Cafcass Supervision Policy to make it a requirement for targeted management oversight on assessment decisions that recommend the introduction of time with a child where there has been domestic abuse or no contact with a parent. Where required, strengthen manager and supervisor knowledge and supervisory skills in relation to applying this aspect of the Supervision Policy, to improve the impact of their oversight and provision of reflective supervision. 	Policy team, Service Managers and Practice Supervisors to implement	Aug 2021	Cafcass audit programme and a second Cafcass audit for the Learning and Improvement Board (to take place late 2021) will find evidence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consistent management oversight with clear rationales in assessment decisions that recommend the introduction of time with a child where there has been domestic abuse or no contact with a parent. The best interests and safety of children will be clear and central to the recommendations. an increase in writing to the court following a potentially unsafe order with data to demonstrate any regional learning. an increase in how practitioners rate their confidence in challenging unsafe court orders. an increase in Cafcass' work that is rated good or outstanding through audit.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop practice guidance on potentially unsafe orders that guides managers in the steps they can take to challenge them as they arise (whether interim or final) and the process of escalation. This will be disseminated to all Cafcass practitioners and shared with the courts. 	Principal Social Worker, Cafcass Legal Team and Policy Team, Service Managers and Practice Supervisors	Aug 2021	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group and reflective supervision to oversee assessment decisions that recommend spending time with a parent who has been abusive or no contact with a parent to promote consistency in practice. 	Service Managers and Practice Supervisors	Dec 2021	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal Learning Plans focussed on domestic abuse practice for every Family Court Adviser, with progress reviewed in biannual performance reviews with managers. 	Service Managers	Biannually	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A management review of our work with a family will be started when there are prolonged proceedings, to explore the issues and what needs to be done to support a safe conclusion for the child. 	Service Managers and Practice Supervisors	Underway and by Dec 2021	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal Learning Plans are in place highlighting areas of learning and of good practice in applying the learning from the Domestic Abuse Learning and Development Programme. Plans track strengths and identify progress and evidence against areas for improvement. Audit, quality assurance and supervision find that management review and feedback from children is consistently triggered where there are prolonged proceedings. 			

Strengthen our practice

Ref	What will we do?	How will we do it?	Who will do it?	When will we do it by?	How will we know that we have done it?
2.	<p>Strengthen our practice with a focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk assessments and a clear rationale for decisions. • Better understanding of domestic abuse and distinguishing it from harmful conflict. • Strengthening our direct work with children to explain our rationale, recommendations, and outcome of the case. • Speaking consistently with other agencies who know the child and family, and signposting to specialist agencies where appropriate. <p><i>Learning areas identified from the learning review audit, focus improvement groups, and the MoJ Expert Panel on Harm in the Family Courts.</i></p>	<p>Implementation of the Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Development Programme to all our staff. The programme includes training and workshops to strengthen our:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to risk assess patterns of domestic abuse. • Safeguarding interviews to create opportunity for more compassionate interaction, building on learning from working remotely with children and families during the pandemic. • Understanding of the harm to children living with domestic abuse, including coercive and controlling behaviours and recognising behaviours that are the result of trauma. • Social work analysis with a clear explanation about how and why recommendations have been reached, with consideration of the welfare checklist and the longer-term outcomes for children. • Direct work with children to explain how and why recommendations have been reached, any decisions made by the court, and what their plan and next steps will look like. • Understanding of the culture and values that impact professional decision-making in respect of domestic abuse to clearly distinguish domestic abuse from harmful conflict and improve our understanding of how different aspects of a person's identity (including any protected characteristics) can influence how domestic abuse is experienced. • Work with children as individuals and not as a group of brothers and sisters, whilst recognising the importance of these relationships, to understand and represent to court each child's unique needs and voice. 	<p>National Improvement Service, Service Managers and Practice Supervisors responsible for implementation with Family Court Advisers, accountable to Assistant Directors</p>	<p>From May 2021 and by the end of 2021/22</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion rates for the Cafcass Domestic Abuse Learning and Development Programme will be monitored and reported on, including the impact on practice. • Through audit and an increase in Cafcass' work that is rated good or outstanding. Audit includes feedback from families, the judiciary and Board members. • Tracking progress on Family Court Advisers' domestic abuse Personal Learning Plans and Family Court Advisers rating their confidence against the practice elements before and after the programme. • Annual practice observations of Family Courts Advisers direct work with families, undertaken by Service Managers and Practice Supervisors.

Ref	What will we do?	How will we do it?	Who will do it?	When will we do it by?	How will we know that we have done it?
2.		Implementation of the revised Domestic Abuse Practice Pathway and Guidance, which includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence-based practice tools to assist Family Court Advisers in assessing different elements of domestic abuse and how to explain the use that is made of specialist materials in reports to court. Use of the distinguishing domestic abuse and harmful conflict screening tool. Analysing and presenting in reports the diverse and unique needs of children whilst also not making assumptions about any individual. Working with children with a disability or other additional needs to support them to share their experience, especially where there are concerns about domestic abuse. 	National Improvement Service, Service Managers and Practice Supervisors responsible for implementation with Family Court Advisers, accountable to Assistant Directors	From May 2021 and by the end of 2021/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through audit and an increase in Cafcass' work that is rated good or outstanding. Audit includes feedback from families, the judiciary and Board members. Tracking progress on Family Court Advisers' domestic abuse Personal Learning Plans and Family Court Advisers rating their confidence against the practice elements before and after the programme. Annual practice observations of Family Courts Advisers direct work with families, undertaken by Service Managers and Practice Supervisors.
		Implementation of the new Cafcass Practice Framework - <i>Together with Children and Families</i> and the explicit values about working in partnership with children and families. The new framework is based on five values: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Always looking for the strengths and risks in families. Decision making that is clear and reasoned. Believing in respectful relationships. Holding children and their families at the heart of our practice. Wanting to know more about you and what is important in your life. 	National Improvement Service, Service Managers and Practice Supervisors responsible for implementation with Family Court Advisers, accountable to Assistant Directors	From Jul 2021 and by the end of 2021/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence in audits, supervision and quality assurance of reports and casework. Feedback from children and families including through the audit programme, complaints and compliments.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce guidance with SafeLives to strengthen the relationship between Family Court Advisers and Independent Domestic Violence Advisers, who work with victims of domestic abuse to help them become safer. 	National Improvement Service, Policy, Service Managers, Practice Supervisors	Sep 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit and quality assurance find consistent communication with other agencies who know the child and family.

Facilitate more opportunity for feedback from children and families

Ref	What will we do?	How will we do it?	Who will do it?	When will we do it by?	How will we know that we have done it?
3.	<p>Facilitate more opportunity for feedback from children and families.</p> <p><i>Learning areas identified from the learning review audit and the MoJ Expert Panel report on Harm in the Family Courts.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through the Cafcass Family Forum which has a clear feedback impact into practice and our work with families and children. 	Family Forum Co-Ordinator and Principal Social Worker	Underway and by Mar 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear feedback mechanisms have been established which effect change. Feedback mechanisms include a variety of ways for children and families to provide feedback, including in person, remotely and anonymously. Children tell us that they feel listened to, understood, and have their experience reported to court, measured through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audits that seek feedback from children Encouraging children to feedback through established mechanisms that effect change (see section 3) General feedback.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embed learning from complaints and compliments with a clear plan to improve and change practice in response. 	Customer Service Team	Oct 2021	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively encourage children and families to feed back to us throughout our work to help us to improve. 	All staff and Principal Social Worker	Underway and by Mar 2022	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the end of proceedings, provide children and families with information about additional support in their area when needed, and seek feedback from families in closed cases. 	National Improvement Service, Service Managers and Practice Supervisors responsible for implementation with Family Court Advisors, accountable to Assistant Directors	Oct 2021	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review our complaints framework so that families are supported to provide feedback and there is greater clarity about the process with a strong emphasis on early resolution, especially for children. 	Project reporting to Operational Director	Underway and by Mar 2022	

Influence the family justice system at local and national level

Ref	What will we do?	How will we do it?	Who will do it?	When will we do it by?	How will we know that we have done it?
4.	<p>Influence the family justice system at local and national level.</p> <p><i>Learning areas identified from the MoJ Expert Panel report on Harm in the Family Courts and feedback from Learning and Improvement Board members.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant Directors to explore multi-professional reviews of work with a family following case closure to reflect on practice with feedback from the children and families involved in the case. 	Cafcass ADs, Designated Family Judges, relevant family justice professionals, children and families	Sep 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-professional evaluation of practice to encourage improvement across the family justice system, reflecting on the strengths and learning points in a case and applying these to future cases where relevant.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with Cafcass Cymru and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory to strengthen research on family justice and understand children's lived experiences through improved access to our data, analysis and practice insights. Research is disseminated to Cafcass practitioners through seminars, bulletins and the Cafcass library. 	Policy, Analytics, Cafcass Cymru, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory	Mar 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cafcass uses its unique real-time national data to improve understanding across the system of the needs of children and families. More comprehensive data is available on domestic abuse and other factors such as ethnicity with more researchers accessing Cafcass' anonymised case file data through Swansea Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) databank.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a new Cafcass Management Information Development Group to undertake work to review and improve how we collect and analyse information about the incidence of domestic abuse allegations, whether and how they are substantiated, and the implications for child arrangements made. 	Director of Strategy, Cafcass Analytics, IT and National Improvement Service	Mar 2023	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and Ministry of Justice to review current Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Programmes and identify options to commission effective child-centred interventions. 	Cafcass, Domestic Abuse Commissioner, MoJ	Review date to be confirmed by MoJ.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive evaluation of the new commissioned programme and monitoring of its impact via service providers, including direct feedback from participating children and families.

Owner: Sarah Parsons, Principal Social Worker

Date for review: June 2022