



Ministry
of Justice

Child Focused Courts Target Operating Model

Private Family Law

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1. Purpose and structure of this document

Private law children proceedings include cases where the family courts are asked to make decisions about arrangements for a child, such as where they live or who they spend time with. Child Focused Courts represent significant reform to this process, replacing the previous Child Arrangements Programme with a new model designed to improve the quality and timeliness of information before the court so judges can make decisions earlier while prioritising the safety and wellbeing of the child.

In March 2026, the UK Government committed to the roll-out of Child Focused Courts across England and Wales over the next three years; this means that the model will be available in all court areas by March 2029.

This document is intended to establish a shared understanding of the system-wide ambition and aspiration for the future of private law proceedings, via Child Focused Courts, in England and Wales. The document is a recognition of the need to ensure consistency, transparency and accountability as partners across the family justice system collectively seek to deliver the Child Focused Model in additional court areas in England.

The Family Procedure Rules 2010 and supporting Practice Directions set out the legal procedural framework for family proceedings. Many of those Rules and Practice Directions continue to apply to cases operating under the Child Focused Model. Practice Direction 36Z identifies the types of cases the Child Focused Model applies to and incorporates Practice Direction 12B (Pilot), which sets out the legal procedural requirements of the Child Focused Model.

Those legal procedural requirements are reflected in this target operating model. In addition, this target operating model reflects learning from delivery in existing areas and brings together policy and design decisions with the reality of operational practice. Adherence to the principles and practice, as outlined in this target operating model, creates the conditions for successful delivery of the Child Focused Model and for achieving system-wide change.

The target operating model has been developed collaboratively by the Ministry of Justice working with delivery partners including His Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS), the judiciary, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru, Local Authorities, Police and Crime Commissioners and local domestic abuse support providers.

Chapter 2 provides the context for our target operating model, outlining what we hope to achieve through reform to private law proceedings and the changes being made. It also sets out some of the wider landscape - for example, Government commitments in relation to Violence Against Women and Girls, and how delivery aligns with other change programmes such as HMCTS digital reform.

Chapter 3 sets out key design principles, including an overview of how and why the model differs from the Child Arrangements Programme. This includes delivery assumptions and where flexibility in implementation may be appropriate. The chapter includes a detailed process map of the end-to-end journey under the Child Focused Model.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the roles and responsibilities across each delivery partner involved in delivering the Child Focused Model.

Chapter 5 sets out key delivery requirements and aims to distinguish between resource and capacity required for implementation of the model and ongoing requirements – including, for example, initial requirements for supporting infrastructure and training.

Chapter 6 outlines data and information requirements, including what is needed in order to understand the impact of Child Focused Courts both on children and families and on partners delivering the new model.

Chapter 7 includes a glossary and helpful links in relation to Child Focused Courts.

Having a clear and agreed target operating model is required to deliver Child Focused Courts to consistently high standards, in a financially sustainable way. The Child Focused Model represents significant change to private law proceedings and, together with partners, we recognise the need to learn, improve and potentially refine the model as it is nationally operationalised. As such, we expect that there will be further iterations of the target operating model.

While we have sought to use language that will be accessible to a wider audience, and to reflect the benefits we are seeking to achieve for children and families, this document is primarily aimed at those working within the family justice system.

2. The case for change

2.1 Learning from the evidence

There is an established body of evidence which is clear that we need to improve the experience and outcomes for children and families involved in private law proceedings.

In June 2020, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) published the report ‘Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases’¹ (the ‘Harm Panel report’), which demonstrated that the adversarial nature of proceedings in the family courts was retraumatising, and in some cases, re-victimising survivors of domestic abuse and failed to properly consider the voice of the child in proceedings, identifying “deep seated and systematic issues with how risk to both children and adults is identified and managed”. The Report was also critical of the length of proceedings, the ineffective use of court resources and the lack of coordinated multi-agency support, particularly for vulnerable groups including families where there were safeguarding risks.

Publication of the Harm Panel report followed a parallel judicial led cross-system Private Law Working Group report² in March 2020, which considered the implementation of the Child Arrangements Programme – noting it was not working as intended and identifying a number of challenges with implementation. Since then, reports from Women’s Aid³, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory⁴ and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner office⁵ have reinforced key messages from the Harm Panel.

Partners across the family justice system have welcomed these reports and are committed to reform in private law proceedings that:

- Moves away from an adversarial system to an investigative and problem-solving approach that promotes safety from harm.
- Improves the response to children and parents who have experienced domestic abuse, including the impact of coercive control and trauma.
- Centres and amplifies the voice of the child through meaningful and safe engagement and participation in proceedings.
- Promotes collaborative multi-agency working, with a shared focus on finding safe and sustainable solutions to improve children’s welfare and outcomes.

¹ [Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases](#)

² [PLWG Response to Consultation](#)

³ [The Family Justice Response to Domestic Abuse - The Report](#)

⁴ [Children’s experience of private law proceedings: six key messages from research](#)

⁵ [Everyday-Business-full-report-web.pdf](#)

Private Law Pathfinder Pilot

The Private Law Pathfinder Pilot was launched in Dorset and North Wales in February 2022 as a key element of the Ministry of Justice’s response to the Harm Panel Report. The pilot provided an opportunity for the family justice system to trial an improved approach to private law proceedings, replacing the Child Arrangements Programme, and implementing reforms committed to in response to the Harm Panel Report.

A process evaluation of the pilot⁶ found that, compared to the existing Child Arrangements Programme, participants recognised centring “the voice of the child” in proceedings as a key aspect of the delivery of the model. This included hearing and respecting children’s views much earlier in the proceedings and ensuring their views were more effectively reflected in decision making. Children in North Wales described their experience of the model and being listened to as a ‘relief’, with one child reporting that it felt like “a weight had been lifted”⁷.

Following the success of the pilot, the Government committed to national rollout of the model, now known as the Child Focused Model, across England and Wales. As implementation progresses, we are continuing to monitor delivery closely, identify opportunities for improvement, and ensure that the benefits evidenced through the pilot are realised consistently across all court areas. Chapter 6 sets out more detail on this process.

Wider policy landscape

The Child Focused Model is central to the family justice system’s contribution to the Government commitment to halve Violence Against Women and Girls. It is estimated that between 73% and 87% of private law proceedings involve domestic abuse⁸. The Child Focused Model introduces bespoke domestic abuse support with a specialist risk assessment and ongoing support to families who have experienced domestic abuse. This has been described by Dame Nicole Jacobs, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, as a “*vastly improved experience for victims*”⁹.

The Child Focused Model also supports the wider efforts to make court processes more efficient by streamlining the court process; prioritising early information gathering; moving from a two-stage social work process to a single Child Impact Report; minimising the need for multiple court hearings; and supporting an improved user journey through multi-agency working and better case progression.

The Child Focused Model supports earlier decision-making, with courts already delivering the model resolving cases up to twice as fast as the national average. In addition to

⁶ [Private Law Pathfinder Pilot: understanding the experience of children and families - GOV.UK](#)

⁷ [Children and young people’s experiences of participation in private proceedings in the family courts](#)

⁸ [Everyday-Business-full-report-web.pdf](#)

⁹ [Commissioner responds to the government’s evaluation of Pathfinder Family Court pilots | Domestic Abuse Commissioner](#)

system 'performance' metrics of hearings per case, case duration and outstanding caseload, we are seeing wider benefits from implementation once the Child Focused Model is in steady-state within a local area:

- effective multi-agency working with clear and coordinated local arrangements;
- frequent early resolution / conclusion at first hearing;
- increased number of children engaged by Cafcass/Cafcass Cymru;
- improved feedback from children and families;
- positive feedback on domestic abuse support services;
- reduction in returning cases.

The Child Focused Model is being delivered in a context of wider strategic reform and cross-system work to reduce demand and increase productivity. This includes work to support families to resolve their disputes without coming to court, where it is safe and appropriate to do so, and more broadly to support the earlier resolution of cases, for example through continued investment in the family mediation voucher scheme and through tightening the exceptions to Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting (MIAM) requirements. Whilst the Child Focused Model is delivering reform to private law proceedings, it aligns with improvement work in public law proceedings relating to children, through greater focus on investigative and problem-solving approaches, particularly as part of pre-proceedings work.

Parallel work being undertaken by delivery partners also aligns with the strategic aims of Child Focused Courts and is helping to underpin and embed the cultural change required for successful delivery. This work includes:

HMCTS Reform: Private law proceedings are to move to a digital platform to modernise user experience and drive efficiency (currently in four early adopter sites). National rollout of the digital case management service will be phased across all 140 family court locations between October 2026 and March 2027, subject to ongoing discussions with the President of the Family Division.

Judiciary: Along with system partners, the judiciary has been undertaking targeted work to address the longest running cases and reduce the backlog of private law work to create the conditions for successful implementation of the Child Focused Model. The President of the Family Division, Sir Stephen Cobb, has said of the aims of the Child Focused Model that 'reducing delay is not merely an administrative achievement: it is central to justice for children. If we can combine efficiency and humanity, we will not only improve the system but also its purpose'. The senior judiciary strongly support the Child Focused Model and see it as a transformative approach to private law proceedings, enabling informed, safe decisions without delay. This overlaps with other priorities for the judiciary which include transparency in the family courts and the commitment to wider cultural change in relation to the family courts' response to domestic abuse.

The Child Focused Model also complements wider judicial efforts to strengthen children's participation in family proceedings, including the President of the Family Division's "Writing

to Children – A Toolkit for Judges”¹⁰, developed in partnership with the Family Justice Young People’s Board. The toolkit supports judges in communicating decisions to children in a clear and accessible way, helping them to understand how decisions affecting their lives have been reached and to feel assured that their wishes and feelings have been carefully considered.

Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru: Both Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru have launched their respective ‘Domestic Abuse Practice Pathway’¹¹ and ‘Domestic Abuse Practice Guidance’¹² which seek to improve social work practice in relation to domestic abuse. Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru have also developed a suite of letters and supporting materials to enhance engagement with children and parents.

¹⁰ [Writing to Children – A Judges Toolkit 2026](#)

¹¹ [domestic-abuse-practice-pathway](#)

¹² [Domestic abuse practice guidance: Cafcass Cymru | GOV.WALES](#)

3. The Child Focused Model

3.1 Design principles

The Child Focused Model is centred on improving the experience and outcomes for children and families whilst delivering a streamlined and efficient multi-agency court process for private law proceedings. It responds directly to the principles set out in the Harm Panel which called for:

- a culture of safety from harm;
- an approach which is investigative and problem-solving;
- resources which are sufficient and used more productively; and
- a coordinated approach between different parts of the system.

The Harm Panel report also called for the needs of children, litigants in person, and those affected by domestic abuse and other serious safeguarding concerns to be central considerations, in addition to the design principles. These remain pivotal to reform in the model.

3.2 Key stages

The Child Focused Model follows a streamlined process designed to gather the right information at the earliest opportunity to understand both the needs of the child and any risks to their welfare to support safe decision-making. Broadly, the steps involved in the process are as follows:

- **Applicant makes application:** a parent or carer applies to the court to make a decision about arrangements for a child (under section 8 of the Children Act 1989) or to enforce an existing child arrangements order.
- **Court reviews the case:** initial gatekeeping identifies key issues and determines which social work agency (Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru or a Local Authority) should complete the Child Impact Report.
- **Child Impact Report prepared:** a holistic assessment of risk and need is undertaken through the completion of the Child Impact Report, bringing together safeguarding information, professional assessments, risk information and the views of those involved, including the child where appropriate. Where domestic abuse is raised as an issue in the case, a referral for support via an Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) can be made. The IDVA can provide practical and emotional support to the victim and expert insights into the risks of domestic abuse in the case.

- **Court considers the evidence:** the court reviews the Child Impact Report and any other relevant information to understand the child's circumstances and welfare needs.
- **Final decision made** – the court makes a decision based on the information presented to it, with the child's needs and welfare at the centre. The Child Focused Model aims to support agreement between parties where possible, and where judicial determination is required, to ensure the court has the information needed to make a safe and welfare focused decision, often without the need for more than one hearing.

A [process map](#) is available on gov.uk setting out the process in more detail. The map shows the end-to end journey of private law proceedings under the Child Focused Model, beginning with an application to the court through to informing the child about the final order. The map puts the whole process on one page and sets out the responsibilities of each agency involved throughout and the timelines for each stage.

3.4 Key design differences

The Child Focused Model has a number of key design differences compared to the Child Arrangements Programme. These are summarised in the table with subsequent detail of how the model works in practice.

Practice assumption	Practice under the Child Arrangements Programme (CAP)	Practice under the Child Focused Model
Information gathering and reports	Safeguarding Letter/Safeguarding Enquiries Report and Section 7 Report	'One report, one hearing' approach where possible: Child Impact Report, due up to 50 working days after the order has been made.
Responsible social work agency	The court will order a Safeguarding Letter/Safeguarding Enquiries Report from Cafcass/Cafcass Cymru. A Section 7 Report may be ordered from Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru or the local authority, where certain criteria are met.	Where a local authority has had specific involvement with the family within the previous 12 weeks, they will be ordered to complete the Child Impact Report (CIR). Where a local authority has not been involved Cafcass/Cafcass Cymru will be ordered to complete the CIR.
Proportion of children engaged by Cafcass / Cafcass Cymru during the court process	Average of 30-37%	Minimum of 65, anticipated up to 85%.

Referral to specialist domestic abuse risk assessment and support	No embedded referral pathway	Embedded referral pathway for Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) support and Domestic Abuse, Stalking and 'Honour'-based abuse (DASH) risk assessment.
Hearings	Multiple reports and multiple hearings	'One report, one hearing' approach where possible.

Voice of the child

When making a decision about a child's upbringing, the "welfare checklist" in section 1(3) of the Children Act 1989 sets out the requirement for the court to have particular regard to a list of factors, including the wishes and feelings of the child, considered in light of the child's age and understanding. To enable the 'voice of the child', there are several ways children can participate in proceedings following the Child Focused Model, if they wish to, including: engaging with an officer of the social worker agency during the preparation of Child Impact Report; being represented by a court-appointed Children's Guardian (where an appointment has been made under rule 16.4 Family Procedure Rules 2010); writing to or meeting the judge; and, in exceptional circumstances, giving evidence directly to the court.

Practice Direction 12B (Child Arrangements Programme) sets out that "Wherever possible, and where age appropriate, it is also expected that the child/children involved in a dispute will have their voices heard when decisions which impact them are being made," [PD12B paragraph 15]. Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru engage with 30 to 37% of children on average under CAP and this engagement takes place once a Section 7 report has been ordered as Cafcass/Cafcass Cymru are not permitted to contact the child before the First Hearing Dispute Resolution Appointment [PD12B paragraph 13.6]. In 2020, the Harm Panel found: "a large proportion of children have no direct involvement in the family court process, with parents or carers being relied upon to represent their views."

Under the Child Focused Model, as part of the information gathering process for the Child Impact Report (CIR), the responsible social work agency is expected to engage with the child, unless the child does not wish to express a view or it is not appropriate. Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru are therefore expected to engage with 65 to 85% of children, dependent on the needs and circumstances of the child. It is also envisaged that local authorities ordered to write the CIR will engage with 100% of children. This is because local authorities are ordered to write the CIR typically where the child is already known to them.

The expectation is that the social worker preparing the CIR will engage with the child, unless the child's age, understanding, or preferences means direct engagement is not appropriate. Where a child is pre-verbal, the social worker can observe them engaging with the parties.

There may be limited cases in which it is not appropriate to engage with the child, whether directly or indirectly. Reasons for not engaging with a child could include that there has been no change since previous and recent proceedings, or that engagement would be traumatising for the child. In such cases, the reason for not engaging with the child must be set out in the CIR [PD12B (Pilot) paragraph 13.1A].

Information gathering and reports

Cases under the Child Arrangements Programme (CAP) often involve at least two reports: a Safeguarding Letter or Safeguarding Enquiries Report written and submitted before the first hearing; and a Section 7 Report later in proceedings, if ordered by the court.

The Safeguarding Letter (in England) or Safeguarding Enquiries Report (in Wales) is a short report prepared by Cafcass or Cafcass Cymru before the first court hearing to identify any immediate safeguarding concerns and recommend next steps, such as further assessment through a Section 7 Report, a fact-finding hearing, or any interim contact arrangements.

A Section 7 Report is a detailed assessment prepared by Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru or a local authority when the court needs more information to decide what arrangements are in a child's best interests. It covers the child's circumstances, wishes and feelings, the ability of each parent or carer to meet the child's needs, safeguarding issues and any identified risks, and provides recommendations to the court.

In line with a 'one report, one hearing' approach, the Child Focused Model replaces the Safeguarding Letter/Safeguarding Enquiries Report and Section 7 Report with a comprehensive CIR prepared early in the process. This frontloads the information gathering and gives the court a full picture much earlier in the progression of the case. The CIR combines safeguarding checks, risk assessments (which may include a DASH risk assessment when domestic abuse is raised as an issue in the case), the child's wishes, feelings and circumstances, and the parents' or carers' views on the recommendations into a single report. This CIR is available to the judge or magistrate at the Safeguarding Gatekeeping Appointment and before any hearing which the parties attend.

Under the terms of this target operating model, the CIR is filed no later than 50 working days of the order being made, unless an extension is granted by the court. An extension may be granted, for example, where it serves a clear purpose in facilitating a more complete, safe or informed assessment of the child's circumstances and welfare, and where the benefits of additional assessment outweigh the impact of the delay on the child. It is expected that where agencies can complete the CIR in a shorter timeframe, they should do so as this will be safe, appropriate and realistic for some cases.

The Child Focused Model places a strong emphasis on engaging all parties in proceedings to ensure that assessments are informed by a full understanding of the child's circumstances. The social work agency responsible for completing the CIR (see below) will need to make reasonable and proportionate efforts to secure participation, recognising that individuals may engage in different ways. Where engagement cannot be achieved,

decisions about whether and how a case can progress will be guided by the child's welfare, the availability of sufficient information to undertake a robust assessment, and any safeguarding concerns that may require the court's attention.

Responsible social work agency

Under CAP, the court orders Cafcass or Cafcass Cymru to submit a Safeguarding Letter/Safeguarding Enquiries Report to the court within 17 or 20 working days, respectively [PD12B paragraph 22.3].

A Section 7 Report may be ordered where there are welfare issues or other specific considerations. This can be ordered to be prepared by Cafcass or Cafcass Cymru, or a local authority. In practice, the court will usually order the local authority to complete the Section 7 Report if: the child is the subject of an open and active statutory social work case with the local authority; or, in the 12 weeks before the Section 7 is ordered, there has been a statutory social work assessment of the child's welfare or the child has been the subject of a child in need or child protection plan.

In the Child Focused Model, if the child's case is open to the local authority – or has been within the past 12 weeks (through an open and active statutory social work case, assessment under Sections 17 or 47 of the Children Act 1989, or a Child in Need or Child Protection Plan with the Trust or Local Authority), then the local authority may be responsible for completing the CIR. This aids continuity and avoids duplication for children and families, as the local authority already holds relevant information and has recent involvement with the child and family. The aim is to avoid re-traumatising children and families as a result of having to repeatedly share their stories and experiences with new professionals when they have already established a relationship with social workers.

The court makes the decision about which social work agency should be responsible for writing the CIR. In England, at the initial gatekeeping, the court will send a proforma to the local authority to establish whether the criteria are met for the local authority to write the CIR. In Wales, the court orders Cafcass Cymru to lead on the CIR, who will then liaise with the local authority and informs the court that the case has been transferred if the criteria are met for the local authority to write the CIR.

Referral to specialist domestic abuse risk assessment and support

In response to the Harm Panel's recommendation for enhanced risk assessment processes and improved multi-agency collaboration, the Child Focused Model embeds a referral pathway to domestic abuse support services and a referral can be made (with the parties' consent) when domestic abuse is raised as an issue in a case. Referrals to domestic abuse support services are not contingent on gender. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 makes clear that children who see, hear or experience the effects of domestic abuse are victims in their own right. Provision of specialist support for child victims of domestic abuse is currently limited but can be offered under the Child Focused Model and is something that we are continuing to explore. Where counter allegations of domestic abuse

are made within a case, both parties can be referred to the IDVA service for assessment and/or support.

The Ministry of Justice provides funding to Police and Crime Commissioners to commission local, specialist services to conduct a Domestic Abuse Stalking and 'Honour'-Based Violence (DASH) risk assessment and to provide support to victims of domestic abuse.

Where domestic abuse is raised as an issue in the case, the IDVA may share the DASH with the social work agency to inform the writing of the CIR and the social worker's recommendations for the court about what is safe and in the child's best interest. The IDVA may also share a summary of their professional judgement (informed by the DASH and other risk assessment tools and agreed to by the victim) which is appended to the CIR. The summary will therefore be seen by the court and the parties unless there are concerns that disclosure may be inappropriate or unsafe.

Hearings

Cases under CAP typically have a First Hearing Dispute Resolution Appointment (FHDRA), following the submission of a Safeguarding Letter/Safeguarding Enquiries Report. If a Section 7 Report is ordered, the case will be listed for a Dispute Resolution Appointment (DRA). Other hearings may be held during the course of proceedings, including case management hearings, Fact-Finding Hearings (FFHs), and a Final Hearing.

Most cases under the Child Focused Model should require only one hearing – a Decision Hearing. If the court considers it appropriate, a case could be concluded by the making of a final order at the Safeguarding Gatekeeping Appointment, without an attended hearing. This could occur because the frontloaded information gathering and assessment stage has resulted in a holistic CIR which provides the court with the information and recommendations required to make an appropriate and safe order (decision), particularly if the parties consent to an order being made. Where the court makes a decision without an attended hearing, the parties have the right to ask the court to reconsider the decision, usually within seven days of the order being served.

Where there are outstanding issues which require further information or discussion with the parties or professionals involved in the case, a Decision Hearing can often resolve the case. Where this is not possible, additional hearings should be listed by exception, for example in following the urgent case process, or where there is a requirement for a Fact-Finding Hearing, or contested applications for permanent removal from the jurisdiction.

At the Decision Hearing, the court will – informed by the contents of the CIR – investigate the issues in the case with the parties and encourage them to focus on the child's best interests. If, despite the court's assistance, the parties are unable to reach agreement, the court will – where appropriate and safe to do so – resolve the issues in dispute and conclude the proceedings by making a final order(s).

Fact-Finding Hearings remain an important safeguard under the Child Focused Model. When reviewing the CIR, the court will consider whether findings of fact are necessary and proportionate, identify the specific issues requiring determination, and decide the scope and format of any fact-finding process. In cases involving allegations of domestic abuse, the court will consider whether findings are necessary to establish a factual basis for assessing risks and making decisions about the child's welfare (in line with Practice Direction 12J). While the Child Focused Model's holistic information gathering may help identify and narrow disputed issues at an earlier stage, hearings to determine disputed facts will continue to be used where required to support safe and informed decision-making.

Holding fewer hearings can reduce delays, lengthy adjournments, and the overall duration of proceedings, meaning children and families have a resolution much sooner. It can also allow victims of domestic abuse to avoid having a potentially re-traumatising experience by attending court. Holding fewer hearings also ensures court resources are being used efficiently.

4. Partnership working

4.1 Overview of multi-agency approach

The Child Focused Model was designed in collaboration with multi-agency delivery partners – including the judiciary, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru, HMCTS and Local Authorities. Stakeholders with a particular interest in the family justice system – including academics, legal practitioners and representatives from the domestic abuse sector were also involved in the initial design of the Child Focused Model and continue to provide feedback from their networks which has proved valuable in understanding how the model is operating in practice.

Beyond design, the Child Focused Model itself is reliant on establishing effective local cross-system working arrangements which are central to delivery in a number of ways:

- HMCTS and the judiciary work together in gatekeeping processes.
- Allocation of the preparation of the CIR to the correct social work agency is reliant on timely response to initial enquiries of the relevant Local Authority by HMCTS in England or by Cafcass Cymru in Wales.
- The agency responsible for the Child Impact Report will liaise with local police forces as required for police checks.
- Identification of domestic abuse enables referral to embedded local domestic abuse support services.
- The social work agency responsible for producing the CIR will consider all relevant information from partners in assessing risk and in making recommendations to the court in the CIR. This may include information from police, schools, health professionals and other local services in addition to any assessment from local domestic abuse providers following referral.
- The social work agency responsible for preparing the CIR will engage with the child, where appropriate, and ensure that the child's views, together with the parents' or carer's views on the recommendations, are reflected in the report.

4.2 Key roles and responsibilities:

HMCTS

HMCTS helps to ensure children and families experience a timely, well-managed court process by coordinating case progression and supporting multi-agency working. Specifically, the Child Focused Model impacts HMCTS operations in the family court across a number of different roles:

Justices' Legal Advisers – Justices' Legal Advisers are involved in gatekeeping, order drafting, box work and query management, and court attendance (with and without magistrates). The Child Focused Model requires a heightened level of preparation before court due to the length of the CIR and a focus on conciliation-style problem solving. Court hearings are listed for longer times, but there are fewer of them.

The Safeguarding Gatekeeping Appointments are more time-consuming than gatekeeping under the previous model. Justices' Legal Advisers support gatekeeping and allocation decisions, while the allocated judge determines next steps.

Administrative and delivery staff – staff are responsible for processing applications, fee handling, query management, judicial liaison, administering listing, court clerking, implementing special measures, instructing intermediaries/interpreters, creating bundles, correspondence, processing and drafting court orders. The streamlined court process requires enhanced case progression functions to ensure involved parties and professional agencies are aware of filing timelines, hearing dates. This includes:

- sending pro-forma to Local Authorities to determine their involvement at the outset of the case (practice in England), and allowing the gatekeeper to decide early on which agency should be responsible for the CIR;
- contacting litigants in person by telephone within 5-10 working days of service of the application to acknowledge receipt of the application, check their understanding of the papers, outline the court process, establish any special measures or reasonable adjustments required for court attendance;
- if at any point an immediate risk is identified in a case where Cafcass/ Cafcass Cymru is preparing the CIR, notifying the judge that a risk assessment under section 16A of the Children Act 1989 will be filed for their review;
- actively monitoring the filing of CIRs; and
- processing requests for CIR extension / transfer requests.

Wider impacts of the Child Focused Model on HMCTS include those resulting from the key differences between the model and the Child Arrangements Programme. Under the Child Focused Model, there is an enhanced focus on timeliness, meaning work must be processed quickly and efficiently, including drafting court orders and listing matters for hearings.

Team Leaders and Delivery Managers are expected to be single points of contact for Cafcass/Cymru and Local Authority for any delivery risk or issue escalations. Multi-agency working is supported by attendance at Local Implementation Group meetings and later, business as usual regular meetings.

Service support – there is a new team within the wider Family Service Team to oversee delivery of the Child Focused Model. The team is responsible for ensuring the Child Focused Model is delivered in keeping with the ethos, acting as an escalation point, stakeholder management, and integrating the model with wider Private Law initiatives.

Judiciary and magistracy

Judges and magistrates make decisions about children's welfare. We know from delivery in the existing sites that the Child Focused Model requires judges to adapt their way of working, with the overall aim that safe decisions will be made without delay. Expectations under the Child Focused Model include the below.

- Adopting a trauma-informed approach to domestic abuse and seeking to understand how the arrangements sought will impact the child.
- Where appropriate, determining cases at Safeguarding Gatekeeping based on the content of the Child Impact Report. In these circumstances an order may be made without a single attended hearing.
- Recognising that the Child Impact Report provides a complete, holistic view of the impact on the child of the order being sought. A CIR should include views of parties and (where appropriate) the child, and as such, the attendance of Cafcass/Cafcass Cymru and local authority social workers at a hearing will not be routine.
- Problem solving and judge-led conciliation approach may be adopted where safe to do so at the decision hearing, with the aim that issues are narrowed and safe agreement is reached between parties, wherever possible.
- Openness to consider participation of child or young person in broad terms – this could include speaking to or meeting with the child, or writing to the child, and consideration of how the child is to be informed of the outcome.

As a result of the 'one report, one hearing' approach, cases require less judicial resource in a typical case under the Child Focused Model. While some of the released capacity may be required to accommodate the current increase in case volumes, the balance will be directed to other areas of the family jurisdiction where it can be used to improve efficiency and performance.

Cafcass / Cafcass Cymru

Where they are leading on the preparation of the CIR, Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru are responsible for providing independent, child focused assessment and advice to the court and for ensuring that the child's welfare, safety and lived experience are central to decision-making within the Child Focused Model. This includes promoting meaningful child participation for all children who would benefit from this, engaging directly with children and families at the earliest appropriate point, undertaking appropriate enquiries, identifying risk and protective factors, and setting out clear analysis and recommendations through the CIR.

The Child Focused Model presents a significantly different way of working for both Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru. It moves assessment from a two-stage process (a safeguarding letter and Section 7 report) to a single CIR. Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru may make onward

referral to specialist services where domestic abuse has been raised as an issue, either within the application or as part of the assessment undertaken in preparing the CIR. Compared with the Child Arrangements Programme, the timeline for the social work assessment, in the form of the CIR, is condensed – requiring filing within the time period set out within the court order, unless there is a purposeful extension.

In delivering their responsibilities, Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru operate within wider organisational requirements, including relevant statutory duties, safeguarding responsibilities, information governance requirements, professional standards, practice guidance and national operating procedures. Local implementation arrangements should align with agreed governance, escalation and de-escalation routes, contingency protocols, recording expectations and performance monitoring frameworks to support consistent, safe and timely delivery.

Effective delivery of the Child Focused Model also requires clear protocols and working arrangements with key partners, including local authorities, police, domestic abuse services and other specialist providers. These arrangements should support good outcomes for children through timely safeguarding checks, appropriate information sharing, early identification of domestic abuse and other risk factors, and access to targeted interventions where required. Partner arrangements should be underpinned by agreed points of contact, referral pathways, response timescales, escalation routes and mechanisms for resolving operational issues.

Quality assurance and management oversight arrangements exist within Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru to provide confidence that practice for children is safe, consistent and aligned to the aims of the model. This includes management oversight of case progression, review of the quality and timeliness of Child Impact Reports, assurance of safeguarding and domestic abuse practice, monitoring of compliance with agreed timescales, and oversight of any local issues affecting delivery. Themes from quality assurance activity are used to inform practice improvement, learning and development, and wider programme assurance.

Local Authorities

In cases where the local authority is already engaging with the children and families, the local authority will lead on engagement and provide advice to the court. We know that under the Child Focused Model, local authorities are completing more CIRs than they were completing Section 7 Reports under CAP. Local authorities in existing delivery areas for the Child Focused Model have reported that increased involvement at the early stage of proceedings is leading to a reduction in the number of reports being requested under section 37 Children Act 1989. This represents a shift in the profile of work for local authority teams and requires additional training and upskilling in private law proceedings generally, as well as in the Child Focused Model specifically.

Local authorities ordered to complete CIRs should do so on a template that is almost identical to the Cafcass/Cafcass Cymru templates (additional fields are available for prior

engagement with family and any considerations under section 37 Children Act 1989). As with Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru, local authorities are expected to engage with the child or young person at an early stage, complete the CIR within the time period set out within the court order, request relevant police checks, and make referrals to commissioned specialist support services where domestic abuse has been identified. This ensures that the experience of the Child Focused Model is consistent for children and families, whether their CIR is being completed by Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru or a local authority.

Court attendance

Under the Child Focused Model, the relevant officers of the social work agency will attend hearings by direction. When attendance is directed, it should be on the basis that they are required to give evidence to assist with decision-making. Where the relevant social worker considers that their attendance at a hearing is likely to be in a child's best interest, they can request the Court's permission to do so. Court attendance will typically be in-person, but it can be remote via video link, in which case it will be agreed with the court in advance of the hearing taking place.

Domestic abuse support services

Specialist domestic abuse support services are a core element of private law proceedings introduced under the Child Focused Model and were not funded or embedded in the same way under the Child Arrangements Programme. The responsibility of the domestic abuse support services within the model is two-fold:

- (1) Provide a specialist assessment of risk in relation to domestic abuse
- (2) Provide support to the victim-survivor, including if requested and where feasible, in-court at a hearing.

It is expected that local providers of specialist domestic abuse support will work closely with the social work agency responsible for completing the Child Impact Report. A professional assessment and summary of risk and impact, agreed with the victim-survivor, will be provided by the IDVA to the CIR author to inform their wider social work assessment and the summary will be appended to the CIR itself. Where there are counter-allegations, an additional assessment is also provided by the IDVA supporting the other party. In order for input from the domestic abuse support service to be properly considered in the social work assessment, analysis, and recommendations to the court, it is expected, that these will be provided to the relevant social work agency in a timely manner. Ideally, the assessment and summary of risk and impact should be shared with the CIR author within 10 to 12 working days, or up to 15 working days for cases involving counter allegations.

IDVA providers under the Child Focused Model are specialists and often work closely with wider community support services and organisations and may signpost to these services for additional or ongoing support.

Legal practitioners

Legal practitioners provide advice and representation to parties under the Child Focused Model, whether self-funded by the party or under legal aid arrangements. Their role remains important in giving legal advice and supporting parties to understand the process, consider their options, and cooperate with the court. Legal practitioners provide a valuable service in helping the parties navigate complex cases.

We do not expect the use of the Child Focused Model to directly increase or impact the overall number of Child Arrangements cases entering the system. However, it may alter the typical involvement of legal representatives, reflecting the potential earlier resolution of issues, the possibility of orders being made without a hearing where appropriate, and a reduction in the number and duration of hearings.

Legal Aid

Legal aid is available for child arrangement proceedings using the Child Focused Model if an individual is a victim of domestic abuse or at risk of being abused, or if the child who is the subject of the order is a victim of child abuse or at risk of abuse. Funding is subject to providing the required evidence of domestic abuse or child abuse and passing the means and merits tests. Legal aid may also be in scope for proceedings using the Child Focused Model in cases of unlawful removal of children from the UK, subject to passing the means and merits tests.

To conduct legal aid work, practitioners must hold a family legal aid contract with the Legal Aid Agency. At the outset of the matter, the legal aid provider will need to submit an application to the Legal Aid Agency for a certificate to request a grant of legal aid for the client for the matter up to the level of Family Help (Higher). A further decision to grant Legal Representation will then be required should the matter proceed to a Decision Hearing.

In response to feedback received during the pilot stage, the decision to grant Legal Representation has been delegated to legal aid practitioners on an interim basis to ensure that the timeline for making a decision does not become a barrier to accessing legal aid. This will apply exclusively to Child Focused Model cases where a certificate has already been granted up to Family Help (Higher). Responsibility for deciding whether to grant legal representation will rest with the legal aid practitioner under delegated authority. Where they consider it necessary to seek a decision from the Legal Aid Agency, this should be done through the usual process. Work is ongoing to determine the most appropriate long-term solution.

5. Delivery requirements

Delivery of the Child Focused Model requires three phases: preparation, implementation and transition to steady-state. For some parts of the system, the end-state model requires fewer resources than under CAP. However, the Child Focused Model introduces new requirements to the system, including new costs, notably the introduction of the specialist domestic abuse support services. Findings from the early process evaluation indicated that whole-system costs to deliver the Child Focused Model are broadly in line with costs under CAP; however, there is a recognition that the profile of resources and associated costs across different system partners has shifted. This includes, for example, efficiencies from reduced court and judicial time per case, but increased social work resource required to engage with more children. Set out below is what we have learnt about capacity, infrastructure and training requirements to deliver the Child Focused Model.

5.1 Capacity

Preparation and implementation

During preparation and implementation, additional capacity is required to effectively deliver transformation and temporarily “double run” private law proceedings. Double running refers to the period after go-live where the system is managing cases received prior to go-live under the CAP alongside new cases under the Child Focused Model. The faster timelines of the Child Focused Model cause a peak in workload as the expected dates for report filing and listing hearings of both models overlap temporarily. To manage this period, the outstanding “legacy” CAP caseload is reduced as far as possible ahead of go-live, in the way outlined below.

In HMCTS a Local Implementation Manager (LIM) is put in place approximately 6 months before go-live to coordinate implementation of the Child Focused Model. In addition, temporary administrative resource is usually funded before go-live to support the reduction of legacy caseload. At go-live, additional Justices’ Legal Adviser resource is funded to undertake gatekeeping and support hearings during the double running period. The exact resource funded within an area will be dependent on the outstanding caseload relative to receipts alongside broader readiness criteria. Family court areas in a strong position will require significantly less funding. All temporary HMCTS capacity should end 12-months after go-live.

Temporary capacity in Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru beyond the permanent uplift is funded to manage the double running period. This will include Family Court Advisers and other relevant roles. This resource will start a few months ahead of go-live and should operate until 12-months after go-live.

Steady-state

Relative to the CAP, steady-state operation of Child Focused Model requires increased capacity for Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru alongside a new requirement for domestic abuse support services.

Under the Child Focused Model almost every case will require the preparation of a CIR. While in some cases the CIR will be completed by the local authority, overall this still amounts to more work for Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru than the associated work under the CAP where a lower proportion of cases required a Section 7 report. There are also a greater number of children engaged during proceedings compared to the CAP. Therefore, the Child Focused Model requires a permanent increase in the funding for Family Court Advisers and other relevant roles in Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru. The size of the permanent increase will vary across family court areas depending on relevant private law receipts, the proportion of cases that previously required a Section 7 report and any significant change in the proportion of cases allocated to local authorities.

Specialist domestic abuse services are introduced under the Child Focused Model. These services deliver both professional risk assessment and support for victims who consent to a referral. The services are most often delivered in line with the existing footprint of domestic abuse services as smaller localised services. These services are sometimes members of larger organisations which share resources and professional standards. Domestic abuse services require qualified accredited IDVAs, management capacity to oversee the service, and training as required to deliver the model. The local funding for domestic abuse services will depend on relevant private law receipts and the rate at which referrals are made to service. The funding for domestic abuse services within Child Focused Courts is provided by the Ministry of Justice and is a permanent requirement of the model.

There is no additional permanent capacity requirement for HMCTS under the Child Focused Model. The model introduces a case progression call to unrepresented parties to explain the court process; this is performed by the administrative team. There is also a reduction in the number of hearings per case and an associated reduction in the work required to list, prepare for, and hold those hearings. These changes have a neutral impact on capacity required by HMCTS. For the judiciary, the reduced number of hearings means a net reduction in judicial capacity required by the Child Focused Model.

Overall, when including broader efficiencies from reduced hearings and shorter case durations, the total capacity required to deliver the Child Focused Model in steady-state is similar to the capacity required to deliver CAP. The profile shifts to require more social worker capacity as well as specialist domestic support, while less judicial capacity is required.

5.2 Supporting infrastructure

Effective implementation and delivery of the Child Focused Model requires infrastructure to support the principle of multi-agency working and new processes within the model. During implementation, the Local Implementation Group (LIG) is established. This is a forum for all partners involved with the delivery of the model. The LIG allows for the co-ordination of implementation activity and the escalation of risks and issues. The LIG will be formed approximately 6-months before go-live and will continue to operate post go-live until the court area transitions to steady-state. There are several factors that are considered by the programme before an area is agreed to be ready to transition to steady-state, including the reduction of outstanding legacy Child Arrangement Programme cases, and performance data demonstrating that the area can confidently manage demand within its permanent resource allocation. Decisions on readiness to launch and on readiness to transition to steady state are taken by the national cross-system Programme Board, on the recommendation of a supporting Operational Readiness Board where the local assessment of readiness, and any risks, is considered in detail.

The Child Focused Model is primarily delivered through existing digital infrastructure. Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru have made some changes to their case management systems to support new processes under the model. The Child Focused Model will be supported by the ongoing rollout of the HMCTS Private Law digital service. The digital platform will provide a more accessible and transparent experience for children, families and professionals by enabling applications, evidence and case management activities to be completed online. Users will benefit from clearer guidance, timely notifications and improved visibility of case progress, helping them better understand and engage with the court process. Enhanced digital case management and information sharing will also support more effective multi-agency working, reduce duplication and delays, and ensure decision makers have access to the information required to make timely, child-focused decisions.

5.3 Knowledge and training

The Child Focused Model represents a significant shift in practice for all partners and requires a coordinated and sustained approach to knowledge building and training. During implementation, training is delivered locally with national support and coordination provided as part of the approach to rollout. Each area implementing the Child Focused Model will have a partnership day where practitioners from all agencies attend in-person for multi-agency for training and engagement on the principles and end-to-end process of the model.

Individual agencies will also deliver role-specific training. This training is delivered both nationally and locally. The Judicial College have introduced Child Focused Model material into their national training offer. Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru will take a strategic approach to workforce training across England and Wales. Local authority social workers, Justices'

Legal Advisers, Magistrates, and administrative teams, will be trained locally as part of preparation and implementation activities.

6. Information and data requirements

The evidence and data gaps regarding the process and outcomes of private law proceedings are widely known. The reports published by the Harm Panel, Domestic Abuse Commissioner¹³, National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee¹⁴ all set out system-wide challenges, including the inability to follow a child's journey through the family justice system from end-to-end and to understand the experience and impact of decisions made in family courts on children and families.

In line with the recommendations set out in these sources, we are committed to understanding and demonstrating the impact of Child Focused Courts on the experience and outcomes of children and families.

This chapter sets out the current data and evidence base, the plans being developed to improve this, and how this should look in the end-state for Child Focused Courts.

To address data challenges across the family justice system more broadly, the MoJ has established a new Data Sub-Group reporting to the Family Justice Board. This Sub-Group brings together senior leaders from relevant government departments and agencies to oversee the development and implementation of an ambitious family justice data strategy.

6.1 Current evidence

The current evidence available to assess delivery of Child Focused Courts against the strategic objectives of the programme is limited. In terms of process and outcomes for children and families, feedback to individual agencies has been broadly positive. Children are engaged in a much higher number of cases and small-scale research commissioned in 2023 by Cafcass Cymru¹⁵ found children felt they were listened to during proceedings, and that the majority were happy with the outcome of their case. However, this area requires significant further work to achieve a comprehensive understanding.

The quantitative data available comes directly from HMCTS, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru and IDVA providers. The HMCTS data is limited by the management information available and is not fully integrated with data from other partners. Performance data is reviewed regularly within a cross-system working group which meets regularly to oversee progress and address any issues. The Family Justice Board has introduced separate timeliness targets for cases managed under Child Focused Courts and the Child Arrangement Programme, with an expectation that 80% of Child Focused Courts cases conclude within 26 weeks. Progress against these targets is monitored and reported regularly using HMCTS

¹³ [DAC Family-Court-Report- 2023 Digital.pdf](#)

¹⁴ [Improving family court services for children](#)

¹⁵ [Children and young people's experiences of participation in private proceedings in the family courts](#)

management information. Available data demonstrates that Child Focused Courts are delivering efficiency in terms of reduced case duration and lower levels of outstanding cases.

The latest publication of Child Focused Courts ad hoc management information covers case duration and caseload in areas launched up until Mid and West Wales and West Yorkshire, which started the Child Focused Model in 2025. The publication of [this data](#) can be found on gov.uk. We anticipate this will be the final ad hoc publication and future data reporting on Child Focused Courts will be covered through regular reporting from His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service.

Findings from the Pathfinder pilot process evaluation showed the number of private law hearings per case falls from 5 to between 1.3 - 1.4 and disposal rates improve under the Child Focused Model. This has been used alongside the best evidence currently available to inform the resourcing assumptions set out in Chapters 4 and 5. Further evidence is required to understanding the potential system wide savings associated with the Child Focused Model including judicial time, Public Law and Legal Aid.

6.2 Research, learning and monitoring strategy

To ensure we can take appropriate and timely action based on outputs we will have research, learning and monitoring strategy in place. The strategy is focused on improving our qualitative and quantitative data collection, conducting and acting on fast paced practice learning, and commissioning external research. This work will take place in parallel with further expansion of the model.

We have committed £500,000 to support the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office to lead a 'phase two' of the Family Court Review and Reporting Mechanism. This follows on from findings set out the first phase Report titled "Everyday Business" and will consider three Child Focused Court areas, through a mixed methods project to explore experience and outcomes for adult and child victim of domestic abuse. This underpins the research strand and is anticipated to be delivered in 2028.

Practice learning is embedded within the programme to ensure a cross-agency approach to gathering, analysing and applying learning as the model expands into additional court areas. The themes and issues to be explored through the learning strand of the strategy will be determined through emerging insight, practice questions and through commissions from programme governance – some of the first themes being explored include engagement with children and returning cases.

The rollout of Child Focused Courts represents a significant opportunity to improve the data in the family justice system. Under the monitoring strand we will use data from all partners to drive deeper insight into experiences for children and families, improve operational management and efficiency, as well as responding to public and parliamentary interest.

6.3 End-state information and improvement

While the research, learning and monitoring strategy will improve understanding of the model in parallel with expansion, it is vital that monitoring and improvement are embedded in the end-state operation of Child Focused Courts beyond the lifespan of the programme.

The mechanism and responsibilities to achieve this will be further established for the final TOM and beyond as elements of the research, learning, and monitoring strategy are completed. Local cross-system forums will play a key role in ensuring best-practice and continuous improvement for Child Focused Courts.

7. Annexes:

7.1 Glossary

C100	Application form that is used to make an application for a Child Arrangements Order, Prohibited Steps or Specific Issue Order under S.8 Children Act 1989.
C79	Application form that is used to make an application to Enforce a Child Arrangements Order, Prohibited Steps or Specific Issue Order.
C1A	Application form that is used to raise concerns to the court regarding domestic abuse and other types of harm. Is it usually filed alongside a C100 and can be used to respond to allegations made by the other party. The purpose is to make sure the court knows about any safeguarding concerns as early as possible.
C2	Application form that is used to request the court to respond to an issue whilst the case is ongoing. This could be used, for example, to ask the court for an urgent hearing or requesting contact arrangements are changed before the final hearing.
CAP	Child Arrangements Programme: the framework used by the family courts in England and Wales for resolving disputes between separated parents or family members about a child's living and contact arrangements. This is the framework that the Child Focused Model replaces.
Cafcass	Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service: Cafcass advises the family courts about the welfare of children and what is in their best interests.
CIR	Child Impact Report: undertaken by Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru or Local Authority, the report combines safeguarding checks, risk assessments (including a DASH risk assessment when domestic abuse is a feature of the case), the child's wishes and feelings, and the parents' or carers' views on the recommendations into a single report.
DASH	Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment and 'Honour'-Based Abuse assessment. This a risk assessment that helps practitioners identify and understand the risk that victims of domestic abuse are facing.

FCA	Cafcass - Family Court Adviser: qualified social workers who advise the family courts in cases involving children.
Gatekeepers	Legal advisers and judges making case management decisions.
IDVA	Independent Domestic Violence Adviser: a specialist domestic abuse support worker that delivers victim-centred, emotional and practical support to victims of domestic abuse. Under the Child Focused Model, the IDVA also undertakes a risk assessment and provides the court with expert insights into the risks of domestic abuse in the case.
Legacy or CAP (cases)	Child Arrangements Programme cases that have not been resolved prior to Child Focused Model implementation.
Party	A party is someone who is formally involved in the court process. This could be a parent or other people with parental responsibilities, e.g. adoptive parents.
Special Measures	Provisions to assist vulnerable parties during court proceedings such as screens, separate entrances and exits to the court building, separate waiting areas, participation by video link or assistance from an intermediary.

7.2 Links

[Child Focused Court end-to-end process map](#)

[Child Focused Court Delivery Update](#)

Family Justice Young People Board website: <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/children-and-young-people/family-justice-young-peoples-board>

Cafcass website: <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk>

Cafcass Cymru website: <https://www.gov.wales/cafcass-cymru>

Find out more about legal aid: <https://www.gov.uk/legal-aid>