

# Ofsted's inspection of Cafcass: Coventry, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and the National Business Centre service area

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Cafcass Coventry, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and the National Business Centre service area provides services to children and families in Coventry, Northamptonshire, and Warwickshire. In addition, the office site includes the Cafcass National Business Centre and this facility was also inspected and evaluated in accordance with relevant sections of the Ofsted evaluation schedule for Cafcass.

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## Introduction

1. Ofsted carried out the inspection of service provision by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service in the Coventry, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire service area and the National Business Centre in the week commencing 14 November 2011.
2. Cafcass consists of a national office in London and 17 areas. The Head of Service is the senior manager in each service area and is accountable to the sector's Operational Director. The operational directors are directly accountable to the Cafcass Chief Executive.
3. The Cafcass Coventry, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire service area provides services to children and families in the local authority areas of Coventry, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. The National Business Centre provides an initial screening service for all new private law applications for the whole of England and is based in the Coventry office. The Operational Director has been in post since 2009 and the Head of Service has been in the current post since April 2011.
4. The professional staff that provide the social work service to children and young people subject to private and public law proceedings are based in Coventry. Four operational service managers manage service delivery, supported by 32 family court advisers, three family support workers, an office manager and four administrators.
5. During the fieldwork, inspectors examined an extensive range of documentation and held meetings or telephone conversations with the judiciary, local authorities and interest groups. Interviews or discussions were held with the Operational Director, the Head of Service, the senior Human Resources Manager, the NBC Business Manager, the NBC Enhanced Office Manager, NBC Business Support Staff, the Customer Services Manager, a commissioning and partnership manager, family court advisers, family support workers and the service managers. Inspectors evaluated private and public law reports, case files, complaints records and human resources files and observed Cafcass practice with children and families using the service.

## Overall effectiveness

### Grade 3 (satisfactory)

6. The overall effectiveness of the Cafcass Coventry, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire service area is satisfactory. Children, young people and their families are receiving a timely service and the service area is meeting its statutory functions.
7. The area's own evaluation of its strengths and areas for development is accurate. Managers operate in accordance with a single vision and shared

objectives. Effective action has been taken to reduce sickness absence, and resources are focused on improving the quality of services.

8. Safeguarding is satisfactory and the service provides effective advocacy for the majority of children and young people. Performance management arrangements are satisfactory, although appraisals are insufficiently focused on future planning for staff members.

## Capacity for improvement

### Grade 3 (satisfactory)

9. Capacity for improvement is satisfactory. The Head of Service and her management team have a clear vision as to how to achieve their objectives and this is well communicated to staff. Each Service Manager takes responsibility for particular areas of work such as safeguarding and partnership working, but it is too early to see the impact of this arrangement on the quality of services.
10. The Head of Service and the Service Managers have an appropriate and realistic appreciation of the area's strengths and weaknesses, supported by an internal health check undertaken by the Cafcass National Improvement Service in November 2011. As a result, they have identified realistic but robust priorities for service improvements. They have a clear awareness of the need to manage change in a sensitive yet vigorous manner.
11. Managers have appraised the learning and needs of the staff group. A wide range of learning opportunities are provided, including dedicated days on specific topics where deficits in knowledge or skills have been identified, for example succinct and analytical report writing and proportionate working and planning.
12. Business planning and an Area Improvement Plan support the implementation of the area's objectives.
13. The management team has taken effective and appropriate action to address issues of performance and sickness absence, and staffing resources are in the process of being increased. Supervision and appraisal processes are in place, but their quality is too variable.
14. Performance in respect of key performance indicators has improved from a low base, and this improvement has been maintained since April 2011.
15. Financial planning is effective in enabling the delivery of cost-effective services. The use of agency staff is carefully monitored and utilised to ensure an efficient use of resources.

## Areas for improvement

16. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for children and young people in Cafcass Coventry, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire, the service area should take the following action.

### Within three months

- Use information on the individual and diverse needs of service users to inform assessments and recommendations.
- Establish a system to monitor the ethnicity and diversity of complainants.
- Ensure that all cases are substantially allocated to a practitioner.
- Ensure that public law cases subject to a position statement clearly focus on the child's welfare when agreeing to the local authority's plan.
- Improve the quality and consistency of case recording.

### Within six months

- Develop links and a closer working relationship with local voluntary sector organisations particularly those supporting victims of domestic abuse and working with fathers.
- Improve diversity monitoring and use the information obtained to inform service planning and design.
- Ensure that the service area learns from all expressions of concern or complaints from service users.

## Meeting the needs of service users

### Ambition and prioritisation

#### Grade 2 (good)

17. Ambition and prioritisation are good. The Coventry, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire Cafcass service area has existed in its current form since April 2011 when, as part of an internal re-organisation, the teams were relocated into the National Business Centre and services for Leicestershire were transferred to another service area.
18. The business plan clearly identifies the key areas for improvement. The priorities are appropriate and are accompanied by clear outcome measures which are regularly reviewed in management team meetings. Priorities include making better use of supervision to improve the quality of practice, ensuring that safeguarding responsibilities are understood and acted upon, and working effectively with the judiciary, particularly with regard to early intervention processes in private law. The business plan is risk-assessed and is reviewed every three months. Many of the actions have been achieved or are in progress

and for those that are not on target, appropriate remedial action is identified. The service area has been subject to a thorough unannounced internal review and two follow-up reviews over the last eight months. The most recent review, in November 2011, accurately identifies that progress has been achieved in all aspects of performance.

19. The Head of Service and the management team are aware that changes within the area, dating back over 18 months, have adversely affected the morale of some staff. Strategies have been put in place to address this and are beginning to have an impact. Business support processes are efficient and have contributed in particular to improving efficiency in the early intervention team. Data collection systems are accurate and key information is up to date and easily accessed by managers.
20. Clear lines of accountability have been established across the service area. Unit costs are well managed and the area budget is on target. Agency staff are used effectively and in small numbers to cover sickness absence. Commissioning has been developed, although evidence of effectiveness is limited, for example the outcomes of parenting information programmes are not routinely collated.

## **Performance management**

### **Grade 3 (satisfactory)**

21. Performance management is satisfactory. The service area achieves good levels for many key performance indicators, with some showing better than national average performance, such as the substantive allocation of care work by the time of the case management conference.
22. Allocation of private law cases is consistently timely, and performance on court filing times is good in most cases. Filing dates for reports are closely monitored by managers and effective arrangements are in place to ensure that filing dates continue to be met if the allocated worker is on sick leave. This ensures that cases are not delayed and that children and families receive a prompt service. All cases seen by inspectors were appropriately risk-assessed and monitored.
23. Managers have good access to electronic information on the performance of staff. Systems are effective in enabling managers to record performance and to ensure that all performance objectives are assessed during the year. Performance information is also used effectively with staff who are subject to performance action plans. Quality assurance of court reports is not yet resulting in sustained improvement due to the fact that the Cafcass system is not consistently applied in all cases.
24. All relevant staff have received recent supervision in accordance with expected timescales. Supervision frequency is monitored at each management meeting, and appropriate action is taken if performance deteriorates. Supervision records demonstrate that cases, workload and personal issues are regularly discussed.

However, agreed actions are not consistently followed through from one meeting to the next, and some actions do not have timescales for completion. Supervision files demonstrate sensitive consideration of staff returning to work from sick leave, and also of dealing with issues of conduct and behaviour. Although appraisals are present on all files, the quality of most appraisals seen by inspectors is inadequate. The content in many cases is minimal and does not consistently provide evidence to support the outcomes. Forward planning and learning objectives are not always clear.

## **Workforce development**

### **Grade 3 (Satisfactory)**

25. Workforce development is satisfactory. The workforce plan identifies clear priorities that are linked to improving outcomes for children and families, such as staff development and reducing the number of days lost to sickness. Staff sickness levels are much higher than the national average and robust action is being taken in conjunction with human resources to reduce the number of days lost. This is beginning to have a positive impact. Poorly performing staff and those not compliant with expectations are effectively supported through a performance framework that includes formal and informal action plans, and capability hearings if required. Evidence indicates that such measures have led to increases in sick leave, but also have resulted in the successful return to work of a number of staff.
26. Caseloads are monitored closely by managers, and an appropriate workload management system is in operation.
27. Staff have access to a wide range of training, which includes nationally required courses such as safeguarding and equality and diversity, and learning from serious case reviews and complaints.
28. Robust human resource processes are in place to ensure that staff who are recruited are suitable to work with children. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are carried out on all staff prior to employment and references are taken up and agreed by the recruiting manager before contracts are issued. The process of renewing CRB checks every three years is good practice. Most managers have undertaken safer recruitment training.

## **Partnerships**

### **Grade 3(satisfactory)**

29. Partnership arrangements are satisfactory. The service area is in the process of strengthening links with partner agencies, and this process has been assisted by one of the Service Managers having designated responsibility for this role. The service area has been innovative in instigating a pre-proceedings pilot project which has been well received by Coventry City Children's Social Care Services. Relationships with local authorities are satisfactory. Arrangements



include an effective protocol regarding escalation of proceedings in public law cases. Relationships with the judiciary are well established and effective work has been undertaken to ensure that final hearing dates have not been lost due to staff sickness.

30. Links with statutory sector organisations have been appropriately prioritised and are satisfactory. However, links with voluntary sector organisations, such as groups that support victims of domestic violence and fathers' groups are insufficiently developed.
31. Effective working relationships with panel solicitors and local authority legal representatives, which result in clear planning for children subject to public law proceedings, were observed by inspectors.
32. Contact activities are commissioned centrally, and these include a range of provision to meet need, such as supported contact centres and parenting information programmes on block and spot purchase arrangements to respond to demand. A domestic violence perpetrators' project has recently commenced but it is too early to determine its effectiveness.

## **Equality and diversity**

### **Grade 3 (satisfactory)**

33. Practice observation by inspectors showed that the needs of families were accommodated and that they were treated respectfully. All offices in the area are easily accessible to service users and staff with disabilities. Efforts have been made to make reception areas welcoming and child-friendly. Designated rooms are available for work with children, offering a range of age-appropriate resources to encourage effective engagement.
34. Although there have been a number of recent training events to promote culturally competent practice, the service area's approach to collecting and using diversity monitoring information is inconsistent.
35. The service area is aware of the need to recruit a staff group that is more representative of the local area, and equality impact assessments have been undertaken. However, only a small number of files and court reports seen by inspectors demonstrated that information on service users' diverse needs had been used to inform assessments and recommendations.

## **Value for money**

### **Grade 3 (satisfactory)**

36. Value for money is satisfactory. Financial planning systems are effectively utilised by managers. Value for money has been improved by making efficiency savings, for example by creating one team to handle all of the early intervention work for the area. All work in the early intervention team is now

allocated on receipt, so there are no delays. Most key performance indicators are delivered and slippages are quickly addressed. Work to combine recruitment and business partner services from three localities to a central location has led to the streamlining of processes and economies of scale.

37. Effective and proportionate use is made of agency staff. The area is currently recruiting permanent family court advisers to reduce the need for agency staff and improve value for money. The level of use of self-employed contractors is low. Staff have been deployed effectively to cover staff sickness and vacancies. A project has been successful in reducing the number of unallocated public law cases and in ensuring that final hearing dates are not missed. Family court advisers are allocated work in both public and private law, which increases the capacity of the area to respond to any change in demand for services.
38. Unit costs are lower than average and the total budget forecast for the year is on target. The costs of commissioned services are known and monitored effectively at national level.

## Safeguarding

### Grade 3 (satisfactory)

39. The contribution of the service area to safeguarding children and young people is satisfactory. In the majority of case files seen by inspectors, staff identify and respond appropriately to safeguarding concerns. Relevant and, in most cases, timely referrals are made to children's social care services when child protection concerns are identified. However, in two cases seen by inspectors, referrals to the local authority had been delayed where there was information to indicate that children may have been at risk of significant harm.
40. Clear and relevant safeguarding information is provided to the court in the majority of Schedule 2 letters seen, enabling early decisions to be based on sound risk assessment. The quality of safeguarding assessments in case plans and reports is satisfactory overall. Recommendations to the court are effective in ensuring that children are safeguarded.
41. Safeguarding has an appropriately high priority throughout the service area business plan. Safeguarding measures are embedded in arrangements for commissioned services and safer recruitment processes are robust. The role of the local authority designated officer is well understood. Safeguarding training is available and attended by staff, including business support staff. Some managers and practitioners have attended training to learn lessons from serious case reviews and this has been disseminated to the wider staff group in team meetings.
42. The contribution of the service to the three Local Safeguarding Children Boards that are covered by the service area is based on a proportionate national approach, but is too variable, with limited attendance by Cafcass representatives over the last year.

## Evaluation

### Grade 2 (good)

43. The quality of evaluation is good. Managers' analysis of the strengths and areas for development in the service area is accurate and identifies matters where improvements are needed. This includes issues which have presented particular challenges. The findings from the recent internal health check and auditing are largely accurate and are helpful in highlighting key priorities that are identified and effectively monitored through business planning and management meetings.

## Quality of provision

### Service responsiveness

#### Grade 3 (satisfactory)

44. The key performance indicator on meeting filing times for court reports in private law has been met and performance slightly exceeds national averages. Schedule 2 letters seen by inspectors were all filed within the agreed timescales. Performance in allocating private law cases has been consistently high in the past year, and there has been a sustained improvement in the indicators regarding the timeliness of cases filed by the agreed date.
45. High sickness absence levels in the service area had affected the ability of practitioners to commence and complete work on new cases and for part of the past year the Cafcass target for public law cases being filed with the court has not been met. Appropriate action has been made to address this by one of the service managers undertaking cases where there was a likelihood of final hearing dates being lost.

## Case planning and recording

#### Grade 3 (satisfactory)

46. Case planning and recording are satisfactory. The quality of the majority of case plans seen by inspectors is satisfactory. Plans provide an appropriate analysis of children and young people's needs and accurately identify the key issues with an appropriate course of action.
47. The quality of recording in case files is too variable. Inspectors saw examples of detailed, up-to-date and well structured records, but also a significant number of examples of inadequate case recording on contact logs, including illegible handwritten records, gaps in recording and reference to individuals which did not make clear their role or the nature of their involvement. In addition, some records did not make it sufficiently clear whether concerns were historical or current.

## **Assessment, intervention and direct work with children**

### **Grade 3 (satisfactory)**

48. Assessment, intervention and direct work with children is satisfactory. Direct work observed by inspectors was purposeful, had been carefully planned and was undertaken sensitively. Children are supported to explore and express their views and feelings in a suitable and relaxed environment, enabling them to both talk about and write down their views to the court.
49. The majority of assessments seen by inspectors demonstrate a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the child's individual needs, and included accurate records of the child's wishes and feelings, which were reflected appropriately to inform reports.

## **Reporting and recommendations to the court**

### **Grade 3 (satisfactory)**

50. Most reports in private and public law seen by inspectors were concise, proportionate and demonstrated consistent child focused work. Inspectors saw examples of clear analysis, which logically led to the recommendations. However, some reports seen included grammatical errors and were not written with sufficient clarity.
51. A small minority of private law reports seen lack robust analysis to inform comprehensive recommendations. The content of reports was not always satisfactorily shared with relevant parties in advance of hearings.
52. Public law cases were of a high standard, providing succinct analysis of complex issues and appropriate challenge to plans. In uncontested public law cases, position statements provided by family court advisers provide a satisfactory summary of the key issues.

## **Complaints**

### **Grade 3 (satisfactory)**

53. The response to complaints from service users is satisfactory. Most complaints are responded to within timescales and are of a satisfactory quality.
54. Cafcass has taken effective action to respond to complaints in a more timely way and any delay is now slight. Communication with people making a complaint is maintained well during the process.
55. A very large majority of complaints are resolved at an early stage, but the service area does not gather information from complainants as to whether they are satisfied with the outcome.

56. The quality of the response to complainants is at least satisfactory. Letters to complainants almost always comprehensively deal with all of the service user's concerns and are written clearly and in a respectful manner. Judgements about whether to uphold or not uphold a complaint are almost always sound. Where a complaint is not upheld a justification is clearly given and where a complaint is upheld, an appropriate apology is provided, together with an explanation as to what action will be taken as a result of the complaint.
57. Information regarding how to complain is not sent out to service users and there is no specific information for children and young people as to how they can raise concerns.
58. The service area has limited information regarding the ethnicity and diversity of complainants and is therefore unable to monitor whether complainants are representative of its service users.
59. The lessons learned from complaints are regularly disseminated and have led to some improvements, but overall there have been insufficient service improvements based on the comments of the broad range of Cafcass service users.

## **The National Business Centre (NBC)**

### **The quality of the service provided by the NBC is good (grade 2)**

60. This inspection provides an overall judgement based on an evaluation of the quality of the service provided by the NBC reflecting those parts of the Ofsted evaluation schedule which are relevant to its role: ambition and prioritisation, partnerships, value for money, safeguarding and service responsiveness.
61. Although it has only been operational since December 2010, the NBC has, through effective management and business processes, rapidly created very significant savings in time and financial resources whilst providing a substantially improved service. Managers have been highly influential in creating an effective team culture in which all staff are involved in robust quality improvement activities. Auditing is extensive and appropriately focused. Plans to achieve further efficiencies are supported by a comprehensive and robust NBC business plan, which identifies clear objectives.
62. Managers have created highly efficient but economical arrangements with West Midlands and Warwickshire police forces to provide police checks for the 17 police forces that currently use the NBC service. The NBC provides a national service but at reduced cost to Cafcass and with increased efficiency and effectiveness in the processing of applications, timely safeguarding measures and in obtaining police checks.
63. In all cases seen by inspectors, practitioners made appropriate contacts with local authorities when safeguarding concerns or risks had been identified.

## Definitions

### Inspection grades

Grade 1 - outstanding	The service provided is well above the minimum requirements and makes a demonstrable contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people.
Grade 2 - good	The service provided is consistently above the minimum requirements and contributes to improving outcomes for most children and young people.
Grade 3 - satisfactory	The service provided meets minimum requirements and contributes to improving outcomes for children and young people.
Grade 4 - inadequate	Minimum requirements are not met by the service and it makes little or no contribution to improved outcomes for children and young people.

### Principle of 'no delay'

Section 1(2) of the Children Act 1989 sets out the general principle that any delay in determining the question about a child's upbringing 'is likely to prejudice the welfare of the child'. This means that any unnecessary delay should be avoided.

### Private and public law

Family law is that area of the law which regulates and deals with family and domestic relations, including, but not limited to, marriage, civil and domestic partnerships and the welfare of children. Where these matters are dealt with by courts, they are known as family proceedings. The person or body that brings the issue to court is known as the applicant and the person or body opposing the application is known as the respondent. In general terms applicants and respondents are known as parties to the proceedings.

Private law is that part of the family law where the state does not normally need to be involved. Private law proceedings involving Cafcass are usually about situations where parents have separated and they cannot agree where a child should live or with whom they should have contact. The law that established Cafcass states that it should only become involved in family proceedings where the welfare of the child is, or may be, in question.

Private law cases are dealt with through what is known as The Private Law Programme. This is designed to provide a framework for the consistent national approach to the resolution of issues in private law proceedings. It is designed to assist parties to reach safe agreements where possible, to provide a forum in which to find the best way to resolve issues in each individual case and to promote outcomes that are sustainable, that are in the best interests of children and that take account of their perspectives.

Public law is that part of the family law which deals with relationships between parents, or those with a parental role, where the state does need to be involved to ensure that a child does not suffer significant harm. Court proceedings are usually initiated by a local authority applying for a care or supervision order. This may result in the child being looked after by the local authority under a care order. Adoption-related applications are also normally public law proceedings.

Public law cases are dealt with through the Public Law Outline.<sup>1</sup> This is a system aimed to control delay in family court public law proceedings. It was introduced across England and Wales in April 2009, with new Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities.

## **Welfare checklist**

The Children Act 1989 section 1(3) sets out what is known as the welfare checklist. It comprises seven features that should be balanced equally when courts consider whether an order should be made. The welfare checklist considers: children's wishes and feelings; their physical, emotional and educational needs; the likely effect of any change in circumstances; characteristics that make up their identity; any harm suffered or at risk of suffering; parental capability; and the court's powers. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 section 120 extends the definition of harm within the meaning of the Children Act 1989 section 31, 'including, for example, impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another'.<sup>2</sup> Under court rules, Cafcass practitioners are under a duty to have regard to 'the matters set out in section 1(3)'. Note: Requirements in regulations and court rules are not 'statutory' in that they are not set out in a statute and are therefore secondary legislation.

## **Schedule 2 letter**

A schedule 2 letter is provided to courts by Cafcass for first directions hearings in private law proceedings. The letter informs the court about whether there are any risk factors to children known at that stage in proceedings which the court should consider before deciding next steps. The duty on Cafcass to make risk assessments is set out in Children Act 1989 section 16A.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information visit: [www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/careproceedings.htm](http://www.justice.gov.uk/guidance/careproceedings.htm).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/38/contents>.

## Record of main findings

<b>Cafcass service area; Coventry , Warwickshire and Northamptonshire</b>	
Overall effectiveness	Satisfactory
Capacity for improvement	Satisfactory
<b>Meeting the needs of service users</b>	
Performance management	Satisfactory
Workforce development	Satisfactory
Ambition and prioritisation	Good
Partnerships	Satisfactory
Equality and diversity	Satisfactory
Value for money	Satisfactory
Safeguarding	Satisfactory
Evaluation	Good
<b>Quality of provision</b>	
Service responsiveness	Satisfactory
Case planning and recording	Satisfactory
Assessment, intervention and direct work with children	Satisfactory
Reporting and recommendations to the court	Satisfactory
Complaints	Satisfactory