

What happens next?

Children and adults told inspectors that they thought that a DVD about the court process and the Cafcass role within that would be a good idea. Inspectors thought this was a good idea too.

Ofsted has asked Cafcass to make improvements in a number of areas including:

- the ways in which Cafcass workers ensure children's safety
- completing work more quickly
- ensuring that children and families are more fully involved in assessments
- making sure court reports are of a good standard.

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) works with children, young people and their families when courts are involved in their lives. Families may meet a worker from Cafcass in two ways:

- Firstly, when children may be suffering harm, the local council children's service may go to court to start what are called care proceedings. This may be because the council thinks that a child cannot be kept safe at home or it thinks that a child should live away from home. The Cafcass worker (children's guardian) will then talk to everyone involved. The Cafcass worker writes a report to advise the court on whether the council's assessment and plans for that child are in their best interests. The Cafcass worker will also include the child's wishes and feelings.
- Secondly, when parents separate and a child is living with one of them, there may be disagreements, usually between the parents, about where the child should live or how often the child should see the parent they aren't living with. The Cafcass worker (family court adviser) may be asked by the court to either help make an agreement, or undertake an assessment before writing a report about what the Cafcass worker thinks would be in the child's best interest. The Cafcass worker will also include the child's wishes and feelings.

The full report, *Ofsted's inspection of the experience of Cafcass service users in the family courts in South Yorkshire*, is on the Ofsted website at www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports.

If you would like a version of the leaflets in a different language, or in large print, Braille or audio, please contact enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk, or telephone 08456 404040.

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A survey of Cafcass service users in the family courts in South Yorkshire



What the inspectors did

Inspectors work for Ofsted, which has a duty to inspect how well Cafcass carries out its statutory functions. In early 2008, Ofsted surveyed a sample of children, young people and adults in South Yorkshire about their views of Cafcass. Ofsted followed this up with a number of telephone and face-to-face interviews with both adults and children. In addition to this, inspectors read court reports that Cafcass workers had written for the court, looked at case records and spoke to groups who represent people who use the family courts.

Children's views

Most children and young people told inspectors that:

- they understood why the Cafcass worker had talked with them
- they had enough time with the Cafcass worker
- the Cafcass worker was easy to talk to.

However, not all children and young people were so positive. For example, while one young person told inspectors that the Cafcass worker 'was really nice to talk to', another child said: 'He [the Cafcass worker] put us on the spot; we don't know the answers to his questions, we didn't feel able to say we didn't know.'

Some further messages from children and young people included:

- that the Cafcass worker listened but did not report what the child said they wanted
- that their views had not made a difference to what happened
- that they thought that the report was not fair
- that they thought that the Cafcass worker had not helped them.

Adult's views

About a third of adults felt that the Cafcass worker was not easy to contact. However, some made positive comments such as: 'he was always available, if I left a message he would get back at his earliest convenience.'

Service users gave many examples of good practice, including one who said the worker had arranged a helpful introductory meeting with their child to help build trust before discussing difficult issues in their case. However, some adults were less happy: one parent said: 'The family court adviser spent ages with the child, he was distressed at the end. I wasn't sure why he was seeing him, he said he wanted to have a chat; a lot of it was irrelevant.'

Some people felt they had not been treated fairly. Inspectors read the reports which service users had commented on critically, but found no evidence to support the feelings of unfairness.

Court reports

Cafcass court reports are an important part of proceedings and assist the court in making its decisions. Inspectors found that reports sometimes did not discuss the safety of the child sufficiently and in some instances did not say enough about the child's wishes and feelings, but usually were easily understood and the right length.

For those children who the council children's services were involved with, the Cafcass worker was good at advising the court about what was in the child's best interests. However, families in which the parents had split up sometimes had to wait a long time for the Cafcass worker to finish their work.