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Dear Ms Tiotto

Focused visit to Cafcass

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) from 21 to 23 October 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were lead inspector Rachel Griffiths and team inspectors Lisa Walsh, Rodica Corbazan, Jo Warburton, Tom Anthony, Christine Kennet and Sarah Canto.

Inspectors looked at Cafcass's arrangements for the following aspects: The effectiveness of practice and advice to the court in private law cases where children and adults have experienced or are experiencing domestic abuse.

This visit was carried out in line with the framework for the inspection of Cafcass. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including holding discussions with family court advisers (FCAs), managers and senior leaders, and observations of practice. They looked at Cafcass data, performance management and quality assurance information. They also spoke remotely with members of the family justice young people's board (FJYPB), members of the family forum, representatives from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), practitioners from the Safe Lives domestic abuse charity, the President of the Family Division and three Designated Family Judges (DFJs).

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection in 2024, senior leaders have implemented, reviewed and relaunched a new domestic abuse practice policy. Bespoke training has been developed and delivered to FCAs and managers at all levels. This has strengthened practice and advice to the court to better support children and adults who have experienced or are experiencing domestic abuse. This is not yet consistent across all operational service areas. Unprecedented and unrelenting demand on the service is outstretching available FCA resource in some operational service areas. This is causing delay in proceedings concluding for some children.

Despite the workload pressures, most staff speak very positively about working for Cafcass. The positive impact of high-quality management support and training can be seen in the work of curious and highly skilled practitioners who listen to children and their primary caregivers about their experiences. Practitioners understand very well the impact of domestic abuse and harmful parenting on children. This is vastly improving the advice and recommendations to court to help ensure that children's welfare is better safeguarded.

Main findings

When Cafcass receives notifications of court applications, thorough safeguarding checks inform an initial analysis of risk. FCAs make further safeguarding enquiries and produce a safeguarding letter for the court. When FCAs identify risks to children, they make immediate safeguarding referrals to local authorities, including in respect of connected children who are not subjects of the court application.

FCAs are very skilled in eliciting information from parents and analysing the impact of adult behaviours on children, but not all safeguarding letters provide sufficient details about children's ethnicity and identity. Overall, safeguarding letters are well written, with a strong focus on children's safety, and provide appropriate advice to the court to inform next steps.

While most safeguarding enquiries start promptly, in one operational service area increased demand and a small number of staff vacancies and sickness have overstretched the available FCA resource. This means that, for some children, once the safeguarding checks have been completed, there are delays in FCAs' availability to complete safeguarding letters or section 7 reports. Senior leaders are trying to mitigate and minimise the impact of delay for children by allocating children's cases to other operational service areas, and allocating children's cases to line managers to safely monitor until resource becomes available and recruitment is achieved.

Some children are negatively impacted by delays in the family justice system more widely. For example, some courts are having to list cases several months in the future given their own capacity challenges. Delayed order production creates further uncertainty for children and slows safe case progression and closure to Cafcass. Cafcass senior leaders are proactively escalating these matters and working constructively with the courts to try to address the delays and make concerted efforts to hasten proceedings.

When the court directs Cafcass to produce a section 7 report, FCAs write to children at the outset to help them understand the court processes and what will happen when the FCA visits. FCAs write these letters sensitively, considering children's age and level of understanding. FCAs meticulously plan for visits and their assessments to help them get to know what life is like for the child, and to help them to understand the impact of harm, or the risk of harm from domestic abuse. Practitioners are especially curious about any previous proceedings and gather any information about adult criminal behaviours, coercive control and alienating

behaviours. Strong management oversight of this planning is evident on children's records.

A particular strength identified during this visit is how the voices of children shine through and inform FCA assessments in section 7 reports. FCAs are very skilled at building relationships with children and undertaking direct work with them to understand their unique circumstances, what their lives are like and what they want to happen. When children are too young to express their views, FCAs observe their behaviour, presentation and their interactions with their caregivers. When children are non-verbal, FCAs ascertain the child's communication methods and carefully plan how they can hear and understand the child's voice. These observations and the use of children's direct words in reports, and where children have been supported to write to the judge, have a powerful impact. These enable judges to hear what children think and make sure that their voice is heard. This is helping judges to make decisions about future arrangements that are in children's best interests.

Most section 7 reports evidence very well how FCAs use guidance from the Cafcass domestic abuse practice policy, the associated training and a wide range of practice tools to help them to analyse risks relating to domestic abuse. Since the previous inspection, section 7 reports evidence much more clearly how FCAs listen to children and adults who have experienced domestic abuse, to assess the harm or risk of further harm. FCAs more accurately consider, record and share with the court what they have been told. In a very small number of reports, there is insufficient analysis in relation to the impact of domestic abuse on adults.

FCAs typically articulate their recommendations to the court based on their analysis of risk very well, including children's responses to recommendations. When FCAs do not give children's views absolute precedence, they sensitively help children to understand the reasons for this. Goodbye letters sent to children at the conclusion of proceedings provide them with a further understanding of the decisions made by the court, and why they were made.

Tackling delay remains a national improvement priority for Cafcass senior leaders. Cafcass is engaged in an MoJ-funded pilot scheme known as 'Pathfinder', which aims to improve experiences for children and families in private family law proceedings and reduce court delay. In one operational service area, delays for children have been positively reducing because of the Pathfinder pilot. More children are being seen by FCAs and sooner, proceedings have fewer court hearings and comprehensive child impact reports are putting children at the forefront of thinking and decision-making. The Pathfinder pilot is reducing the length of proceedings for some children and is improving the experience of children and parents where they are the victims of domestic abuse or harm.

The increase in private and public law applications being received by Cafcass is palpable across the service. Despite the best efforts of senior leaders, there is insufficient FCA resource to keep up with the increasing demand. This is a particular challenge, as plans progress to roll out Pathfinder across more service areas will

require additional resources. Senior leaders report that without an increased and stable workforce they will struggle to continue to build on and strengthen further the quality and impact of practice where domestic abuse is a factor.

Some FCAs report that their caseloads feel too high due to the increased demand, some staff vacancies and some sickness absences. Despite feeling some pressure, most practitioners said that they feel well supported by their managers to manage their caseloads and recognise the efforts senior leaders are making to increase capacity. Most practitioners spoken to during the visit said they enjoyed working for Cafcass, and that they understood the need for ongoing improvement. Practitioners shared senior leaders' aspirations to continually strengthen practice and children's experiences where domestic abuse is a factor. This was also reflected in the most recent Cafcass staff survey.

Senior leaders continue to model an unstinting commitment to improving the experiences of children during their involvement with Cafcass. Inspectors spoke to a wide range of key stakeholders during the visit for their views. These included child experts from the impressive FJYPB and adults by experience from the family forum (a group of parents who have experienced court proceedings). Inspectors also spoke with a domestic abuse charity, representatives from the MoJ, designated family judges and the President of the Family Division. The feedback was very positive and highlighted how senior leaders listen and welcome their feedback to influence service development and practice improvements. There is a strong culture of learning from complaints. Impressively, every complaint made by a child is upheld, in recognition of how interventions have made children feel.

Senior leaders at a national and local level have a detailed understanding of the key strengths and challenges for the service, including where certain aspects of domestic abuse practice need to be strengthened. A comprehensive range of quality assurance activities, including extensive audit activity, which is increasingly undertaken collaboratively with practitioners, is providing senior leaders with a clear line of sight into quality and impact of practice. Over the last 12 months, these robust systems helped senior leaders to identify some practice and management shortfalls in one operational service area. This resulted in a whole service support, intervention and improvement plan. Current practice is now improving.

Overall, casework audits are of a good quality, highlighting practice strengths and areas where FCAs can improve their practice. While auditors celebrate good practice and set advisory actions to improve practice, the lack of timescales to complete actions makes it more difficult for managers to monitor how quickly or effectively actions are completed, or their effectiveness.

Senior leaders have developed a comprehensive range of training opportunities to further enhance the quality of practice in relation to domestic abuse. Most recently, a very well-attended 'achieving for children' practice week, with a focus specifically on domestic abuse, was well received by practitioners. They spoke positively about the quality of this training and the opportunity to reflect with colleagues about their

work. The increasing use of group and situational supervision for practitioners is also providing staff with more opportunities for reflection and learning about the impact of domestic abuse on children's lives.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
His Majesty's Inspector