

# Good Practice Guide

Reviewing good practice from relevant programmes in relation to the DFJ Trailblazer pilot

Edition 3:

August 2024

# Purpose and structure of this document

## **Purpose**

The DFJ Trailblazer pilot is a DfE-funded programme supporting 5 Trailblazer DFJ areas throughout England to 1) identify drivers of delay across the family justice system, and 2) develop and deliver solutions.

The Good Practice Guide is a quarterly publication developed as part of the DFJ Trailblazer pilot Learning Programme. The purpose of this document is to highlight examples of good practice in care proceedings throughout England. The document includes both innovative ideas and important considerations to execute standard practices effectively. Cases are not intended to be seen as prescriptive solutions to challenges in Trailblazer areas. Rather, it seeks to inspire, and to stimulate discussion.

This document will be updated on a quarterly basis with a final version bringing together practice from each of the iterations.

## **Structure overview**

- Slide 4 A matrix mapping the cases to key drivers of delays raised in diagnostic sessions
- Slides 5-12 A high-level overview of the models and programmes
- Slide 13 A preview of future content for the next issue of this guide

# **Overview of case studies and presented initiatives**

# Mapping to the Trailblazer pilot

Key drivers of delay:	West Yorkshire LFJB and Teesside LFJB	Worcester DFJ area	Teesside Floating Case List	Dorset DFJ area	Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC)	Pause	London Infant and Family Team (LIFT)	Positive Choices
Late presentation of family members								
Workforce capacity			✓	✓		✓		✓
Court capacity		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
PLO tracking issues		✓						
Low PLO assessment quality		✓	✓		✓			
Use of external assessors								
Availability and frequency of expert assessments usage		✓			✓		✓	
Lack of trust in LA assessments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Changes in plan			✓	✓				✓
Lack of information sharing among partners	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓

# West Yorkshire LFJB and Teesside LFJB

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- The Local Family Justice Board in West Yorkshire and in Teesside have been identified as examples of good governance.
- Both areas have a committed Chairperson. In West Yorkshire, that person is from a local authority legal team, and in Teesside, a local barrister.
- Meetings focus on productivity and ensuring that it doesn't become a space for airing complaints.
- Problem-solving is collective. Chairs are visible, communicate regularly with stakeholders, and understand their strengths and areas of interest. This promotes shared responsibility of actions rather than tasks sitting with a small number of people.
- Emphasis is on relationship building, both through national conference but also in less formal settings.
- LFJBs actively use data insights as a basis for future direction and action.

## OUTCOMES

- Strong LFJB governance creates an ethos of problem-solving in an area and fosters a shared responsibility for tackling problems.
- Involving stakeholders and ensuring members feel part of decision-making facilitates greater information sharing among partners and a recognition that problems often require a system-wide response.

## KEY FEATURES

- Agreed Terms of Reference and Statement of Expectations.
- Strong cross-sector buy-in from CAF/CASS and Judiciary.
- Secretariat support from HMCTS.
- Joint training, sharing of good practice, and coming together to prepare protocols, discuss themes, and ensure that they have a good network of contacts across the area which supports partnership working.
- In Teesside, sub-groups link in with the LFJB by having the Chair or Vice Chair attend.

## Helpful links and articles

- We are collaborating with the Ministry of Justice team to share learning on effective LFJB practice and support the work they are doing in this area. An updated version of the LFJB Chair handbook is being developed.
- For more information on these initiatives, please contact us.

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# Worcester DFJ area

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- In response to a poor Ofsted inspection outcome in 2016, a partnership including a newly formed Children’s Trust, a new DCS and a new DFJ acted to improve timeliness.
- LA developed a Liquid Logic workspace for legal planning meetings.
- Legal case tracker provides an overview of workloads by case type and by lead solicitor.
- The legal case tracker RAG-rates each case for delay and risk.
- Legal and children’s services teams meet every six weeks to resolve issues, provide updates and reflect on recurring themes.
- The Trust employs three Case Progression Officers who provide specialist support on ‘stuck’ cases, track private law activity and support the wider social work teams to QA and develop practice.
- Final hearings are listed within 6 weeks.
- Expert assessments are used rarely; the DFJ trusts conclusions from LA social workers.

## OUTCOMES

- Worcester ranks the lowest for average case duration at 24 weeks despite a high number of applications per 10,000 children (ranking 11<sup>th</sup> nationwide).
- . The local partnership worked to improve timeliness, reducing from 50-70 weeks in 2016 to 24 weeks in January 2024. Worcester is considered an area with consistently strong performance.

## KEY FEATURES

- Worcester DFJ implemented an internal ‘charter’ covering blocking time for listing.
- Strict limits on each case’s elements and time in the courtroom.
- Increased judicial caseloads.
- Case management hearings run like seminars which are more participatory, and discussion based and less adversarial.
- Consistency in judicial decision-making.
- Case tracking enabled by robust data collection and advanced audit tool.

## Helpful links and articles:

- For more information on these initiatives, please contact us.

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# Teesside's Floating Case List

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- The Teesside listing team maintains a list of 'floating', less complex cases that judges can take on if their scheduled hearings conclude ahead of time.
- The list is around three to four cases, compiled by the listings team and shared with judges and their clerks on a daily basis.
- Judges take a collaborative approach where everybody does what they can i.e. judges who are currently managing complex trials will sign off orders when they can, whilst those with more time will take contested hearings.
- Cases are listed for three rather than five days (but this tends to reduce to 1.5 days). There is a commitment from judges to fit reading time and judgement writing around their hearings.
- At the same time, there is a commitment to allocate sufficient time to the management of complex cases that require more than 26 weeks to resolve.
- New judges joining the court have focused training to adapt to this approach.

## OUTCOMES

- Fitting cases into the schedule via the floating list has led to a significant reduction in waiting times for court hearings.
- This has contributed to the average duration of care proceedings in the DFJ area (Cleveland and South Durham) consistently staying under 30 weeks in FY 2023-24 and trending positively.
- Pre-proceedings work has improved, with a good rehabilitative focus as key issues are identified before proceedings and can be acted on.
- Staff resilience has been maintained through the 'pacing' of the approach.

## KEY FEATURES

- Commitment to schedule hearings with the best outcomes for children in mind, not around barristers' schedules
- An experienced listing team that manages both civil and family cases
- A collaborative environment where judges and clerks work closely together
- A strong, collaborative culture across the partnership led by the LFJB
- A commitment from advocates to distil issues down to their essentials
- Use of a floating list strongly mirrors the approach taken with criminal courts to manage court capacity and caseloads
- The listing team provides comprehensive training in the approach to new joiners to ensure continuity.

## Helpful links and articles:

- For more information on this initiative, please contact us.

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# Dorset DFJ area

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- Dorset’s approach to public and private law proceedings have seen significant reform over the past few years.
- Children’s services moved to a locality model in 2020, which brings together social care, early help and education teams together to work collaboratively to meet the needs of children and families. This approach has increased management oversight through locality based ‘line of sight’ meetings.
- In November 2022 Dorset implemented a whole family approach to safeguarding. This has had a positive impact and will be rolled out across the county moving forward as part of the DfE Families First for Children Pathfinder.
- Dorset have increased work with local Family Rights Group to further improve pre-proceedings practice.
- Dorset has also been involved in the Pathfinder for private law proceedings, which promotes a less adversarial approach and has reduced delay in private law and increased capacity for the judiciary to work on public law cases.

## OUTCOMES

- These changes have prompted a decrease of the number of children in care from 470 in 2021 to 390 in 2024.
- A reduction in the number of children in care proceedings from 97 children (49 families) to 64 children (35 families).
- Over the last six months 55% of Dorset’s children have had care proceedings conclude within 26 weeks, 41% have concluded between 27 and 38 weeks and 36% have concluded over 38 weeks (national average) – with the longest at 65 weeks.

## KEY FEATURES

- More extensive pre-proceedings work.
- Increased court confidence in the quality of Dorset’s assessments and care plans.
- Whole family approach to safeguarding.
- The Dorset Public Law Charter, which focuses on system culture change and strict splits of permanent judicial responsibilities.
- Few police interventions and Emergency Protection Orders.

## Helpful links and articles:

- For more information on this initiative, please contact us.

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# FDAC (Family Drug and Alcohol Courts)

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- FDAC is an alternative family court for care proceedings.
- It is specifically designed to work with parents who struggle with drug and alcohol misuse.
- It is all about trying to solve the problems that have led the local authority to bring the parent to court. To do this, the same judge reviews the case every fortnight in an informal hearing with each parent.
- In these meetings, known as Non-Lawyer Reviews, parents get to speak directly to the judge.
- A specialist multi-disciplinary FDAC team works closely with the judge and other professionals to provide intensive treatment and support for parents wishing to turn their lives around.

## OUTCOMES

- Cases are resolved with 52% fewer hearings.
- Cases are 82% less likely to feature contested final hearings.
- Children are 4 times more likely to return to their parents at the end of proceedings.
- Children returned home are 14% less likely to return to court.
- Parents are 4 times more likely to stop using drugs and alcohol.
- For every £1 spent on an FDAC team, £3.20 of net savings are returned to the taxpayer (source: [FDAC case for investment](#)).

## KEY FEATURES

### Outside of the court process

- Multidisciplinary specialist FDAC team
- The use of dynamic assessments and access to evidence-based interventions
- Trauma-informed practice
- Regular drug testing

### Court process changes

- Judicial continuity
- Non-lawyer reviews
- Pre-court briefings which improve information sharing
- Adapted courtroom layout

## Helpful links:

- [FDAC website](#) – holds information for parents and for practitioners
- [FDAC cost-benefit analysis](#) – The Centre for Justice Innovation produced a financial analysis of FDAC which evidenced significant savings.

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# Pause

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- Pause is a national charity that works to improve the lives of women who have had – or are at risk of having – more than one child removed from their care. They engage with women who are part of this cohort and, following 16 weeks of engagement, support women who want to join the Pause Programme to commit to a pause in pregnancy for 18 months.
- Once the women have been supported to take this pause in pregnancy through working with a local sexual health service and a Pause Practitioner, the Practitioner will work with the woman through their Practice Model which is centred around an intensive and supportive relationship between a woman and their Practitioner who work together to build a better future over 18 months.
- Pause Practitioners tailor the programme of support to the woman's specific needs and hopes for the future. This includes providing advice and support across health needs, therapy, education & employment, self-reflection and more practical support, like accessing benefits.

## KEY FEATURES

- The Pause approach is trauma-informed and is designed to work *with* women, rather than *for* them, and puts the women at the centre of this relationship-based approach.
- The Pause Programme works with women who have no children in their care and so can focus on their own needs.
- Pause Practitioners have small caseloads to ensure they can concentrate on the women they are working with and give them sufficient support.

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## OUTCOMES

In 2022-23:

- Of those who completed the Pause Programme, 76% reported improved emotional wellbeing and resilience; 74% improved their physical and mental health; and 62% have an improved relationship with their children.
- There was an average reduction of 14 infants entering care in those local authorities who ran a Pause practice.
- For every £1 spent, it is estimated that £4.50 is saved rising to £7 after 7 years.

## Helpful links:

- <https://www.pause.org.uk/what-we-do/>
- <https://www.pause.org.uk/our-impact/>
- [DfE evaluation of Pause.](#)

# London Infant and Family Team (LIFT)

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- The London Infant and Family Team (LIFT), helps social workers and judges decide whether a child on a care plan should live with their birth family or enter care permanently.
- LIFT brings together specialists in infant mental health and social care and works with a family over a 9-15-month period. Within this period, the team assesses the parent's health and wellbeing, including any addiction, mental health, or trauma.
- They establish treatment goals and offer tailored support to strengthen the parent-child relationship. Decisions about whether the child should be placed in care permanently are made following the treatment programme and are based on the parent's capacity to strengthen their caregiving relationship. Where parents can achieve significant change, children are rehabilitated back into their birth family. If nothing changes, adoption is recommended.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES:

- King's College London's (KCL) research in East London with the LIFT teams is currently underway, so no confirmed outcomes have been reported.
- However, KCL expect to see that a service model that focuses on infant mental health brings benefits to children who enter care at a young age as they grow older – in terms of their social, emotional and mental wellbeing – compared to the existing social work model.

## KEY FEATURES

- The LIFT assessment is relationship-focused, with the practitioners looking at the interaction between parent and child to understand how the child's needs are being met.
- Strengthening the caregiver-child relationship is crucial to the programme.
- The infant's mental health is a core part of the approach.
- LIFT teams are multidisciplinary comprising of social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists.

## Helpful links:

- [NSPCC overview of Infant and Family Teams](#)
- [How is this being evaluated?](#)

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# Positive Choices (Calderdale Council)

## WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- Positive Choices is a single point of access for support and advice during pregnancy and early years for care experienced and other vulnerable young people.
- The service aims to support these young people to prevent their children from coming into care by improving their parenting skills and ability to work through their challenges.
- The service works with these young people both antenatally and postnatally, up to two years post-birth across three main areas: **encouraging** the parent to look introspectively by completing reflective work; **educating** the parent through programmes and courses provided by the practitioners which provide the parent with information on how to keep their child safe and happy; and **practical support**, like helping the parent access benefits, consider different childcare options and assisting with housing conditions.
- Following the birth of the baby, there is an 8-week post-birth programme which focuses on bonding, cues, and safe sleeping.

## KEY FEATURES

- Each family is provided with a key worker who will have a protected caseload to ensure they are consistent, which minimises stress for the parents and builds a trusting relationship.
- The practitioners encourage parents to shift their outlook from one of presumed failure to one of hope for lasting change.
- If the decision is made that the child will be removed at birth, Positive Choices continues to work with the parent, ensuring they are supported.

## OUTCOMES

- Evaluation of the programme has found that this intervention before birth was influential in improving the quality of attachment between carers and their children.
- Between 2017-2021, 66% of parents supported by Positive Choices were able to keep their babies.
- A 2020 evaluation also found that after engaging with key workers, fewer children needed ongoing social care interventions. The estimated savings between 2017-20 have been quantified to be £781,744.

## Helpful links:

- [Overview of Positive Choices as well as information for practitioners and young people](#)
- [Evaluation of Positive Choices](#)

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## Upcoming Good Practice Guide content



- ▼ SWIFT – Specialist Family Service in East Sussex providing specialist assessment and intervention.
- ▼ FASS - The Family Assessment and Safeguarding Service (FASS) is a specialist mental health team based in Oxfordshire and is part of the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), with expertise in attachment, family trauma and family relationships.

If you have any suggestions for initiatives to feature in future iterations of this guide, we would really like to hear from you:

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