

# Case stories

The real experiences and impact of care proceedings on parents and young people

November 2024





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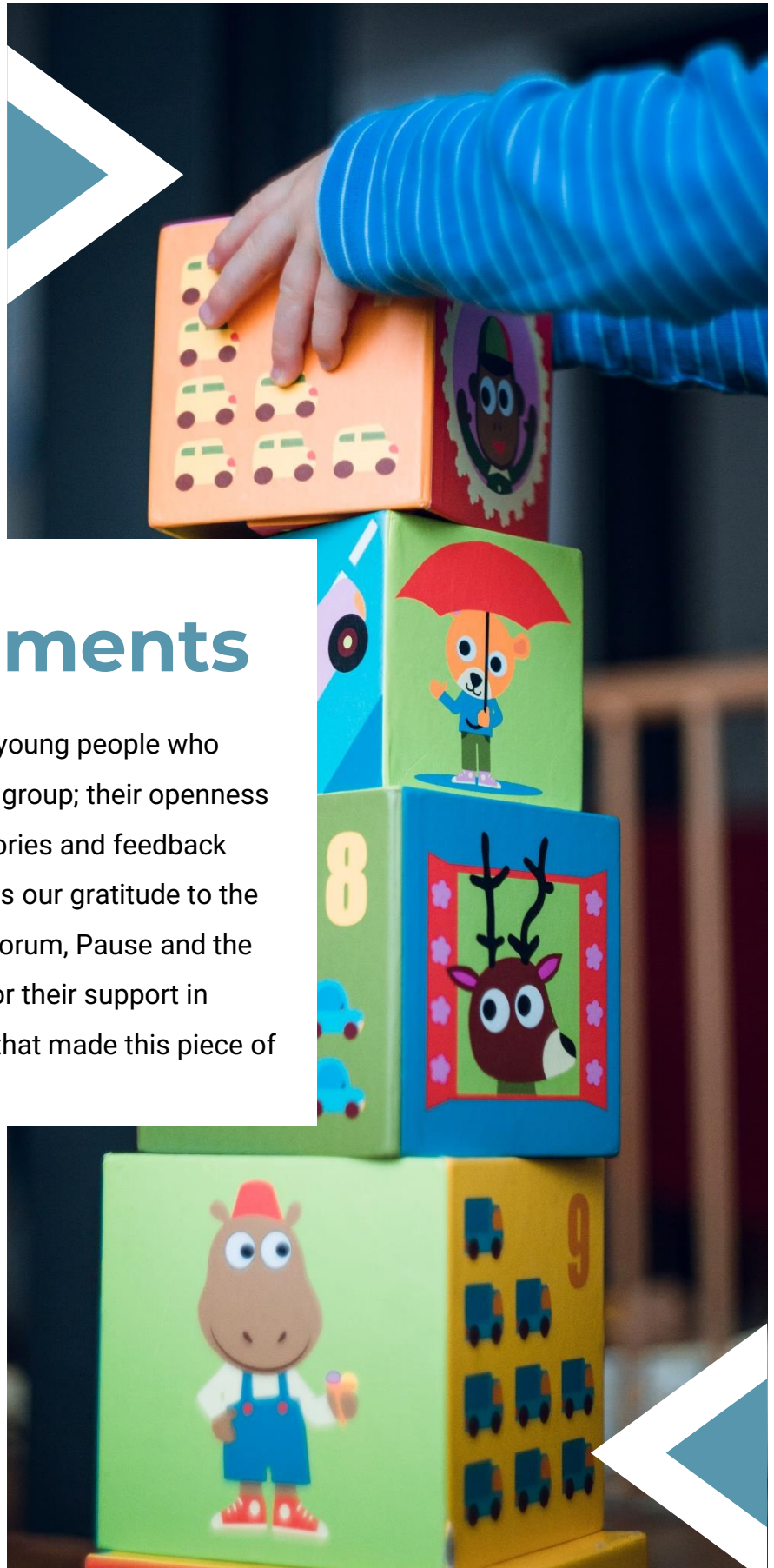
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(available in a separate pack)



# Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the parents and young people who participated in the interviews and focus group; their openness and honesty in sharing their insights, stories and feedback were invaluable. We also wish to express our gratitude to the representatives of the Cafcass Family Forum, Pause and the Family Justice Young People's Board, for their support in facilitating these crucial conversations that made this piece of work possible.





# Foreword

Care proceedings represent one of the most significant interventions the state can make in a family's life. At their core, they are about protecting children and, in many cases, saving lives. However, the process is intricate and emotionally charged for everyone involved, especially for families who often arrive with deep trauma and vulnerability. How often do we pause to consider the weight of these decisions on families? Despite being rooted in a mission to improve lives, there remains an ongoing need for the family justice system to evolve – ensuring it operates with fairness, compassion, and effectiveness at every stage.

This report sheds much-needed light on the lived experiences of adults and young people who have faced decisions that profoundly affect their lives due to care proceedings. It highlights both positive and negative aspects of the system and captures the profound, long-lasting impact that proceedings can have on individuals. Importantly, it reminds us that sometimes the smallest gestures—showing respect, offering a kind word, or genuinely listening—can create a meaningful difference for those at the centre of these processes and conversations.

As professionals in the family justice system—whether social workers, Cafcass guardians, judges, solicitors, or other experts—we approach our work each day with unwavering hope and determination to positively impact children's lives and support their families in achieving the futures they deserve. Our shared mission is noble, yet this report serves as an essential reminder that our good intentions must be reflected in the experiences of those we serve. We must ask ourselves: How effectively are we translating our intentions into actions that resonate with the families we aim to assist?

The stories and themes presented in this report urge us to reflect on our practices and ignite a conversation around improvement. How can we enhance the system to not only function effectively but also embody compassion and care? How can we ensure that every child, every parent, and every family receives the support and dignity they deserve throughout this process?

I hope this report acts as a catalyst for reflection, dialogue, and transformative change. Let us take the lessons learned to heart, guiding us toward a system that not only prioritises child protection but also respects and uplifts every person involved in the process. Together, let's foster a culture of kindness and empathy at every stage of the care proceedings process, championing the mantra that 'better never stops' as we strive for continuous system wide learning and improvement.

**Ana Popovici**

**Deputy Chief Executive Serving Richmond and Wandsworth and  
Executive Director for Children's Services Wandsworth**

# About the authors



## About Mutual Ventures

We are public service and children's services reform experts. We aim to improve life chances by making public services better, more sustainable and more connected to communities.

Since Mutual Ventures was established in 2011, we have been at the forefront of innovative solutions to improve outcomes for children and families. We specialise in family justice and are the **DfE's delivery partner on a Designated Family Judge (DFJ) Trailblazer Programme** aimed at tackling unnecessary delays in care proceedings.

We are grateful to Mutual Ventures for delivering this insightful piece of work. This report provides a powerful glimpse into the real-life experiences of those navigating care proceedings.

Our investment in this work underscores our commitment to reducing delays in the family court system. By understanding these personal stories, we aim to drive meaningful changes that will improve outcomes for children and family experiences within the family court system.

***Department for Education***

# Executive Summary

## Objective and scope of this work

This report highlights the profound and lasting impacts of delayed care proceedings on parents, children and young people. Through a series of journey maps, we illustrate the real-life experiences and challenges faced by those who have gone through care proceedings, as it happened for them. The journey maps were created through interviews with mothers from the Cafcass Family Forum and the Pause programme, and young people from the Family Justice Young People's Board. While identifying details have been anonymised, the experiences described are real. All maps are compiled in a separate pack, which should be read in conjunction with this report.

## Findings

After developing the journey maps, it became clear that the clear themes running through all their experiences were that:

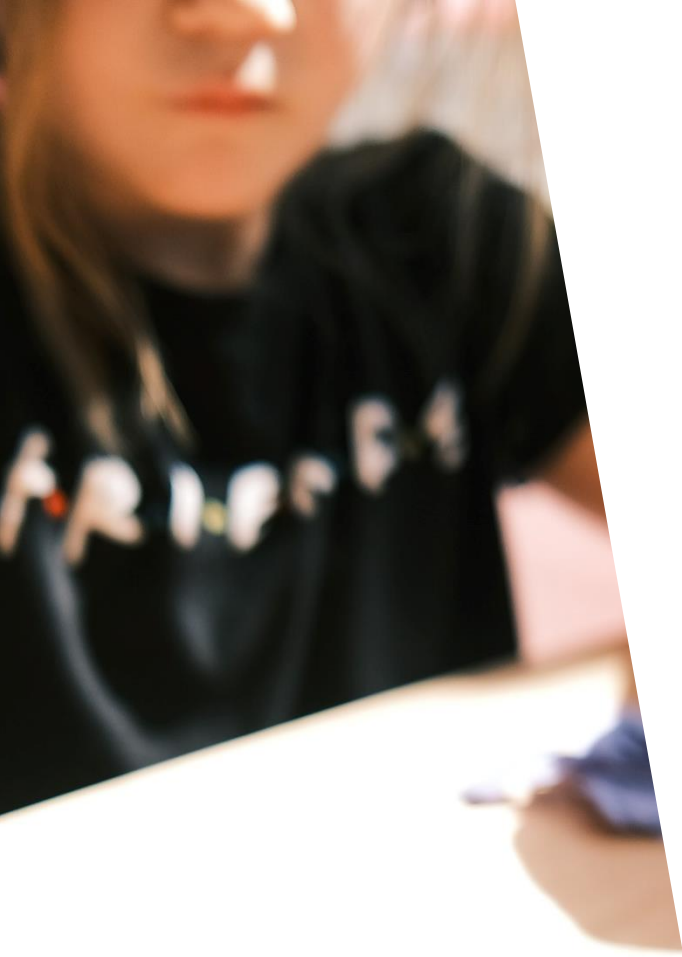
- ▼ The behaviour and attitude of professionals across the system had the potential to make profound impacts on individuals, both positively and negatively;
- ▼ Parents and young people find the processes in care proceedings very difficult when moving between bursts of activity and speed followed by long periods of inactivity, and the settings in court frightening and isolating; and
- ▼ The lack of available support systems before, during and after proceedings (for parents, but also young people as care leavers), left individuals struggling to cope with decisions that had been made through the court.

These themes also present tangible and realistic opportunities for change by: enhancing communication, behaviour, and attitudes to be more accessible, and better managing expectations during the process; addressing challenges with logistical and environmental issues in courts, better access to technology, better pacing throughout the proceedings; and expanding the availability of support systems before, during and after proceedings.

## Recommendations

If we do nothing, the long-term impacts felt by individuals and the system – which are already extremely serious – will only worsen. Many parents faced worsening mental health issues – and a complete loss of trust in key authorities like the local authority and police. As well as children and young people feeling excluded from conversations and struggling with permanence, the uncertainty and delays in proceedings often led to late diagnoses of special educational needs in children, resulting in serious behavioural issues.

The findings in this report stress the need for systematic and cultural changes to improve care proceedings for parents, children and young people. By adopting trauma-informed practices, promoting kindness and providing comprehensive emotional support throughout, we can better support parents, children and young people through care proceedings. This report aims to inspire improvements in the handling of care proceedings which will ultimately lead to better outcomes for all involved.



## Section 1. Introduction

Background to DFJ Trailblazers, the purpose of this report, and methodology of the research



## What is the DFJ Trailblazers Pilot Programme?

'DFJ Trailblazers: Reducing the Time to Family Court' is one of three Department for Education pilot programmes, funded by HM Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund. It involves working directly with local authorities (LAs) in five Designated Family Judge (DFJ) areas to implement tailored, whole system solutions and interventions to target local drivers of delays, with the aims of:

- ▼ **Diverting more cases from courts;**
- ▼ **Reducing the number of hearings per case, particularly further case management hearings;** therefore
- ▼ **Reducing delays in the family justice system;**
- ▼ **Reducing costs; and**
- ▼ **Improving outcomes for children and families.**

DFJ areas were invited to apply to join the Trailblazers pilot where their average case duration was above the national average. The Trailblazers pilot was then rolled out to five DFJ areas in February 2024: **Central London; Cheshire & Merseyside; Essex, Suffolk, Southend-on-Sea, Thurrock; Guildford; and Wolverhampton & Telford.**

The five Trailblazer DFJ areas have developed local solutions based on five intervention themes outlined by the DfE:

- 1) **Aligning system governance;**
- 2) **Improving data availability and use;**
- 3) **Creating vehicles and incentives for multi-agency collaboration;**
- 4) **Improving pre-proceeding practice and diverting cases from courts;**
- 5) **Helping children and families navigate the system.**

Across the five Trailblazer areas, local solutions focus most prominently on themes 1-4. Although some LAs have pre-existing forums for engaging with individuals with lived experience of Trailblazers to gather their feedback, this is not consistent across all LAs in each Trailblazer area.

Mutual Ventures has therefore undertaken this small piece of research as part of the pilot's learning programme to build up a better understanding of how delayed care proceedings have impacted the lives of real people, draw out key themes and recommendations for change, and share this learning with the five Trailblazers and the wider sector.

*To learn more about the DFJ Trailblazers pilot, please visit our website:*

[DFJ Trailblazers - Reducing Delay in Family Court](#)



## Why did we do this?

The purpose of this report is to capture the experiences and impact felt by parents and young people when care proceedings are delayed. Often, discussions about delays in care proceedings and efforts to improve outcomes for families and children focus on metrics – case numbers, average durations, or financial implications. While these factors are important, they only tell part of the story. Care proceedings profoundly affect individuals, leaving lasting impacts on their lives.

To bring these experiences to the forefront, we engaged with mothers who participated in the Pause Programme, as well as volunteers from the Cafcass Family Forum and the Family Justice Young People's Board. Drawing from their stories, we created a series of journey maps - a storytelling technique that visually represents an individual's experience throughout care proceedings. These maps aim to summarise their journeys and highlight the impact that care proceedings had on their lives.

We developed nine journey maps in total – eight based on the experiences of mothers and one reflecting the experiences of young people.

The journey maps do not seek to place judgement or blame. Rather, they seek to illustrate how those involved in delayed care proceedings feel, pinpoint key areas for improvement, and inspire more empathetic and effective handling of care proceedings in the future.

One of the overarching intervention themes of the DFJ Trailblazers pilot is to help parents and young people better navigate the family justice system. This report extends that effort by shedding light on the lived experiences of those directly affected. By understanding their journeys, we can better address their needs and improve outcomes for families and young people navigating this complex system.



## How did we do this?

### Parents' journey maps

To understand the experiences of parents, we conducted 1:1 interviews with five mothers from the Cafcass Family Forum and three mothers from the Pause Programme. These interviews were guided by a series of pre-approved questions developed and approved by sector specialists (former social workers and Directors of Children's Services). Interviews were recorded to more accurately capture more information, which was then collated into journey maps. To make sure all details were correct and reflected their experiences, the participants reviewed the draft journey maps and provided further feedback to ensure the accuracy of their stories.

### Young people's journey maps

For the young people's journey map, we hosted a focus group with three young people from the Family Justice Young People's Board. During this session, we discussed a journey map based on a fictional young person (which was developed with desk-based research from previous cases) to see if it resonated with their own experiences. We then adapted the journey map with the feedback from this discussion, to create a map that more authentically captured their experiences and reflected areas the participants felt was important to highlight (e.g. the impact on mental health).

### Anonymisation





The journey maps have been anonymised to protect the identity of all participants. Names, dates and locations have been changed unless otherwise specified.

### Sensitivity / trigger warning

This report and the appendix with journey maps contain stories that include challenging and sensitive material, such as experiences of trauma, abuse, and the emotional impact of care proceedings. Some readers may find this content difficult. Please approach the material with care.

## Journey map example

### Vanessa's Journey Map

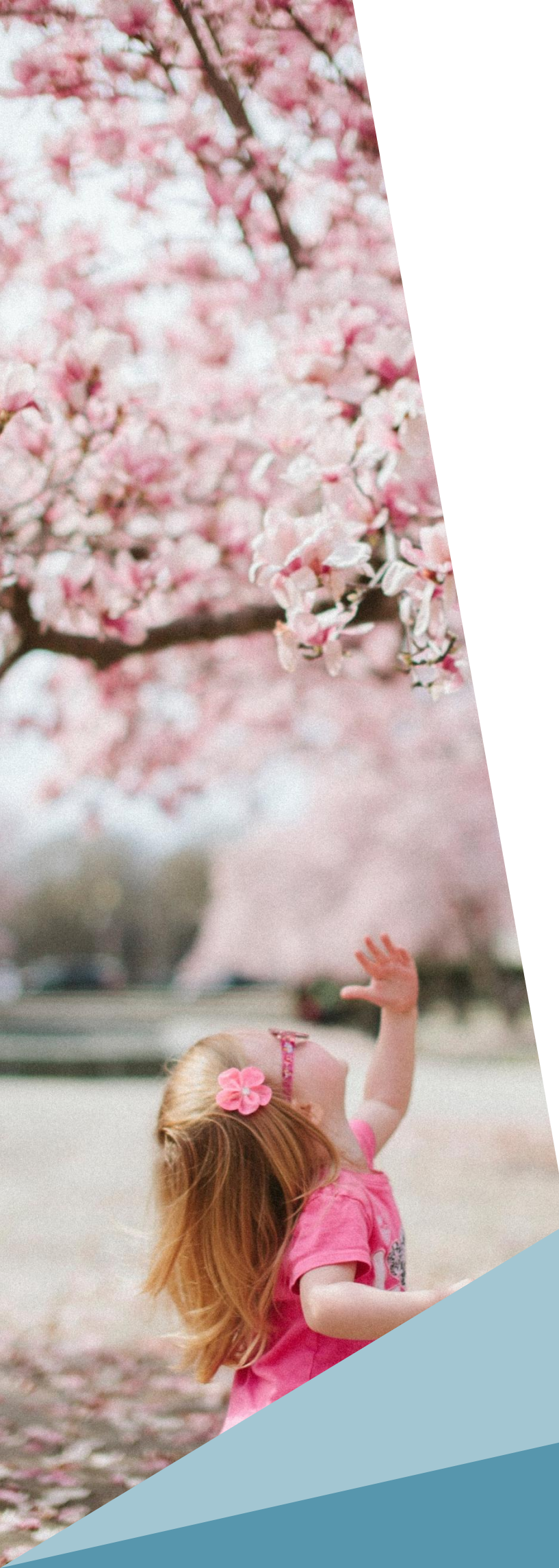
 <p>My name is Vanessa. I am 38 years old and I live in Stockport. I have been sober for five years and I am a graduate of the PAUSE program. My little girl was a newborn when proceedings started.</p> <p>My key message: "I would say the key message is to treat the parents as human beings, no matter what it says on paper just wait till you meet the real person. Let the person show you they have changed and what to do better." To mothers: "You never heal, you never forget but it does get better. You still think about your child or children but each day gets easier."</p>				
				
	PRE-PROCEEDINGS	FIRST HEARING AND FURTHER CASE MANAGEMENT HEARINGS	ISSUES RESOLUTION HEARING	FINAL HEARING
What usually happens at this stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The local authority gathers information to decide whether to make a care application.</li> <li>This involves a child and parent(s) meeting with multiple professionals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A first hearing is held, where the court makes plans for how decisions are going to be made for the child and what information is needed.</li> <li>More hearings may be required.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A special hearing where the family court decides which issues need to be sorted out and listens to people's views about the child's safety and future plans.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The judge will listen to all the evidence and make a final decision.</li> </ul>
My journey	My court proceedings were during COVID. Everything was online but I didn't own a phone or a laptop. The local authority tried to keep in touch by sending letters or calling my hostel repeatedly. This whole situation was confusing and left me feeling disorientated. I was still expected to complete online parenting courses or attend sessions with Better Lives. However, without a laptop and with Better Lives staff not showing up, these expectations were impossible to meet. My social worker didn't respond to any of my solicitor's attempts to explain all this. She would often remind me, 'I am your daughter's social worker, not yours.'	I was finally given a phone, but I did not know how to use Zoom. This was an alien concept. I was granted supervised contact with my daughter at a centre, but the place was far from child-friendly, it almost looked like an office. I was only given three weeks notice before my first court hearing and only told via text message. The first two court hearings were over Zoom in my solicitor's office. This experience felt surreal. I struggled to understand much of what was being said, but thankfully, my solicitor was there to explain everything. Throughout this time, I was doing routine strand tests.	The court hearings faced numerous delays because the biological father, who was recently released from prison was fighting for custody. His refusal to complete hair strand tests and various assessments meant the court hearings were repeatedly postponed. This part was the most challenging for me because as the process went on, I grew closer to my daughter. The inevitable final hearing loomed over us for ten months. There is, however, one small act of kindness I won't forget. A staff member at the contact centre took the time to compile photos of my daughter and me. This meant so much to me.	At the final hearing, the judge did not even look me in the eyes and being in the court room for the first time was scary. After the final hearing, my social worker said I could no longer phone her. I was given the chance to say goodbye to my daughter, as the court ruled she was to be adopted. I was introduced to my PAUSE practitioner shortly after the court proceedings ended. It was like an angel had come into my life. She was so lovely and for the first time, I felt as if someone was truly listening to me. It felt incredible to experience that because all through court proceedings no one even asked if I was okay.
Emotions	 Confused	Judged isolated	Mixed emotions, frustrated	Lost
Quotes	"Even though I was feeling horrible at the time, in a way, I was sort of lucky because my solicitor went above and beyond her job. She was actually like some kind of counsellor."	"Not one positive thing was said about me even though I was trying my best and was sober for a couple months before the first court date." "It is like they expect you to change overnight, it is ridiculous."	"It was absolute torture because as the process was dragging on, I was becoming more attached to my daughter. She even started calling me mum." "I had a feeling I wasn't getting her back so making it this long felt like a punishment."	"I felt so small when I was in the courtroom, like this tiny, little mouse in this big, huge room." "If it wasn't for PAUSE my story, could have been different, I could have gone back to drinking." "It was really nice to just have someone sort of make me feel like a human again."
Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authorities</li> <li>Key professionals such as social workers and doctors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authorities</li> <li>Judge</li> <li>Solicitors</li> <li>Key professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authorities</li> <li>Judge</li> <li>Solicitors</li> <li>Key professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authorities</li> <li>Judge</li> <li>Solicitors</li> <li>Key professionals</li> <li>PAUSE practitioner</li> </ul>
Timeline	June 2020 - November 2020 (24 weeks)	 November 2020 - October 2021 (52 weeks)	October 2021 - July 2022 (40 weeks)	July 2022 - September 2022 (8 weeks)
Pain points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No acknowledgement of my circumstances.</li> <li>Limited contact with my social worker.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There were many unrealistic demands.</li> <li>The language used in proceedings was not accessible.</li> <li>The process was far too long.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>My growing attachment to my daughter was not considered.</li> <li>The father's involvement in the court process was not managed closely.</li> <li>The process took too long.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The social worker was dismissive and unhelpful.</li> <li>The judge did not even make eye contact with me.</li> </ul>
Positives	I had a great solicitor.	I was bonding with my daughter.		I met my PAUSE practitioner.

### Each journey map includes:

- ▼ an anonymised biography providing background on the individual;
- ▼ a comparison of 'what usually happens at the key stages of care proceedings' versus 'my journey';
- ▼ direct quotes describing experiences and emotions at each stage of the process;
- ▼ a timeline of court proceedings, indicating when the 26-week statutory mark was exceeded;
- ▼ key pain points and positive moments within the process.

All journey maps are in the appendix of this report.





## Section 2. Key themes

Overview of the key themes and insights from the case stories



## Key findings

The case stories provide meaningful insights into the lived experiences of parents and young people navigating delayed care proceedings. While the sample size is modest, the stories offer a powerful lens through which to understand the emotional, practical, and systemic challenges faced by individuals in these circumstances.

The findings are drawn from the interviews and focus group, and the analysis has identified three key themes that encapsulate the core issues highlighted by participants. These themes not only reflect individual experiences but also offer broader lessons for improving care proceedings and supporting better outcomes for families and young people.

### Communication, behaviours and attitudes of professionals


1

Theme one focuses on the critical role that communication, behaviours, and attitudes of all professionals involved in care proceedings (including judges, social workers, Cafcass guardians) play in shaping parents' and young people's experiences of care proceedings, influencing trust, understanding, and overall outcomes.


2

### Challenging processes and settings

Theme two highlights a system marked by bursts of intense activity around deadlines, followed by extended periods of inactivity or delay, creating a cycle of rushed decision-making and prolonged waiting.

### Lack of available support systems


3

Theme three emphasises the lack of accessible and consistent support systems, leaving families and young people without the help they need to navigate care proceedings and their associated challenges effectively.

These themes are explored in more detail below and are illustrated with direct quotes from participants to provide deeper insight into their experiences.

## Theme 1: Communication, behaviours and attitudes of professionals

The attitudes and behaviours of professionals often had a significant impact on the parents and young people. There were examples of professionals displaying kindness and support whilst others were unfortunately dismissive or judgemental. In some cases, this undermined the parents' progress and trust in the process. This mixed experience was true and relevant for all professionals across the various stages of the court proceedings. Furthermore:

- ▼ Many parents experience a lack of clear, accessible communication throughout the care proceedings.
- ▼ Expectations are often unrealistic or poorly conveyed, with some parents given assurances (e.g. sobriety leading to child reunification) that do not materialise.
- ▼ Communication barriers are prevalent, with technical language being challenging and little effort made to adjust for cognitive impairments like ADHD or dyslexia.
- ▼ Interpersonal behaviours also have a very significant impact, with some professionals displaying kindness and support while others being dismissive or judgmental, potentially undermining parents' progress and trust in the process.



*"My son had a wonderful Cafcass Guardian who was very supportive and knew how to cater to his needs. She would often get down on the ground to speak to him so he could feel more comfortable."*



*"I felt judged constantly and belittled. During one court hearing, the local authority said to me, 'you cannot keep using the death of your mother as an excuse.'"*



*"The judge was comforting and even said to me, 'you are doing a great job and should be proud of yourself'. This meant a lot to me because I was worried the judge would say I was a bad mum or that I am doing something wrong."*



*"The judge was rude and said, 'I won't be funding Charlotte's dialectical behavioural therapy because it would be a waste of resources.'"*

## Theme 2: Challenging processes and settings

There were numerous challenges associated with the processes both in and out of court (timing, technology, courtroom arrangements). This included the pace of decision-making, and around courtroom arrangements being insensitive to personal circumstances.

Furthermore:

- ▼ The court process itself can be disempowering and overwhelming, with logistical and environmental issues adding to parents' stress. Parents often report that some parts of the court processes feel rushed and lack sufficient time for preparation and consultation with legal support.
- ▼ Many parents lack access to essential technology or are unfamiliar with virtual platforms, affecting their participation in virtual hearings (especially an issue during covid pandemic).
- ▼ Decisions are sometimes rushed - such as requests for Section 20 agreements shortly after childbirth - leaving parents feeling pressured and unprepared.
- ▼ Courtroom arrangements can be insensitive to trauma histories, for instance, requiring mothers to sit with past partners who were abusive or mothers with juvenile arthritis struggling to travel to court.



*"Immediately after giving birth, I was asked to sign a Section 20. I wasn't even given any time to rest or even think about the decision. I felt rushed and overwhelmed."*



*"The transition from the final hearing to having my baby back home was too quick. There were no social services to help with the transition. I wanted it to happen more slowly to cause my girl as little emotional pain as possible."*



*"My court proceedings were during COVID. Everything was online but I didn't own a phone or a laptop. The local authority had to keep in touch by sending letters or calling my hostel."*



*"I was forced to sit with my baby's father in the courtroom. This was an incredibly uncomfortable and intimidating experience."*

## Theme 3: Lack of available support systems

This cuts across the full timeline of care proceedings including: LA or social services intervening before parents reach crisis point, to better divert from proceedings; during care proceedings, where parents and children have insufficient emotional support to help them cope with the situation; and the 'cliff edge' post-proceedings where individuals are adapting to the decisions made but support has ended. Furthermore:

- ▼ The availability of support for parents and young people is limited and inconsistent across the timeline of care proceedings.
- ▼ Preventative support during pregnancy, especially to avoid care proceedings, is often felt to be lacking, leaving mothers feeling isolated and unsupported.
- ▼ During care proceedings parents and children do not receive emotional support to help them cope with the situation.
- ▼ Post-proceeding support is similarly scarce, with minimal resources for children reuniting with families or mothers adapting to changes.
- ▼ Additionally, the environment in Mother and Baby Units is often isolating, with limited community or peer support, further compounding the challenges parents face during these high-stress periods.



*"I had raised my son for eight years of his life, I was just struggling with something and needed help. It was only after things got serious that social services got involved."*



*"Losing my child led me down a dark path, I turned to drugs, and I started living on the streets after I became homeless."*



*"I went completely insane. I was on the verge of being sectioned, I was trying to end my life every other day. My mental health was catapulted to a catastrophic level."*



*"The whole experience was horrible; there's just no other way to describe what I was put through."*



A photograph of two children, a boy and a girl, walking away from the camera through a field of purple heather. The boy is on the left, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and yellow pants. The girl is on the right, wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and rainbow-striped pants. They are holding hands. The background is a blurred landscape with hills under a cloudy sky. The image is partially obscured by a white diagonal shape on the right side of the page.

## Section 3. Long-term impacts

Long-term impacts of delayed care proceedings on parents, children and young people, and the system

## Long-term impacts

Although the proceedings may have concluded for the professionals involved, the ripple effects continue to profoundly impact parents, children and young people, and broader public services. These continued effects underscore the far-reaching and lasting impact care proceedings have on families, often compounding the very challenges they aim to address.

### The impact on parents

- ▼ **Substance use:** Some parents who had previously struggled with addiction reported difficulties maintaining sobriety or retreated further into substance and alcohol use.
- ▼ **Mental health:** Many parents experienced increased mental health difficulties (for instance, a parent diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder faced further challenges when a judge refused to allow the local authority to fund dialectical behaviour therapy to help her manage the condition). Other parents related how they fell into severe depression, in some cases to the point of being suicidal, which for some led them to repeatedly try to take their own lives – and for others, led to being sectioned under mental health legislation.
- ▼ **Social isolation:** Many parents shared they also lost previously close friend and family relationships. They often felt unable to share their struggles, while assessments of family members during proceedings strained or severed relationships. One parent's eventual homelessness was linked to the loss of their support network.
- ▼ **Distrust in authorities:** Parents described a profound loss of trust in key institutions such as local authorities and the police. Many expressed fear of interacting with these agencies in the future or an outright refusal to engage with them, even when in need.

### The impact on children and young people

- ▼ **Trust issues:** Young people struggled to believe that proceedings were truly “over.” Repeated moves between foster placements and residential care eroded their sense of permanence and stability.
- ▼ **Need for control:** Feeling excluded from key conversations due to their age led young people to seek control elsewhere, often in ways detrimental to their mental health, such as obsessive focus on schoolwork.
- ▼ **Delayed diagnoses:** The uncertainty and delays in proceedings resulted in late diagnoses of special educational needs, such as autism or ADHD. This lack of timely intervention delayed access to crucial support, such as speech and language therapy, leading to significant behavioural challenges in school.

### The impact on the system

The delays in several sets of proceedings had a clear impact on wider public services in that considerable additional costs had to be incurred, which placed a strain on already-stretched resources.

- ▼ **Prolonged stays in temporary accommodation:** Parents housed in Mother and Baby Units for what was intended to be a few weeks often remained for months or even years due to court delays. This not only created issues for the parents but also prevented new mothers and babies from accessing these units, limiting their availability for others in need.
- ▼ **Repeated foster placement disruptions:** There were parents and young children who were in foster placements but had to be moved repeatedly over several months; and where no placements were available, parents and children often needed to be housed in hotels, all of which would come with a rapidly increasing cost to the local authority.
- ▼ **Prolonged use of contact centres:** Delays resulted in parents relying on contact centres for supervised visits with their children for years instead of weeks or months. This placed additional demands on social workers and Cafcass staff, pulling resources away from other proceedings and further straining the system.





## **Section 4.** **Recommendations**

An outline  
of recommendations and  
their potential impact



## Recommendations

The themes identified throughout our conversations with mothers and young people present clear challenges – but also present specific and tangible opportunities for adjustments, ranging from small actions to larger changes.

### Enhancing communication, behaviour, and attitudes of professionals



#### 1.1. Foster trauma-informed practices

**Training and supervision support:** All professionals involved in care proceedings, including social workers, Cafcass guardians, judiciary and legal representatives, should undergo trauma-informed training. This would help them understand the impact of past trauma on parents and respond sensitively, fostering a supportive environment and avoiding judgmental behaviours. It would also help them use trauma-informed approaches.

#### 1.2. Promote small acts of kindness

**Clear and kind communication:** Professionals should use plain, accessible language, avoiding jargon, and take care to explain complex processes. They should ensure that expectations are realistic and clearly outlined, particularly regarding services and goals, to avoid giving parents false hope. Encourage professionals to use kind words and show appreciation for parents' efforts, such as acknowledging progress or expressing empathy. This could be done through local value charters / covenants developed by Local Family Justice Boards and adopted by all partner agencies.

**Positive gestures:** Develop practical guidance focused on encouraging professionals to engage in small, meaningful gestures, like offering encouraging words, recognising parental efforts toward improvement, and compiling photos of children and parents during supervised visits. This should be based on real live examples provided by social workers and parents. These gestures can affirm parents' progress and convey compassion, helping to build trust and reduce the emotional strain of the process.

#### 1.3. Provide inclusive emotional support and advocacy

**Dedicated advocates:** Consider making a dedicated advocate or emotional support worker available to all parents who want to access support, offering someone they can talk to throughout the proceedings. This individual could help the family understand the process, offer a compassionate ear, and advocate for adjustments to accommodate any cognitive needs, such as ADHD or dyslexia.

**Peer support groups:** Establish local peer support groups where parents can experience and receive mutual support, enhancing their emotional resilience.

## 2

## Addressing challenges with processes and settings

**2.1. Improve access to technology and training**

**Technology access:** Ensure that parents have access to necessary technology, such as mobile phones and laptops, to participate effectively in virtual proceedings.

**Training on virtual platforms:** Ensure that support with using platforms like Zoom is available to ensure parents are comfortable and capable of navigating virtual court environments. This could be part of the advocacy and emotional support service described above.

**2.2. Promote respectful and sensitive court process**

**Respectful timeframes:** While there is an ongoing focus on reducing unnecessary delays, parents need to be allowed sufficient time for parents to prepare for court proceedings, including time to consult with solicitors and understand their legal rights and options. A minimum time for preparations could be stipulated in local value charters / covenants developed by Local Family Justice Boards (as described above).

**Trauma-informed courtroom environment:** Create guidelines for court settings that prioritise the emotional and physical safety of families, such as ensuring separate seating for parents with a history of domestic abuse. This could involve a pre-hearing consultation to identify and address any specific safety concerns.

**Better manage fathers and family participation:** Strengthen policies around the involvement of fathers and other family members in a way that is sensitive to family dynamics (e.g. preventing coercive behaviours). Properly managing participation helps ensure proceedings are fair and supports child welfare goals without disregarding family safety and well-being.

## Expanding availability of support systems

### 3

#### 3.1. Provide comprehensive support throughout the process

**Continuous support:** Consider providing all families with access to continuous advocacy and emotional support throughout the entire process, from initial investigations through to post-proceeding support. An assigned advocate (separate to a social worker) could provide a stable point of contact, helping families navigate the system and providing emotional support during challenging times. This could include providing resources such as dialectical behavioural therapy, alongside prescribed medication, to help parents manage stress and emotional challenges.

**Preventative support:** Offer dedicated support (such as substance abuse and mental health programmes) during pregnancy to help prevent the need for care proceedings, addressing issues proactively to support family stability. This could include using Family Drug and Alcohol Courts in pre-proceedings.

**Supportive environment in Mother and Baby Units:** Mother and Baby Units should be designed to foster community and provide opportunities for social interaction, allowing access to peer support and family-like connections that can help alleviate feelings of isolation. This can include support groups, family-oriented activities, and regular interaction with advocacy staff. Where appropriate, promote community mother and baby assessments.

**Regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms:** Use feedback from parents and children to refine and enhance support mechanisms continuously. Adapt support services based on emerging needs and feedback, ensuring that the assistance provided remains relevant and effective in addressing the challenges faced by families.

#### 3.2. Enhance post-proceeding support

**Reintegration services:** Develop robust post-proceeding support for children returning home and for mothers adjusting to changes, ensuring they have access to necessary resources and community support.

**Increased access to child-friendly spaces:** Ensure that supervised visit spaces are child-friendly and provide opportunities for bonding in a warm, welcoming environment. Adjusting these spaces to be more inviting can create positive shared experiences for families, improving parent-child relationships even within structured settings.

# Conclusion

The findings in this report underscore the profound and lasting impacts of delayed care proceedings on parents, children, and young people. The findings stress the urgent need for systematic and cultural changes to improve care proceedings.

While some recommendations can be implemented locally, others will require broader national change.

Any professionals involved in care proceedings can undergo trauma-informed training to better understand and respond to the needs of parents and children. Local Family Justice Boards can develop value charters to promote clear and kind communication, ensuring that expectations are realistic and clearly outlined.

Additionally, local authorities can establish peer support groups and explore the use of dedicated advocates to offer continuous emotional support throughout the proceedings.

On a national level, there is a need to ensure that court processes are respectful and sensitive to the needs of families. This includes creating guidelines for trauma-informed courtroom environments and ensuring that parents have access to necessary technology and training for participating in virtual hearings.

National focus should also consider how to expand the availability of support systems, such as providing comprehensive support throughout the entire process and enhancing post-proceeding support for children and parents.

These are a small sample of stories, but they also reflect the experiences of thousands of people currently going through care proceedings. It is imperative that we learn from these stories, and take action to ensure better outcomes for all involved.



# Glossary

Below is a list of terms referred to in this report and the journey maps, and their definitions.

**Adjournment** – A decision made by the family court to hold the court hearing at another time because things are not ready or people need more time to do something.

**Adoption Order** – A type of order made by the family court which transfers parental responsibility to new, adoptive parents and means that a child or young person is no longer legally the child of their birth parents.

**Barrister** – A legally trained person who advises people going through the family court and speaks for them in court hearings.

**Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)** - a type of mental health diagnosis; those diagnosed may have difficulties with how they think and feel about themselves and other people, or may experience emotions that are very intense, overwhelming or changeable. They may also experience difficulties with relationships or their sense of identity.

**Care order** – An order made by the family court when the local authority can prove that a child or young person living in their area is not being looked after properly.

**Contact centre** – This is a safe place where children and young people can see a parent who they do not live with. Usually, this allows for direct contact, supervised contact or supported contact.

**Cafcass guardian** – The family court will ask for a children's guardian, from Cafcass, to help them and represent them. The guardian is an independent person who is there to keep the court focused on what is best for the child or young person. They will also appoint a solicitor to act for the young person in court.

**Direct contact** – When a child or young person spends time with someone that they do not live with.

**Final order** – This is the last order made by the family court.

**Foster placement** – People who give a home to children and young people who need a safe place to live. They may have children of their own, or other foster children living with them.

**Indirect contact** – A child or young person can use forms of contact such as letters, cards or gifts to communicate with a parent where the court considers it is safe and beneficial for them to do so.

**Issues Resolution Hearing (IRH)** – This is a special hearing where the family court decides which issues need to be sorted out and hears arguments about which is a true version of events.

**Pre-proceedings** – Work that is carried out by the local authority (sometimes involving Cafcass) before a decision on making a care application is made.

**Section 20** – a voluntary arrangement where children in England are looked after in the care system by local authorities. It is an arrangement that can be put in place without any court oversight, but it is not a court order. Children in voluntary arrangements are not described as being 'in care'. Instead, they are described as 'accommodated' by children's services.

**Special Guardianship Order (SGO)** – This family court order allows another person to become a child's 'special guardian'. It is for children who cannot live with their birth parents and gives parental responsibility to the special guardian so that they can make decisions alone about the child's life.

**Supervision order** – A supervision order makes the local authority take responsibility for advising, assisting and befriending a young person, and ensuring that the child or young person is kept safe in the care of their parents.

**Supported contact** – This is direct contact whereby a child contact centre worker gives some support to the adults so that they can meet the needs of their child.