

Good Practice Guide

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

Edition 4:

November 2024

Purpose and structure of this document

Purpose

The DFJ Trailblazer pilot is a DfE-funded programme supporting five 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 4-11 A high-level overview of the models and programmes
- Slide 12 A preview of future content for the final issue of this guide



Overview of case studies and presented initiatives

Mapping to the Trailblazer pilot

Key drivers of delay:	Pre-Case Management Hearing Pilot	One Adoption West Yorkshire – EPP Practice Development	AI policy buddy – North Yorkshire	Working with children affected by parental imprisonment – Lancashire VRN	Family Hubs - Essex	Lifelong Links – Family Rights Group	SWIFT – East Sussex
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	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Pre-Case Management Hearing Pilot

WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- A national Shared Outcomes Fund pilot which involves the use of Pre-Case Management Hearings in cases where care proceedings are issued.
- It introduces an information-sharing meeting between the child(ren)'s local authority social worker and the Cafcass Guardian involved with a family, which will take place after the issuing of care proceedings but before the first Case Management Hearing (CMH). This will allow:
 - The Guardian to have a better understanding of the family.
 - The Guardian to be better informed on the social work analysis, the timing of the application and the reason for the type of Order applied for.
 - Increased clarity in decision-making to reduce uncertainty that could lead to requests for new or additional expert assessments or challenges around identifying a suitable placement.
 - A smoother and less adversarial court experience for families and professionals, reducing unnecessary delay.
 - Coordinated and quality letters of instructions.

KEY FEATURES

- An option for a meeting facilitator who would guide the conversation and outline the meeting format (likely a service manager or case progression officer).
- Family Friendly Pre-Case Management Hearing Meeting Notes which will provide information that was shared by the social worker and the guardian during the meeting.

OUTCOMES

- An evaluation for the pilot will be completed in March 2025. The expected outcomes are:
 - A streamlined partnership approach between the local authority and Cafcass,
 - Increased information sharing.
 - The voice of the child remains central to the process.

Helpful links



Context and aims



How to: Guide for LAs

DELAY DRIVER MAPPING

Late family presentation

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One Adoption West Yorkshire – Early Permanence Placement (EPP) Practice Development

WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

The aim of an Early Permanence Placement (EPP) is to reduce the number of placement moves a young child may experience through care proceedings. This is achieved by placing young children who cannot be cared for within their own families with a foster carer. The foster carer would then adopt the child(ren) should the parents be unable to make the changes required for them to be able to return to their care. The practice development initiative aimed to:

- Increase the number of EPP opportunities for children in West Yorkshire;
- Improve understanding and awareness of EPP placements;
- Focus on the partnership between the foster carers, birth parents and the local authority to enable fully informed decisions to be made and there to be realistic expectations around potential outcomes;
- Reduce delay for children finding a permanent placement;
- Review practice to identify areas for development and improvement;
- Improve support for EPP foster carers;
- Engage with birth parents to better understand their experiences.

KEY FEATURES

- A designated member of staff leading on the practice development.
- Increased education and training on EPP placements for parents, foster carers and professionals.
- A focus on the partnership working with foster carers and their allocated social workers.
- Peer support networks.
- Adjusted terminology to ensure the focus is on the best outcomes for the child.
- Supporting the system to share consistent messages.
- Supporting realistic expectations.

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OUTCOMES

The anticipated outcomes of this practice development are:

- Increased numbers of EPP carers in West Yorkshire.
- Increased awareness and upskilling of social workers in identifying families and most suitable referrals.
- Introduction of a mandatory training module for adopters.
- A further fuller EPP training opportunity is available that incorporates views of experienced EPP carers.
- Creation of a Peer Mentoring service for EPP carers and built-in informal information sessions.
- A three-episode podcast series on Adopting through Early Permanence.
- Identified areas of further practice development e.g. wider family support.

Helpful links

- [One Adoption West Yorkshire Podcast - Episodes 1-3 on adopting through Early Permanence](#)
- [Early Permanence Planning Practice Guide](#)
- [The legal framework of Early Permanence](#)

AI Policy Buddy – North Yorkshire

WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- The Policy Buddy is an AI tool developed by engine-ai.co.uk which provides guidance and advice to the children’s social care team in North Yorkshire.
- Policy Buddy uses RAG (Retrieval Augmented Generation) trained with knowledge of local and national legislation, procedures and guidance relating to children’s services.
- The tool allows social workers to ask questions and seek guidance on a wide range of things. One example in the webinar (linked below) was: **“A family whose child is subject to a child protection plan wants to them out of the country on holiday. What needs to happen?”** The tool then provides some suggested next steps for the social worker.
- The service enables staff to check the sources of the response.
- This tool was created to address challenges with staff workloads enabling them to spend more time working directly with families and children.

OUTCOMES

- This tool has only been in use for three months at the time of writing but early feedback has been promising with staff finding that Policy Buddy increases efficiency.
- Almost 1,000 staff have been trained on the platform. Feedback from frontline staff and managers has been universally positive.
- Anecdotally, staff also feel more confident in the ability of technology to support them.
- Staff also report feeling more connected with legislation, policies and procedures.

KEY FEATURES

- The Policy Buddy is trained to only look at internal policy documentation and national legislation. This reduces the risk of hallucination – a term used in AI to describe a response returned by an AI tool presented as fact when it is actually false or misleading.
- The tool can provide guidance in over 50 different languages or tailored to specific audiences. For example, you might ask it to explain something technical as if you were eight years old.
- The tool has an accessible front end which allows staff to find information and crucially, check the sources of results. It also works on a phone and can use speech-to-text functions.

Helpful links

[Policy Buddy – blog post](#)

[Tool demonstration \(as part of a webinar\)](#)

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Lancashire Violence Reduction Network – Toolkit for professionals working with children affected by parental imprisonment

WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- This toolkit is designed to support professionals working with the approximately 300,000 children impacted each year by parental imprisonment. Where that parent is their primary carer (most likely their mother), 95% of children are forced to leave their home.
- Data on these children is scarce with an exact figure unknown. Many of these children are likely in private fostering arrangements with people known to their parents.
- It aims to raise awareness among professionals, improve their skills in addressing the needs of these children, and promote multi-agency collaboration to ensure timely support and positive outcomes.
- The toolkit includes a Child Impact Assessment which is not recommended as a statutory procedure, but a tool that statutory or non-statutory professionals can use to better understand the needs of a child. This assessment was co-created with the Prison Reform Trust, the Merseyside Women's Services Alliance, Time-Matters UK and staff from Wirral safeguarding Children Partnership's Family Matters.

OUTCOMES

- There is no evaluation to confirm outcomes from the use of this toolkit.
- The anticipated outcomes from the use of the toolkit are:
 - Improved experiences for children affected by parental imprisonment
 - Better understanding of the needs of these children from professionals
- Outcomes for children with imprisoned parents is also limited as there are no requirements for data to be collected either in the court or when a parent arrives in custody.

KEY FEATURES

- Information and guidance on the processes of key stages including arrest, prison and release and how a child might be impacted by this.
- The Child Impact Assessment can be completed with a child to better understand their network and what they've experienced through the process of having a parent incarcerated.
- A support wheel can form part of the Child Impact Assessment to help children map out their network and identify where their support is.

Helpful links

- [Impact on children of parental custody - toolkit](#)
- [Mia's story - book to support children with a parent in prison](#)
- [7 minute briefing - Impact of parental incarceration](#)

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Essex – Family Hub model

WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- The Essex Family Hub model is an integrated approach to providing support for families with children from pre-birth to 19 years old (or up to 25 for those with special educational needs and disabilities)
- The services provided by the hub include:
 - 0-5 Healthy Child Programme,
 - Healthy Schools Programme,
 - 5-19 Healthy Child Programme,
 - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support up to 25 years,
 - Children in Care,
 - Safeguarding Services.
- The Family Hub service is commissioned by Essex County Council and delivered by HCRG Care Group with Barnardo's.
- Although not directly linked to reducing delay in care proceedings, family hubs are a vital early intervention model supporting families dealing with substance misuse and resilience support for parents.

OUTCOMES

- Essex's partner in Family Hubs delivery report that:
- 99% of children and young people they work with through the Hubs model feel supported in reaching their goals.
 - 94% of risks removed following subsequent assessments.
 - 98% of young parents feel they are making more positive lifestyle choices.
 - 96% of mothers say their emotional wellbeing has improved.

KEY FEATURES

- A Family Hub is located in each district across Essex in convenient areas accessible to the community.
- Services are managed and delivered based on four regions within Essex aligned to the local government districts (Mid, North, South and West).
- In addition to the Essex-wide offer, some regions have bespoke offers, for example, the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board commission a range of health-related services from physiotherapy to speech and language therapy.

Helpful links

- [Homepage for Essex Child & Family Wellbeing Service](#)
- [Essex Council webpage - Family hubs](#)

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Lifelong Links – Family Rights Group

WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- Lifelong Links is a programme that aims to address the fragmentation of family networks that often occurs when children are looked after away from their parents.
- It aims to improve the sense of identity and belonging in looked after children that will support young people while they're in care, and also as they transition into adulthood.
- This model was developed by the Family Rights Group in collaboration with key stakeholders including children and young people in care and care leavers, as a result of the 2013 Care Inquiry which found that the care system too often broke relationships for children, rather than built them.
- Through working with a Lifelong Links coordinator, a young person will be supported to map their support network and identify who is important to them. The coordinator will then make contact with these people and bring them together in a Lifelong Links family group conference.

OUTCOMES

- Increased supportive relationships: The number of family and friend connections for young people in care increased significantly, from an average of 7 to 26 connections
- Improved placement stability: Young people who participated in Lifelong Links were more likely to remain in the same foster care or children's home a year later compared to those who did not participate.

KEY FEATURES

- A trained independent coordinator works with the child to identify important people in their lives, such as family members, former foster carers, teachers, and other significant adults.
- During the conference, a plan of support is created with and for the child. This plan is then integrated into the child's care or pathway plan.
- A new app-based tool called 'Circles' supports young people and professionals to explore who in a child's life is most important to them.

Helpful links

- [Lifelong Links - Family Rights Group](#)
- [Family Rights Group Lifelong Links portrait – Sadie's story](#)

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SWIFT – East Sussex

WHAT IS THE INITIATIVE?

- SWIFT is a jointly commissioned, multidisciplinary provider of specialist assessment and intervention. The service receives referrals only from Social Care services or Peri Natal units.
- Teams are structured by thematic risk presentation with a solid and stable workforce. SWIFT provide mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, learning disability, sexual risk and domestic abuse support services.
- SWIFT assessments are based around clear and transparent guidelines which are developed by practitioners but can be tweaked by judiciary and lawyers involved in cases.
- It promotes less reliance on psychological or psychiatric assessments and more focus on interventions for parents. Parents are encouraged to tell their story to one practitioner, rather than having to repeat their story to many different people across multiple services.
- Within pre-proceedings and proceedings, SWIFT practitioners can assist in the planning of assessments and interventions to support parents.

OUTCOMES

- For adult mental health provision, 144 assessments were completed (2018/19) leading to 62 interventions and only 13 referrals to other services.
- Only 15 disengagements from the service (less than 10%).
- For Drug and Alcohol prevention, 156 assessments leading to 100 interventions and 20 referrals to other services.
- 13 disengagements from 74 discharges from alcohol service.

KEY FEATURES

- Truly multidisciplinary, including management and reporting structures.
- Structure based on parental risk presentation.
- Experts supplement and add value to social work evidence.
- Pre-proceedings is an opportunity to multi-disciplinary assessment and intervention.
- A strength-based model;
- It has taken 5 years to develop the model which is now fully supported by Cafcass and the judiciary. Feedback is very positive.

Helpful links

- [SWIFT Specialist Family Service – Nuffield overview](#)

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The next Good Practice Guide will be a compilation of all previous guides and will also include examples of the work and good practice from the five current Trailblazer areas who have been participating in the DFJ Trailblazers pilot programme.

However, if you have any suggestions for initiatives to feature in the final iteration of this guide, we would really like to hear from you:

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