

# Good Practice Guide

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

Version 1:

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# 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 purpose of this document is to highlight examples of good practices throughout England, which may help Trailblazers in the solution design phase of the pilot. The document includes both innovative ideas and important considerations to execute standard practices effectively.

The purpose of these cases is not to provide definitive or prescriptive answers to the Trailblazer areas. Rather, it seeks to inform the thinking behind the solution development process, to inspire, and to stimulate discussion among the Trailblazer areas.

## **Structure overview**

- Slide 4 A matrix mapping the cases to key drivers of delays raised in diagnostic sessions
- Slides 5-11 A high-level overview of the models and programmes
- Slides 12-13 Additional good practice examples and ideas



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

# Mapping to the Trailblazer pilot

Key drivers of delay:	London Councils' joint workforce initiatives	Tri-borough Care Proceedings Pilot	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Pre-Birth Protocol	Family Group Conferencing	Bournemouth court-based social worker training	North Somerset pre-proceedings approach	Warrington pre-proceedings practice
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	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

# Joint workforce initiatives across London Councils

## WHAT ARE THE INITIATIVES?

- The London Pledge (2022): a shared commitment by London's Directors of Children's Services to addressing increasing agency reliance together. Part of this includes introducing agreements among areas to not outcompete each other on pay, and to cap what LAs may pay for agency workers, to reduce social worker turnover.
- The Big Listen (2023): survey research in collaboration with the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme to collect social worker feedback (n = 1000+) to inform regional workforce strategies.
- London Social Work for Children: a web-based platform that aims to provide employment and professional development opportunities across London, to both practicing and prospective social workers, including local and regional recruitment campaigns as well as professional development resources.

## OUTCOMES

- 32 London Boroughs have signed the London Pledge. The London councils anticipate that the initiative will help to create a stable and high-performing workforce of social workers in London.
- The published findings from The Big Listen survey are being used to shape regional workforce priorities.

## KEY FEATURES

- Inter-council collaboration, transparency, and information sharing
- Dedicated efforts to collect workforce feedback and insight
- Emphasis on targeted trainings to develop current and future social workers
- Centralised source of recruitment campaigns for social work positions across a region
- Non-compete element among local authorities to improve social worker retention

## Helpful links:

- [The Big Listen final report](#)
- [London Social Work for Children website](#)
- [The London Pledge Commitment Document](#)
- [London boroughs collaborate to end "bidding wars" over social workers](#)

## DELAY DRIVER MAPPING

Late family presentation

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# Tri-borough Care Proceedings Pilot

## WHAT ARE TRI-BOROUGH CARE PROCEEDINGS?

From 2012-2013, the Tri-Borough local authorities (Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster) ran a pilot that aimed to reduce court delays by lowering the average number of hearings per case from 8.8 to 4.

Elements of the pilot included:

- 1) A newly appointed Case Manager worked directly with social workers and managers in order to improve the quality of social work assessments and statements presented to court.
- 2) Emphasis on judicial continuity in cases, and improved case management of timescales from the court for the child.
- 3) Cafcass' earlier assignment of Guardians and solicitors to cases.
- 4) Redesign of parenting and fostering/adoption assessments to be proportional to the case complexity, meaning that some will be less than previously standard 12-16 weeks.
- 5) Development of a project learning program, which tracks cases, processes, costs, and outcomes for children throughout the pilot.

## OUTCOMES

The pilot reduced the average court time from 49 weeks to 27 weeks. Approximately half of the pilot cases had completed within 26 weeks. It also reduced the median duration of pre-proceedings.

## KEY FEATURES

- Dedicated Case Manager role
- Emphasis on improving social work assessments and statements in court
- Frontloading assignment of workers to cases
- Strategic redesigning of assessments to reflect cases and reduce delays

## Helpful links:

- [Pilot final report](#)
- [Pre-legislative scrutiny of the Children and Families Bill: Written evidence from the Tri-borough Care Proceedings Pilot](#)

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# Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Pre-Birth Protocol

## WHAT IS THE PROTOCOL?

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Pre-Birth Protocol is a publicly available document that clearly outlines the standard practice, expectations, and timescales involved in the area's pre-birth work. The document provides guidance for identifying risk factors and working alongside parents to protect the unborn child from harm.

The protocol aims to standardise early, comprehensive pre-birth assessments and to share plans of service/intervention with parents by week 35 of gestation. This emphasis on early work and assessments may reduce delay throughout the process.

In its guidance, the document lays out expected areas of joint working in the pre-birth process. For example, it discusses joint visits to the prospective parent(s)' home by the social worker and the community midwife for information sharing. It also lays out the process and timelines for Multi-Agency Meetings and Discharge Planning Meetings, which involve relevant staff from the Leaving Care Service, Learning Disability Services, Drug and Alcohol Services, Housing colleagues, and other applicable groups.

Standardised templates for the Discharge Planning Meeting are linked within the Protocol, which creates a straightforward and user-friendly path to protocol compliance.

## KEY FEATURES

- Regional standardisation of practice and expectations
- Emphasis on early pre-birth assessments to frontload work and preparation
- Clearly defined timescales and areas for cross-system collaboration
- Easily accessible guidance for scenarios involving complex factors, including learning disabilities, concealed or denied pregnancies, and prospective parents with care experience

## Helpful links:

- [The Pre-Birth Protocol](#)
- [Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's other multi-agency policies and procedures](#)

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# Family Group Conferencing (FGCs)

## KEY SUCCESS FACTORS OF FGCs

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) involves a mediated discussion among the child and their network to collaboratively create a plan for the child, generally during pre-proceedings or before. Although there is no legal requirement for an FGC, the practice has become increasingly standard, with 80% of LAs using them as of 2022.

Many areas cite parents' lack of willingness/trust as a main barrier to their successful and consistent usage. Some specific considerations to maximise the effectiveness of FGCs include:

- More work needs to be done to communicate FGCs' benefits to families so that FGCs can be used for a greater proportion of cases
- There is a potential opportunity to promote FGCs with local private solicitors so that they can encourage their clients to participate
- Active efforts to avoid paternalism and humiliation

## KEY FEATURES

- Early family empowerment and engagement
- Trust building among stakeholders
- Focus on involvement of the child in plan development
- Cost effective method providing a path toward alternatives to issuing care proceedings

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## OUTCOMES

- A randomised controlled trial (RCT) assessed the use of FGCs among 21 LAs throughout the country from 2020-2022. It concluded that, compared to cases without FGCs, the cases with FGCs:
  - were 8.6% less likely to go into care within 12 months
  - saved £960 per child saved in first 12 months
  - were 0.82x less likely to have care proceedings issued
- A 2017 evaluation of the Leeds Family Valued programme showed that expanding FGCs to more families, including those affected by domestic violence, led to reduced court proceedings, fewer looked-after children, £755 in savings per family, and a decline in Child Protection Plans.

## Case studies and helpful links:

- [RCT findings report](#)
- [Leeds Family Valued model](#)
- [North-east Lincolnshire Creating Strong Communities report](#)
- [2021 study on successes and failures of FGCs](#)



# Bournemouth Court-based Social Worker Training

## WHAT IS BOURNEMOUTH DOING TO TRAIN SWs?

In Bournemouth, the judiciary works alongside Bournemouth University and invites social work students to come to Court for tours and conversations. Social workers engage in training co-arranged by legal and the local authorities.

As part of the training, they use the Court space for a day and work alongside with the Designated Family Judge. In his involvement with the Court talks, the Judge aims to:

- 1) Clearly articulate the Court's expectations of social workers
- 2) Demystify what happens in Court
- 3) Explain that even when the Judge disagrees in Court, it does not mean that the social worker was necessarily wrong
- 4) Discuss what to consider and how to proceed when things go wrong in Court
- 5) Highlight his respect for social workers and the importance of their jobs
- 6) Make Court a less scary place for social workers, and emphasise that although it is hard, social workers are able and qualified to attend

This initiative serves as a valuable example of system-wide commitment to workforce training and relationship building.

## KEY FEATURES

- Building social workers' confidence in Court
- Strong engagement from the Judge
- Collaboration among judiciary and local university
- Focus on strengthening system-wide relationships
- Effort to validate social workers' invaluable roles in the system
- Emphasis on clarifying specific expectations on social workers

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## OUTCOMES

- The programme has not collected formal outcomes data, but the Designated Family Judge's feedback is that social workers seem more confident to raise concerns and have more open conversations.
- If the programme functions as intended, potential outcomes will include improved social worker confidence and competence in Court, improved trust in social work quality, and thus reduced use of external social work assessors.

# North Somerset innovative approach to pre-proceedings

## WHAT IS THE APPROACH?

- The key priority is to propose creative support packages and therapeutic support to families with an aim to divert cases from court. This includes:
- Expectation of a family network meeting and a family-led plan for every child
  - Parenting assessments that are therapeutically driven
  - Cognitive assessments done early on to inform how social workers could best engage with parents
  - Instead of costly psychological assessments, the LA prefers to fund therapeutic support (there is enough evidence to support that any therapeutic support benefits families, even if they do not have full psychological or psychiatric assessments; the LA is currently liaising with the judiciary on this approach to ensure it is not contested in court).
  - Creative support packages (e.g. 24/7 support package to enable a child to stay with grandparents, daily childcare support for a mother of six that needs to separate from her partner)

## KEY FEATURES

- Early involvement and engagement with family members
- Therapeutically driven assessments
- Therapeutic support throughout pre-proceedings
- Creative support packages to create avenues for children to remain within their community
- Cost-effective means of providing support to families

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## OUTCOMES

North Somerset's average duration of care proceedings was 31.8 weeks, as compared to 54 weeks in the entire Bristol County Court (based on CAFCASS data 1/4/2021 to 31/3/2022).

# Warrington pre-proceedings practice

## WHAT IS THE PROGRAMME?

A 2022 project led by Warrington Borough Council and Salford City Council sought to:

- Encourage the effective use of pre-proceedings
- Limit issuing care proceedings when possible and appropriate
- Prioritise using family members or S20 instead of urgent applications
- Frontload planning and assessments
- Encourage each LA to craft their own digital PLO Toolkit to align staff with local processes and assessments, and create regular, targeted trainings in line with such toolkits.
- Introduce self-assessments and peer reviews to evaluate the PLO area of practice

## KEY FEATURES

- Emphasis on inter-agency collaboration
- Focus on diverting from issuing care proceedings
- Focus on reducing urgent applications
- Information sharing and documented standard best practices in each LA
- Staff trainings and assessments to align staff with best practices

## OUTCOMES

- All 23 LAs in the North West have PLO Toolkits in place. Self-assessments of their PLO areas of practice are intended to continue into the future.
- CAFcASS delivers an annual, regional training programme, and PLO training programmes are delivered to diverse stakeholders.
- Establishment of quarterly practice hubs to regularly discuss PLO practice with all 23 LAs
- There is growing collaboration among DFJs and CAFcASS to improve joined-up working

Helpful links:

- [Warrington Guidance, including the PLO Toolkit](#)

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# Additional good practice examples and ideas (1/2)

## System-wide collaboration

- ▼ East London Respect Charter: parties identified that post-pandemic communication had become unhelpful and processes were being ignored. A relational charter developed jointly with practitioners is aimed to turn around this dynamic.
- ▼ South London Care Proceedings Project: Four South London local authorities jointly funded a post to coordinate the research in relation to their care proceedings and tracking of outcomes, with the aim to improve practice and impact for children. The project focuses on increased partnership working, with a dedicated resource to develop partnerships with CAFCASS, judges and the Local Family Justice Board.
- ▼ Other potential ideas:
  - ▼ Designated service manager position in local authorities, who is responsible for developing relationships and communicating with partners
  - ▼ Fortnightly drop-in sessions with DFJs to discuss and escalate issues
  - ▼ PLO Practice Lead for a region, whose work feeds into the LFJB
  - ▼ Performance meetings with other local authorities in the same Court

## Training ideas

- ▼ Joint trainings for CAFCASS guardians, social workers and IROs on the specific expectations of each role

## Additional good practice examples and ideas (2/2)

### Cross-system collaboration

- ▼ Newham “Safe & Together”: Newham is embedding a new practice model ‘Safe & Together’ to become more informed about domestic abuse. This includes significant changes introduced at the Child Protection phase, which hopefully will become more effective – the LA sees it as a way to decrease the number of cases that go to the PLO stage.
- ▼ Coventry Family Valued Programme: The programme is based on Leeds’ relational model assuming working ‘with’ families rather than doing things ‘to’ them. Services that draw on existing strengths and relationships in the wider family network are used to support the continuity of familial relationships. As part of the Family Valued launch, the LA is looking to increase its family group conference capacity. Coventry anticipates that it may have a positive impact on the working culture and cases in the PLO.

### Repositories of good practice

- ▼ North West ADCS Pre-proceedings and PLO Practice Guide: A cross-North West task force teamed up to identify and publish examples of good practice of pre-proceedings and PLO in the region.

### Ideas for tracker tools to track cases in pre-proceedings

- ▼ To ensure the tracker is well-embedded and used, review the data monthly in each of the locality meetings and meetings with RAA.
- ▼ Feed the tracker information into monthly performance meetings to review issues with pre-proceedings, identify learning, and prevent drift and delay.
- ▼ Conduct peer reviews of pre-proceedings tracking to improve processes and share good practices.