

Practice guide

Family Help & Children's Social Care

Family Law – Reducing court delays trailblazer, Cheshire West & Chester

Background and purpose

Cheshire and Merseyside was one of five areas awarded Department for Education funding as part of the Designated Family Judge (DFJ) trailblazer project which aimed to reduce delays in court proceedings and improve the quality of practice. Audit activity and collaborative solution-finding sessions identified the need to tackle challenges in availability, timeliness and quality of external independent assessments, as well as late presentation of family members. This led to the concept of developing our own Assessment Hub to complete better quality, more timely independent assessments. The Hub focused specifically on Parenting and Kinship assessments instructed during court proceedings and was hosted by Cheshire West & Chester (CWAC) on behalf of the nine local authorities involved.

What we did to improve children's outcomes and experiences

We set up an Independent Assessment Hub where social workers were released from their LA to complete assessments solely for the Hub. The maximum number of assessments at any one time was three per social worker, meaning they could work more intensely with families and build relationships quickly. All assessments were quality assured by the service manager to ensure the highest quality and most accurate recommendations.

A training offer to improve practice was developed for all nine LAs. This included upskilling social workers in the ParentAssess model to work with parents with learning needs; CoramBAAF training to strengthen Kinship assessments; Lucy Faithfull Foundation training to improve assessments of protective carers; bespoke TheraplayUK training to strengthen child and parents' relationships; and family time observation workshops to ensure a consistent approach to observations that inform assessments. A Knowledge Exchange event promoted shared learning and improved practice across Cheshire and Merseyside.

We collaborated with Speak Up Advocacy to offer advocacy to any parent/carers assessed through the Hub and developed two videos with Experts by Experience. One for use in induction or training encouraged best practice in working with families; the second supported family members involved to feel more prepared and able to work with professionals during court proceedings. There was also a support offer to all kinship carers, with 15 referrals to the Kinship Reach Programme.

What is the impact?

Independent assessments were completed at least two-four weeks shorter than typically instructed to ensure decisions for children could be made in a timely manner. Parenting assessments were

completed within eight weeks from point of receiving the letter of instruction; viability assessments within two weeks; and ten weeks for full fostering assessments.

447 training places were provided reducing the need for Independent Social Worker assessments by addressing the lack of sufficient practitioners trained in ParentAssess and improving the quality of assessments in the nine LAs. Feedback from practitioners on the impact on practice has been positive - *"I attended training last month and it really made me think about my practise so would like as many staff to attend as possible because it's so relevant to our role"; "That parent assess training was fabulous. I think it's the best training I have been on, in a long time."*

12 independent Assessments were completed and impact on children and families included:
"The impact of delay on the child was minimised due to the Hub being able to assist with the assessment."
"Assessments of the family was positive, and the LA has changed its proposed plan of removal."
"In this case, the parent has been listened to, and areas of support has been carefully considered."
"Has allowed case to conclude within 26 Weeks. The LA had specified 4-6 weeks to complete which would have meant re-timetabling, however Hub completing it within two prevented this."

Feedback surveys were developed for family members and professionals to provide their views on the work and impact of the Hub. Professionals including guardians, solicitors, and IROs, as well as family members including a father, mother and carer, confirm that the purpose of the Hub was met – assessments were reported to be timely, they were described as high quality, detailed and thorough, and positive impact was noted including preventing delay

Feedback from carers supported via the Kinship collaboration included a maternal grandmother kinship foster carer: *"I was 'screaming for someone to talk to when we started, and you have provided that. I have really appreciated our conversations, you always make me feel better and help me to see light at the end of the tunnel. The referral to Someone Like Me was very relieving in sharing my situation with another kinship carer."*

Resources

[Letter of Instruction Template](#)
[Presentation](#)
[DadPad](#)
[Kinship- the kinship care charity](#)

Find out more

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