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Considerations for the national roll out of ‘Child Focused Courts’

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This briefing paper is informed by our collective findings from: the Ministry of Justice funded Strand 1 (process evaluation and financial analysis) and Strand 2 (experiences of children and families) evaluation of the Pathfinder Courts, The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office ‘Everyday Business’ Family Court Review and Reporting Mechanism Report and the Ministry of Justice Harm Panel Report. From this body of work, we make the below recommendations for the national roll out of the ‘Child Focused Courts’ (formerly known as Pathfinder Courts), with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of children’s voices and supporting victim-survivors of domestic abuse.

Recommendation 1: Ensure children’s voices are included throughout the court process in all cases

Both strands of the Pathfinder evaluation identified that children’s voices are heard more regularly and effectively in the early stages of the Pathfinder court process compared to usual Child Arrangements Proceedings (CAP). However, issues persisted with the inclusion of children’s voices later in the proceedings, particularly in the process of decision-making. These issues were similarly identified in the Everyday Business report. In the national roll-out of the Child-Focused Courts, it should be ensured that children’s voices are actively heard throughout proceedings, including in decision-making, and that they are informed of the reasons for the court’s decision.

Recommendation 2: Promote continued improvements in understanding and responding to the impacts of domestic abuse

Although professionals felt that understandings of domestic abuse and reducing re-traumatisation for victim-survivors had improved under the Pathfinder model, many victim-survivors interviewed for the second strand of the evaluation felt that domestic abuse continued to be minimised. Many issues identified in the Everyday Business and Harm Panel Reports persisted in the Pathfinder evaluation from the perspective of victim-survivors. These included the nature and impact of coercive and controlling behaviour not being fully understood by professionals, lack of understanding of the gendered dynamics of domestic abuse, persistent exclusions of the adversarial court process (in particular for litigants in person) and continued traumatic impacts of the court process for victim-survivors. To address these issues, the Child Focused Courts should continue to aim to create a cultural shift in the response to domestic abuse, centred on understanding the impacts of domestic abuse for child and adult victim-survivors. This should include ongoing multi-disciplinary training focused on trauma-informed and gendered approaches to domestic abuse, accountability where courts perpetuate harm and opportunities to share and learn from good practice. Domestic abuse services should be fully integrated into learning and accountability processes, ensuring that their expertise and experience is centralised in achieving this cultural change.

Recommendation 3: Ensure that domestic abuse services have the capacity and resource to deliver key services

In both strands of the Pathfinder evaluation, domestic abuse services were seen as integral to the success of the model and provided a lifeline to victim-survivors.



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However, the evaluation identified notable issues with resourcing and capacity, and with the level of referrals to these services. National roll-out of the Child Focused Courts should ensure the inclusion of domestic abuse services as key partners in the court process, with appropriate and consistent referrals, engagement in feedback loops, and sufficient resourcing and staffing.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that providing an effective, supportive response to families is prioritised

Professionals in the Pathfinder evaluation spoke positively about the ‘quicker’ and more ‘efficient’ court process, particularly the ways in which the model made better use of resources and staff time. However, some children felt they did not have enough time to build trust and express their views about their case, and adult victim-survivors of domestic abuse suggested they would have appreciated more time to have their experiences heard in court. The Everyday Business report also identified that professionals tended to emphasise speed of case progression over considerations of procedural or substantive justice. A recent Nuffield Family Justice Observatory briefing notes that ‘success’ in a family justice context should emphasise the well-being of children, equity and participation (Ott, 2026). In the Child Focused Courts, efficiency and better use of resources and staff time should not be understood solely by reference to time targets, but as effectiveness in providing a supportive environment, ensuring the voices of child and adult victim-survivors and alleged perpetrators are heard, and achieving safe and durable outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Reconceptualise and re-introduce the review stage

The review stage (stage 3 of the Pathfinder Model) has recently been removed from the Child Focused Court model. The Pathfinder evaluation emphasised that, although this stage required revision, it had the potential to be an important part of the process for child and adult victim-survivors of domestic abuse. The importance of this stage, as set out in the Harm Panel Report, is to enable the court to determine whether proceedings are indeed effective, by checking whether orders have proved to be safe and durable. The Harm Panel and Everyday Business reports extensively document the harms that may be perpetuated where this follow-up does not occur. In the national roll-out, an adapted version of the review stage should be reintroduced, reconceptualised as something akin to ‘court user’ feedback rather than a further stage of proceedings.

Recommendation 6: Ensure consistent and improved administrative data gathering

Both the Harm Panel and Everyday Business reports highlight substantial issues with family court administrative data, particularly in relation to domestic abuse. The financial analysis of the Pathfinder process evaluation also identified gaps and issues with this data. With the forthcoming introduction of a new Core Case Data system for the family courts, there is an opportunity to gather and publish more comprehensive child arrangements cases. In the national roll-out of Child-Focused Courts, more robust and consistent data gathering in relation to all stages of proceedings should be prioritised. In particular, the Everyday Business report noted that the C100 and C1A forms do not include tick boxes for coercive and controlling behaviours, stalking and harassment and so-called honour-based abuse. In the national roll-out, these categories should be included to encourage better identification of these kinds of behaviours and improved understandings of their prevalence. Demographic information of all parties (including children) should also be collected.