

Cafcass' response to the Department for Education's (DfE) consultation on children's social work post-qualifying standards and induction

Cafcass (the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Ministry of Justice. Cafcass is the largest employer of child and family social workers as Family Court Advisers and Children's Guardians. Cafcass has a statutory duty to safeguard the welfare of children in family law proceedings in England. We make sure that their wishes and feelings are heard and advise the courts about what is in their best interests. We are independent of the courts, local authority children's services, education, and health authorities.

Every year Cafcass recruits between 12 and 20 newly qualified social workers, who undertake a three-year induction programme to develop their practice. Cafcass has a Social Work Academy in place to support Cafcass practitioners to deliver an exceptional service, including newly qualified social workers. This is through a comprehensive learning and development programme, talent management scheme and career pathway. *Questions 1-8 ask for basic details about the organisation completing the consultation response, so have not been included.*

Post qualifying standards

Question 9: To what extent do you agree that the proposed domains as set out in the new post-qualifying standards set a reasonable expectation that social workers should meet by the end of their second year?

Cafcass would request to be involved in further conversations on the post-qualifying standards. We would welcome becoming a member of the expert writing group, in our capacity as the largest employer of children's social workers in England.

The domains set a reasonable expectation that social workers should meet by the end of their second year. However, there is a need for flexibility in the post-qualifying standards to meet the variety of newly qualified social work roles where some statements are more applicable to local authority social workers than to Cafcass practitioners. For example, the following 'does' statement: '6.2 D1 acts as lead professional within multi-agency networks and coordinates interventions and effectively chairs and/or leads multi-disciplinary meetings'. Whilst Cafcass practitioners may effectively contribute towards multi-agency meetings, they will work with families for a limited time within their family court proceedings and therefore may not be best placed to chair/lead multi-disciplinary meetings that will continue beyond the conclusion of proceedings.

Question 10: To what extent do you agree that the proposed outcomes as set out in the new post-qualifying standards set a reasonable expectation that social workers should meet by the end of their second year?

The outcomes set a reasonable expectation that social workers should meet by the end of their second year. However, as set out above, the specificity of the outcomes may not apply to all newly qualified social work roles therefore flexibility is needed.

Question 11: Do you think there are any areas of practice missing from the proposed new post-qualifying standards?

Cafcass previously fed into the development of an Early Career Framework led by Research in Practice, and our representations included the need for standards on anti-discriminatory practice, reflection and professional curiosity. We are pleased to see these represented in the standards.

Whilst domestic abuse is referenced multiple times, there is a need for domestic abuse to be a common thread throughout the standards in the same way that the identity and individuality of the child and family is threaded throughout. Whilst a feature of both public and private law proceedings, domestic abuse concerns are raised in c. 60% of private law applications, making it one of the most pressing issues families face. There is not enough in the standards on the crucial role social workers play in assessing domestic abuse and its impact on the child and family. It is particularly important for the standards to reflect on the lived experiences of children as victims of domestic abuse (as recognised in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021) and how this must be considered in social work assessments.

An area of practice that could be strengthened in the proposed standards is private law practice. The Pathfinder pilot, currently underway in Dorset and Bournemouth, Birmingham and Solihull and across Wales, takes a more problem-solving, investigative approach to private law to better support child and adult victims of domestic abuse and other harms. Under the pathfinder model more work is being directed to local authorities, with Birmingham and Solihull children's social care completing Child Impact Reports in a quarter of children's cases. It is therefore essential for standards to cover the nuances of private law work, in addition to public law, especially if the pathfinder pilot is rolled out nationally.

We welcome the section on anti-discriminatory practices and behaviours. We recommend for the standards to be further strengthened around anti-racist practice, to clearly set out the ways in which newly qualified social workers are expected to embody this practice in their work with children and families.

Question 12: Do you think there are any areas of knowledge and skills missing from the proposed new post-qualifying standards?

As above, it is key that flexibility is built into the standards so that they reflect the diverse range of social work roles undertaken with children and families.

Whilst the standards include references to court skills, these are an essential part of newly qualified social workers' roles at Cafcass, and we would welcome further information in the standards about this specialist area of practice. Whilst 'does' statements are included on providing high quality reports to court and presenting information in a clear, balanced way, little is included on the analytical skills needed to present to court. This includes on giving oral evidence; navigating cross-examination; having a strong understanding of the legal framework, principles, terminology and case law including where transparency orders are made; communication skills in a court setting; conducting risk assessments and risk management; and safeguarding children in family court proceedings. These skills will also be essential for local authority social workers attending court.

Section 6 on 'Leadership & management' is not aspirational enough in setting out the desire for newly qualified social workers to become the system leaders for the future. Standards could be included on leadership competencies, systems thinking, and multi-professional collaboration to support the development of social workers who are equipped to lead transformational change, influence policy, and drive innovation across the sector.

Question 13: Are there any 'knows' statements in the proposed new post-qualifying standards that you think should not be included? (knows and does statements are detailed in the post-qualifying standards document)

The 'knows' statements are a helpful way of setting out the knowledge base required of post-qualifying social workers.

The following 'knows' statement includes a reference to children 'witnessing' domestic abuse: *'4.2 K13 experiencing challenges earlier in life can increase the likelihood of children following trajectories leading to negative outcomes in the future (e.g. witnessing domestic abuse in early childhood increases the risk of criminal exploitation, experiencing in utero or early childhood trauma increases the risk of instability in permanence arrangements during adolescence); opportunities to divert individuals away from these need to be explored at the earliest opportunity'*. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 made clear in its definition of domestic abuse that children **experience** domestic abuse and are not passive witnesses, so we would strongly recommend a change being made to reflect this.

Section 3 on 'Assessment & planning' should include a 'knows' statement on legislation, including a requirement for newly qualified social workers to have knowledge of relevant case law and Practice Directions crucial to the role of a social worker. This would be in addition to the current 'does' statement: *'3.2 D2: applies in-depth knowledge of relevant legislation, guidance, national, regional and local policy and procedures; interprets and navigates these appropriately across the continuum of interventions for children and families of legislation'*.

The following 'knows' statement states that *'5.2 K2: thresholds define the boundaries of the role and function of statutory social work'*. Cafcass would ask that the term 'statutory' is clearly defined to enable a consistent understanding.

Question 14: Are there any 'does' statements in the proposed new post-qualifying standards that you think should not be included? (knows and does statements are detailed in the post-qualifying standards document)

Cafcass supports the 'does' statements, however it is essential that there is flexibility as some of the statements will not be as relevant to all social work roles. An example of this is in the following 'does' statement: *'2.5 D4 'autonomously and confidently manages tensions between members of the extended family network and the wider community; works to repair these relationships to strengthen the child's support network'*. Whilst Cafcass practitioners may speak with extended family members when undertaking their enquiries including managing family tension, their role is limited to the duration of families' court proceedings and therefore it may not be feasible to work to repair those relationships during their limited involvement.

Regarding the following 'does' statement: *'2.6 D2: builds relationships with all agencies, including non-statutory partners, and draws on these relationships, including when swift and decisive action is needed'*, it would be helpful for the term 'non-statutory partners' to be defined clearly within the standards so that it is consistently understood.

Question 15: Are you aware of any other evidence of effective social work practice, not already reflected in the new post-qualifying standards, that we should consider?

Cafcass welcomes reflection being mentioned multiple times within the post qualifying standards, as it is an essential part of social workers' development. The standards could go further to include more specific terminology on reflection, including the need for reflexivity. This is the process where an individual reflects on their thoughts, beliefs and experiences to understand how they influence practice and interactions with families.

Reflexivity is key to social workers' critical thinking and critical practice, and should form a crucial element of newly qualified social workers' professional development. It will provide the opportunity for newly qualified social workers to develop self-awareness through examining their own biases, values and assumptions; enhancing their practice by learning from mistakes; and supporting resilience by giving space for them to reflect on challenges and successes. Reflexivity can help newly qualified social workers manage the demanding nature of their work, particularly during the early stages of their careers, therefore we could strongly recommend its inclusion.

Social Work Induction Programme

Question 16: To what extent do you agree with our proposals for training, in the new social work induction programme?

Cafcass would request to be involved in further conversations on the induction programme, as the largest employer of children's social workers in England.

Cafcass welcomes the consultation document acknowledging that the training programme will need to find the right balance between national consistency and flexibility to meet employer and individual needs. This will enable the training programme to be adapted to the range of social work roles, whilst enabling a consistent experience and outcomes for the programme.

Cafcass developed our current training package for newly qualified social workers in partnership with the University of Central Lancashire, who support the delivery of the module and moderate the training programme. This model would be Cafcass' preference for the new training programme so that we are able to develop specialist training for new social workers at Cafcass, whilst having the academic rigour of the training being externally supported and moderated.

Cafcass agrees with the consultation document setting out the importance of newly qualified social workers being supported by experienced social workers. There is a need for DfE to consider the training required for those providing supervision, assessment and oversight to new social workers as part of the training programme, which should be specific to the organisation. The impact of having an appropriately trained individual with the right skillset will influence the next generation of social workers, and it is important that this is done right to achieve the best outcomes for children and families. The current Cafcass model holds an expectation that newly qualified social workers will be overseen by Practice Educators at Cafcass who hold a Practice Educator Professional Standards qualification.

Social Work England holds an annotations register which shows the public that a social worker has completed additional qualifications and training in an area relevant to social work. Cafcass understands that consideration is currently being given to annotating the Practice Educator role, which we support. This would recognise the expertise and skills gained through the role, which is transferrable between organisations and may make becoming a Practice Educator a more attractive offer.

Regarding the need for protected time for new social workers to engage in the induction programme, Cafcass currently provides a 20% workload reduction to provide the individual with enough time to successfully complete their induction. We would retain this for both years of the proposed induction programme.

Question 17: To what extent do you agree with our proposals for assessment in the new social work induction programme?

Cafcass welcomes the flexibility provided to the employer in the assessment of the induction programme, as set out in the consultation document. There is also a need for specificity in the assessment to avoid variation in a national programme, where the specific assessment activities required should be clearly outlined to enable consistency and quality assurance.

As set out above, Cafcass developed our current training package in partnership with the University of Central Lancashire who support the delivery of the module. The outcome of the training and assessment is then moderated by the University externally, which allows decisions to be scrutinised by an external assessor. This model would be our preference for the new induction programme.

The consultation documents set out that there will be no nationally prescribed or regulatory outcomes for the assessment component of the programme. Cafcass suggests that there needs to be a minimum standard for the assessment. We welcome the suggestion for DfE to provide non-statutory guidance to employers on what action should be taken as a result of the assessment outcome, to gain greater national consistency should a newly qualified social worker underperform.

Newly qualified social workers joining Cafcass are on a probationary period for six months, before being confirmed in post. It is important to understand whether the standards and induction period would mean that the probationary period should be extended to two years as part of the induction programme, which would require significantly more resource. Additionally, if a newly qualified social worker does not pass the assessment, clarification will need to be provided on the necessary next steps.

Question 18: To what extent do you agree that the eligibility criteria for the new social work induction programme should include the following:

- **child and family social workers who qualified within four years of starting the social worker induction programme**
- **child and family social workers employed in statutory roles at local authorities**
- **child and family social workers employed in statutory roles at organisations who carry out statutory duties on behalf of local authorities**
- **child and family social workers employed in non-statutory roles (e.g. in the private, voluntary, or independent sector)**
- **agency child and family social workers**
- **child and family social workers who qualified outside the UK**
- **child and family social workers from Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland**

‘Examples of non-local authority employers who deliver statutory child and family social work include Cafcass, independent fostering agencies and national charities delivering services for local authorities. We are keen to understand whether these organisations could deliver the new induction and if there may be challenges covering the new PQS. Should there be challenges, an option might be for those organisations to work with local authorities to enable their new social workers to experience the full range of the PQS. ‘

As the largest employer of children’s social workers in England, it will be important for Cafcass to deliver the new social work induction programme to newly qualified social workers. The demands of the new induction on all agencies delivering it will need to be carefully considered. It is essential that the induction is focused on practice to provide an exceptional experience for children and families in every child’s case.

Question 19: For employers only: Which of the following types of support would you need to deliver the social work induction programme:

- **centrally provided learning materials funding**
- **guidance on programme delivery**
- **support for practice supervisors & assessors**
- **practice supervisor & assessor capacity**
- **events**

- **digital hosting of materials**
- **other (please add below)**

Cafcass will require significant time and notice to consider how to implement the induction programme and any changes needed to our current Social Work Academy model.

Cafcass agrees that all the above is required, as the proposals involve a high degree of change so agencies will benefit from support to successfully deliver the new induction programme. We would particularly welcome support on practice supervisors and assessors, and practice supervisor and assessor capacity. It would be helpful for guidance to also be considered on assessments and outcomes. Regarding guidance on programme delivery, we would ask that our response to question 16 on training is considered. Whilst guidance is helpful, we would not want it to take away from the autonomy of Cafcass owning our own training. Consideration could be given to organisations having a liaison point with DfE to support induction planning.

Regarding the digital hosting of materials, careful consideration is needed to make sure this is accessible to every agency.

Currently Cafcass receives £2,000 per newly qualified social worker to cover the additional costs related to recruiting someone newly qualified. Whilst this is welcomed, it is a small sum when considering the additional resource and training required. Will this sum be maintained or increased under the new induction programme?

Question 20: For employers only: How could we most effectively limit the challenges of delivering the assessment of the social work induction programme?

- **central guidance/templates on assessment**
- **digital service to support administration**
- **external moderation support**
- **clear guidance for evidence requirements**
- **other (please state below)**

All of the above would be helpful to help deliver the assessment aspects of the induction programme. This should include what to do following a non-desirable assessment outcome of the induction programme for a newly qualified social worker.

Question 21: Do you believe that the proposals set out in this consultation are likely to have a differential impact (positive or negative) on people with any of the following protected characteristics?

- **age**
- **disability**
- **gender reassignment**
- **marriage and civil partnership**
- **pregnancy and maternity**
- **race**
- **religion or belief**
- **sex**
- **sexual orientation**

- **none of the above**
- **not sure**

There is a need for the induction guidance to provide appropriate support for those who may be on extended periods of leave whilst in their newly qualified phase, including throughout pregnancy and/or maternity leave. Currently the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment cannot be extended and must be suspended when an individual is on maternity leave, which negatively impacts on newly qualified social workers. Consideration should be given to providing extensions in these circumstances.

It will be important for the assessment guidance to establish that assessments should be tailored to an individual's needs, including neurodiversity, mental health needs, and physical needs. Resources, training, and assessments should be accessible to all newly qualified social workers.

Question 22: Looking at the years beyond the post-qualifying standards (PQS) for practitioners, and accompanying social work induction programme, what areas of further specialist development, in addition to child protection, should be considered?

- **practice education**
- **management and leadership skills**
- **assessments skills**
- **analysis and using data**
- **specific harms**
- **adult mental health**
- **child mental health**
- **court skills**
- **other (please state below)**

All of the above areas are needed beyond the post-qualifying standards. Continuous Professional Development should also be included, as it is a requirement of Social Work England re-registration. Learning should be a continuous journey to enable social workers to adapt to each families' experience. Every child is different, with unique experiences, and should be treated as such.

In terms of Court Skills, please see our response to question 12. The induction programme should equip the new social worker with the knowledge and skills to take into court work (including reports to court as well as attending court). Any continuous professional development regarding court skills should be in addition to core training on this in the two-year induction period, which should be set out in the standards.

Question 23: Do you have any other comments on the proposals outlined in the consultation?

Cafcass would request to be involved in further conversations about the induction and standards in our capacity as the largest employer of children's social workers in England. For further information, and to arrange discussions please contact policyteam@cafcass.gov.uk.

It would be helpful to understand the intended timescales for delivery and implementation of the post-qualifying standards and induction, as changes to Cafcass' training and induction will require significant time for designing and embedding within the organisation. It would be useful for DfE to make public any Impact Analysis that has been completed for the organisations expected to implement the changes.

Close partnership working with Social Work England is needed to facilitate a cohesive and effective approach to developing the standards and induction framework. This collaboration is critical to avoid siloed or fragmented efforts, which can lead to inconsistencies in expectations, practice, and accountability across the profession. Social Work England, as the regulatory body, plays a pivotal role in maintaining and upholding professional standards. Co-production will support the standards to be sustainable, enforceable, and aligned with regulatory expectations. This alignment will also support a smoother implementation process, greater professional buy-in, and a shared understanding of what constitutes good practice from the outset of a social worker's career. Ultimately, this partnership will help foster a culture of shared responsibility and continuous improvement, making sure that new social workers are supported by a robust, coherent, and regulator-endorsed foundation as they enter the profession.

To ensure that Cafcass continues to attract the best possible candidates, it is vital that we are supported to remain competitive - both in terms of professional development and remuneration. Currently, newly qualified social workers are employed on a different pay scale point than Family Court Advisers. As such, any new post-qualifying standards and induction programme must include clear guidance on the duration of the programme and the key qualification milestones. This clarity is essential to support a compelling offer from Cafcass to prospective candidates and to support our internal development programme to be aligned with national and local authority expectations.

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