



Cafcass Research Governance Framework

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Cafcass is committed to evidence-informed practice based on, amongst other things, good quality research. We aim to use our unique position and insight to generate high impact and timely research to inform our own practice and influence policy across the family justice system. We consider applications for research involving access to our staff, case management data, and in some cases service users.
- 1.2. This framework sets out how we support and facilitate good quality research involving Cafcass that is likely to be useful for us and the children and families we work with, and how we make sure that it is conducted ethically to protect service users and staff.
- 1.3. We define 'research involving Cafcass' as any work which involves collecting information for research (as opposed to the routine collection of information for management, monitoring or audit purposes) from or about individuals who may be service users, their families, or those who work for Cafcass. This framework applies to all such research.
- 1.4. Applications for research involving Cafcass are reviewed by the Cafcass Research Governance Committee ('the Committee') to ensure that only appropriate research is completed. The Committee considers: whether the research and its use are ethical and appropriate; whether it likely to be feasible and within our resources to support; and whether it is likely to be useful for Cafcass and our service users. A fuller list of criteria considered is set out below. The Committee is made up of an academic advisor and senior Cafcass management, advised and supported by the Cafcass Policy Officer.
- 1.5. The legal basis on which Cafcass carries out research, interviews staff, and shares information relating to family proceedings¹ is section 13 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 which says: *The Service may commission, or assist the conduct of, research by any person into matters concerned with the exercise of its functions.* This may involve case files which hold service users' personal information. Each service user is alerted to our [privacy notice](#) within introductory correspondence, which sets out what information we collect, how we use it and who we share it with.

2. The application process

- 2.1. Any person thinking of undertaking research involving Cafcass can informally discuss their idea or proposal with the Policy Officer.

¹ If the research requires access to case information Practice Direction 12G of the Family Procedure Rules 2010 authorises any person who is lawfully in receipt of any information relating to the proceedings to communicate that information to anyone conducting an approved research project. An approved research project means a project approved in writing by a Secretary of State after consultation with President of the Family Division, approved in writing by the President of the Family Division or conducted under section 83 of the Children Act 1989 or *section 13 of the CJCSA* (above).

- 2.2. Before making an application to Cafcass, prospective applicants should first get their proposal approved by the institution or organisation at which they are based, including, if relevant, by the institution's research ethics committee.² They are free to enquire in general about the expected feasibility of the proposal with the Policy Officer before this. Internal applicants should also discuss the proposal and the required resources with their line manager, supervisor or practice assessor.
- 2.3. Applicants must use the [Cafcass application form](#), available on the website, to submit the application in Word format, together with any supporting documents (for example, interview schedules, university ethics approval). There is guidance within the application form on the type of information that should be provided. This should be sent to policyteam@cafcass.gsi.gov.uk.
- 2.4. The Policy Officer will review the application and may, if necessary, seek clarification or further information from the applicant. They will then submit this application, with their own comments, to the Committee.³
- 2.5. The Committee will decide, within a maximum of four weeks of receiving the request, to (a) approve the application (b) refuse it or (c) ask for revisions. They may also make comments and suggestions to improve the research design. The Policy Officer will inform the applicant in writing of the Committee's decision and any comments.
- 2.6. If successful, the applicant will be required to agree certain conditions before commencing the research, which will include the following:
- That the Policy Officer will be advised of any major changes to the research design or plan, for their consideration as to whether re-approval from the Committee is required.
 - That Cafcass is kept up to date on progress and findings of the research and is given sight of the findings in advance of publication to be ready for any enquiries from the public or the media arising from the research;
 - That Cafcass is acknowledged in the research report and any publications arising from it;
 - That, on completion, the researcher will write a short summary of the research – including any relevant policy and practice implications for Cafcass – for inclusion in a staff newsletter within Cafcass to maximise the impact of the research.
 - That a full copy of the final report and any subsequent publications arising from it are provided to Cafcass for possible placement in the Cafcass library.
- 2.7. No fieldwork, such as interviews with staff or access to Cafcass data, may take place until approval has been received from the Committee. Where research involves contact with

² For applicants not based at an institution with its own ethics committee, Cafcass' Research Governance Committee will need to perform this function and may require additional documents, such as consent forms, for scrutiny.

³ For internal applicants, such as students on placement with Cafcass, the application may be considered by only one Committee member.

Cafcass' service users or access to case-related data, approval will be made subject to each researcher with such access providing:

- A current,⁴ clear enhanced DBS check certificate
- Proof of completed data protection training within the past two years.
- A signed confidentiality and information assurance declaration (provided by Cafcass).⁵

3. Criteria we consider

3.1. Cafcass has limited resources and our participation in research must be proportionate to the likely usefulness and significance of the research. We therefore reserve support for research that appears feasible, ethically sound and high impact. A higher threshold is considered for research involving contact with Cafcass' service users or access to case-related data. These criteria are set out below.

3.2. The principal researcher and research team.

- Individuals are affiliated with an academic institution or another organisation, and are judged competent (i.e. have sufficient research qualifications, skills and experience) to deliver good quality research within the field.
- Applications from external undergraduate, masters or PQ students will not normally be supported. This is because such research is unlikely to be published externally and, consequently, of sufficient benefit to Cafcass and the children and families with whom we work to justify our participation.
- Applications from students in Cafcass placements will usually be supported where they involve contact with a limited number of Cafcass staff, but not where they involve contact with Cafcass service users or access to case-related data.

3.3. Scientific and ethical conduct.

- The proposed research is judged to be robust and scientifically sound, with an appropriate methodology for the subject matter.
- The proposed research is judged to be ethically sound in both its conduct and use, and has approval from the relevant university/institution's ethics panel, where applicable.
- The proposed research will be conducted in compliance with data protection legislation.
- Appropriate data security measures are in place to safely record, handle and store data during the project and following completion of the research.
- Confidentiality and anonymity is guaranteed so that no Cafcass staff, service user or case will be identifiable in any research report.
- The anticipated risks are considered clearly and relevant mitigations are set out. These are weighed against anticipated benefits.

⁴ A DBS check must remain current during the period of access to Cafcass data. It is considered current if it was issued within the previous 12 months.

⁵ Compliance is reported to the Cafcass Information Assurance Board which monitors Cafcass' data sharing.

3.4. Resources required to support the research.

- The nature of the proposal makes Cafcass' involvement necessary.
- Likely costs to Cafcass, including staff time and data provision,⁶ of supporting the work are clearly identified and have been built into the initial funding bid. These are proportionate to the expected benefit of the research.
- The research is not likely to disrupt Cafcass' ability to provide its service.

3.5. Benefits for Cafcass.

- The potential significance of the research is clearly set out, linking aims and outputs. This is relevant to Cafcass' [statutory remit](#) and [strategic aims](#), and the findings are likely to be of use to Cafcass and the children and families we work with.
- Where research involves contact with Cafcass service users or access to case-related data, the research has national significance contributing to the evidence base of best practice.
- The research does not appear to duplicate existing similar research.
- The findings will be presented in an accessible and timely manner, with clear plans for dissemination to influence the family justice sector.

3.6. Where applicants are unsure that their proposal meets the criteria, they may wish to contact the Policy Officer for an informal discussion before submitting their application.

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⁶ Access to case data usually requires laptop database access. This is charged at cost to Cafcass, which is currently £132+VAT per month.