



# Family justice 2030

Improving the lives of children and families



June 2026



# Welcome to family justice 2030, where we set out our vision for a system designed around what a child needs.



## Vision

- A system that helps children and their families to thrive.
- A system that enables children and families to meaningfully participate in vital decisions about their lives.
- A system that treats people fairly and equitably.



## Rationale

- The organisations involved in families' lives before, during and after decisions are made in the family court do not have a shared mission. Children and families often report feeling unheard and services are not built around their needs. There are also unaddressed inequities in families' experiences.



## Mission

- To improve the lives of the children and families who come into contact with the family court.



## Change

- A shared mission that directs us all towards what children and families need to thrive. Opportunities for change lie ahead.



# Foreword

The family justice system makes life-changing decisions about tens of thousands of children's lives each year – often because their parents are unable to agree on their care, or because the state is intervening to protect them.

We have been reflecting on why the family justice system is not working as it should.

Why a system which, by definition, witnesses people at one of the most vulnerable times in their lives, can unintentionally add to their distress by being disempowering and difficult to navigate.

Why a system, guided by the principle that the welfare of the child is paramount, can leave children feeling outside of the process while decisions are being taken about them.

Or why a system that has the pursuit of justice at its core treats some families better than others.

Maybe part of the answer is that the family justice system is not operating like a good system at all.

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory's mission is to improve the lives of the children and families who come into contact with the family court. We have used data and research, and listened to the lived experience of children, parents and professionals, to find ways to improve practice and policy.

As we have evolved, we have shifted our focus from primarily 'shining a light' on what is happening in the family justice system to employing our convening power and getting behind innovation to catalyse changes in practice.

Now we have taken a step back to examine the wider landscape and think about what the future holds. We have explored what has and has not changed, and why we have come up against the same barriers to progress, time and time again.

We think any system needs to meet three tests to work for the benefit of the people who use it.

Firstly, there needs to be a clear, shared commitment. A strong system has a sense of purpose that everyone working in it can contribute towards.

Secondly, the people it exists to serve must have some agency. It is about 'working with' rather than 'doing to'. In family justice – where the state has the power to decide who a child should live with or spend time with – the power imbalance is naturally weighted towards the state. But that does not mean that children and families should not have a voice, an opportunity to be heard, and a chance to shape a system that is all about helping them.

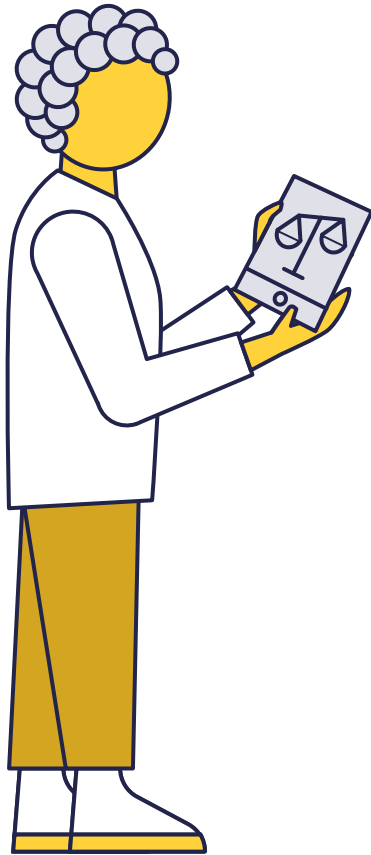
Thirdly, there needs to be a rock-solid commitment to equity to ensure that the system works for everyone, regardless of their race, gender or disability.

We have seen the development of a new five-year strategy as an opportunity. Rather than continue to pursue incremental change, we have been thinking about what it would take to challenge the barriers to progress and for the family justice system to meet these three essential tests.

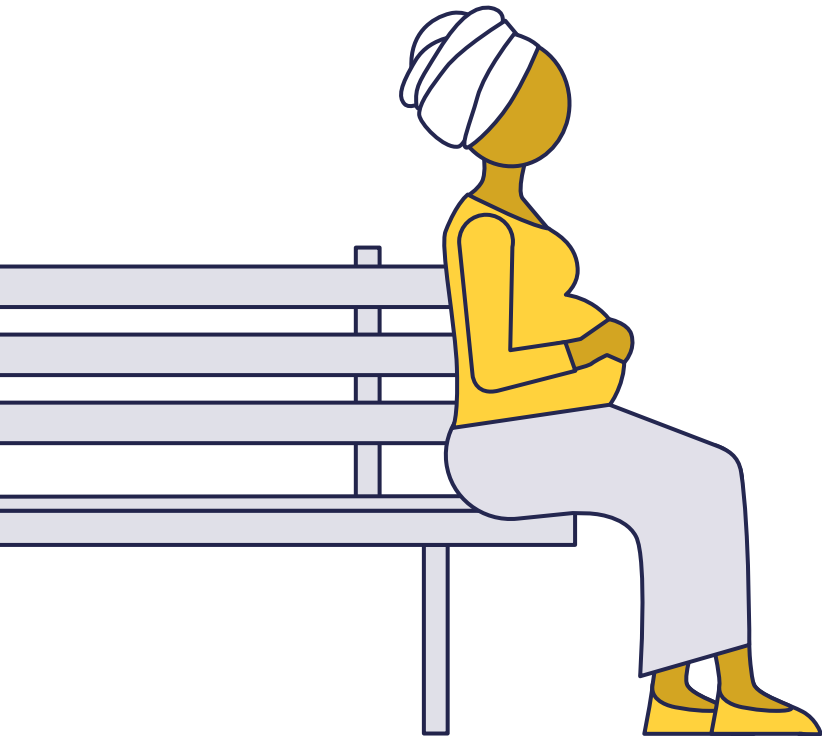
**Lisa Harker, Director**



# Family justice system 2030



# Making it work



National data focused on what matters to children, families and society.

A shared mission for everyone working in the system.

Further development of problem-solving approaches.



Children and families understand the court process and the decisions made about their lives.

Local and national data collection about the prevalence and quality of participation.

Innovative practice that centres on improving experiences.

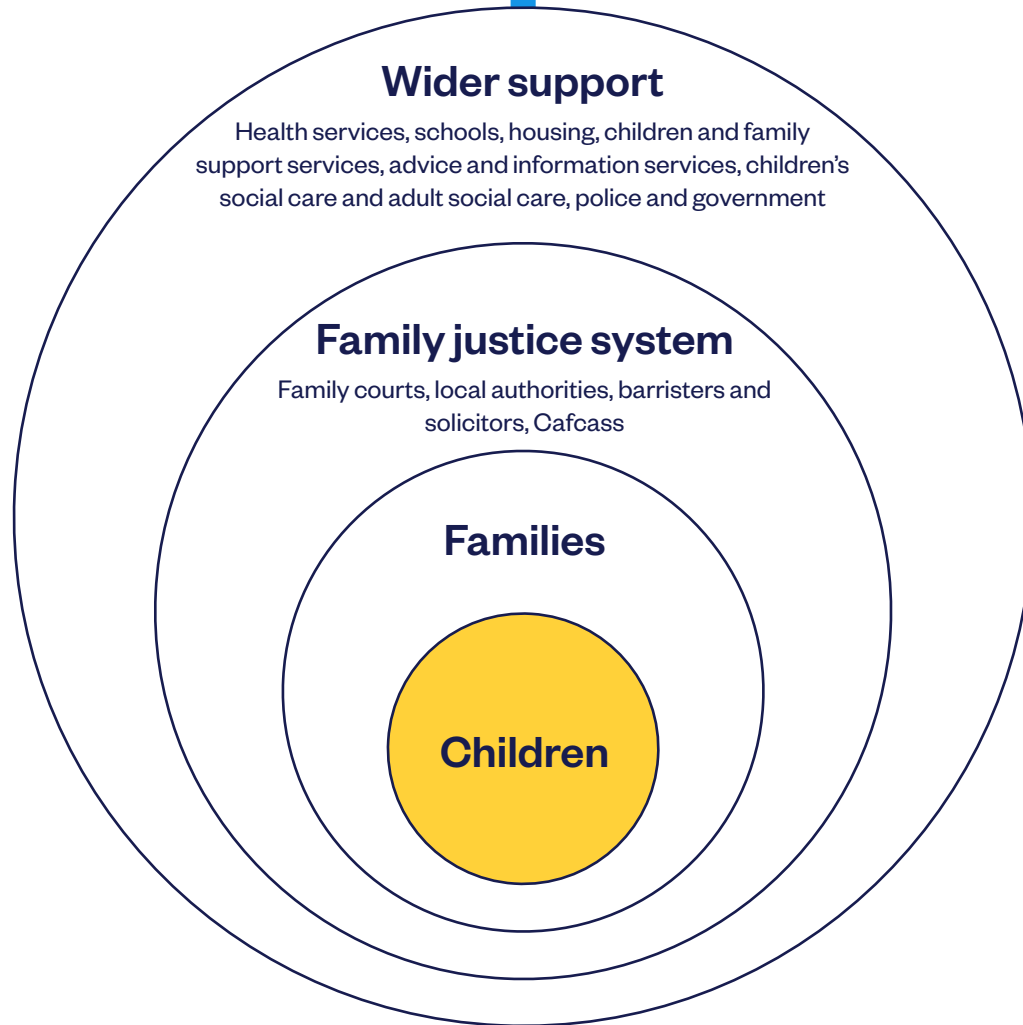


Quality national data related to protected characteristics.

Awareness of inequities and a deeper understanding of how they are experienced.

Action taken to address inequities.





**Working together  
as a system to meet  
a child's needs**



# Where we are

## A system that is not designed around a child's needs

Time and money is spent on court instead of helping families to resolve difficulties earlier.

Addressing immediate risk overshadows a more balanced approach to a child's longer term well-being.

There is no shared, cross-system knowledge base to inform child-focused practice.

The family court does not act as a gateway to support or therapeutic help – parents who have a child taken into care will often have future children taken into care.

No measurement of what matters – professionals do not have information about children's outcomes.

## Limited opportunities to participate

Children and families often feel unheard and do not always understand court proceedings or the decisions made about them.

Private law proceedings are structured around parents advocating for what they want rather than focusing on what children need.

Young people can feel pitted against their parents in care cases.

Children and adults lack the information they need to properly understand proceedings, including final decisions.

Children and families have little voice, so services are not built around their needs.

## Unaddressed inequities

There are inequities in people's experiences of the family justice system in relation to ethnicity and disability.

There are significant variations in decision making between regions and in relation to the ethnicity of children and families.

There are racial inequities in referrals, orders, placement stability, and later educational and employment outcomes.



# The way forward

## Goal 1

### Working towards a system that helps children and families to thrive, we will:

- explore how different professionals, policymakers and the public view the system's purpose
- advocate for new national data that helps orientate the system towards the things that really matter to children, families and society
- commission research to demonstrate how you could measure children's outcomes
- support the development of problem-solving approaches
- turn evidence about the ways in which the family justice system can harm children and families into actionable change.

## Goal 2

### Working towards a system that enables children and adults to participate in a meaningful way, we will:

- commission research that deepens our understanding of various and varied experiences
- bring together a wide range of professionals to identify the conditions required for positive change
- support innovations in practice (such as new ways to engage directly with children) that centre on improving experiences
- seek to improve local and national data collection in relation to participation
- listen to the experience of children and adults, working with partners to ensure a diversity in the voices we hear.

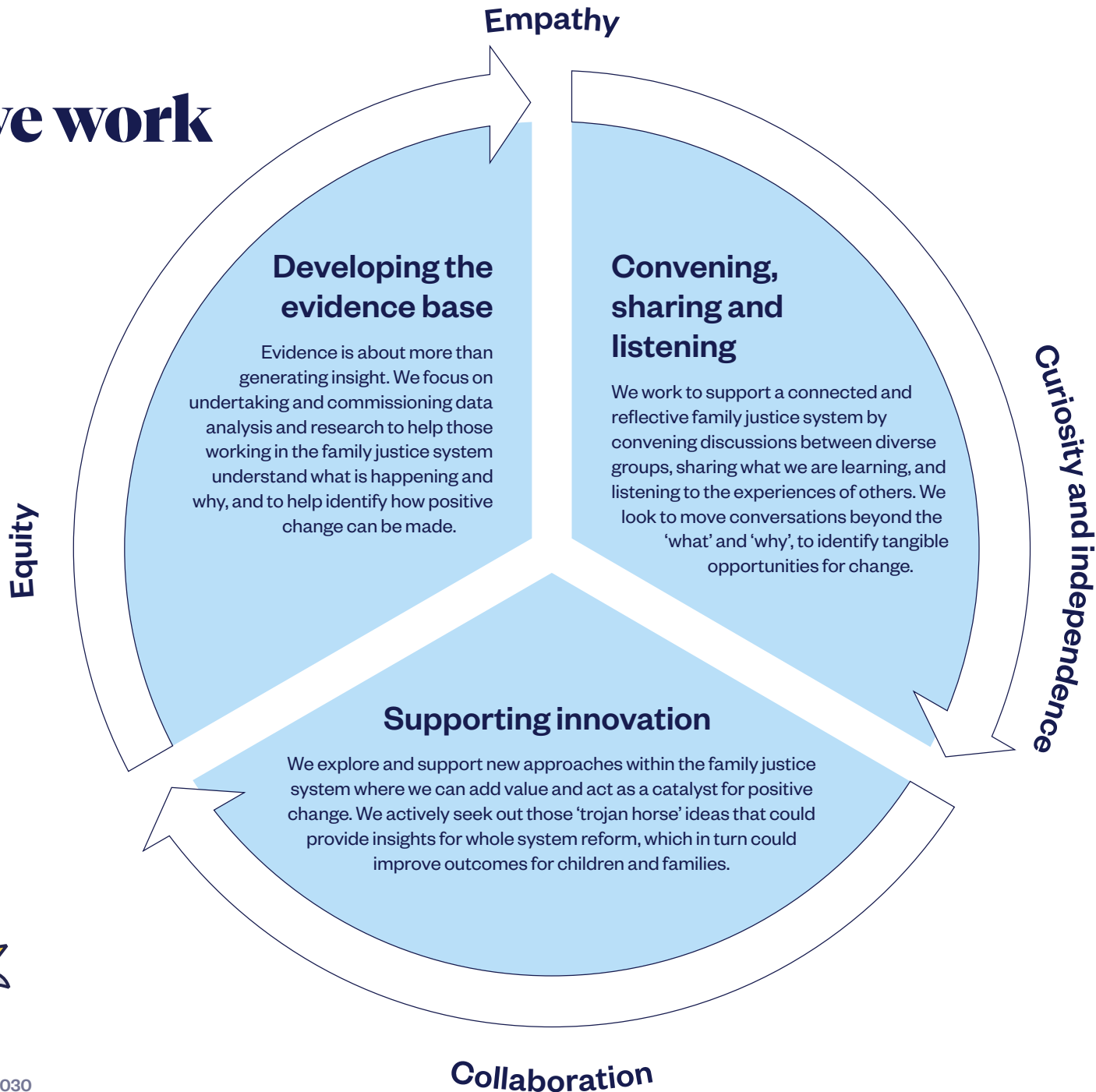
## Goal 3

### Working towards a system that treats people fairly and with equity, we will:

- seek to improve national data collection in relation to personal characteristics (such as ethnicity and disability) so that differences in experiences of the family justice system can be seen
- commission research that shines a light on different inequities, their drivers and intersectionality
- work in partnership with organisations to identify and share best practice
- work with professional groups and people with lived experience seeking to reduce inequalities in the system
- build an equity focus into all of our work.



# How we work



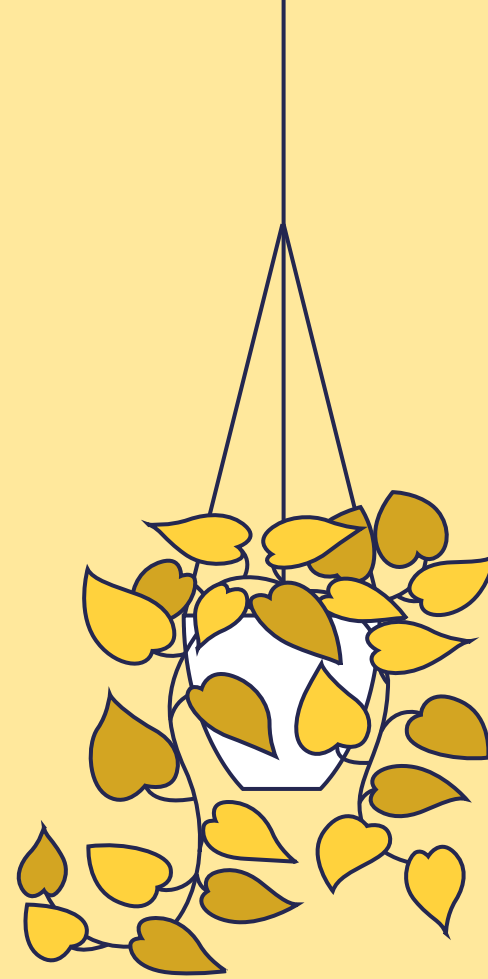
# Keeping an eye on the horizon

The lives of children and families will be shaped in part by the societal shifts around them.

The burgeoning mental health crisis among young people – tomorrow’s parents – and the prospect of a contraction in social welfare, could give rise to more families in difficulty. The increasing polarisation of living standards and lifestyles could create a more hostile environment for the families who are already facing challenges. Technological innovation has huge potential to make the family justice system more efficient, but the ungoverned proliferation of online advice and AI-driven applications threatens to increase inequity and injustice.

At the same time, the family justice system is slowly changing. A new approach to managing private law proceedings, which has a stronger focus on understanding children’s perspectives and needs, is showing signs of promise. Major government reforms to children’s social care, early years and family services offer the hope of earlier support for families.

Opportunities for change lie ahead.



# Get in touch

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) turns research, collaboration and new ideas into better experiences for children and families in the family justice system in England and Wales.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy and improve people's lives. The Nuffield Foundation is also the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute.

We are always keen to expand our network of partners and would invite anyone who is interested in improving the lives of children and families in the family justice system to get in touch.

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