

Foreword to the Family Court Annual Reports 2007/2008

This is the fourth annual report on the family jurisdiction of the county courts. It provides an overview of performance and information about local service delivery at each court centre from a judicial and administrative perspective.

Whether it is families having trouble with contact or residence arrangements for children whose parents' relationship has broken down, or care cases where local authorities apply to the courts to take a child at risk of harm into care, the family courts routinely deal with some of the most pressing concerns the public face today. The decisions they make have profound and long-term effects on the lives on those involved and cumulatively on society as a whole.

It is vital that family courts command the confidence of the public, if the public – including the parties involved – are to accept their decisions. This can best be achieved if justice in these courts is seen to be done.

I therefore recently announced measures to shed more light on the family courts, whilst continuing to protect the privacy of the parties and children involved. Rules of the court will be changed to allow the media to attend family proceedings, subject to reporting restrictions at the discretion of the court. We will also be piloting the provision of written judgements when a final order is made in certain family cases. And the rules on disclosure will be relaxed to allow parties and legal representatives to disclose more information relating to family proceedings to obtain the advice and support they need.

Many of those who come before the family courts are vulnerable – whether because they are victims of domestic abuse or are experiencing traumatic family breakdown – and the family courts have a responsibility to protect them.

Children involved in care proceedings are among the most vulnerable. For the duration of the proceedings, they are left uncertain as to their future and often moved between temporary care arrangements. We have therefore worked this year to reduce the impact of unnecessary delay in care proceedings. In April, a Public Law Outline replaced the existing Protocol for Judicial Case Management in Public Law Children Act cases. This reflects the revised guidance introduced for local authorities on preparing care applications for court.

To protect victims and potential victims of forced marriage, the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 was implemented this year. This enables courts to take steps to prevent forced marriages taking place and to order those responsible for forcing another into marriage to change their behaviour.

Work has continued to establish a unified family service, bringing together the work of the family proceedings courts and the county courts wherever possible under one roof and provide centralised administration for court hearings, providing simpler routes to family justice for the public. The results of pilots in Birmingham, Barnet and Ipswich were very positive, and we are now part way through a plan for the national rollout of similar co-located administrations and family court centres.

I am enormously grateful to the dedicated court staff, members of the judiciary and other agencies who have worked tirelessly to implement these policies and practices and to improve the delivery of family justice in this country. Their energy and commitment has been critical to creating a system that is accessible, responsive and appropriate to the needs of the people it serves. I have every confidence that this excellent work will continue over the coming year.

Rt. Hon Jack Straw MP

Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice