

CFJ-EN Annual Seminar 2026

The value of investing in child-centred justice

CONCEPT NOTE

Practical details

Dates	29 - 30 October 2026
Location	Brussels, Belgium
Venue	To be confirmed
Language of the seminar	English
Seminar format	In-person event
Expected participants	Approx. 120 people
Co-organisers	Child Friendly Justice European Network (CFJ-EN) Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures (IICF) University of Strathclyde, Scotland
Title	The value of investing in child-centred justice

Abstract

The 2026 CFJ-EN Annual Seminar makes the case that child centred justice is not a cost - it is a strategic, longer-term investment in children, communities, and society.

The 2025 CFJ EN Annual Seminar highlighted the importance of bridging child justice and child protection systems, showing how essential collaboration across systems and services is for achieving child centred justice. Building on this foundation, the 2026 Annual Seminar considers the full ecosystem of systems, services, and professionals required to secure children's rights, well-being, and justice needs - and, critically, the value of investing in that child-centred justice ecosystem to ensure children are fully supported.

This year's Seminar responds directly to emerging trends across Europe, where calls for punitive measures against children are resurfacing, alongside increasingly constrained budget environments.

and reparative strategy. Where adequately resourced, child centred justice provides the scaffolding needed to uphold children's rights and address their justice problems before they become situations of crisis or justice involvement. Where children do seek justice as a reparative mechanism, child centred approaches ensure that children can claim their rights, and remedies are accessible, appropriate, and timely.

The Seminar is designed to strengthen participants' skills in influencing and engaging stakeholders at all levels. Participants will gain insight into how investment decisions are made, how to work effectively with - and convincingly influence - key stakeholders, and how multi-level advocacy and partnerships can shift mindsets toward child centred, multi system approaches.

Together, these elements create a Seminar that deepens cross sector understanding, strengthens the case for sustained investment, and supports longer-term commitment to child centred justice across Europe.

1. About the 2026 Annual Seminar

This year's Child Friendly Justice European Network Annual Seminar builds upon the 2025 focus on bridging collaborations between child justice and child protection. It starts with a shared understanding that children's rights, experiences, and well-being are shaped by a whole ecosystem of systems, services, and professionals long before the *key point for enhanced support*.¹

The Seminar will explore how the interconnected systems that children navigate - across justice, child protection, education, health, social care and welfare, community services, and more - play a crucial role in preventing harm and identifying children's needs early, before they develop into situations of crisis or more formal involvement across justice systems. By examining these intersections, participants will identify where prevention and early intervention work well, and where gaps in provision foster adverse conditions.

The core theme is **the value of investing in child-centred justice** as both a prevention and reparation mechanism. When adequately resourced, child-centred justice systems and professionals provide the scaffolding needed to uphold children's rights and respond before situations develop into crisis. When children do seek justice as a reparative mechanism, child-centred approaches ensure they can claim their rights and access remedies that are appropriate, accessible, and timely. The Annual Seminar will support participants to move beyond viewing child-centred justice as a cost, towards understanding and communicating child-centred justice as a strategic, longer-term investment in children and in society. Participants will be equipped to articulate this case and to advocate, influence, and convince the relevant stakeholders and authorities needed to accelerate change.

The programme is designed to strengthen participants' skills and confidence in engaging stakeholders at every level. It brings together a shared understanding of children's justice needs and lived

¹ The point where a child's unmet needs, rights, or well-being become urgently evident. This may happen alongside, or in response to, a child's involvement with civil, administrative or criminal justice systems.

realities; the early identification of emerging challenges and conditions that give rise to crisis points; the difficulties practitioners face when working across complex, siloed systems; the pressures and priorities shaping policymaking in restricted budget environments; the factors influencing investment decisions; and how to work effectively with essential policymakers, ministers, and officials - understanding how they are best influenced, and how to support them to be receptive and responsive. The Seminar also highlights the role of multi-level advocacy and partnerships in shifting mindsets toward child-centred, multi-system thinking.

To support participants in developing the case for investment in child-centred justice, the Seminar introduces a simple yet powerful framework – the McTaggart Approach (Annex 1).

The Seminar offers tailored benefits for each group:

- **For practitioners:** Participants will deepen their understanding of how investment and resource decisions are made, leaving them equipped with advocacy tools to better influence decision-making, priorities, and investment. The programme will support practitioners to demonstrate the value of prevention and early intervention, and confidently articulate these benefits to the children and families they work alongside, as well as to strategic and operational decision-makers, and key stakeholders. By sharing front line insights and children's experiences, practitioners will be better placed to accelerate a shift from siloed, single-system responses to well-resourced, holistic, child-centred, and intersectional approaches.
- **For policymakers:** Participants will gain clearer insight into children's lived experiences and how their own areas of policy responsibility can and do impact on these experiences, the realities of navigating fragmented services, and the justice needs that go unmet when prevention is under-prioritised and under-resourced. Participants will build confidence in articulating, influencing, and convincing key stakeholders and authorities of the value of investing in child-centred justice, for longer-term outcomes for children and wider society. Participants will be equipped with tools to strengthen the integration of child-centred perspectives into policy design and priority setting. Participants will also deepen their understanding that these issues are of equal importance for policymakers working in areas which seem far-removed from children.²
- **For budget-holders and funders:** The programme will help decision-makers understand the longer-term value of investing in prevention-focused, child-centred approaches which positively secure children's human rights, well-being, and development. Equally of importance is understanding the significant short- and longer-term costs associated with punitive measures, late intervention, or non-intervention. It will also strengthen their capacity to evaluate the economic, social, and societal returns of investing in comprehensive, early, and integrated support for children, both directly and in areas seemingly far-removed as noted above.

2. Objectives and Guiding Questions

² As their work is likely to be fundamentally dependent on the well-being and security of families and societal objectives, therefore including children.

The General Objective of the Annual Seminar is to strengthen participants' understanding, commitment, and practical capacity to advocate for and advance the value of investing in child-centred justice as a prevention and reparation mechanism.

The Seminar aims to equip participants not only with new insights - such as how to recognise and respond to children's rights and justice needs before they develop into crisis or justice involvement - but also with the clarity and confidence to apply these insights within their own national roles and contexts.

A core ambition of the Seminar is that each participant leaves with a concrete, personalised post-Seminar plan of action that identifies:

- What is genuinely new, important, and valuable for you in your own work?
- What specific steps will you take - within your own circumstances, responsibilities, and national context - to translate this learning into practice?
- How will you initiate or strengthen discussions in your own context to promote meaningful progress and real change in investing and securing child-centred justice?

The Specific Objectives of the Annual Seminar are to:

1. Equip practitioners with the skills, language, and evidence needed to advocate for investment in preventative, coordinated child-centred justice.

- Strengthen understanding of how fragmented, siloed systems shape a child's lived reality, and why early, integrated support is essential to prevent children developing into situations of crisis or justice involvement.
- Build capacity to identify the resources, capabilities, and evidence and data required to create meaningful change for children.

2. Strengthen policymaking and planning agendas to support system-wide alignment, longer-term prevention, and improved outcomes for children and society.

- Enhance participants' ability to interpret research evidence on the broader drivers influencing children developing into situations of crisis or justice involvement.
- Develop capacity to identify and analyse wider patterns across systems and communities, understanding their longer-term implications for children, communities, and societies.

3. Mobilise, prioritise, and optimise budget-holders and funders to raise awareness of the value of investment to advance child-centred justice.

- Strengthen understanding of the economic value of prevention, diversion, and early intervention, including how to use cost-benefit and return on investment perspectives.
- Advocate with confidence that investment in child-centred justice should never be viewed as a cost, but as a driver of longer-term net benefit to children, families, and society.

3. Expected Outcomes

General Outcomes:

- Participants develop a shared language, conceptual clarity, and a common vision of child-centred justice as a longer-term investment in children, communities, and society.
- Cross-sector professionals gain a deeper understanding of each other's roles, capacities, pressures, and decision-making environments.
- Participants leave with increased confidence to collaborate, advocate, influence, and integrate early and coordinated support in their national contexts.
- Each participant formulates a personalised action plan outlining new insights, practical next steps, and priorities for stimulating national or institutional discussions on sustaining progress.

For practitioners:

- Practitioners can clearly communicate the damaging impact of fragmented services and punitive responses on children's lives and outcomes.
- Participants gain practical advocacy tools to influence decision-making and funding.
- Participants build confidence in evidencing the impact of their work in ways that can inform how budget-holders and funders use economic tools such as cost benefit and return on investment analysis.

For policymakers:

- Policymakers recognise that investing in joined up, preventative approaches, reduce long-term need and delivers more sustainable resources use of resources. This states the action needed rather than focus on current negative which leaves them to decide what is needed to address the issues.
- Front-line perspectives and children's experiences are more visible and influential in policy development and priority setting.
- Participants identify policy levers that can reduce fragmentation and promote early, multi-sector collaboration.
- Investment in child-centred justice becomes more compelling within policy agendas, strategic frameworks, and long-term planning cycles.
- Policymakers leave better equipped to advocate and convince national or other key stakeholders on child-centred justice as mechanisms to improve system efficiency and societal outcomes.

For budget-holders/funders:

- Budget holders understand the comparative long-term costs of early intervention versus reactive or punitive responses.

- Funders gain clarity on the societal, fiscal, and cross-sector returns generated by child-centred, preventive, and multi-system approaches.
- Budget holders and practitioners develop mutual understanding of the pressures and criteria involved in resource allocation and policy prioritisation.
- Participants recognise the financial and non-financial benefits of whole-system approaches and collaborative investment strategies.

4. Participants

- Representatives of civil society organisations working with children in contact with justice, or adjacent spaces
- Researchers working in fields including law, social work, sociology, child protection and neuroscience
- European Networks working in the field of child justice and/or child protection
- Europe-level and national-level policymakers, particularly those with remits including children and families, justice, welfare, etc.

5. Draft Agenda

Thursday, 29 October 2026 (9:00 am – 5:30 pm)

- Opening plenary
- Opening Keynote address
- Plenary Discussions
- Interactive Session: Youth Experiential Learning Simulation

Thursday, 29 October 2026 (PM)

- Networking Dinner (*optional*)

Friday, 30 October 2026 (9:00 am – 1:30 pm)

- Plenary discussions
- Interactive Workshop Sessions
- Closing Keynote address
- Closing Plenary

6. Participation of children and young people

The participation of children and young people with lived experience of justice systems, in an appropriate and inclusive way, is at the heart of our events. During the CFJ-EN 2026 Annual Seminar, var-

ious parts of the agenda will include their participation, including ensuring their views are included in plenary sessions.

7. About the Organisers

The **Child Friendly Justice European Network** (CFJ-EN) was launched in April 2019 by Defence for Children International Belgium (DCI-Belgium) as an informal network. Initially, it brought together the seven European sections of Defence for Children International and later expanded to include additional non-DCI organisations. In 2022, the CFJ-EN formalised its status through a Framework Partnership Agreement with the European Commission, solidifying its role as a fully operational network. Legally hosted and coordinated by DCI-Belgium, an organisation founded in 1991 under Belgian law, the Network operates with the mission of advancing children's rights in alignment with the UNCRC. CFJ-EN focuses specifically on child-friendly justice, advocating for justice systems that are adapted to address the unique needs, vulnerabilities, situations and rights of children. By fostering collaboration among its members, the CFJ-EN seeks to harmonise practices and amplify its collective impact across Europe, ensuring that children's rights are a central consideration in all justice processes. As of January 2026, the CFJ-EN is composed of 40 Members in 21 European countries.

The Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures (IICF), based at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland, works with partners with a collective vision of ensuring that children and young people have what they need to reach their full potential, particularly those facing adversity. IICF convenes the Global Working Group on Justice for Children, an international, multi-agency Working Group which works to place children, and their human rights, at the heart of the global movement for justice and the achievement of SDG 16.3: equal access to justice for all. The Global Working Group includes Child Friendly Justice European Network, Defence for Children International, ECPAT International, International Legal Foundation, the Legal Empowerment Fund, OECD, Terre des hommes, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, and UNICEF, with support from the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies and in close collaboration with the Justice Action Coalition.

Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) based at the University of Strathclyde is a boundary spanning organisation that leads national work to shape Scotland's response to children and young people in conflict with the law, and their families. It works to ensure this work is rights-respecting and improves outcomes for children, young people, and their communities. CYCJ connects research, policy, and practice to drive change at national and local level, while increasingly contributing to international work on child friendly justice.

8. Rationale of CFJ-EN Annual Seminars

The CFJ-EN is funded under a Framework Partnership Agreement with the European Commission. To ensure that the Network's mission is achieved, the CFJ-EN committed in its multi-annual ac-

tion plan to the organisation of annual seminars with a view to strengthen and further develop the Network. The purpose of the annual seminars is to create a space for exchange, mutual learning, resources sharing and capacity building among practitioners and policy makers in Europe working towards respecting the rights of children in contact with justice systems.

Annual Seminars are therefore dynamic and interactive spaces, which contribute to build bridges with other Networks and Alliances, enhance collaborations with key regional institutions, namely the European Union and the Council of Europe, and promote the dissemination of promising practices and innovative ways of working with children who are in contact with justice systems, whether in criminal, civil or administrative proceedings.

9. Contact Details

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The CFJ-EN is part of the legal entity of



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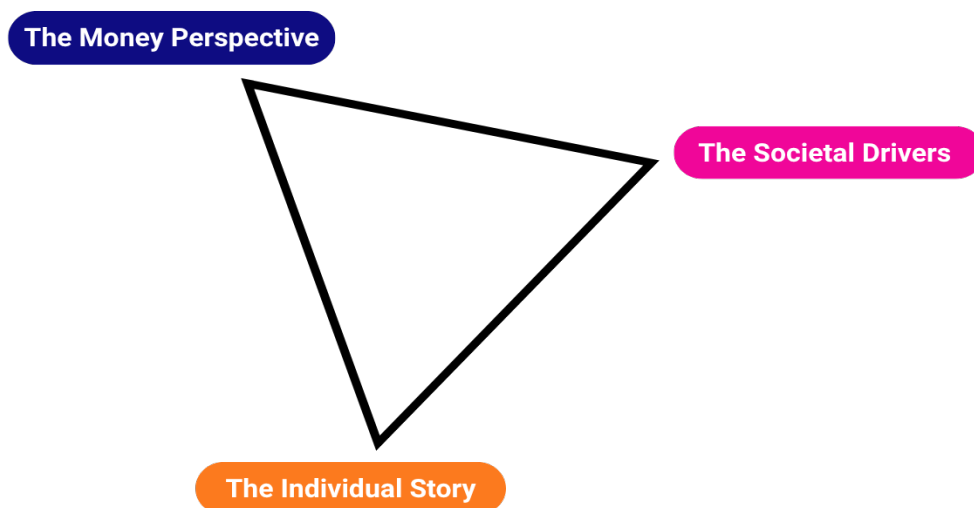
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Annex 1: The McTaggart Approach

To support participants in developing the case for investment in child-centred justice, the Seminar will introduce a simple but powerful framework built around three complementary perspectives.



The Individual Story

Children come into contact with justice systems in many different ways across civil, administrative and criminal contexts. Some experience this directly in their homes, schools, and communities where their rights need to be upheld, where decisions are made about their lives, or where harm has occurred or alleged.

This strand focuses on children's lives and experiences, and the practitioners who support them every day. It aims to strengthen practitioners' capacity to articulate the consequences of how fragmented systems and punitive responses fail children, the consequences of inaction or delayed support, and the positive value of investing early in coordinated, child-centred approaches.

The Societal Drivers

Children's justice needs are often shaped by drivers such as exclusion, barriers to identity, violence, limited access to justice, lack of prevention, the capacity of support networks, and harmful influences in their environments. These have both individual and structural impacts on children, but are often rooted in multi-generational inequalities, and societal cycles which result in the absence of real opportunities for development, and their ability to exercise real choice and agency in their lives. Bringing a societal perspective is critical for shaping effective advocacy and policy prioritisation.

This component looks at the wider patterns, systems, communities and long-term implications for society. It is essential for engaging policymakers, senior leaders, and those working at a whole-government or strategic level. By illustrating how multiple services interact - or fail to interact - this perspective shows why structural alignment and long-term planning are necessary to prevent situa-

tions of crisis and improve outcomes at scale.

The Money Perspective

From a financial perspective, several forms of economic analysis help demonstrate the value of prevention and early intervention. Benefit–cost analyses assess whether overall benefits outweigh programme costs. Cost-savings analysis highlights direct financial savings. Cost-effectiveness analysis compares the cost of achieving specific outcomes. Return on investment shows financial returns relative to spending. The crucial point here is to determine *what* benefits and costs should be identified for analysis, how direct/indirect these benefits and costs are (do they require looking at the impact on children alone, or broader impacts on a multitude of other objectives for children, families, and communities), and the necessary time period – short-term, over the lifetime of a child, or multi-generationally. Most importantly, investing in children should never be seen as simply a cost, no matter how constrained resources are. While economic and financial realities are crucial contexts, the **net benefit** of the investment is the key concept to highlight. Highlighting this concept requires taking note of the value of the individual story, and societal drivers, on the journey towards robust evidence and data.

This component emphasises the resources required to achieve meaningful change and the economic value of prevention and diversion, to address children's needs and rights before situations develop into crisis or involvement with formal justice systems... It focuses on the evidence of what is effective and quantifies the costs of inaction across the ecosystem. When rooted in and informed by individual stories and a wider society perspective, this level speaks directly to funders, donors, and budget-holders, helping shift conversations from short-term service costs to sustainable, long-term investment in children and society.