

Family drug and alcohol courts: costs and benefits

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 Centre
for
Justice
Innovation

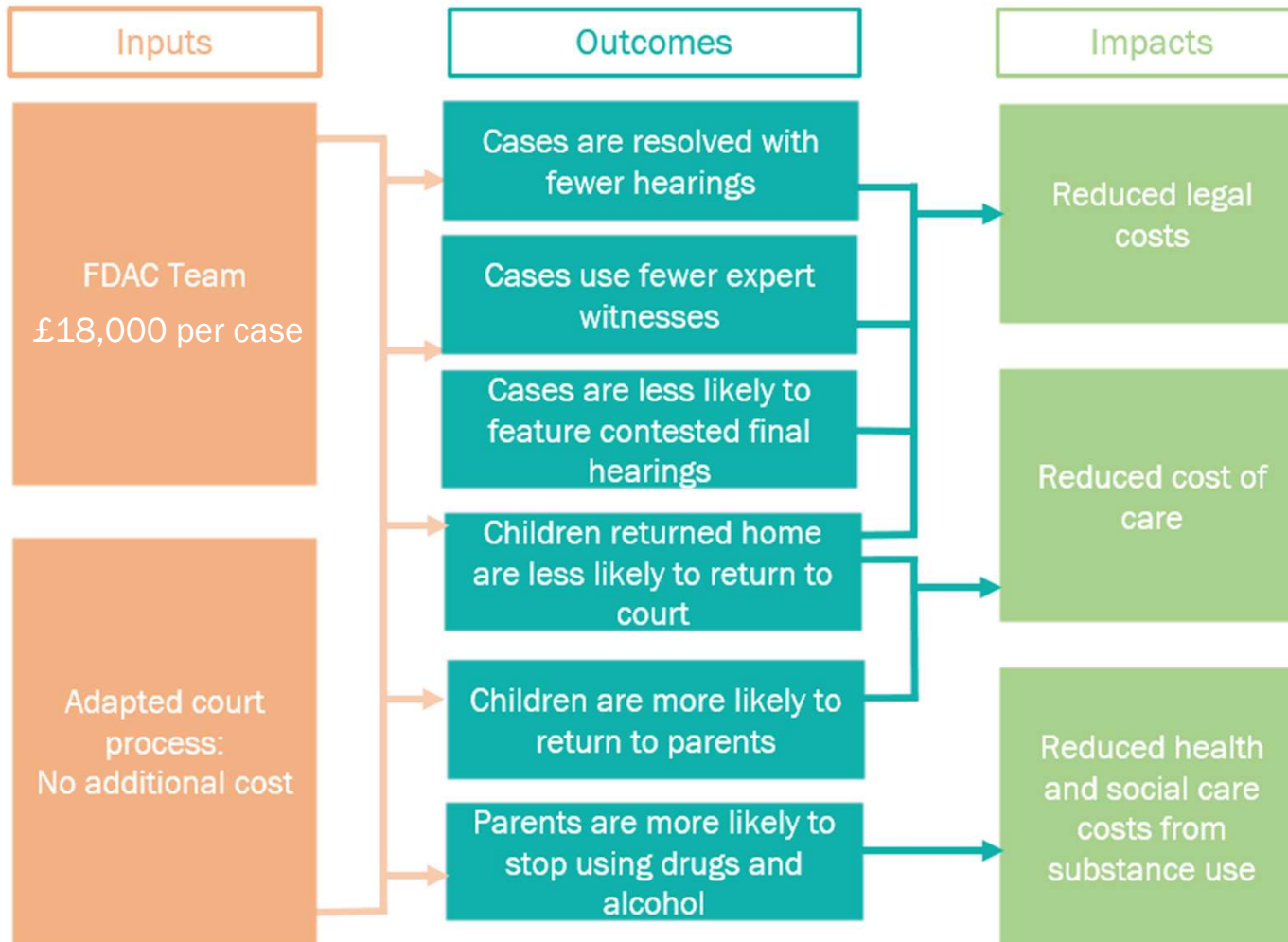
The cost of care proceedings

- It is estimated that the total cost of care proceedings to the state each year is £1.2 billion, with a **single public law case costing a local authority, on average, £120,000**.
- This represents 10% of all direct annual expenditure on the children's social care system.
- Increased numbers of children entering care and the growing cost of care placements is intensifying this financial pressure. Across England, **spending on children's services increased by £800 million in 2021/2022**, a substantial 8% surge from the previous year.
- Modelling suggests that each one-week reduction in average proceedings duration could generate a financial benefit of approximately £24 million across all English local authorities.

In addition to their high cost, the detrimental impact of the care system on children and the longstanding trauma that is experienced by families in care proceedings is well evidenced.

Yet even going through the intensive intervention of care proceedings does not prevent families from experiencing similar interventions in the future. A significant number of parents return to court (often repeatedly) in recurrent care proceedings, estimated to make up 20% of public law cases.

Mapping the financial impacts of FDAC



Reduced legal costs

Outcome	Evidence	Financial impact
Cases are resolved with fewer hearings	FDAC cases are typically concluded in an average of 3 hearings compared to 6 in standard proceedings[1]	A single hearing costs an LA £500, or £2,300 if barristers are used[2]
Cases use fewer expert witnesses	8% of FDAC cases use expert witnesses compared to 96% of comparison cases[3]	Expert witnesses cost an average of £1,200[2]
Cases are less likely to feature contested final hearings	4% of FDAC cases ended in a contested final hearing, compared to 24% of cases in standard proceedings[3]	A contested final hearing costs an LA £650, or £3,650 if barristers are used [2]
Children returned home are less likely to return to court	34% of reunited FDAC families returned to court within 5 years, compared to 55% in standard proceedings[4]	Each return to court will trigger the full range of case costs (est. £80,000)[5]

Reduced costs of care

Outcome

Children are more likely to return to parents

Children returned home are less likely to return to court

Evidence

52% of children in FDAC were returned to parents compared to 13% of parents in standard proceedings.[3]

34% of reunited FDAC families returned to court within 5 years, compared to 55% in standard proceedings[4]

Financial impact

A one year foster care placement costs an average of £46,000. A one year residential placement costs £324,000[6]

Each return to court has the potential to trigger a further placement

Reduced substance misuse costs

Outcome

Parents are more likely to desist from using drugs and alcohol

Evidence

33% FDAC parents had stopped misusing substances by the end of proceedings compared to 8% in standard proceedings.[3]

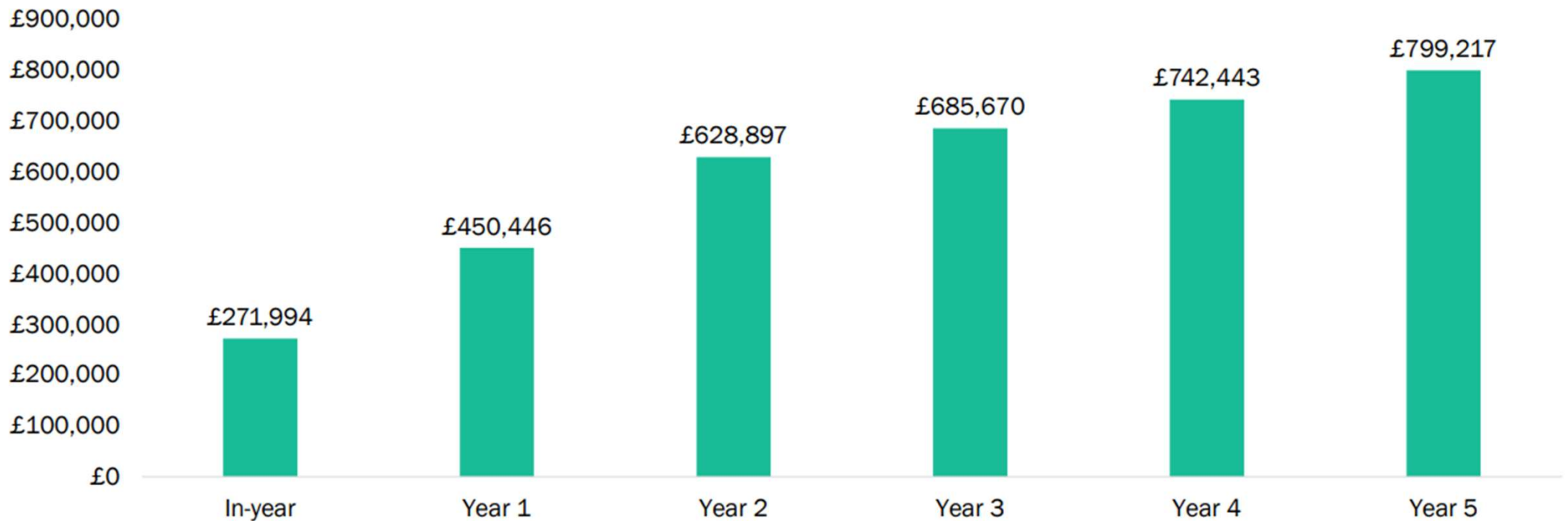
Financial impact

One person misusing drugs costs £4,700 a year through offending and health care costs.[7] One person misusing alcohol costs £2,500 in treatment costs.[8]

Overall costs and benefits

Our 2021 analysis suggests that operating a typical FDAC team for a year costs £540,000 per year and produces £800,000 net savings across five years[9]. However the evidence base has significantly strengthened since this analysis was conducted. Our forthcoming work (due for publication later this year) will present a more robust picture.

Total net savings by FDAC team over time



Sources

1. New analysis completed by Mutual Ventures on the basis of engagement with FDAC teams and review of HMCTS data
2. New analysis by Mutual Ventures based on data supplied by local authorities
3. Foundations (2023) *Evaluation of Family Drug and Alcohol Courts* (<https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FDAC-report.pdf>)
4. Harwin et al 2016. *After FDAC: outcomes 5 years later Final Report*. Lancaster University (https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/cfj-fdac/files/2016/12/FDAC_FINAL_REPORT_2016.pdf)
5. Independent review of children's social care
6. Data supplied by Greater Manchester local authorities
7. Estimating the crime reduction benefits of drug treatment and recovery (National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, 2012)
8. Alcohol Use Disorders: diagnosis, assessment and management of harmful drinking and alcohol dependence (NICE Clinical Practice Guidance 115)
9. Centre for Justice Innovation (2021) *Rolling-out Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDAC): The business case*