

**CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND  
BOARD MEETING – 14<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 2023**

- Present:** Mrs Gemma Loughran, *Chair*  
Ms Dawn Shaw, CEO  
Ms Veronica Callaghan, Non-Executive Director  
Mr David Douglas, Non-Executive Director
- In Attendance:** Mr Sean Brown, Head of Corporate Services  
Ms Teresa Fallon, Assistant Director
- Apologies:** Mr Lee Wilson, Non-Executive Director
- Minute Taker:** Mrs Colette Cronie, Personal Assistant

**START TIME: 9.30am**

**88.23 APOLOGIES AND WELCOME**

- 88.23.1 Apologies were received from Mr Wilson. Mrs Loughran welcomed Mrs Cronie to the meeting, who was standing in for Mrs Andrew to take a record of the meeting.

**89.23.1 DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

- 89.23.1 There were no interests declared.

**90.23 MINUTE OF THE BOARD MEETING OF 2<sup>ND</sup> NOVEMBER 2023**

- 90.23.1 The minute of the meeting of 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2023 was reviewed and approved as an accurate record.

**91.23 MATTERS ARISING**

***Report on Mandatory Training***

- 91.23.1 Mr Brown spoke to a report of training undertaken broken down by the respective staff group. It was noted that there was a very poor response

from the Guardian staff group. Ms Shaw advised that at the recent Guardian Staff Meetings, she reiterated the importance of everyone ensuring that they have completed the mandatory e-learning training. The general response amongst Guardians was that they are feeling extremely overwhelmed due to the current situation with regards to allocation. Mrs Loughran suggested advising the Guardians to allocate up to 15 minutes per day to dedicate to completing the training.

- 91.23.2 Training requirements have also been incorporated into the Mid-Year Reviews. The Board discussed the importance of all the e-learning modules and in particular the Fire Safety programme. Following discussion, it was agreed that Ms Shaw will inform all staff that the Board have recommended that the Fire Safety module is completed by the end of January 2024. Mr Brown advised that he is attending Fire Warden Training on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023 and will confirm with the Board at the next meeting, how many individuals have yet to complete the Fire Safety training.

**ACTION: The CEO to inform all staff of the Board's direction that the Fire Safety Module is completed by the end of January 2024.**

## **92.23 CHAIR AND NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING**

- 92.23.1 Mrs Loughran advised that there was a meeting of all Arms-Length Bodies with the Permanent Secretary on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023. Mrs Loughran was unable to attend however advised that there were no specific matters on the agenda which related to the Agency.

## **93.23 CEO BRIEFING / UPDATE REPORT**

- 93.23.1 Ms Shaw advised that she attended a recent Ground Clearing Meeting and reported that Mrs Loughran and Ms Callaghan's term of office will come to an end in March 2024 and it is likely that their terms will be extended.
- 93.23.2 Ms Shaw provided an update on the current situation with regards to allocation and Mrs Loughran thanked Ms Shaw for the papers provided outlining this. Ms Shaw advised that the situation has not changed, there are currently 150 cases which are unallocated, involving 169 children. The situation remains extremely challenging and Mr Thompson,

Guardian Service Manager is currently on sickness absence, therefore Ms Fallon and Ms O'Kane are assisting Mrs Savage with allocation.

- 93.23.3 Ms Shaw advised that she has written to Judge McFarland updating on the situation. The Agency have also agreed that adoption cases will not be allocated until six weeks before the final hearing.
- 93.23.4 It was noted that this is an extremely challenging situation and staff are currently under immense pressure. Ms Shaw stated that there are also a high number of Guardians off on sickness absence which is an added pressure with regards to allocating cases. Following discussion, it was agreed that the Mrs Loughran would send an email to all staff acknowledging the current pressures and to wish them a Happy Christmas and commend them for the work completed throughout 2023.
- 93.23.5 Ms Shaw updated the Board on the current situation with regards to recruitment. Six Band 7 Guardians have been appointed and will commence in February 2024. Ms Shaw advised that after reviewing the budget, it was felt that there were funds available for two more Band 7 Guardians, therefore this will bring the Agency up to a total of eight Band 7 Guardians. The two candidates on the waiting list will be offered posts. . This is as a result of using resources from self employed staff which has reduced in number.
- 94.23.6 Ms Callaghan commended the Agency on the measures which have been put in place with regards to return cases and adoption applications and advised that as these are measures which have not been taken before, this will be new information which can be presented to the Department with evidence of the associated impact.
- 93.23.7 Mrs Loughran advised that the Board are astounded at the quality and volume of work which has to be completed in terms of allocation and are extremely pleased at how the Agency are approaching this. However due to the fact that allocation is the Agency's greatest risk, this situation must be continuously monitored to ascertain if any marginal moves can be completed to help the situation. It was noted that all steps have been taken by the Agency, correspondence has been sent to the HSC Trusts, the Judiciary and all stakeholders.
- 93.23.8 Ms Shaw advised that a meeting took place with officials from the Irish Republic who are in the early stages of establishing a Guardian Agency. Mrs Loughran asked that a link is made between the Agency and CAFCASS and Ms Shaw reported that correspondence has been sent,

however no response has been received as yet. Ms Shaw agreed to attempt to make contact again.

**ACTION: The CEO to again try and link with CAFCASS.**

93.23.9 Mrs Loughran again thanked the SLT on the excellent work completed.

### ***Business Plan Objectives – Update Report***

93.23.10 Mr Brown spoke to the Business Plan and updated the Board on progress made and associated rag ratings.

93.23.11 With regards to the Delay Pilot, Ms Callaghan queried whether the delay has been captured sufficiently. Ms Shaw advised that the progress of the Delay Pilot and the associated delay have been extremely disappointing and advised that there will be a discussion with the Chair of the Shadow Justice Board Delay subgroup. Ms Shaw stated that the Trust has sent the data to the Agency and this has been returned with the Agency's information also included. Ms O'Kane has written to Suzanne Mahon, Assistant Director, Western HSCT who is responsible for Chairing the meetings of all Principal Practitioners, to provide an update on the current situation.

## **94.23 FINANCE REPORT**

94.23.1 Mr Brown spoke to the Finance Report advising that the Agency has broken even and there is a spending plan in place for the coming months.

94.23.2 Mr Brown advised that there has been a slight cost saving with the move to James House. Travel expenses are currently approximately £6k per month and Mr Brown advised that this has been a saving as previously this would have been approximately £120k per annum.

94.23.3 With regards to self employed Guardian costs, any money saved has been redirected into the employed staff budget and there may be further reductions next year to manage this budget.

94.23.4 Mr Brown advised that the budget position is satisfactory up to the end of March 2024. There is a pay award which amounts to £200k which will also be included in the costings.

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**95.23. RISK APPETITE**

- 95.23.1 It was agreed that this item would be deferred to the next meeting of the Board when Mr Wilson is in attendance.

**96.23 BUSINESS PLAN OBJECTIVES 2024-25**

- 96.23.1 Mr Brown advised that the Strategic Plan will be featured as a link within the Business Plan and this should be the model for all reporting going forward. Mr Brown spoke to the objectives and strategic themes.
- 96.23.2 The Board discussed the Business Plan objectives and made the relevant amendments to the document. Mrs Loughran recommended that the Agency focus on liaising with more with voluntary agencies in the coming year. Ms Shaw and Mrs Loughran agreed that this would be something which could be taken up next year.

**97.23 MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

- 97.23.1 As an annual requirement, the Board must have sight of the Management Statement which is signed once every five years. The Statement sets out the relationship with the Department and this was noted by the Board.

**98.23 BOARD SELF ASSESSMENT**

- 98.23.1 Mrs Loughran acknowledged that everyone had contributed to the Board Self-Assessment and this was for nothing.
- 98.23.2 Mrs Loughran advised that succession planning will need to begin in terms of permanent staff and allocation and this should be a priority for next year. Following discussion relating to the pressures within the Agency, Mr Brown advised that the risk relating to the management's position has been added as follows – *If the Agency continues to experience sustained pressure there is a risk to a small operational management team's health and wellbeing and the ability to provide a service.*

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**99.23 SERVICE PRESENTATION: *Young People's Forum***

- 99.23.1 At this point in the meeting, the Board were joined by two young people from the Young People's Forum.
- 99.23.2 The young people introduced themselves to the Board members and gave an update on their background including favourite subjects at school, hobbies and family life. The Board thanked the boys for their input throughout the year and advised how valuable their contribution is to the Agency. Mrs Loughran advised that their feedback helps the Agency to continuously improve and focus on what could have been done better.
- 99.23.3 Following discussion around the Agency About Me Leaflets, the boys gave an insight into what they find frustrating or challenging within the Care process, with both expressing how upsetting it can be if contact is scheduled, however then obstacles arise and the contact does not take place. The boys suggested that a page is added to the About Me Booklet which is titled, 'What Ruins my Day' and an additional page 'What Makes My Day.'
- 99.23.4 The boys also informed the Board that they would have found it extremely helpful if they had of been given an opportunity to meet with the Judge personally and feedback their wishes and feelings.
- 99.23.5 The Board thanked the boys for their invaluable insights into the journey of a child through Care and stated they hoped they would continue to remain a part of the Youth Forum to help shape the future of the Agency. The boys were invited to stay for some lunch and refreshments in the Agency as a thank you for their time. Mrs Loughran concluded the meeting with the boys by once again thanking them for their participation and advising that she would be writing to their respective schools to advise of the importance of their role on the Youth Forum and how their feedback and ideas have been taken on board.

**100.23 PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT**

- 100.23.1 Ms Shaw had agreed with the Department to share the Partnership Agreement with the Board as a draft status. Mr Wilson had suggested a number of points which the Board took account of, however it was recognised that this is a template, which the Board have little control over and it was agreed that this would be reviewed in September 2024.

**101.23 BOARD COMMITTEES SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD*****SCG Committee – 7<sup>th</sup> December 2023***

- 101.23.1 Ms Callaghan updated the Board on the last Social Care Governance meeting which took place on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2023. Ms Callaghan advised that there was an in-depth discussion on the Social Care Governance Framework and how this would interact with the Corporate Framework. Mr Brown is currently working on this and the overall aim is to have an integrated approach. The Committee reviewed allocation measures and the Supervision Policy and Case Grading. Ms Callaghan commended the Agency for the work completed on the Supervision Policy. Ms Callaghan also advised that she recommended to the SCG Committee that the work around case grading should be considered as a quality improved initiative which should be shared regionally.

**102.23 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE*****Letter to the Judiciary from the Chief Executive***

- 102.23.1 Ms Shaw has written to the Judiciary providing an update on the current situation on allocation however has not yet received a response.

***HSC(F) 35-2023 - The Payment of Remuneration of Chairs and Non-Executive Members Determination (NI) 2023***

- 102.23.2 Mrs Loughran referred to the above circular and noted that the Pay Award was not reflective of the volume of the work being undertaken by the Board.

***HSC(F) 38 2023 - Legal Cases Controls***

- 102.23.3 The Board noted the circular HSC(F) 38 2023 - Legal Cases Controls.

***NI HMKPS Scheme Launch Comms***

- 102.23.4 Ms Shaw advised the Board that this was discussed at a recent SLT meeting and it was agreed that in order to retain a neutral working environment, this opportunity will be declined.

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**103.23. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 103.23.1 The next meeting of the Board will take place in Lisanally House, Armagh on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2024 at 10.00 am, and Mr Tom Teggart will be invited to attend in person.
- 103.23.2 Mrs Loughran concluded the meeting by thanking all members of the Board for their co-operation throughout the year and wished them a Happy Christmas and New Year.

**END TIME: 2.30PM**

**DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 22<sup>nd</sup> FEBRUARY 2024 AT 10 AM.**



## ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
<b>80.23 Policies</b>	Mr Brown to reissue all organisational and HR policies for information to staff.	Mr Brown	To be reissued on launch of new Intranet
<b>82.23 Board committee Meetings since Last meeting of the Board</b>	Mr Wilson and Mr Brown to liaise over the review/preparation of the Assurance Framework, Governance Framework and Governance Plan, for discussion at the March 2024 meeting of the Audit & Risk Committee and then April 2024 meeting of the Board.	Mr Brown / Mr Wilson	Assurance Framework in draft
<b>91.23.2 Matters Arising – Report on Mandatory Training</b>	<p>It was agreed that Ms Shaw would inform all staff that the Board have recommended that the Fire Safety module is completed by the end of January 2024.</p> <p>Mr Brown also agreed to confirm with the Board, how many individuals have yet to complete the Fire Safety training.</p>	<p>Ms Shaw</p> <p>Mr Brown</p>	
<b>92.23.1 Chair and Non-Executive's Briefing</b>	Mrs Loughran will liaise with NICON for an update on the recent Arm's Length Bodies meeting with the Department and will report back to Ms Shaw.	Mrs Loughran	
<b>93.23.4 CEO Briefing</b>	Mrs Loughran would send an email to all staff acknowledging the current pressures and to wish them a Happy Christmas and commend them for the work completed throughout 2023.	Mrs Loughran	

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<b>93.23.8 CEO Briefing</b>	Mrs Loughran asked that a link is made between the Agency and CAFCASS and Ms Shaw reported that correspondence has been sent, however no response has been received as yet. Ms Shaw agreed to attempt to make contact again with CAFCASS	<b>Ms Shaw</b>	
<b>96.23.2 Business Plan Objectives 2024-24</b>	Mrs Loughran recommended that the Agency focus on liaising with more with voluntary agencies in the coming year. Ms Shaw and Mrs Loughran agreed that this would be something which could be taken up next year.	<b>Mrs Loughran Ms Shaw</b>	