

Children's Court Guardian Agency for
Northern Ireland
Formerly known as NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA)

Equality and Disability Action Plans 2023-2028

October 2023



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We will consider any request for this document in another format or language.

Please contact us at:

Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland

James House

2-4 Cromac Avenue

Gasworks Business Park

Ormeau Road

Belfast

BT7 2JD

Website: <https://nigala.hscni.net/>

Email: admin@childrenscourtguardianagencyni.co.uk

Telephone: 0300 555 0102

1. Introduction

The Children’s Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland is committed to promoting equality and good relations. As a member of the HSC family in Northern Ireland our Equality and Disability Plans have been developed in cooperation with nine other members of that family¹. The implementation of those Plans will also be jointly undertaken where possible; and where there are issues specific to our Agency our Plans provide for us to address them separately.

The following is what we and our colleagues in the nine other public bodies have committed to do.

“For people with a disability, we recognise that we have to do more to promote positive attitudes and to encourage their participation in public life. We want to make sure we do this in a way that makes a difference to people. We will put in place what is necessary to do so. This includes people, time

¹ These organisations are the NI Blood Transfusion Service, Business Services Organisation, NI Medical and Dental Training Agency, NI Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Patient and Client Council, Public Health Agency, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

and money. Where it is right to do so, we will include actions from this plan in the yearly plans we develop for the organisation as a whole. These are called ‘corporate’ or ‘business’ plans.

We will also put everything in place in the organisation to make sure that we do what we have to under the law. This includes making one person responsible overall for making sure we do what we say we are going to do in our Equality and Disability Action Plan.

We will make sure we let our staff know what is in our plan. We will also train our staff and help them understand what they need to do”.

The member of staff in our organisation who is responsible for making sure that we do what we have committed to do is Sean Brown. When you have any questions, you can contact Sean at:

Sean Brown
Head of Corporate Services
Children’s Court Guardian Agency for NI
James House
2-4 Cromac Avenue
Gasworks Business Park
Ormeau Road
Belfast BT7 2JD

Telephone: 0300 555 0102 (select option 1)
admin@childrenscourtguardianagency.cyni.co.uk

One of our Board members, Lee Wilson, also takes a particular interest in the development and implementation of our Equality and Disability Action Plan. Lee is a member of our Equality and Disability Working Group.

2. Who we are and what we do

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland is a special agency which employs social workers, called Children's Court Guardians, who have a particular role in respect of children and young people whose future care arrangements are being considered by the court. The role of the Children's Court guardian is to advise the court of the best interests of these children and young people and to ensure that the court is aware of their wishes and feelings.

In order to fulfil this role, our guardians:

- Consider what work the relevant Health and Social Care Trust is undertaking with the family including the child(ren) or young person(s). This work is likely to include an investigation of the challenges in the life of the family and the capacity of the adult(s) to meet the challenges. It will involve a consideration of the help

which could be given to the adults to ensure that the best interests of the child(ren) or young person(s) are met.

- Meet the family members including the child(ren) and young person(s) in order to understand as fully as possible what has been happening within the family and to decide what needs to be done to promote the welfare of the child(ren) and young person(s).
- Talk to the child(ren) and young person(s) to find out what are their wishes and feelings about their future living and care arrangements.
- Appoint a Solicitor whose understanding of the law will help the guardian to identify what steps need to be taken to promote the welfare of the child(ren) and young person(s) and to ensure that their wishes and feelings are understood by the court.
- Assist the court to make sure that all the right information is available and to avoid unnecessary delay in making decisions about the future family life of the children and young people.

Like other publicly funded organisations we have to manage our resources – our staffing, our information technology, our offices - efficiently and effectively and ensure that we

provide a high-quality service which is good value for money.

3. How people can be involved in our work

There are a number of ways in which people can be involved in the work of the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland.

The Agency engages with relevant stakeholders from the HSCTs, Judiciary, Solicitors and relevant organisations e.g. Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) to inform and influence practice developments. The Agency developed "About Me" and "About Court" resources for Children's Court Guardians to use with children and young people to support their engagement and participation in court proceedings. The resources were piloted and feedback from children and young people was incorporated into the documents. The consultation process involved educators in the learning disability sector who provided tools and images used for children and young people with specific learning needs.

In 2017 the Agency established a young people's forum - Northern Ireland Youth Associates Board (NIYAB). A most important role was played by NIYAB in the planning and delivery of the Agency's Conference "Are we Listening?"

held on 14 February 2020. NIYAB has also been very involved in the re-branding of the Agency, including the design of our new logo and our website, following our change of name in March 2023.

4. What the law says

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland has to follow the law under **Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998**. It says that in our work we have to promote equality and good relations. We have to treat people fairly based on their need and to make things better for staff and people who use our services. It also says that we have to build better relationships between different groups of people.

There are nine different equality groups that the law requires us to take account of:

- Gender (and gender identities)
- Age
- Religion
- Political opinion
- Ethnicity
- Disability
- Sexual orientation
- Marital status
- Having dependants or not.

There are three good relations groups we need to consider:

- Religion
- Political opinion
- Ethnicity.

We also have to follow the law under the **Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006**, which says that we have to:

- Promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and
- Encourage participation by disabled people in public life.

This includes people with any type of disability, whether for example, physical disabilities; sensory disabilities (such as sight loss or hearing loss); autism; learning disabilities; mental health conditions (such as depression); or conditions that are long-term (such as cancer or diabetes). Some of these disabilities may be hidden, others may be visible.

Both pieces of legislation require us to develop an action plan: An Equality Action Plan and a Disability Action Plan. We have to send these plans to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and then report every year on what we have done.

5. How we reviewed our last plans and developed these new plans

As we have indicated above, we worked with nine other organisations to review our last plans and to develop these new plans. This is a summary of the steps taken jointly by all these organisations.

We reviewed what we have done so far to promote equality and good relations, to promote positive attitudes towards people with a disability and to encourage their participation in public life.

As part of our Five-Year Review, we asked our staff to consider the following questions:

- What has worked well?
- What has not worked well?
- What lessons have we learned?
- Did we do what we said we would do?
- Has this made a difference for people in the way we thought it would?

For the new plans, we asked them to consider two questions:

- In your area of work, what are the key issues for people in the equality groupings?

- What can you do to address these issues?

We encouraged our staff to look at a range of sources of information such as:

- Our Five-Year Review of Equality Scheme;
- Monitoring data;
- New research or data;
- Equality screening exercises that have been completed;
- Their professional experience and knowledge;
- Issues raised in consultations or through other engagement with staff and service users.

We engaged closely with Tapestry, our HSC Disability Staff Network, in the development of our Disability Action Plans. We held a focus group to find out from members of staff with a disability or who cares for someone with a disability what issues are important and what issues they think the organisation should address as a priority.

We also read up on what the Equality Commission says would be good to do. All this helped us think about what else we could do to make a difference.

6. What we have done so far

We have taken the following steps to promote equality under our previous action plans:

- We produced a leaflet targeted at staff who are carers. It highlights the policies and support offered by BSO and HSC Regional Organisations, and also signposts carers to different local sources of help in each HSC Trust area. Details are also provided on counselling and advice services. The leaflet is included in the Tapestry website, and was forwarded to staff through a series of corporate communications.

- Domestic Abuse – Awareness Raising
A webinar, facilitated by Women’s Aid, was organised specifically for Children’s Court Guardian staff to support the Workplace Policy on Domestic Abuse and it addressed a range of topics. 19 members of staff attended this webinar. Topics included:
 - Definitions of domestic violence and strategy development;
 - Myths and stereotypes;
 - Forms of domestic violence and associated behaviours; and
 - Trauma and the impact of domestic violence.

- We have already referred to our conference held on 14 February 2020 on the theme ‘Are We Listening?’. Our Youth Associates Board had a significant role not only in the preparation for the conference but also as

participants on the day. They developed art work and poetry based on their experiences and that material was displayed around the conference venue. Some of them spoke at the conference, sharing their experiences with the audience which included health and social professionals, solicitors, barristers and judges.

Promoting positive attitudes towards disabled people

The joint initiatives to promote positive attitudes towards people with a disability and encourage the participation of people with a disability in public life include.

- 17 disability awareness days for staff. Each looked at different disability. The aim of these days is to increase the knowledge and awareness of our staff including how to support a person with that particular disability. Since the pandemic these sessions have been held online via zoom. They are then recorded and uploaded to the website of Tapestry, the disability staff network.
- Development of a dedicated module on disability as part of the eLearning resource called Making a Difference which is available to all Health and Social Care staff. Our Agency staff are asked to complete the programme at induction.

- Delivery of training sessions on mental health awareness to our staff, including mental health first aid, mindfulness and managing stress, and courses for staff who are carers.

Encourage the participation of people with a disability in public life

- Together with our partners, we set up Tapestry, a disability network for our staff. Part of the role of this network is to raise disability issues with decision makers in our organisation.

7. What we have learned so far

Some of the key points we have learned from developing and implementing our action plans are described below.

Disability Awareness Days

- Since we moved our days online we have seen a significant increase in the numbers of staff attending our events. Also, they come from a wider range of locations.
- Recording the sessions has been a great success. This means that staff who cannot attend on the day can access the event whenever it suits them.

- Staff who are carers of a person with a disability, for example of a person living with ADHD or with dementia, have an unmet need for comprehensive information.
- Staff are interested in learning more about how to support a family member, not just colleagues in the workplace.

We have found that attendance at awareness raising events is greatest when the subject is most relevant to staff. This can be because they have the condition themselves or they know or work with someone who has the condition. Staff will continue to be consulted about the areas relating to disability on which they would like more information.

Tapestry – Disability Staff Network

- Staff fora needs to be refreshed and promoted on an ongoing basis.
- For a forum to be effective in its supporting and influencing role, a committed HR presence at senior level is essential as is the timely engagement and consultation on policies/decisions/strategies etc. to inform the development of these.

8. What is in the new plans

There are two separate tables below. The first table lists all the actions that we will undertake to promote equality and good relations. This is our Equality Action Plan.

The second table describes what we will do to promote positive attitudes towards people with a disability and to encourage their participation in public life. This is our Disability Action Plan.

Both plans include an indication of the anticipated difference the plans will make and how the identified actions will be undertaken.

9. How we will monitor these plans

Every year our Agency, in cooperation with the other organisations, writes up the steps taken to implement the plans and any challenges in the way of such implementation. We send this report to the Equality Commission and also publish it on our website:

<https://nigala.hscni.net/publications/equality-disability/>

We review the plans every year to see what changes, if any, are required. The introduction of major changes would not

be made without consultation with appropriate equality groups.

The annual review of our plans includes an acknowledgement of work completed and clarification of what still needs to be done. In that way the plans are kept up to date.

After five years there is a further review of our plans which involves engagement with people with a disability to assist us.

The plans are available on our website.

[Equality & Disability | NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency \(hscni.net\)](http://hscni.net/Equality%20&%20Disability%20|%20NI%20Guardian%20Ad%20Litem%20Agency)

We will send our plans to all organisations and individuals on our consultation list when we have finalised them and also when we have made major changes to them.

To find out whether what we do makes a difference, we will do a number of things, for example, for training and awareness events, we ask our staff about what learning they are taking away with them.

You can find further information on how we will monitor each action in the plans themselves.

10. Equality Action Plan 2023-2028:

What we will do to promote equality and good relations:

1. Engagement:

What we will do

Promote and develop the Children's Court Guardian Agency's Equality & Disability Working Group within the Children's Court Guardian Agency.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Promote equality, disability, diversity and good relations in the workplace and embed these values as part of the Agency's culture.

Performance Indicator and Target

Membership of the Working Group to include at least 1 member of staff from each of the following - management, business support, administration and Children's Court Guardians and Agency Board. To meet on quarterly basis.

By Whom/When

Senior Leadership Team and Equality & Disability Working Group. March 2024

2. Communication/Publication:

What we will do

Revise and implement guidance to achieve consistent corporate branding and ensure that our website, and all information (operational and corporate) generated by the Agency is accessible and complies with best practice guidance.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

All information and materials produced to be rebranded in line with the Agency name change and consistent format achieved throughout materials, website, and documentation. The re-branding should be accessible to all.

Performance Indicator and Target

All information and materials produced is of consistent style and complies with best practice guidance.

By Whom/When

Senior Leadership team supported by Corporate Services Team. March 2024

3. Section 75 Data Collection:

What we will do

Review section 75 data captured on the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) to ensure categories are reflective of the changing demographics in NI. Specific focus will be on the following:

- Gender identity - children and young people;
- Capturing diversity of adoptive and foster carer's -same sex couples, single carers Capturing diversity of adoptive and foster carers e.g. same sex couples, single carers, parents/foster carers from diverse racial backgrounds
- Black and minority ethnic children and young people including those who have been subject to trafficking and child sexual exploitation.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Categories on GCIS to be updated and data captured to inform awareness sessions and training for staff. Inform development of resources for engagement with children. Develop staff cultural competencies and strengthening knowledge and skills in relation to specific needs and issues of the Section 75 groups.

Performance Indicator and Target

Audit of categories currently available on the case information system to be completed in year 1. Categories to be updated, reflective of NI demographics by year 2.

Categories to be reviewed annually to ensure they are reflective of the NI demographic. Staff knowledge and skills strengthened in relation to specific needs/issues relating to Section 75 groups.

By Whom/When

Equality Lead supported by Corporate Services/ Children's Court Guardian Agency Equality & Disability Working Group. March 2028

4. Data Collection – Disability:

What we will do

Review of disability categories and data collected in relation to service users on GCIS. Case information system to be amended and updated.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Data captured to inform disability awareness sessions and training for staff for inclusion in the Agency's training plan. Inform development of resources for engagement with children and young people.

Performance Indicator and Target

Audit of categories currently available on the case information system to be completed in year 1. Categories to be updated, reflective of NI demographics by year 2. Data analysed annually to inform review/development of resources.

By Whom/When

Children's Court Guardian Agency Equality & Disability Working Group supported by Corporate Services Team.
March 2028

5. Monitoring:

What we will do

Encourage all staff to complete section 75 data on HRPTS.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Accurate equality screening data to allow the Agency to identify any potential issues and mitigation. Create an inclusive culture and ensure supports are in place for staff.

Performance Indicator and Target

>75% of staff completed section 75 data on HRPTS.

Annual communication to staff to update their personal detail on HRPTS.

By Whom/When

Children's Court Guardian Agency Equality & Disability Working Group. March 2028

6. Monitoring:

What we will do

Commence annual analysis of equality monitoring data. In year 1:

- Carers Leave

Our Equality and Disability Working Group will plan the issues to be analysed in subsequent years.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Create an inclusive culture and ensure supports are available for staff.

Performance Indicator and Target

Baseline data regarding carers leave established in year 1 and reviewed annually. Audit to assess other policies/processes the Agency may use to collect and analyse data in year 2. Staff feel supported within the Agency.

By Whom/When

Equality Lead/Corporate Services and BSO HR. Reviewed annually March 2028

7. Interpreting/Translation:

What we will do

Development/review of resources and materials to ensure information is available for parents, carers, children and young people about the Children's Court Guardian Agency service, where English is not their first a language.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Information readily available for parents, carers, children and young people from outset of case.

Performance Indicator and Target

Audit of languages of service users, using data collected from case management system. Improved communication and engagement with those who do not speak English as a first language.

By Whom/When

Senior Leadership Team with support from Corporate Services Team. March 2024

8. Engagement/Feedback:

What we will do

Review existing feedback form and develop a process for collecting feedback from a) children and young people

whose first language is not English and b) children and young people with disabilities.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Seeking to ensure that a) children and young people whose first language is not English and b) children and young people with disabilities are afforded equality of opportunity to provide feedback.

Performance Indicator and Target

Review to be completed and process developed for obtaining feedback from those who do not speak English as a first language and those children and young people with disabilities in year 1. Monitor the return of feedback on an annual basis and analyse data provided.

By Whom/When

Assistant Director with support from Corporate Services Team. March 2028.

9. Awareness Raising:

What we will do

Equality & Disability induction for new Board members.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Induction for new Board members to introduce the Agency's statutory duties in relation to equality and good relations.

Performance Indicator and Target

Capacity of all Board members to provide an oversight, leadership and challenge role in relation to statutory duties.

By Whom/When

Senior Leadership Team supported by Corporate Services Team. March 2024.

11. Disability Action Plan 2023-2028:

What we will do to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage the participation in public life of people with a disability:

1. Awareness Days:

What we will do

Raise awareness of the lived experience of people with disabilities.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Increased staff awareness of a range of disabilities. 2 awareness days profiled every year.

Performance Indicator and Target

Over 50% of staff taking part in the evaluation indicate they know more about people living with disabilities and conditions as a result of the awareness days.

By Whom/When

Senior Leadership Team with support from BSO Equality Unit. March 2028

2. Placement Scheme:

What we will do

Create and promote meaningful placement opportunities for people with disabilities.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Promoting positive attitudes and encouraging participation in public life.

Performance Indicator and Target

Placement considered and where possible offered each year. Feedback through annual evaluation of scheme indicates that placement meets expectations. At least one placement participant is successful in applying for paid employment within 12 months of completing their placement.

By Whom/When

Senior Leadership Team with support from BSO Equality Unit. March 2028

3. Training:

What we will do

Themed disability training to be built into the Agency's training plan.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Manager-specific training regarding disability will be included in the training plan to assist in managing a diverse workforce and ensure that communication is inclusive.

Performance Indicator and Target

All managers to have received training by end of year 2.

By Whom/When

Senior Leadership Team March 2025.

4. Accessibility:

What we will do

Undertake an audit of our website to: Identify key information to be made available in other formats including signed video format and ensure relevant contact details are available and up to date.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

New website being developed to be compliant with WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility standards, ICO Guidelines on cookies and privacy and the Data Protection Act 1998 & GDPR. The website build will be compliant with W3C standards for HTML, CSS and mobile. Audit of website to be conducted

with a view to considering the formats for sharing key information.

Performance Indicator and Target

New website to be compliant with accessibility standards and include an accessibility statement. Completion of audit to assess the formats for sharing key information on website.

By Whom/When

Children's Court Guardian Agency Equality Lead supported by Corporate Services. Audit to be complete March 2024. Alternative formats March 2028

5. Tapestry

What we will do

Promote and encourage staff to participate in the disability staff network and support the network in the delivery of its priorities.

Promote Tapestry through email, CCGANI internal website, discussions.

What we are trying to achieve and who for

Encourage participation in public life. Staff with a disability feel more confident that their voice is heard in decision-making. Staff with a disability feel better supported.

Performance indicator and Target

Tapestry staff survey. Increase in Tapestry membership or in participate in meetings.

By Whom/When

Children's Court Guardian Agency Equality & Disability Working Group with support from BSO Equality Unit. March 2028.

Signed by:

Dawn Shaw
Chief Executive

Date: September 2023

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