

**CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
BOARD MEETING – 23rd October 2025**

- Present:** Mrs Gemma Loughran, *Chair*
Ms Veronica Callaghan, *Non-Executive Member*
Mr David Douglas, *Non-Executive Member*
Ms Kathryn Stevenson, *Non-Executive Member*
Mr Lee Wilson, *Non-Executive Member*
Ms Edel McKenna, *CEO*
- In Attendance:** Mrs Ursula Crickard, *Assistant Director*
Ms Jennifer Ferguson, *Head of Corporate Services*
CCGANI Youth Board members (Item 78.25)
Ms Geraldine McGuigan, *VOYPIC (Item 78.25)*
Ms Corinne Gorman, *Guardian Services Manager (Item 78.25)*
- Minute Taker:** Mrs Ann Andrew, *Business Support Manager*

START TIME: 9.45am

78.25 SERVICE DELIVERY PRESENTATION

- 78.25.1 Mrs Loughran welcomed the Youth Board members, Ms McGuigan, and Ms Gorman to the meeting. Each Board member introduced themselves and shared a brief overview of their background.
- 78.25.2 Mrs. Loughran expressed her delight in presenting certificates to the young people for achieving the Youth Impact Award through Volunteer Now and the Children's Court Guardian Agency. She highlighted that this is a significant accomplishment, reflecting their dedication to service development and commitment to shaping a better society. These awards formally recognize leadership, responsibility, and positive influence, while also supporting personal growth, future opportunities, and affirming the vital role young people play in building inclusive and resilient communities. She congratulated each member and noted the Board's pride in their achievement.
- 78.25.3 Mrs Crickard acknowledged the contribution of Ms McGuigan from VOYPIC, noting that the success of this work was only possible through her efforts.

78.25.4 Mrs. Loughran then invited the young people to share their reflections on the past 12 months and their vision for the year ahead regarding Youth Board priorities. They were summarised as:-

- **C** emphasized the importance of reminding Guardians that young people will eventually access their files, so reports should be written sensitively and factually, avoiding surprises.
- **L** stated her goal is to improve experiences for future young people.
- **Le** expressed gratitude for the award and noted upcoming OCN training, which will support her UCAS application and strengthen her personal statement.
- **J** agreed with previous comments and shared his satisfaction with the year's work and receiving the award.

78.25.5 **C** suggested that professionals in court—such as social workers and lawyers—should always remember the child at the centre of proceedings, rather than focusing solely on arguments. **L** added that children/young people should not be seen as cases but as individuals whose lives are deeply impacted. **C** proposed including a photo of the child in case files to make this more personal and praised Guardians for taking time to learn about the child beyond the case details.

78.25.6 Mr Wilson raised the issue of journalists attending Family Court hearings. **C** felt this was inappropriate, as it turns personal circumstances into stories. Others agreed, and following discussion, Mrs Loughran confirmed she would write to the Lady Chief Justice to convey the Youth Board's views.

ACTION: **Mrs Loughran to write to the Lady Chief Justice to express the views of the Youth Board in journalists attending Family cases in the courts.**

79.25 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

79.25.1 Mrs Loughran provided an opportunity for the members of the Board to identify any conflict of interest in respect of today's agenda. None were noted.

80.25 MINUTE FROM LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

80.25.1 The minute of the previous meeting of the Board on 23rd October 2025 was agreed as an accurate record, proposed by Ms Stevenson.

81.25 MATTERS ARISING

81.25.1 There were no actions from the last meeting.

82.25 CHAIR & NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING**Meeting of ALB Chairs**

82.25.1 Mrs Loughran reported that she had attended a meeting of ALB Chairs with the Minister. She noted that discussions highlighted ongoing financial pressures reinforcing a challenging outlook for all of Health and Social Care.

Audit & Risk Committee Chair's Forum

82.25.2 Mr Wilson noted he attended a meeting of Audit & Risk Committee Chairs on 5th November 2025 and reiterated the messages of a challenging forecast for HSC. He updated the Board on the business discussed and provided a summary of the main points.

- *Financial Allocation:* At the start of the financial year, pay allocations are to be set. HSC Trusts will be expected to deliver on agreed objectives/plans, and deficits in the budget will no longer be accepted. The focus is on achieving break-even positions.
- *Future Resource Shift:* From next year, resources will move toward community-based services, and financial allocations will be issued accordingly.
- *Audit Findings:* Catherine McKeown (Head of Internal Audit) presented on the main limited findings identified throughout HSC. These were categorised under Contract management, Performance management and Training and Culture.
- *Governance Change:* Trust CEOs have been given authority to make decisions collectively. There are reservations about how this will work in practice.

83.25 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

83.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Chief Executive's Briefing* and Ms McKenna spoke to same. She made specific mention of the following:-

83.25.1 **Waiting List:** Ms McKenna reported that, as at 1 December 2025, the Agency had 167 unallocated cases relating to 282 children. Nineteen cases have been ringfenced for allocation in the coming weeks. Thirteen cases, all waiting for over 120 days, have been accepted by Guardians as overtime/additional hours. It was agreed with the workforce that these cases should be concluded within 16 weeks of allocation; if not, they will transfer into Guardians' substantive caseloads, thereby avoiding a revenue tail in 2026/27.

83.25.2 **Workforce:** Ms McKenna advised that following a period of extended sick leave, a Guardian Services Manager has returned to work and transitioned into a Guardian role. Recruitment to the vacant GSM post is planned for January 2026. This Guardian post will align with the four additional posts approved under the Agency's Business Case.

The Quality Assurance, Learning and Improvement Manager (QALIM) role will be advertised in January 2026. This post is critical for audit and performance oversight, learning and improvement, and management of self-employed Guardians.

A new Principal Guardian is expected to commence in January 2026 to backfill Ms Robinson, who has moved into a GSM position. A second Principal Guardian, representing one of the additional posts approved via the Business Case, is anticipated before year-end. Recruitment will also be initiated for the remaining two Principal Guardian posts and for a waiting list of Band 7 Children's Court Guardians.

Ms McKenna further noted that a corporate/administrative workforce review is underway, led by an HSC Leadership Centre Consultant, with BSO HR and Trade Union engagement.

83.25.3 **Finance:** Ms McKenna provided an update on the current financial position and highlighted several planned expenditure projects, including training initiatives and work with HSCLC. She confirmed that the Agency had offered to the Department a £37000 non-recurring retraction from our budget and that offer had been gratefully accepted and implemented with effect from the end of October 2025.

83.25.4 **Audit Activity:** Ms McKenna advised that an audit of supervision and peer group supervision is scheduled for next week. The findings will be presented at the Board meeting in February 2026.

- 83.25.5 **Case Grading:** Ms McKenna reported that an Associate from the Leadership Centre has been identified to support the Agency in reviewing and revising the Case Grading Model to ensure it is fit for purpose and provides a more accurate analysis of demand and capacity in caseloads. There was discussion regarding the Safe Staffing Model, which Ms McKenna confirmed will also be considered.
- 83.25.6 **GCIS Upgrade:** Ms McKenna noted that Ms Ferguson has submitted the business case to ensure business continuity with GCIS. Ms Ferguson confirmed that the process to upgrade the case management system, to future-proof operations, will commence in January 2026.
- 83.25.7 **Board Workshop:** Ms McKenna advised that the pre-read for the Board Workshop, prepared by Ms Maura McMackin (HSCLC), will be circulated to members before the end of the week.
- 83.25.8 **Joint Learning Forum:** Ms McKenna reported that the inaugural virtual meeting of the Four Nations Learning Forum (Cafcass Cymru, Cafcass, GAL National Service, and CCGANI) took place on 2 December 2025. The next meeting is scheduled for 28 January 2026.

84.25 FINANCE REPORT

- 84.25.1 Ms Ferguson presented the *Finance Report* as at Month 7 (*October 2025*) and reported a surplus position of £101k.
- 84.25.2 Ms Ferguson detailed the cumulative expenditure in comparison to income. She highlighted the underspend, mainly due to vacant positions, has been offset against the Senior Executive pay award which was made in August.
- 84.25.3 Ms Ferguson confirmed that a £37k retraction has already been made to the Department and another is likely to take place before year-end.

85.25 SEPARATE LEGAL REPRESENTATION

- 85.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the paper on Separate Legal Representation (SLR), outlining the updated Policy and Procedure for cases where a child or young person is deemed competent and represented by their own legal team, and the Guardian requires SLR. Ms McKenna advised that the Financial Controls section (page 11) is currently under review by the Head of Corporate Services and the Business Support Manager.

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- 85.25.2 The Board reviewed the policy and Mrs Loughran expressed concern regarding paragraph 13 (page 10), which addresses situations where an application for separate legal representation is not granted. She highlighted that this raises questions about the guardian's role eroding its importance, which is affirmed in the statutory provision. She clarified that Guardians do not sit with other legal representatives as they are not lawyers; their role is to prepare reports. Mrs Loughran proposed preparing a position paper on this matter for consultation with the family judiciary. She emphasised that the wording should focus solely on the best interests of the child, with no reference to discharge.
- 85.25.3 Ms McKenna noted that the first paragraph reflects practice in England. Following discussion, it was agreed that Mrs Loughran and Ms Stevenson would revise paragraph 13. Advice would then be sought from the judiciary on this matter. Mrs Crickard supported obtaining legal clarity.
- 85.25.4 Mr Wilson queried the inclusion of a £1,500 invoice threshold within the Financial Controls section; Ms McKenna explained this originated from the previous policy. Mrs Loughran suggested engaging with the Solicitor Panel regarding the practicalities of estimating costs, noting variability based on case duration, expert involvement, and court level. Ms Stevenson added that inclusion of a Barrister would significantly increase costs.
- 85.25.5 Ms McKenna confirmed that once finalised, the policy will be shared with Judge Kinney and Judge Humphries for review. It is anticipated that the policy will be discussed at the January Accountability Meeting, with actions progressed by then. Subject to that discussion, the draft policy will be presented at the February Board meeting for approval prior to workforce dissemination.
- 85.25.6 The following actions were agreed:-
- ACTION: Mrs Loughran and Ms Stevenson to propose revised wording for paragraph 13 (page 10).**
- ACTION: Ms Ferguson / Mrs Andrew to review Financial Controls within the Policy.**
- ACTION: Ms Ferguson to liaise with Ms Casey to complete Equality Screening of the Policy.**
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86.25 PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AUDIT, FINDINGS & ACTION PLAN

- 86.25.1 Mrs Loughran introduced the Professional Standards Audit, Findings and Action Plan. Mrs Crickard advised that the audit was undertaken by the CEO, Assistant Director, and Guardian Services Managers.
- 86.25.2 Mrs Crickard outlined the audit scope, sample size, and key findings. She reported that overall results were positive, indicating strong professional conduct. Guardian court reports were generally of a high standard, with several exemplary examples. Compliance in recording was also noted as positive.
- 86.25.3 Mrs Crickard highlighted that the Action Plan outlines specific practice areas we aim to strengthen. These include ensuring compliance during initial visits, improving the accuracy of recording (noting inconsistencies between court reports and records), and reviewing and updating existing court report templates.
- 86.25.4 Mrs Crickard indicated there were a lot of positives coming out of the audit but managers always knew there would be learning coming out of the audit. She highlighted some Additional Observations, such as the need to promote feedback and the work of the Youth Board, and provide further training on retention & destruction of records. Mrs Loughran has also agreed to provide training on the issue of competence for both guardians and solicitors
- 86.25.5 Ms Callaghan commended the audit as an excellent baseline and welcomed the approach. Mrs Crickard noted KPIs will support managers going forward.
- 86.25.6 Ms McKenna confirmed the findings will be presented at the joint staff meeting in March. Oversight of the Action Plan will be incorporated into the workplan and reported through the SCG Committee, with mid-year and year-end updates to the Board.

87.25 DRAFT WHATSAPP PRACTICE DIRECTION

- 87.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Draft Practice Direction on the use of WhatsApp for work-related communication on work mobile phone devices*. Ms Ferguson spoke to same and noted the Practice Direction sets out interim guidance for the Guardian staff. She noted this was in anticipation of a regional policy being issued.

- 87.25.2 Ms Ferguson explained the process for use of WhatsApp and confirmed that guardians now have to “opt-in” to use it. She indicated that a Guardian reported another Trust has already removed WhatsApp from work devices.
- 87.25.3 Mrs Crickard noted it was useful to have the guidance which sends a message to Guardians about accountability.
- 87.25.4 The Board approved the *Draft Practice Direction on the use of WhatsApp for work-related communication on work mobile phone devices*, proposed by Ms Callaghan and Mr Wilson.

88.25 BOARD SURVEY

- 88.25.1 Ms Ferguson referred to the Board Survey which was issued to all members. She confirmed four responses have been received to date and encouraged everyone to complete. Feedback will follow at the Board workshop in January 2026.

89.25 BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS, SINCE THE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 89.25.1 Mrs Loughran confirmed there has been one Committee meeting since the Board last met:-

SCG Committee – 20th November 2025

- 89.25.2 Ms Callaghan drew the Board's attention to the draft minute of the SCG Committee meeting held on 20 November 2025. This serves in place of a Committee Assurance Report, reflecting the interim management arrangements agreed at the previous meeting for Mrs Crickard.
- 89.25.3 Mr Wilson highlighted the reference to *Delayed Notifications* within the minute and requested clarification on how this issue is being managed. Ms McKenna explained that the delays relate to the Agency receiving Article 60 appointments from the Court. This has been a widespread issue across all courts, with some delays extending for several months. She confirmed that the matter was raised with the sFJB, who received full details. The Court Office Manager has since provided assurance that the problem has been addressed.

- 89.25.4 Mrs Crickard noted that the delays had led to negative comments about the Agency in Court, with the primary concern being the impact on the child. Ms McKenna assured the Board that the issue has now been resolved and will continue to be monitored.
- 89.25.5 Ms Callaghan queried whether, in future, the Board would accept draft minutes in place of a formal report. The Board confirmed its agreement with this approach.

90.25 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

- 90.25.1 Mrs Loughran drew attention to the correspondence that had been circulated for informational purposes. The Board duly noted the contents:-
- a) *HSC(F)23-2025 - The Payment of Remuneration of Chairs and Non-Executive Members Determination (Northern Ireland) 2025*
 - b) *HSC(F)18-2025 - Guidance on Losses and Special Payments (Including Compensation Payments) – updated*
 - c) *HSC(AfC)(6)2025 - Agenda for Change Pay Arrangements 2025-26*

91.25 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Risk Management

- 91.25.1 Ms Ferguson indicated she had two risks to highlight to the Board. These were discussed under confidential business.

92.25 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

- 92.25.1 There were two items for discussion in confidential session.

END TIME: 12:30pm

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 26TH FEBRUARY 2026, 9.30am

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
78.25 Service Delivery Presentation (Youth Board)	<i>Mrs Loughran to write to the Lady Chief Justice to express the views of the Youth Board in journalists attending Family cases in the courts.</i>	Mrs Loughran	
85.25 Separate Legal Representation	<p><i>Mrs Loughran and Ms Stevenson to propose revised wording for paragraph 13 (page 10).</i></p> <p><i>Ms Ferguson / Mrs Andrew to review Financial Controls within the Policy.</i></p> <p><i>Ms Ferguson to liaise with Ms Casey to complete Equality Screening of the Policy.</i></p>	<p>Mrs Loughran/ Ms Stevenson</p> <p>Ms Ferguson/ Mrs Andrew</p> <p>Ms Casey</p>	