

CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND BOARD MEETING – 18 April 2025

- Present:** Mrs Gemma Loughran, *Chair*
Ms Edel McKenna, *CEO*
Ms Veronica Callaghan, *Non-Executive Member*
Mr David Douglas, *Non-Executive Member*
Ms Kathryn Stevenson, *Non-Executive Member*
Mr Lee Wilson, *Non-Executive Member*
- In Attendance:** Mrs Ursula Crickard, *Assistant Director*
Mrs Ann Andrew, *Corporate Services Manager (Interim)*
- Minute Taker:** Mr David Whitehouse, *Administration Officer*

START TIME: 10am

14.25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

- 14.25.1 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.

15.25 MINUTE OF THE LAST MEETING

- 15.25.1 The minutes of the previous meeting on 6th February 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

16.25 MATTERS ARISING

- 16.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Action List from the last meeting. There were no matters arising for discussion.

17.25 CHAIR AND NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

Joint Staff Meeting

- 17.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the joint staff meeting on 27th March 2025. She spoke highly of the event and its focus on health and wellbeing.

Mrs Loughran also referred to the newly published Agency website and new staff intranet "The Hub".

Meeting of ALB Chairs

- 17.25.2 Mrs Loughran indicated she had attended a meeting of the ALB Chairs with the Minister who noted his commitment to all ALB's. He highlighted the financial constraints within HSC at the meeting and acknowledged the challenges faced.

18.25 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

Chief Executive's Briefing / Update Report

- 18.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Chief Executive Briefing* and Ms McKenna spoke to her paper highlighting some areas for specific mention.
- 18.25.2 **Waiting List:** Ms McKenna highlighted that the waiting list still remains exceptionally high and there continues to be limited capacity. She confirmed that the Agency has submitted a Proposal Paper to the DoH Finance Director Brigitte Worth seeking funding to help address our ongoing pressures. Ms Worth indicated she was content to make the case for some additional funding in 2025/26 to support this growth pressure, however it will be subject to agreement of the Minister in the Finance Department's opening allocation paper which is currently being worked on pending a final budget outcome. The SLT are now currently preparing a business case to fully document the options available. The draft business case is with sponsor branch for comment and will be shared with the Board prior to submission.
- 18.25.3 **Domestic Homicide Review (DHR):** Ms McKenna referred to the DHR Executive Summary which was disseminated for information. She confirmed that an information/training event for all staff is planned for 6th May 2025.

Business Plan 2025-26

- 18.25.4 Ms McKenna shared the final version of the 2025-26 Business Plan for information. She confirmed that the HSC Leadership Centre has been approached to help draft a Quality Improvement Strategy for the Agency.

Business Plan Action Plan 2025-26 - Progress Update

- 18.25.5 Ms McKenna referred to the *Business Plan Action Plan 2025-26 (Progress Update)* and highlighted progress for the Board. Mr Wilson referred to the RAG Rating of red for a number of actions and suggested SLT is being overly harsh as the Agency is 'on track' to deliver, it's just the work hasn't started as yet. Consideration was to be given to an additional category to indicate this position.
- 18.25.6 Ms McKenna indicated that SLT would be considering suitable KPI's to add to the action plan. They would also reconsider the RAG system.

ACTION: SLT are to review the RAG system on the Action Plan.

ACTION: SLT are to consider suitable KPI's for the Agency and apply them to the Action Plan.

19.25 FINANCE REPORT

- 19.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Finance Report* and Mrs Andrew spoke to the report providing an overview of financial management for the financial year 2024-2025, as at Month 11 (February 2025). She highlighted the forecasted year-end surplus position. She provided a summary of key drivers of the underspend and referred to the report for full detail.
- 19.25.2 Mrs Andrew indicated that the Agency no longer needs the £50k it had accumulated to carry out the 'discovery phase' with DHCNI in respect of the GCIS update/replacement. This sum, along with another £23k (costs accrued due to further delays in recruitment) were submitted as retraction to DoH/DoF. This was accepted, and supported by sponsor branch. The retraction has been confirmed. The Agency is on-track to meet the requirement for break-even within the £20k limit.

Separate Legal Representation

- 19.25.3 Mrs Andrew confirmed that the Agency has had one instance of Separate Legal Representation since the last meeting of the Board. The application for Separate Legal Representation was reviewed as justified by the Assistant Director and approved by the CEO. Costs are in the region of £6k and have been accounted for in the 2024-25 budget.

- 19.25.4 Mrs Andrew noted that it is recognised that the Agency will not have budget for such representation in 2025-26. A paper on Separate Legal Representation will come to the next meeting of the Board for discussion.
- 19.25.5 Mrs Crickard and Ms McKenna provided background to the expenditure and the reasons why it was required. It was confirmed that the Agency is reviewing its policy and seeking a legal opinion on its uses through the Departmental Solicitors' office as there is a conflict of interest through BSO DLS. Mrs Loughran asked the Board to note that her daughter is an assistant director at DLS, although she does not see any conflict of interest in this matter.
- 19.25.6 Ms McKenna noted she would keep the Board updated.

Allocation 2025-26

- 19.25.7 Mrs Andrew indicated the Agency has received notification of the *Indicative Resource Budget Opening Allocation* for 2025/26. The allocation of £5,315,277 is based on the 2024/25 budget allocation. This indicative allocation reflects this financial context and an agreement that the Agency will contribute to the plan to breakeven by ensuring savings are delivered to cover inescapable pressures. In the 2025-26 financial planning exercise CCGANI identified £23,000 pressures and CCGANI is asked to ensure £23,000 savings will be delivered to cover these and to continue to take this approach to managing pressures during 2025/26.
- 19.25.8 Ms Callaghan asked about travel costs; she noted that during Covid-19 costs were considerably lower, however we they had never been expected to stay at this level. Ms McKenna highlighted when completing the original business plan for the Band 7 Guardians, travel costs had not been included. This has been included in the current proposal for additional guardians.

20.25 OPERATIONS REPORT (QUARTER 4)

- 20.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Operations Report for Quarter 4 (1st January 2025 – 31st March 2025)* and Ms Crickard spoke to same.
- 20.25.2 Mrs Crickard indicated that it still remains very busy. The waiting list is always changing and as at today the Agency has 165 unallocated cases on the list. She noted that on a positive note the weekly check-in with managers is helpful in terms of streamlining the process and supporting

management oversight of the unallocated cases. One such development has been the introduction of a new case category for cases with Final Hearing dates. The update of the 2-year rule of cases for Guardians and the previous practice of offering panel solicitors cases just before hearing dates has been achieved, which has been welcomed by GSMs and the panel solicitors.

- 20.25.3 Mrs Crickard referred to the data showing cases discharged without a guardian being appointed. She noted whilst this is concerning it has dropped significantly since the last quarter. She indicated that the range of cases that are concluding suggest some of the judges are trying to be helpful for those cases where a public law order is not required and they are then setting final hearing dates.
- 20.25.4 Mrs Crickard indicated that work around 'partial retirement' is still live and OLT now have a clear sense of what a caseload will look like for these staff.
- 20.25.5 Mrs Crickard noted a draft Implementation Plan for the Children & Young People's Strategy has been shared with the Youth Board. This is a 12-18 month plan and once the Youth Board have been consulted and their feedback taken, a final version will be presented to the SCG Committee.
- 20.25.6 Ms Crickard referred to feedback from the judiciary. Ms Loughran suggested we look at why only one judge had replied. Ms Callaghan added that this was discussed in SCG Committee on how we would engage in future to obtain feedback and it was agreed the query would be brought to this meeting. Ms Loughran advised that she would look into this and come back with a response at the next Board meeting.
- 20.25.7 Mrs Crickard referred to Secure Accommodation orders and highlighted that orders have been made or extended without a guardian being involved. Ms McKenna discussed an upcoming meeting with SPPG (who also chair the secure panel) regarding Regulation 10. There will be a fuller review of regulation 10 along with Lakewood. Mr Douglas added that an individual social worker should not be making that decision on their own.
- 20.57.8 Ms McKenna indicated that some solicitors were becoming anxious with unallocated cases, in terms of what to do in representing the child, which is the guardian's role. There is some suggestion from the Law Society that they may require independent legal advice in terms of the role of the solicitor.

- 20.57.9 Ms Loughran extended thanks and appreciation to Ms Crickard for her hard work with allocation. Ms Callaghan highlighted that wherever possible the Operations Report should be anonymised.

21.25 ANNUAL REPORT & ACCOUNTS 2023-24

Annual Report & Annual Accounts 2023-24 (Restated)

- 21.25.1 Ms Loughran referred to the restated *Annual Report & Annual Accounts 2023-24*, which are before the Board for re-approval. Mr Wilson confirmed they have been to the Audit & Risk Committee who now recommend to the Board.
- 21.25.2 The Board approved the Annual Report & Annual Accounts 2023-24.

NIAO Report to Those Charged with Governance 2023-24 (updated)

- 22.25.2 Ms Loughran referred to the updated *Report to Those Charged With Governance 2023-24* which has been updated by the NI Audit Office. Mr Wilson confirmed the Audit & Risk Committee has had sight of the report. The Board noted the report.

22.25 DRAFT PROPOSAL IN RESPONSE TO THE AGENCY'S INTERIM TEMPORARY MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

- 22.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Draft Proposal on the Interim Temporary Management Arrangements* and Ms McKenna spoke to same.
- 22.25.2 Ms McKenna referred to the structure and vacancies faced over the past year, thus allowing for the temporary structure to be put in place. She discussed with the Board the interim management arrangements in place and talked through each arrangement and the recommendation to the Board. Ms McKenna indicated that from a structural and operational point of view, there is a consensus amongst the SLT and OLT that this is the correct infrastructure we need going forward, in relation to our demand, good governance, risk management, staff wellbeing and support. Ms McKenna highlighted the following: -
- 22.25.3 **Two Additional Guardian Services Managers:** Mrs McKenna indicated that the appointment of two temporary additional Guardian Services Managers in July 2024 has generated many benefits for the

workforce and for the Agency. A key advantage has been the ability to align a dedicated line manager to each of the four locality teams. The introduction of the GSM role has been evolving. The reduction from four to three Guardian Services Managers in January 2025 following the resignation of one of the permanent Managers, has been significant, most notably for the Assistant Director who has had to temporarily assume operational responsibility for that Manager's team. The Agency has refrained from externally recruiting to this vacant post pending the Board making a final decision on the overall temporary management arrangements. It is noteworthy, that an EOI was disseminated internally across the workforce however it did not generate any interest. The recommendation would be to permanently increase from two to four Guardian Services Managers. It is considered this is essential to support the workforce and the Agency in its Service delivery to children and young people who are subject to Public Law Proceedings.

- 22.25.4 ***One Assistant Director (reducing the previous complement from 2 Assistant Directors):*** Ms McKenna confirmed that following the retirement of the Agency's two Assistant Directors in 2024, the decision was taken to recruit to only one of these posts while concurrently enhancing the complement of Guardian Services Managers from two to four. In September 2024 the current Assistant Director took up post with the Agency. The Assistant Director has also had to assume responsibility for a wide range of duties and responsibilities which otherwise had been delegated / shared across the Agency's two original Assistant Directors. Ms McKenna commended Ms Crickard who has kept the teams running and kept order showing her ability to drive the entire workforce which has enabled us to get to where we are. Ms Callaghan added that the structure is very good and she is confident we will be able to appoint staff into those posts. She indicated it would be good to review this in a years' time to ask ourselves if the structure working and if the Assistant Director position appropriately banded. Mr Douglas added that we need to be assured we have the right people in post to allow Ms Crickard to return to her core responsibilities. Ms Callaghan added that if a manager is off for any reason the burden falls to Ms Crickard and we need to be conscious of that risk. The recommendation is that the Agency seek Board approval to move to a position of permanently agreeing the provision of one Assistant Director for the Children's Court Guardian Agency.
- 22.25.5 ***Corporate Services Manager:*** Ms McKenna confirmed that the interim role was taken up by Mrs Andrew in September 2024. The role has been challenging for a number of reasons; Mrs Andrew's substantive post was not backfilled so consequently she has been balancing the demands of

both posts, there have been significant vacancies across the Administrative workforce which has required the Corporate Services Manager's attention, the Corporate Services Manager post is a highly complex and demanding role, particularly within an ALB. Mrs McKenna confirmed she undertook to review the Job Description for the 8a position and in doing so it was evident there were gaps identified. It was clear that areas which had been omitted from the revised JD now required inclusion. To this end, the Chief Executive consulted with BSO and sought approval to revert back to the original 8b JD (with some revisions) to enable the post to be advertised permanently. This post has generated a vast range of candidates. The recommendation is that this role be recruited to as a permanent Band 8b Head of Corporate Services post.

- 22.25.6 The Board gave careful consideration to all discussions and approved all recommendations as put before the Board. Mrs Loughran expressed the deep appreciation of the Board to Mrs Mc Kenna, Ms Crickard and Mrs Andrew for their exceptional dedication and hard work during the transitional period

23.25 REPORT ON THE ADMINISTRATION STRUCTURE

- 23.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Report on the Administration Structure* and Mrs Andrew spoke to same. Ms Callaghan highlighted the difficulties encountered in recruiting to Band 3 Personal Secretary positions and Mrs Andrew noted this was a difficulty which was encountered on a regional basis and part of the reason the Agency needed to review the position and structure. The Board noted their support for the review of the Band 2 Clerical Officer position; Mrs Andrew indicated this has been submitted but no outcome has been received to date.
- 23.5.2 It was agreed that the Agency now has a stronger structure going forward and Ms McKenna confirmed one of the band 3 positions was dropped to allow for the funding of the new structure.

24.25 STANDING ORDERS & STANDING FINANCIAL INSTRUCTIONS REVIEW

- 24.25.1 Mrs Andrew referred to the *Standing Orders & Standing Financial Instructions* and referred to the proposed amendments identified upon review. She indicated the main change refers to updates in respect of approvals limits, as reflected by the introduction of the Procurement Act 2023, which came into force on 24th February 2025.

- 24.25.2 Mrs Andrew indicated any further suggested updates could be forwarded to her. The Board approved the Standing Orders & Standing Financial Instructions.

25.25 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

HE1/25/57850 - Interim Permanent Secretary & HSC Chief Executive

- 25.25.1 The Board noted the above correspondence for information.

FAU Memo 04-2025 – Timetable for ALB Accounts 2024-25

- 25.25.2 The Board noted the Timetable of Accounts for 2024-25.

26.25 BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS SINCE THE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

Audit & Risk Committee Report

- 26.25.1 The Board noted the Audit & Risk Committee Report detailed business at the last meeting on 14th March 2025.

26.25.2 SCG Committee Report

Mrs Crickard provided a brief verbal report of the business at the last SCG Committee meeting. She referred to the attached reports (*Solicitor's usage report, Evaluation reports from panel sols and judiciary, PGS mid-point feedback*), which were all shared for information.

27.25 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE REPORT 2024-2025 (END OF YEAR)

- 27.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Annual Governance Report 2024-25* which Mrs Andrew confirmed was reviewed by the Audit & Risk Committee meeting on 14th April 2025. Ms McKenna noted the detail added because of the significant number of changes over the past year. Ms Callaghan noted that it is quite detailed and the information was welcomed. The Board unanimously approved the Annual Governance Report 2024-25.

28.25 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

28.25.1 There was no other business for discussion.

29.25 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

29.25.1 There was no confidential business for discussion.

END TIME: 12:15pm

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 3rd July 2025, 9.30am

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
18.25 Business Plan 2025-26 – Action Plan Progress	SLT are to review the RAG system on the Action Plan. SLT are to consider suitable KPI's for the Agency and apply them to the Action Plan.	SLT	