

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

- Present:** Mrs Gemma Loughran, *Chair*
Ms Veronica Callaghan, *Non-Executive Member*
Mr David Douglas, *Non-Executive Member*
Ms Edel McKenna, *CEO*
Ms Kathryn Stevenson, *Non-Executive Member*
Mr Lee Wilson, *Non-Executive Member*
- In Attendance:** Mrs Ursula Crickard, *Assistant Director*
Ms Jennifer Ferguson, *Head of Corporate Services*
Ms Sinead Marshall, *Guardian Services Manager (46.25)*
- Minute Taker:** Mrs Ann Andrew, *Business Support Manager*

START TIME: 10am

Mrs Loughran welcomed Ms Ferguson to her first formal Board meeting, since her appointment. She also welcomed Mrs Andrew's attendance as Board secretariat and passed on her thanks to those who have assisted with minute-taking over the past months.

46.25 SERVICE DELIVERY PRESENTATION

- 46.25.1 Mrs Loughran welcomed Ms Katherine Quinn, BSO Equality Unit, to the meeting.
- 46.25.2 Ms Quinn gave a presentation and provided the Board with an awareness of the Agency's Equality duties and the duties of the Board and its members. She referred to the role and work undertaken by the Equality Unit, and the assistance provided in the production of the Agency's Annual Progress Report and Equality Action plan. Ms Quinn highlighted future work commitments and identified the Agency is due to complete its 5-year review of the Agency's Equality Scheme, for submission by August 2026.
- 46.25.3 Mrs Loughran thanked Ms Quinn for her informative presentation and reiterated the Board's commitment to Equality.

47.25 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

- 47.25.1 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.

48.25 MINUTE FROM LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD ON 3RD JULY 2025

- 48.25.1 The minute of the previous meeting of the Board on 3rd July 2025 was agreed as an accurate record, proposed by Ms Stevenson and seconded by Mr Douglas.

49.25 MATTERS ARISING

- 49.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Action List from the last meeting and members noted the progress detailed. There were no further matters arising for discussion.

50.25 CHAIR & NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

Meeting of ALB Chairs

- 50.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to a meeting of ALB Chairs with the Minister and updated as relevant.
- 50.25.2 Mrs Loughran indicated she has highlighted the need for more discussion in respect of the challenges for the social care sector and children/young people. She indicated it was agreed this could be an agenda item for discussion which could then go to the Minister for his perspective.

51.25 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

CEO Briefing Report

- 51.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *CEO Briefing* and Ms McKenna spoke to same making specific mention to the following:
- 51.25.2 **Waiting List:** The waiting list remains largely unchanged from the last meeting but it is important to flag a number of underlying factors related to that, ie three Guardians have moved to partial retirement, a further one

will move onto the scheme at the end of September and three will move to partial retirement during October-March26, thus reducing the ability to allocate these staff new cases. Two Guardians were on sick leave over the summer months, though one staff member has since returned and another remains on maternity leave.

- 51.25.3 Ms McKenna confirmed that capacity has been identified across the workforce and as at today there are no High Priority cases awaiting allocation. She noted she was hopeful that significant strides will be made over the coming months, especially with the success for the business case which will have a significant impact on us, although this will not be felt until the beginning of the new financial year. Ms McKenna formally noted her appreciation to the Department on the success of the business cases for additional funds. Mrs Loughran noted her congratulations to Ms McKenna and the SLT on the preparation of the business cases and matrix of information and data provided to support it. Mrs Loughran indicated it was important to keep the judiciary informed of our data and keep them informed of the context of the work undertaken and the challenges the Agency faces.
- 51.25.4 **Workforce:** Ms McKenna indicated that interviews have taken place for Guardian Services Managers (GSM). The two current interim GSMs have been confirmed in post and a new GSM appointed; Stephanie Robinson CCG was appointed and will take up post once the Agency has her backfill from the current CCG waiting list secured.
- 51.25.5 Ms McKenna confirmed that the Quality Assurance, Learning & Improvement Manager job description was submitted for job evaluation and an outcome should be known later this month. The new Principal CCG and CCG have been welcomed in the last few months and have both settled well.
- 51.25.6 Ms McKenna noted there are currently no vacancies across our Corporate and administrative workforce. However, in view of the Department's approval of our Business Case, we now have funding for an additional Band 4 Administrative Officer which will be recruited to once recruitment of the additional Guardians has been progressed.
- 51.25.7 Ms McKenna confirmed that there will be a matching exercise undertaken across the 4 Guardians teams to establish if we have all of our staff correctly located, in order to meet demand from the courts. This will inform where the 4 additional Guardians are placed; Mrs Crickard noted that some initial scoping has taken place but it now needs to be completed. Mrs Loughran suggested that consideration might be given

to having a general meeting for all staff given there are so many changes, proving clarity for all roles, and perhaps having some input from the Board as well.

- 51.25.8 **Performance:** Ms McKenna highlighted the qualitative audit on professional standards scheduled for September, will now move to 4th November. An audit of supervision and appraisal from the GSM has been set aside for 18th December and an audit on the case grading system will take place on 3rd March 26.
- 51.25.9 Ms McKenna indicated that 2 Guardians have been nominated for the Stronger Together social work programme. A gap within the Agency in respect of dual registered social workers has been identified; one Guardian in Armagh and one in L/Derry offices are currently completing the registration process.
- 51.25.10 **Risk Register:** Ms Ferguson indicated that the Risk Register will be reviewed again in advance of the next ARAC with wording updated to reflect the latest position. She referred to the Agency's use of *WhatsApp* and indicated that this has been temporarily stood down as this is non-corporate communication tool; a position paper on its use with recommendation is currently being prepared for submission to ARAC and to Board.
- 51.25.11 **Children & Young People's Engagement and Participation Strategy:** Ms McKenna indicated that the Children & Young People's Engagement Strategy has not progressed as far as we would have hoped. An internal audit has taken place and there are likely to be a number of recommendations from that. Given there may be some slippage this year it is hoped some funding might be aligned to this project and consideration be given to a temporary secondment of a youth worker to help with some of the work. Ms Callaghan referred to the December Board meeting and our commitment to meet with the Young People's Board and queried how we progress the action plan. Mrs Crickard indicated that the members of the group have changed but there have been pieces of work completed eg calendar of workflow, clarity on how meetings will happen, etc
- 51.25.12 **All Service Staff Meeting:** An all service staff meeting is scheduled for 12th March in the Armagh City Hotel. The invitation and agenda will follow.
- 51.25.13 **Annual Business plan:** Ms Ferguson indicated there is a collective Board approach required in advance of next year's annual business plan.

A workshop will be scheduled to look at this along with developing our KPI's. It was proposed that a facilitator from the HSC Leadership Centre might assist with the event and its write-up. A date will be arranged for January 2026.

Business Plan Action Plan 2025-26 – Progress Update

- 51.25.14 Ms McKenna referred to the *Business Plan Action Plan 2025-26 Progress update* which was shared for information. *The Board noted same.*

Cases Allocated and Case Waiting Time 1April25 - 31August25

- 51.25.15 Ms McKenna referred to the report *Cases Allocated and Case Waiting Time (1st April 2025 – 31st August 2025)*, which was shared for information purposes detailing the number of case requests, cases allocated, and waiting time within the period highlighted. The Board noted same.

52.25 FINANCE REPORT

- 52.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Finance Report* and Ms Ferguson spoke to same, for the period as at Month 4 (July 2025).
- 52.25.2 Ms Ferguson highlighted a current surplus of £107k, but indicated the Agency must be mindful of the business case recently approved and a range of other areas of work. She noted that SLT will be looking at risks and any available funds will be repurposed strategically. Mr Wilson highlighted that training is always a good investment, and it was confirmed that SLT have scheduled to review planned expenditure over the coming year.
- 52.25.3 The Board unanimously approved the report.

53.25 PROPOSAL PAPER RE INTERIM MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

- 53.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Proposal Paper re Interim Management Arrangements* and Mrs Crickard spoke to this highlighting the proposals relate to an easement of the Assistant Director duties for a 3-month period.

- 53.25.2 Mrs Loughran noted her admiration for the work ethic of Ms McKenna and Mrs Crickard and acknowledged the demands on SLT. She indicated it was important to not take for granted the health of our staff and confirmed she was happy the proposed arrangements.
- 53.25.3 The Board unanimously agreed and Mrs Loughran requested that a note should go out to staff to confirm same and express the leadership and commitment of the senior leadership team.
- 53.25.4 Ms Callaghan highlighted the number of activities under Mrs Crickard's remit and Mr Douglas noted this was not a sustainable situation. There needs to be careful mapping about what is being aligned to the Assistant Director role and move forward with the mapping work around the integrated governance structure. Ms Stevenson agreed and indicated that arrangements should be kept under review. Ms McKenna noted she appreciated the acknowledgement of the Board and highlighted the work involved in qualitative audits are critical to our core business.
- 53.25.5 Mrs Loughran noted she had concerns about the impact of the burden of work on the SLT and asked that it be kept under review. Mr Douglas acknowledged the volume of work and agreed that timescales may slip but the Board needs to be realistic about what times are set.

54.25 ANNUAL REPORT & ACCOUNTS 2024-25

Report to Those Charged with Governance 2024-25

- 54.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the draft *Report to Those Charged with Governance*. Mr Wilson confirmed that the Audit & Risk Committee had met earlier today and the report was presented by the NI Audit Office. The *Report to Those Charged with Governance* is now recommended to the Board for approval. The Board confirmed they accepted the report and formally agreed same.

Annual Report & Accounts 2024-25

- 54.25.2 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Annual Report & Accounts 2024-25* which were approved by the Audit & Risk Committee and Mr Wilson confirmed they are now recommended to the Board for approval.
- 54.25.3 The Board unanimously approved the *Annual Report & Accounts 2024-25*. Mr Wilson further noted his thanks to all involved in their production.

54.25.4 Mrs Loughran highlighted that the Agency failed to deliver their Annual Report & Accounts within the timescales set by DoH. She indicated that whilst this was understandably outside of our control, that the Department should be informed of same, and correspondence also forwarded to the NI Audit Office highlighting the Agency would hope there would not be a reoccurrence of similar delays going forward.

ACTION: Ms McKenna to communicate with the Department and NI Audit Office to clarify the delays in meeting the timescales set by the DoH, and seeking assurance such delays would not recur.

55.25 COMPLAINTS & COMPLIMENTS ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25

- 55.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Complaints & Compliments Annual Report 2024-25*.
- 55.25.2 Mrs Crickard confirmed the report provides an overview of the complaints and compliments received in-year. A synopsis of each complaint, including details of timescales and learning from each was noted.
- 55.25.3 The Board noted and approved the *Complaints & Compliments Annual Report 2024-25*.

56.25 SEPARATE LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR THE CCG

- 56.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to *Separate Legal Representation* and the paper prepared by Ms Stevenson, Ms McKenna and herself.
- 56.25.2 The Committee reviewed the paper and gave consideration to the problems the Agency faced, the costs and the legal advice and representation services provided by CAFCASS. The Agency has, in the light of the CAFCASS information, looked at possible sources of independent legal advice and representation, including DLS and the Departmental Solicitors.
- 56.25.3 Mrs Loughran referred to the possible funding options available and highlighted the proposals for consideration:-
- The Agency should develop an internal policy;
 - The Agency should ascertain whether funding would be available from the Legal Services Agency;
 - The Agency should explore the potential for pro bono representation.

56.25.4 Following discussion, the Board accepted the proposals. Ms McKenna indicated that while the Agency has a current policy it is not as complete and needs criteria set, and perhaps a budget line accrued to meet the demands.

56.25.5 Ms Callaghan queried the Committee structure for the policy and it was agreed it would come to both SCG Committee and Audit & Risk Committee.

ACTION: Ms Loughran agreed to meet separately with Ms McKenna to discuss the potential for pro bono representation.

57.25 EQUALITY & GOOD RELATIONS DUTIES ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT 2024-25

57.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Equality & Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report 2024-25* which has been prepared by Ms Sinead Casey. The comprehensive report presents the Agency's progress in fulfilling our statutory equality and disability duties.

57.25.2 Ms Callaghan referred to Mrs Crickard who has been leading Equality, and indicated there needs to be realignment of this role to Corporate. She further discussed feedback for the judiciary. Ms Stevenson also highlighted that no screening had been included in the report.

57.25.3 Mrs Loughran requested that some terminology within the report be updated, eg 'persons with a disability', 'persons with a visual impairment', etc.

57.25.4 The Board approved the *Equality & Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report 2024-25*, subject to the minor amendments highlighted.

ACTION: Equality & Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report 2024-25 to have terminology updated in agreement with Board discussion.

58.25 BUSINESS CASE FOR ADDITIONAL FUNDS

58.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Business Case for Additional Funds* and the accompanying documentation. The Board confirmed that they had sight of the information by email and noted their approval by same.

- 58.25.2 The Board formally noted their approval of all documentation in support of the Business Case for Additional Funds. Mrs Loughran congratulated all concerned in the successful outcome of the business case.

59.25 COMMITTEE MEETINGS SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 59.25.1 There have been no Board Committee meetings since the Board last met on 3rd July 2025.

60.25 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

Update to HM Treasury's Orange Book

- 60.25.1 *DAO (DoF) 04/25* It was confirmed that the 2023 edition of HM Treasury's Orange Book Management of risk – Principles and Concepts has been published. This replaced the current version issued under DAO 04/20 dated 7 May 2020. The Board noted same.

61.25 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- 61.25.1 **Board Experience Survey:** Ms Ferguson indicated that with the planned workshops, it was a good opportunity to issue a Board Survey. The feedback will inform and support work under board effectiveness. The Board agreed, and Ms Ferguson indicated it would be issued in the coming months.

62.25 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

- 62.25.1 There was one item for discussion.

END TIME: 12:15pm

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 23rd October 2025, 9.30am

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
54.25 Annual Report & Accounts 2024-25	Ms McKenna to communicate with the Department and NI Audit Office to clarify the delays in meeting the timescales set by the DoH, and seeking assurance such delays would not recur.	Ms McKenna	
56.25 Separate Legal Representation	Mrs Loughran agreed to meet separately with Ms McKenna to discuss the potential for pro bono representation.	Ms McKenna Mrs Loughran	
57.25 Equality & Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report 2024-25	Equality & Good Relations Duties Annual Progress Report 2024-25 to have terminology updated in agreement with Board discussion.	Ms Ferguson	