CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
BOARD MEETING – 23rd April 2026

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*
Minute Taker:	Mrs Ann Andrew, *Business Support Manager*

START TIME: 9.30am

20.26 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

20.26.1 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.

21.26 MINUTE FROM LAST MEETING

21.26.1 The minute of the previous meeting of the Board on 26th February 2026 was agreed. Mr Douglas referred to 8.26.2 and highlighted a minor typographical error for update. Ms Stevenson proposed the minute for approval.

22.26 MATTERS ARISING

22.26.1 The Board reviewed the actions from the last meeting and noted progress.

23.26 CHAIR & NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

23.26.1 ***ALB Chair's Meeting:*** Mrs Loughran advised that she had attended a meeting of ALB Chairs with the Minister, during which the Minister emphasised the bleak financial position.

24.26 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

CEO Briefing

24.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the CEO Briefing covering the period 26th February to 16th April 2026. Ms McKenna spoke to her detailed paper and updated on a number of areas.

24.26.2 She advised on the progress of work in relation to Separate Legal Representation indicating this remains ongoing.

24.26.3 Ms McKenna highlighted current operational pressures, noting that unallocated case numbers remain high. The Agency's waiting list peaked on 3rd April at 211 unallocated cases. She noted that while the 2025-26 Annual Report will reflect a downward trajectory in requests for a Guardian compared with 2024-25, the waiting list has nevertheless remained persistently high.

24.26.4 She advised members that there is a temporary depletion of administrative resources due to staff absences. She noted the Administrative and Corporate Workforce Review is ongoing and is expected to conclude in June 2026. Any accepted recommendations will be implemented during 2026/27 subject to Board approval.

24.26.5 The Board Self-Assessment is scheduled for discussion later in the meeting and will require tailoring to reflect the Agency's specific context.

24.26.6 In relation to Finance, members were advised that the Agency has not yet received confirmation of its budget allocation for 2025-26.

24.26.7 Ms McKenna noted disappointment that the Agency was not successful in appointing at the recent recruitment to the Quality Assurance and Learning & Improvement Manager post.

24.26.8 Mrs Loughran thanked Ms McKenna for a comprehensive and helpful report.

Business Plan 2025-26 Action Plan – End of Year Report

24.26.9 Mrs Loughran referred to the Business Plan 2025-26 Action Plan and Ms McKenna advised this is the End of Year report highlighting the progression of objectives throughout the year. She indicated this will also form part of the discussion at the Ground Clearing meeting scheduled for May 2026 with the Department.

CCGANI Business Plan 2026-27 & – DoH Approval

24.26.10 Ms McKenna referred to the Business Plan 2026-27 which has been agreed by the Board and approved by Sponsor Branch and Peter Toogood, Deputy Secretary DoH.

25.26 FINANCE REPORT

25.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the Finance Report as at Month 11 (February 2026). Ms Ferguson highlighted that the reported surplus at Month 11 primarily reflected vacant posts and maternity-related savings. She drew the Board's attention to the detailed budget breakdown for clarity and noted the retractions from the Agency.

25.26.2 Ms Ferguson advised that she had met with BSO Finance and confirmed that the Month 12 figures demonstrate the Agency has achieved break-even as required, with a year-end surplus of just under 13k which is in line with expectations. She recorded her thanks to BSO Finance for the significant work undertaken in support of the Agency's accounts.

26.26 OPERATION REPORT Q4

26.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the Quarter 4 Operations Report, which Mrs Crickard presented. She highlighted the comprehensive overview of operational activity and ongoing work, noting that the data indicate overall demand currently exceeds capacity. Members were advised that sickness absence levels among the Children's Court Guardians are improving, and plans are being taken forward to manage caseloads accordingly. She also confirmed that guardians continue to perform effectively, and managers post-date unallocated cases where required.

26.26.2 She referred members to the recent increase in activity within the Western Trust area, reflecting a Trust-wide review of kinship care arrangements. She advised that similar reviews are underway across all Trusts, so it is expected that the number of cases requests will rise.

26.26.3 Mrs Crickard noted that managers are progressing recruitment to a Band 7 CCG waiting list and Band 8A CCG is also ongoing. It was noted that preparations are underway for the annual appraisal process across all teams.

26.26.4 Mrs Crickard provided an update on the Solicitor Panel, with members noting that the Separate Legal Representation paper had been presented and that a consultation exercise will be brought back to the Board in due course.

26.26.5 Mrs Crickard also referred to her recent engagement with VOYPIC in relation to Youth Board work. She noted that progress on this work is likely to be slower due to current capacity constraints in the absence of the Quality Assurance, Learning & Improvement Manager.

26.26.6 The Board referred to the delays in notification about case appointments. Mrs Crickard indicated this has been raised in various fora including the sFJB. The Agency will continue to keep this under close review and where necessary escalate for resolution.

26.26.7 Mrs Loughran noted the report was very helpful and informative.

27.26 CORPORATE & ADMINISTRATION SERVICES REPORT

27.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the Corporate and Administration Services Report, which was presented by Ms Ferguson. Ms Ferguson advised that the report provides an update on key Corporate Services activity and assurance across finance, audit, governance, workforce, information governance and business support. Overall assurance remains positive, with strong internal audit outcomes, effective risk and incident management, and the Agency on track to achieve year-end break-even.

27.26.2 She highlighted the continued progress against key priorities, including workforce planning, digital and information governance improvements, the re-tendering of GCIS, and staff wellbeing initiatives. Corporate Services continues to support delivery of the Agency's strategic objectives alongside business-as-usual activity, with the report demonstrating the breadth and volume of work underway across the corporate and administrative functions.

28.26 BEING OPEN FRAMEWORK

28.26.1 Ms McKenna and Mr Douglas referred members to the Being Open Framework. Ms McKenna advised that the framework, as issued by the Department, is intended for implementation by all bodies, likely on an incremental basis. She noted that any supporting policies will be proportionate and specific to the Agency, and that further work will be required to determine initial priorities for implementation. She highlighted that the framework promotes openness, transparency and a listening organisational culture.

28.26.2 The Board acknowledged the relevance of the recent Investors in People assessment and ongoing staff development work in supporting these principles.

28.26.3 Mr Douglas confirmed that, as a Board Member, he was assured regarding the Agency's commitment to the Being Open Framework. He advised that he will attend the People and Wellbeing Committee periodically, at least annually, to support Board-level oversight.

29.26 REVIEW OF SPONSORSHIP ARRANGEMENTS

29.26.1 Ms McKenna referred to the correspondence to all ALB Chairs about the *Review of Sponsorship Arrangements - Board & Audit Risk Assurance Committee Self-Assessment.* The Board noted correspondence from the Department advising of changes arising from its review of the internal Sponsorship Handbook. Members noted that the Department's Board Governance Self-Assessment Tool has been withdrawn in line with the NIAO Board Effectiveness Good Practice Guide (2022), with ALBs encouraged to adopt proportionate, tailored approaches to Board self-assessment.

29.26.2 Members further noted revised arrangements for Audit and Risk Assurance Committee self-assessment, with use of the NIAO self-assessment checklist now recommended. Assurance on completion of both Board and ARAC self-assessments will continue to be provided through the annual Mid-Year Assurance Statement process.

29.26.3 Following Board discussion, it was agreed that the Chairs of both the Board and Audit and Risk Assurance Committee would review the correspondence and prepare proposed changes.

ACTION: Self-Assessment to be discussed at the next Board and Audit & Risk Assurance Committee meetings.

30.26 DRAFT END OF YEAR GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2025-26

30.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the Draft End of Year Governance Statement 2025–26. Ms McKenna advised that the Statement is presented in draft form for Board review and comment, and to allow members to identify any additional areas or amendments for inclusion. It was noted that the final Statement will form part of the Annual Report and will also be submitted to the Department for comment.

30.26.2 Ms McKenna confirmed that the Head of Internal Audit has provided satisfactory assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Agency's framework of governance, risk management and control.

30.26.3 Mrs Loughran recorded her appreciation of the work undertaken by the Senior Leadership Team throughout the year and in preparing the Statement.

31.26 ANNUAL REPORT & ACCOUNTS 2025-26

31.26.1 Ms McKenna referred members to the timetable for the Annual Report and Accounts 2025–26. She advised that a draft report will be available for circulation to the Board for review by Friday 1st May, and requested that any comments or amendments be returned by Monday 4th May to facilitate submission to the Northern Ireland Audit Office on Tuesday 5th May. The Board noted and agreed the proposed timetable.

32.26 CHILDREN'S FEEDBACK 2025-26

32.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Children's Feedback 2025-26 end of year report and Mrs Crickard spoke to same. She highlighted the report provides a strong form of assurance, highlighting the positive experiences reported by children who had an allocated guardian. Ms Crickard noted the overall satisfaction of 98% of respondents.

32.26.2 It was noted that there was only a 36% feedback return rate. Mrs Crickard advised that further work to improve engagement and response rates will be taken forward by herself and Ms Marshall. Members noted that a full appendix of comments will be presented to the Social Care Governance Committee, with key themes and highlights reflected in the Annual Report. Overall, the report was noted as providing robust assurance.

32.26.3 Ms Stevenson raised a query in relation to case closure outcomes and that impacting the response to feedback. Mrs Crickard advised work on this is in the action plan following the recent audit.

33.26 EVALUATION REPORT OF SOLICITORS & JUDICIARY FEEDBACK 2025-26

33.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Evaluation Report of Solicitors' and Judiciary Feedback 2025–26*. Mrs Crickard spoke to the report, noting that it was very positive and reflected high levels of confidence in the work of Children's Court Guardians. Mrs Loughran highlighted a distinct improvement in responses from the judiciary, and Mrs Crickard confirmed an overall response rate of 63%. Feedback from both Solicitors and the Judiciary commended the quality of court reports and the quality of evidence giving.

33.26.2 Solicitors highlighted the challenges arising from the absence of a guardian appointment and from managing schedules of assessment.

33.26.3 Mrs Crickard noted that comments regarding Court report templates were mentioned in the responses, and confirmed this is an area of planned work by the Guardian Services Managers, who will be establishing a working group to look at new court templates. She advised that the UNOCINI had been reviewed, that template materials from CAFCASS were available, and that ongoing principal practitioner work would also be used to inform the review process. Partially retired staff will assist in supporting this work.

33.26.4 Mrs Crickard further noted the importance of sensitively managing any perception that there may be differences in experience or quality of work between Band 7 and Band 8a Children's Court Guardians, and that careful communication across teams would be required.

33.26.5 It was noted that further work on how solicitors are allocated, including the impact of timetables on allocation, would provide a useful communication piece for sharing with solicitors.

33.26.6 Mrs Loughran concluded it was very useful and helpful feedback for the Board.

34.26 BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

34.26.1 There were two meetings of the Board Committee's since the Board last met.

34.26.2 **Audit & Risk Committee:** Mr Wilson reported the Committee met on 24th March 2026. He referred to the Board to the detailed report and highlighted the reports from Internal Audit and confirmed all recommendations have been accepted. He confirmed there was a 98% completion rate of internal audit recommendations, which was excellent. Mr Douglas referred to the discussion on the Being Open Framework and noted he believe the Agency was compliant.

34.26.3 **Social Care Governance Committee:** The Committee last met on 19 March 2026. Mrs Crickard spoke to the report, summarising the business discussed. She highlighted the pressure placed on Guardian Services Managers as a result of the current vacant post and advised that the Expression of Interest process was due to close on 24 April. Mrs Crickard noted that the longer the Guardian Services Manager (GSM) position remains unfilled, the greater the pressure experienced by the team. Mrs Loughran confirmed that the Board had acknowledged this position and requested that Mrs Crickard formally advise them accordingly.

34.26.4 Ms McKenna discussed with the Board some of the reasons around the GSM vacancy and why it is so difficult to fill. There was discussion around critical payments and aspects of core job that are problematic. Ms McKenna indicated that the GSMs first need to consider the pressure points and propose solutions so that these can be considered by the SLT.

35.26 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

35.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred to correspondence shared for information purposes. The Board noted same.

a. HSC(F)04-2026 – Final Indices 2025-26

b. HSC(F)05-2026 – Use and Approval of Confidentiality clauses/agreements

36.26 BOARD SURVEY

36.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the recent Board Survey. Ms Ferguson spoke to the survey, deferred from the previous meeting, noting that a number of responses required further Board discussion and clarification.

36.26.2 Key areas highlighted included meeting start times, horizon scanning, clearer signposting of quality improvement activity, reduced duplication, engagement with Guardian Services Managers, and maintaining a strong focus on children and young people. The Board confirmed it was satisfied with the emphasis on children and young people and agreed that quality improvement activity should be more explicitly identified in future reporting.

36.26.3 It was noted that horizon scanning is addressed through Chair and Non-Executive briefings. Discussion on service delivery presentations reflected mixed views; however, it was agreed that some presentations would be included, with meetings extended where necessary, without compromising core Board business.

ACTION: Board members to consider areas for future presentations so that invitations can be forwarded to speakers and meeting times extended to allow for same.

37.26 DRAFT INTEGRATED GOVERNANCE & ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

37.26.1 Ms Ferguson advised that the draft Integrated Governance Framework had previously been reviewed by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) and that Internal Audit advice had also been sought. The paper had been informed by benchmarking across a number of ALBs and reflected recognised good practice, setting out the aims, scope and governance arrangements from Chief Executive level through to the Assembly. Core best-practice principles, including the Orange Book, were embedded, along with assurance mapping as advised by Internal Audit. The framework aligned Programme for Government commitments with the Agency's strategic objectives and annual business planning, and addressed key risk themes, including people and wellbeing.

37.26.2 Board members welcomed the work undertaken and noted that, while much of the information already existed, bringing it together into a single, coherent framework provided clear assurance. Discussion at ARAC had highlighted the value of appendices setting out assurance sources by committee and frequency, including core mandatory reports, to assist in identifying duplication.

37.26.3 Mr Wilson suggested the Board establish an Integrated Governance Committee to align with the new Integrated Governance Framework to eliminate duplication and provide clearer lines of responsibility. This would mean moving responsibility for risk oversight from the ARAC to the Social Care Governance (SCG) Committee which would then become the Integrated Governance and Risk Assurance Committee. The Audit and Risk Assurance Committee would revert to an Audit Committee. Mr Wilson stated this was the normal practice in each of the Trusts and most of the smaller HSC ALB's. There was extensive Board discussion about governance structures, including the respective roles of ARAC and the SCG Committee, and the balance between assurance and operational scrutiny. Members emphasised the importance of SCG's delegated statutory assurance role and the need to avoid diluting professional standards. It was agreed that the focus of Board committees should remain on assurance rather than operational detail, and that unnecessary duplication across committees should be minimised. Mr Wilson was asked to prepare a paper for management to review and determine if the issue warranted further discussion.

37.26.4 The Board agreed that further work would be undertaken to clearly map assurance documentation, standing agenda items and verbal assurances considered by each committee, with a view to clarifying responsibilities and reducing duplication, while remaining compliant with the Orange Book and good governance practice.

37.26.5 Ms Ferguson proposed the inclusion of an additional paragraph clarifying the Board's overall oversight role, and minor amendments were agreed, including refining references to third-line activity and removing the People and Wellbeing Committee from the governance structure outlined. Members also noted the intention to use the corporate balanced scorecard and KPIs as a future touchstone to assess how effectively the integrated framework operates in practice.

37.26.6 The Board approved the Integrated Governance Framework, subject to the agreed amendments.

ACTION: Ms Ferguson to detail a schedule of assurance documents, standing agenda items and verbal assurances considered by each committee to the framework.

ACTION: Mr Wilson to undertake a piece of work to review and address areas of unnecessary duplication in line with Orange Book principles.

38.26 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

38.26.1 There was no other business for discussion.

39.26 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

39.26.1 The Board met in confidential discussion.

END TIME: 12.45pm

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 2nd JULY 2026, 9.30am

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
29.6 Review of Sponsorship Arrangements	**Self-Assessment tool to be discussed at the next Board and Audit & Risk Assurance Committee meetings.**	Ms Loughran Mr Wilson	
36.26 Board Survey	**Board members to consider areas for future presentations so that invitations can be forwarded to speakers and meeting times extended to allow for same.**	All	
37.26 Draft Integrated Governance Framework	**Ms Ferguson to detail a schedule of assurance documents, standing agenda items and verbal assurances considered by each committee to the framework.** **Mr Wilson to undertake a piece of work to review and address areas of unnecessary duplication in line with Orange Book principles.**	Ms Ferguson Mr Wilson	