

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

START TIME: 9.30am

63.25 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

- 63.25.1 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.

64.25 MINUTE FROM LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 64.25.1 The minute of the previous meeting of the Board on 18th September 2025 was agreed as an accurate record, proposed by Ms Callaghan.

65.25 MATTERS ARISING

- 65.25.1 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.

66.25 CHAIR & NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

Meeting of ALB Chairs

- 66.25.1 Mrs Loughran indicated that a meeting of the ALB Chairs with the Minister is scheduled for November 2025.

NICON Conference

- 66.25.2 Mrs Loughran reflected on the recent NICON conference and the minimal to no input in relation to the work of children's social services specifically. Ms McKenna indicated there had been a Fringe session on day 2 relating to young service users, supported by PHA and NICCY. Following discussion Ms McKenna agreed to raise this at the ALB CEO Forum where Heather Moorehead Director of NICON will be in attendance. She indicated that visibility and influence pertaining to Children and Young People comes through in the Regional Children's Reform Board.

Workshop for Audit Committee Chairs

- 66.25.3 Mr Wilson noted that he had attended a workshop by BSO Internal Audit. He updated the Board on the update to global internal audit standards and the impact this may have on the Agency with a new style of audits being implemented in 2026. He suggested recommendations from internal audit findings may be more strategic than operational going forward. Mr Wilson noted that in terms of our own assurance mechanisms, some duties will fall to the Audit & Risk Committee, and others to the CEO as Accounting Officer. He noted an event is to be organised for senior leadership in the near future.
- 66.25.4 Mr Douglas commended the relationship the Agency has with Internal Audit and noted the Agency benefits from that positive relationship. The amount of scrutiny on small ALBs was acknowledged by the Board.

67.25 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

CEO Briefing Report

- 67.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *CEO Briefing Report* and Ms McKenna spoke to same. She specifically noted:-
- 67.25.2 **Waiting List:** Ms McKenna noted that unallocated cases are our greatest pressure. There are approximately 160 unallocated cases as at today. She indicated there has been downward trend, and the Guardian Services Managers continue to identify capacity and staff embrace the rigor and assurance they bring. She indicated that she and the Assistant Director have had discussions about offering a cohort of around 10 cases out to staff, which have been on the waiting list 120+ days. These will be offered on overtime/additional hours basis with funding linked to the delay in recruitment.

- 67.25.3 **Workforce:** Ms McKenna indicated there is delay in recruitment to the Quality Assurance and Learning Improvement Manager post (due to the job evaluation process) and also to the appointment of the new guardian posts (delay in Retained Recruitment Department). Ms McKenna confirmed that Stephanie Robinson (Children's Court Guardian) was successful in being appointed to the Guardian Services Manager role; it is hoped that she will be taking up post at the beginning of November 2025. Backfill has been identified by Mrs Crickard and Recruitment are currently working through pre-employment checks.
- 67.25.4 **Performance: Audit** - Ms McKenna indicated that management have planned to undertake a qualitative audit of the Professional Standards on 4th November 2025. She indicated the high-level findings will be tabled at the next SCG Committee meeting with the Audit Report findings coming to the Board meeting in December 2025. An audit of peer group supervisions is also planned for 18th December 2025.
- 67.25.5 **Performance: Case Grading** - Ms McKenna indicated management met to look at auditing the case grading system. She noted there are a number of limitations within the model that pose some challenge. After a lot of debate, it was agreed there was little merit in auditing a tool where there are some fundamental issues. Ms McKenna indicated that an associate from the HSC Leadership Centre is going to do a relook and revision of the tool as well as a read across. She noted at the heart of the tool there is an issue around time currency. In addition, the Safe Staffing guidance document from the Department will soon be issued and while this predominately relates to HSCT's, it is hoped there will be useful takeaways from that.
- 67.25.6 Mrs Crickard indicated that case grading is currently not on the agenda for supervision meetings. However, when the model is updated it can then be used to inform supervision. Mr Douglas indicated that it is merely a tool and is never going to be completely accurate. Mrs Loughran asked that more scrutiny be given to case grading scores and that guardians be reminded to keep it up to date. Ms McKenna agreed this needs to be a dual process as it assists in identifying capacity and so needs to be a live discussion between guardians and managers. Ms Callaghan indicated the tool is already progress compared to what was previously in place, so it is important to have an open mind about what the tool is going to look like in the future.
- 67.25.7 **Stronger Together Programme:** Ms McKenna indicated that two staff were to attend the *Stronger Together Programme*. Unfortunately, one individual took unwell at short notice and was unable to start the

programme. Part of the plan was that they revise the court report templates; it is now hoped that this will be undertaken by the Guardian Services Manager.

67.25.8 **Children & Young People's Engagement:** Ms McKenna indicated that an audit of the Children & Young People Engagement was recently completed. Recommendations have highlighted that no action plan is in place to support the Strategy so the HSC Leadership Centre has been approached about taking forward this work, which will ensure the audit recommendations are met before the end of the financial year.

67.25.9 **Investors In People:** Ms McKenna indicated that the Agency currently holds a Silver liP Award which is now due to expire. It has been agreed that the Agency will re-engage with Investors in People, with work to commence in January 2026. Mrs Loughran acknowledged the changes in the last few years and indicated it would be very helpful to get an independent review.

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. She indicated that updates were detailed in blue text for easy differentiation. Ms McKenna indicated there are still issues with securing an electronic data lift on performance activity linked to cases being triaged within 48 hours.

51.25.15 Ms McKenna referred to the forthcoming Board Workshop and indicated that this would entail looking at the Strategic Plan (2 years remaining on the current plan) and preparing the Business Plan for 2026-27. She indicated the KPI's for the business plan will in future be detailed in a separate stand-alone document. Committee Chairs will be asked to feed into what KPI's they feel would assist in providing their Committee with assurance in the coming year. Members are asked to come with ideas and thoughts in advance of the workshop.

68.25 FINANCE REPORT

52.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Finance Report as at Month 5 (August 2025)* and Ms Ferguson spoke to same.

- 52.25.2 Ms Ferguson highlighted a projected year-end surplus of £18k as at Month 5. She indicated this is likely to increase due to the current recruitment delays.
- 52.25.3 Ms Ferguson took the Board through the main areas of underspend. She highlighted the building and engineering miscellaneous costs and confirmed they relate to some issues with our Facilities contract with BSO; it is anticipated invoices are due to follow, but this accounts for the current underspend.
- 52.25.4 Ms Ferguson noted the budget remains stable and positive. She added she is cognisant of the expenditure for month 6 and the recent request for savings from DoH.
- 52.25.3 The Board unanimously approved the *Finance Report*.

69.25 SOCIAL CARE GOVERNANCE 2024-25

SCG Annual Report 2024-25

- 69.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *SCG Annual Report 2024-25* and Ms Callaghan confirmed the report gives a reflection of the business undertaken in the last year. The Board reviewed and accepted the report.

Children's Feedback Report 2024-25

- 69.25.2 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Children's Feedback Report 2024-25* which provides a breakdown of children's feedback for the period 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025. Mrs Crickard highlighted the report was completed by herself and Ms Sinead Casey. The Board thanked both for the rich data provided and accepted the report.

70.25 CCGANI MID-YEAR ASSURANCE STATEMENT 2025-26

- 70.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *CCGANI Mid-Year Assurance Statement 2025-26*. This was presented by Ms McKenna and Mr Wilson confirmed the Audit & Risk Committee had already reviewed the statement and now recommend same to the Board.
- 70.25.2 The Board endorsed the *CCGANI Mid-Year Assurance Statement*.

71.25 QUALITY REPORT 2024-25

- 71.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Quality Report 2024-25* and Mrs Crickard spoke to same. Ms Callaghan confirmed the Report has been reviewed at the SCG Committee and is now recommended for approval by the Board.
- 71.25.2 She indicated that whilst SCG plays an important role in the preparation of the report it cannot solely be their responsibility and there also needs to be corporate responsibility. The Board were in agreement.
- 71.25.3 The Board approved the *Quality Report 2024-25*.

72.25 SEPARATE LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR THE CCG

- 72.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to her update on pro bono representation for guardians who no longer represent a competent child/young person [*Separate Legal Representation for the CCG*] In summary, the key issue is likely to be the decision of the Law Society about pro bono representation. Without a positive decision from the Law Society there cannot be progress despite the willingness of the Pro Bono Committee of the Bar.
- 72.25.2 Mrs Loughran indicated that correspondence to Mr Paul Andrews, Legal Services Agency has also been forwarded, seeking a discussion about same.

73.25 BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 73.25.1 Mrs Loughran confirmed there have been two Committee meetings since the Board last met:-

SCG Committee – 30th September 2025

- 73.25.2 Ms Callaghan referred the Board to the *SCG Committee Report*. The report details the business discussed at the last meeting on 30th September 2025. Ms Callaghan referred to Committee members and confirmed that whilst Mr Wilson and Ms Ferguson are not members, they (along with Mrs Loughran) are welcome to attend any meeting.

Audit & Risk Committee – 17th October 2025

- 73.25.3 Mr Wilson referred the Board to the *Audit & Risk Committee Report* detailing business discussed at the last meeting on 17th October 2025. Mr Wilson confirmed a satisfactory Mid-Year Assurance Statement from Internal Audit. He confirmed the External Audit/NI Audit Office had no changes to the Report to Those Charged with Governance.
- 73.25.4 Mr Wilson indicated that a new risk has been added to the Risk Register. He indicated that there was good discussion around the use of WhatsApp. Ms Ferguson indicated the draft practice guidance and policy will come to the December meeting of the Board, after discussion with Guardians.

74.25 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

HSC (F) 19-2025 Guidance on Acceptance and Provision of Gifts and Hospitality

- 74.25.1 Ms Ferguson referred to the *HSC (F) 19-2025 Guidance on Acceptance and Provision of Gifts and Hospitality*. She indicated the Agency would be reviewing its own Policy on Gifts and Hospitality.

HSC (F) 22-2025 - Revised HSC NIFRS Delegated Limit

- 74.25.2 Ms Ferguson referred to the *HSC (F) 22-2025 - Revised HSC NIFRS Delegated Limit* shared for information.

75.25 BOARD SELF-ASSESSMENT

- 75.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the DoH *Board Governance Self-Assessment Tool* for use by ALB's and completed on an annual basis by the Board.
- 75.25.2 Mrs Loughran guided the Board through each section of the assessment and the Board noted the details under *Red Flag and Good Practice*. The Board updated the suggested *Comments* on the self-assessment.
- 75.25.3 The *Board Governance Self-Assessment Tool* was completed and agreed by members.

76.25 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Board Workshop

- 76.25.1 Ms McKenna and Ms Ferguson referred to the Board Workshop and updated on the plan for a full-day workshop. It was agreed that the workshop would take place on Friday 30th January 2026.

Duty Of Candour Legislation

- 76.25.2 Ms McKenna confirmed there are two important updates in relation to Duty of Candour legislation that will impact Northern Ireland Health and Social Care. She referred to the key elements in the UK Government's Public Office (Accountability) Bill and that the Minister has now announced his decision to proceed with the development of an Organisational Duty of Candour Bill for Northern Ireland, aligned with similar statutory frameworks already in place across other UK jurisdictions. She referred to the Board to the correspondence attached [ref SSUB-0164-2025] for further information.

Board Meeting Location

- 76.25.3 Mrs Loughran indicated that the Board previously agreed to vary their meeting locations, to include the Dobbin Centre and Spencer House offices. Following discussion, it was agreed that the April and July 2026 meetings of the Board would take place in these locations.

77.25 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

- 77.25.1 There was one item for discussion.

END TIME: 12noon

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 11th December 2025, 9.30am