

**CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
BOARD MEETING – 26th February 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*
Mr Brian Moylan, *Information Governance Manager (Item 1.26)*
Mr Ronan Durnin, *Head of Information Governance & Data Protection, BSO (Item 1.26)*
- Minute Taker:** Mrs Ann Andrew, *Business Support Manager*

START TIME: 9.30am

1.26 SERVICE DELIVERY PRESENTATION

- 1.26.1 Mrs Loughran welcomed Mr Durnin, Head of Information Governance & Data Protection in BSO to the meeting.
- 1.26.2 Mr Durnin presented an overview of Information Governance, outlining the responsibilities of the Board and the relevant legislative and policy context. He highlighted the lines of accountability within the Agency and the areas to be incorporated within an Information Governance Framework.
- 1.26.3 Mrs Loughran thanked Mr Durnin for his comprehensive briefing.

2.26 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

- 2.26.1 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.

3.26 MINUTE FROM LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 3.26.1 The minute of the previous meeting of the Board on 11th December 2025 was agreed as an accurate record.

4.26 MATTERS ARISING

- 4.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the action list from the last Board meeting and all members noted the progress. All were noted as complete.

5.26 CHAIR & NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

- 5.26.1 **ALB Chair's Meeting:** Mrs Loughran provided a brief update from the recent ALB Chair's meeting. She indicated the Muckamore Abbey Inquiry Report is scheduled for publication in the coming days.

6.26 CEO BRIEFING

- 6.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the *CEO Briefing*, and Ms McKenna presented an update on Agency activity since the previous Board meeting. She highlighted the new structure of the CEO Briefing, noting that the reinstatement of the Operations Report and the introduction of the Corporate Services Directorate Report have allowed for a more streamlined approach, reducing duplication and providing the Board with a more strategic overview.
- 6.26.2 Ms McKenna reported that the Agency has recently completed its Investors in People assessment and has been awarded *Silver accreditation*. The senior leadership team is extremely proud of the findings, which demonstrate significant progress since 2022. The insight report will be shared with staff at the Development Day scheduled for 12th March 2026.
- 6.26.3 Ms McKenna advised that she and Mrs Loughran had attended the mid-year accountability meeting, where they reiterated the ongoing pressures facing the Agency. She referenced increasing pressures associated with Separate Legal Representation (SLR), particularly the emerging demand and cost unpredictability. Meetings are planned between Mrs Crickard, Ms Ferguson and representatives of the Agency's Solicitor Panel to discuss the position paper and consider options for a sustainable way forward.
- 6.26.4 Ms McKenna provided an update on progress under the Agency's four strategic themes, outlining key achievements across each area.
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- 6.26.5 She advised that the Senior Leadership Team is seeking Board approval of the Draft Conflict of Interests Policy. Subject to approval, the policy will be issued to the workforce with a request for completion of associated forms and, where required, risk assessments and outcomes to be finalised before year-end.
- 6.26.6 In discussion, Ms Callaghan queried the continued low KPI performance in relation to observation of family time. Ms McKenna explained that the Professional Standards were drafted at a time when case progression looked different. As cases are now often allocated close to final hearing, opportunities to conduct observations on two separate occasions are limited. She stressed that the issue reflects timing of allocation rather than staff practice.
- 6.26.7 Ms Callaghan welcomed the strengthened strategic overview provided by the CEO, Assistant Director and Head of Corporate Services. Mr Douglas also commented that the three reports were informative and demonstrated the work invested in preparing them. Ms McKenna acknowledged this and indicated she would be open to further rationalisation, suggesting that a dashboard approach might be appropriate for certain areas such as sickness absence. Ms Stevenson agreed that the reports were helpful in identifying decisions required from the Board. Mrs Loughran noted this as an important point and requested that future reports across the three areas be framed more clearly around decision-making requirements. Members were in agreement.

7.26 FINANCE

- 7.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the Finance Report as at Month 10, and Ms Ferguson presented the update.
- 7.26.2 Ms Ferguson reported a surplus position of £338k. She indicated the surplus had been unavoidable due to ongoing staff vacancies and delays in recruitment. She noted that 86% of the Agency's budget relates to pay costs. The Agency has already given a £37k retraction, and it is intended to make a further retraction.
- 7.26.3 Ms Ferguson drew attention to the correspondence from the Department dated 17 February 2026 regarding *Depreciation / Impairment & AME Resource Budget Control Limits*, which had been circulated for information.
- 7.26.4 Mr Wilson raised a query regarding the consistency and accuracy of surplus figures provided by BSO Finance and questioned why certain information had not been incorporated earlier. This matter was discussed and noted.

- 7.26.5 Ms Ferguson also referred to the proposed savings scenarios of 5%, 10% and 15% requested by the Department. These scenarios have been submitted, but no feedback has yet been received. Mrs Loughran emphasised that any significant reduction to the Agency's budget would have a severe and detrimental impact. It was noted that the Sponsor Branch remains supportive of the Agency and its work.

8.26 BUSINESS PLAN 2026-27

Business Plan and Objectives 2026–27

- 8.26.1 Mrs Loughran noted that the Board Workshop held on 30th January 2026 to consider the Business Plan and Objectives for 2026–27 had been an open and constructive discussion. She invited approval of the finalised Plan. Mr Douglas proposed approval, seconded by Ms Callaghan.
- 8.26.2 During the discussion, Ms Stevenson queried whether the proposed 25% reduction in cases being unallocated could be impacted by anticipated financial constraints? Ms McKenna noted that the objectives were subject to caveats, including potential staffing reductions and variations in case numbers. Mr Douglas further commented that it should be highlighted in the Business Plan that the plan and objectives had been formulated on the basis of the current budget and recruitment plans, and that any material change in the budgetary position would have implications for delivery of the objectives.

Reporting Template on Progress

- 8.26.3 The Board noted the reporting template that will be used to monitor progress against the 2026–27 objectives.

POAP (Schedule of Papers Due)

- 8.26.4 A copy of the Plan on a Page, setting out the progression of papers and business through Committees and the Board, was tabled for information.

Executive Meetings Schedule for 2026 & 2027

- 8.26.5 A draft schedule of Executive Meetings for 2026 and 2027 was tabled for information. This will be updated and recirculated once finalised.

9.26 OPERATIONS REPORT

- 9.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the *Quarter 3 Operations Report*, and Mrs Crickard presented the update. She provided an overview of case numbers along with an update on staffing resources and sickness absence levels.
- 9.26.2 Mrs Crickard reported that recruitment activity has been intensive in recent weeks and is expected to remain so throughout Quarter 4. She advised that the Quality Assurance Learning & Improvement Manager post has closed, and that two CCG (Band 8a) posts linked to the Business Case are currently live on HSC Recruit. In addition, the Guardian Services Managers are progressing a recruitment exercise to establish a waiting list for CCG Band 7 posts.
- 9.26.3 She further noted that work on case grading is progressing, with a pilot planned for June. The intention is to review the pilot in December, with a view to implementing a strengthened model from January 2027.
- 9.26.4 Ms Callaghan raised concerns regarding cases discharged without a guardian and delays in notifications being received by the Agency, noting that the same court has been identified on several occasions. Mrs Crickard advised that she would raise this issue again at the court user group meetings. Mrs Loughran suggested that Mrs Crickard also write to Her Honour Judge McCormick to keep her informed.

ACTION: [Mrs Crickard to write to Her Honour Judge McCormick about late notifications to the Agency.](#)

10.26 BOARD SURVEY

- 10.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the recent *Board Survey*, and Ms Ferguson provided an overview. She noted that it would be beneficial to consider the survey responses in conjunction with the developing Integrated Governance Framework, including future discussions on board and committee structures and how business is delivered.
- 10.26.2 Given the breadth of the discussion required, Mrs Loughran proposed that the item be postponed to the next Board meeting. Members will have the opportunity to review the survey responses and related papers in advance and identify any key issues requiring decision, to help focus the discussion.
- 10.26.3 The Board agreed to defer this agenda item to the next meeting and extend the meeting by 2 hours to facilitate a more in-depth discussion.

11.26 CORPORATE SERVICES DIRECTORATE REPORT

11.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred members to the Corporate Services Directorate Report. Ms Ferguson presented the report, providing an overview of key activity across the Administration and Corporate Directorates. She highlighted the following areas:

- **Audit:** Ms Ferguson advised that the Agency has submitted its Mid-Year Update on Internal Audit recommendations. Recommendations remain on track with all actions either partially or fully complete. She noted this position was reassuring.
- **Assembly Written Questions (AQWs):** Ms Ferguson highlighted the significant workload associated with AQWs, often received at short notice and requiring substantial detail. She proposed that future Corporate Services Directorate reports will include a high-level summary of questions received and noted the need to remain mindful of proposed budget reductions. It was noted that these questions are not specific to the Agency but are directed to all ALBs.
- **Integrated Governance Framework:** Ms Ferguson confirmed that a draft Integrated Governance Framework will be presented to the March Audit & Risk Committee for input, with the potential for subsequent Board consideration.
- **Corporate and Administration Review:** Ms Ferguson reported that a new associate has been appointed to lead the Corporate and Administration Review, due to commence in April 2026. Ms McKenna noted that a revised, staff-centred approach is being taken for this review.
- **GCIS:** Ms Ferguson advised that a three-year extension with Fluent Technology has been approved, with updated terms and conditions.
- **DHCNI:** Ms Ferguson reported that the discovery work with DHCNI is commencing and advised that Damien Moore (DHCNI) has been appointed to support this work.
- **Website:** Ms Ferguson provided an update following the Board's previous discussion on the CCGANI website. She reported that BSO has reviewed the current arrangements and concluded that rebuilding the site within the HSCNI environment would not materially reduce inherent risk, nor would it represent a financially or operationally beneficial option for CCGANI at this time.

12.26 INVESTORS IN PEOPLE (IIP) SURVEY RESULTS

- 12.26.1 Mrs Loughran reported that the Agency had achieved the Silver Investors in People Award and noted this was an excellent outcome. She referred to the accompanying liP Insights Report, highlighting its positive findings and commenting that it reflected very well on the leadership team. She noted in particular the staff feedback indicating that people feel happy in their roles, consider the Agency a good place to work, and feel listened to, representing a strong endorsement of the organisation's culture and leadership.
- 12.26.2 Mr Douglas welcomed the progress and significant improvements since the previous assessment. He was pleased to note that staff had specifically referenced and valued their connection with the Board.
- 12.26.3 Ms McKenna highlighted Board visibility and the approach to holding meetings in the Armagh and L/Derry offices. She raised the practical risks of arranging external office venues—such as cost, catering requirements, and the possibility that staff availability on the day may be limited. It was suggested that clarity of purpose was essential: if the intention is to enable Board visibility and engagement with staff, the forthcoming Staff Development Day may offer a suitable opportunity for this.
- 12.26.4 Mr Douglas highlighted the importance of Board visibility across all locations. Ms Ferguson emphasised the need to ensure staff do not feel under pressure and proposed seeking views from the Guardian Services Managers on what would work best for local teams.
- 12.26.5 Ms McKenna suggested continuing to hold Board meetings in the usual manner, while separately arranging opportunities for Board visibility at each office, thereby meeting both operational and engagement needs. No decision was made and further consideration will be given to this.

13.26 CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION ACTION PLAN

- 13.26.1 Mrs Loughran introduced the Children & Young People's Engagement and Participation Action Plan, and Mrs Crickard presented the key points. She indicated she welcomed the clarity the plan provides on the intended engagement journey.
- 13.26.2 Mrs Crickard, along with Ms Gorman and Ms Robinson will meet with VOYPIC to share the action plan and will subsequently engage directly with young people to gather their views. The initial priority within the plan is to further develop and enhance the Agency's website as a key platform for participation.

14.26 CCGANI SOLICITOR PANEL***Solicitor Panel Reconstitution***

- 14.26.1 Mrs Crickard updated the Board on the reconstitution of the Agency's Solicitor Panel. She outlined the proposed revised timetable, confirming that the full reconstitution process is scheduled for completion by April 2027.
- 14.26.2 Mrs Crickard advised that she is currently in discussions with the Law Society and that planned steps will be sense-checked with them as the process progresses. She confirmed that a communication will be issued to all current Panel members to inform them of the revised timetable.
- 14.26.3 The Board approved the revised timetable for the Reconstitution of the Agency's Solicitor Panel.

Solicitor Panel Usage Report

- 14.26.4 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Solicitor Panel Usage Report*, and Mrs Crickard advised that it was provided for information. She noted that the report is shared with all panel members to ensure openness and equity. She further confirmed that there have been no issues and that full disclosure continues to be maintained.

15.26 SUPERVISION & PEER GROUP SESSIONS – AUDIT REPORT FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 15.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Audit Report Findings & Recommendations on the recent Supervision and Peer Group Sessions. Mrs Crickard indicated that she and Ms McKenna had completed the audit, and it was noted that managers demonstrated a strong understanding of the processes. The key changes proposed relate primarily to refining the template to make it more streamlined, as the current process is labour-intensive to complete, write up and record. The audit outcome was reported as very positive, with only a small number of minor recommendations.
- 15.26.2 Ms Callaghan commended the comprehensive nature of the case summaries presented. Mrs Crickard highlighted the ongoing learning for managers in focusing reports on significant issues and key learning points.

- 15.26.3 In respect of peer group supervision, Mrs Crickard confirmed that attendance is strong, with any non-attendance primarily due to court commitments or annual leave. She advised that peer group supervision is now well embedded across the teams. Operational pressures sometimes result in sessions taking the form of team meetings followed by reflective discussion, which staff also value. Ms Stevenson noted the positive feedback across all key areas arising from the audit.
- 15.26.4 Mrs Crickard referred to appraisal arrangements, and advised that the next cycle is about to commence. Preparation requirements have been significant, and going forward managers will select two cases and guardians one case, focusing on learning, good practice and key themes. Staff and managers are engaged in the appraisal process, though the template requires amendment as it is currently labour-intensive. A more standardised and streamlined approach is proposed.
- 15.26.5 Ms Callaghan sought clarification on Agency's performance data; Mrs Crickard noted there was inconsistency in interpretation by managers so a training component will therefore be developed as managers had differing expectations regarding the scope of the audit template.
- 15.26.6 Mrs Crickard referred to the triage KPI and due to the limitations of GCIS reporting, proposed that this be monitored monthly, acknowledging the small sample size and that KPI measures may change over time. This was agreed.

16.26 BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 16.26.1 Since the Board last met, one meeting of the SCG Committee has taken place in the form of a workshop held on 14 January 2025. Ms Callaghan referred members to the summary of this workshop, which was shared at the Board Workshop on 30 January 2026.

17.26 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

- 17.26.1 Mrs Loughran referred the Board to the following items of correspondence which have been shared for information:-
- a. ***Circular HSC (SE) 1-2026 - Senior Executives Pay Arrangements 2025-26.***
The Board noted the circular.

- b. **Correspondence MC_26_81 - Mike Nesbitt MLA, Minister of Health Commencement of the Identity and Language Act.** The Board noted the correspondence.
- c. **Draft Strategic and Operational Planning Guidance 2026-27.** The Board noted the guidance.
- d. **Being Open Framework for Health and Social Care Northern Ireland.** Ms Callaghan indicated that the Framework document is very welcome and, when considered alongside the liP Report and the feedback from children and young people, provides a substantial evidence base. She emphasised the importance of fostering an open culture. It was agreed that the Board should identify a Non-Executive Board Member to act as a champion; further discussion will follow to clarify the role and expectations. It was agreed that the *Being Open Framework* will be referred to the Audit & Risk Committee and the Social Care Governance Committee for further consideration including nomination of a Board member.

18.26 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

18.26.1 There was no other business for discussion.

19.26 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

19.26.1 There were three items for discussion in confidential session.

Mrs Loughran noted her deep gratitude to the senior leadership team for their preparation of papers for today's meeting.

The meeting was brought to a close.

END TIME: 12.45pm

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 23RD APRIL 2026, 9.30am

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
9.26 Operations Report	Mrs Crickard to write to Her Honour Judge McCormick about late notifications to the Agency.	Mrs Crickard	