

CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND BOARD MEETING – 3rd July 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)*
Ms Jennifer Ferguson, *(appointed Head of Corporate Services)*
- Minute Taker:** Ms Hannah McKernan, *Administration Officer*

START TIME: 9:30am

30.25 APOLOGIES

- 30.25.1 There were no apologies.

31.25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

- 31.25.1 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.

32.25 MINUTE OF THE LAST MEETING

- 32.25.1 The minute of the previous meeting of the Board on 18th April 2025 was agreed as an accurate record.

33.25 MATTERS ARISING

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

34.25 CHAIR AND NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

Meeting of ALB Chairs

- 34.25.1 Mrs Loughran indicated she had attended a meeting of the ALB Chairs with the Minister. He had highlighted the financial constraints within HSC at the meeting and acknowledged the challenges faced. Mrs Loughran highlighted the tight budgetary position and emphasis on the expected pressures in terms of financial position going forward.

Interest of the Lady Chief Justice in Education of Looked After Children

- 34.25.2 Mrs Loughran was one of the speakers at a meeting for judges organised at the request of the Lady Chief Justice. Her topic was the education of looked after children. Mrs Loughran noted this should be addressed during any upcoming education events for Guardians. Ms McKenna confirmed a brief seminar could be arranged; this would be very helpful especially due to roles and responsibilities constantly changing in terms of education for looked after children.

35.25 Chief Executive's Briefing

Chief Executive's Briefing / Update Report

- 35.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Chief Executive Briefing* and Ms McKenna spoke to her paper highlighting some areas for specific mention.
- 35.25.2 **Waiting List:** Ms McKenna highlighted that the waiting list for unallocated cases does continue to present the CCGANI with a significant challenge however it is noted that the figure has decreased in recent times with credit given to Ms Crickard and GSM's for identifying capacity, streamlining processes and the entire workforce for moving everything along efficiently.
- 35.25.3 **Workforce:** Ms McKenna highlighted the Agency is due to welcome a new Principal Court Children's Guardian and Children's Court Guardian in July. While this will mean that all current vacant posts are filled, a number of Guardians will be reducing their hours in line with the partial retirement scheme. It is planned to amalgamate hours when they become available and proceed with a further recruitment campaign to recruit

permanent staff later in the summer: candidates are already on the waiting list from a previous campaign.

- 35.25.4 Ms McKenna formally welcomed Ms Jennifer Ferguson (newly appointed Head of Corporate Services) as an observer to the Board Meeting. Ms Ferguson commences with the Agency on 1st August 2025.
- 35.25.5 Ms McKenna noted the Guardian Services Manager post has been advertised. She noted that the Quality Assurance, Learning & Improvement Manager position has had some challenges and updated the Board on the job evaluation process. A meeting with retained recruitment to discuss the job evaluation is being scheduled.
- 35.25.6 **Finance:** Ms McKenna noted that the Business Case for additional funding for staff has been submitted to sponsor branch in draft format to review the Economic and Financial proforma, and strategic and management sections, for guidance of where to submit at the next stage. Ms McKenna highlighted from the end of year accountability meeting that submission is required as soon as possible.
- 35.25.7 Ms McKenna confirmed 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. A saving of £23,000 should also be delivered (inescapable pressure).
- 35.25.8 **Quality Improvement:** Ms McKenna referred to the quality improvement and highlighted that in recent months the SLT has been focused on completion of outstanding Internal Audit recommendations and a number of the papers tabled at today's Board meeting are a direct response to this, most notably; Complaints Policy and supporting suite of appendices, Business Continuity Plan and Testing Report, revised Risk Register and accompanying updated Risk Management Strategy 2025-26, and new proposed KPI's for the Business Plan. Ms McKenna highlighted the plan to convene a working group of managerial and operational staff to review our Court Templates with the view to potentially streamlining them and removing some duplication whilst ensuring the quality of same is not compromised.
- 35.25.9 **Meeting with the Judiciary:** The Agency's annual meeting with the Judiciary was held on 27th May 2025, and the HSCT's Children's Services Directors, DoH and representation from the Northern Ireland Network for Contact Centres were also in attendance. One of the judges requested

a breakdown on the “average” waiting time to allocate a case to a Guardian. This has been included in the Board’s papers for information.

- 35.25.10 **Visit:** Ms McKenna highlighted to the Board that In September 2025 the Agency will host a site visit from the Guardian *ad litem* National Service. This will allow for insight into delivery of services and possible improvements and allow for opportunity going forward to build a positive working relationship.

Business Plan Action Plan 2025-2026 and KPI’s Progress Update

- 35.25.11 Ms McKenna referred to the Business Plan Action Plan with updated progress. She highlighted the recommended KPIs which were identified as part of audit recommendations; SLT have drafted these and aligned them specifically to this year’s business plan and action plan. There was discussion surrounding KPI’s and Mr Wilson raised the idea of introducing a KPI to track the time taken for a case to be allocated: the Board agreed against this as following further discussion confirmation was provided that every action is being taken to minimise delay.
- 35.25.12 The Board confirmed that the executive team should work on a KPI in regard to case type, to be brought to the SCG Committee and Audit & Risk Committee for further review before being brought to the Board. They also agreed that the executive team could work on how to quantify a KPI in regards to how quickly cases are being triaged after the court has appointed a Guardian. Mrs Loughran noted for clarification to be given on how triage and risk assessment per case is managed and the measurement process surrounding the same.
- 35.25.13 Mr Douglas referred to KPI 2 which was set at 75%. He suggested an increase to 80-90%, in accordance to the child’s needs. The Board agreement agreed and Mrs Loughran confirmed the threshold be set at 90%. Mrs Stevenson suggested for clarity the narrative of “at least to 2 to 3” could be hard to quantify; the Board agreed for this statement to be changed to “at least 2”.

ACTION: KPI’s to be updated in the Business Plan Action Plan 2025-26 to reflect discussions.

Business Plan and Objectives 2025-26

- 35.25.14 Ms McKenna noted that the Business Plan and Objectives 2025-26 have been approved by Peter Toogood. A copy of the final plan and correspondence were shared for information.

36.25 Finance Report

- 36.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Finance Report providing an overview of financial management as at month 2 (May 2025) and Mrs Andrew spoke to same.
- 36.25.2 Mrs Andrew highlighted the reported draft budgeted Income and Expenditure is reporting a deficit position of £138k. She reported that no financial reporting or FMR is required for the Department of Health in month 2 as the budget has not been finalised and only indicative allocation letters have been received in month 2. Mrs Andrew highlighted the forecasted year-end deficit position and drew attention to the key drivers of the underspend.
- 36.25.3 Mrs Andrew confirmed a meeting with finance will be scheduled in the upcoming weeks to be clear on budget areas.

37.25 Annual Report and Accounts 2024-2025

NIAO Draft Report to Those Charged with Governance 2024-25

- 37.25.1 Mr Wilson and Mrs Andrew indicated that the *Draft Report to Those Charged with Governance 2024-25 (RTTCWG)* has yet to be issued. Enquiries by Deloitte (external audit) have yet to be finalised delaying the issue of the report. It is anticipated enquiries will be completed by next week and the RTTCWG available thereafter. Mr Wilson suggested a brief meeting of the Audit & Risk Committee and Board to approve both.

CCGANI Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25

- 37.25.2 Mrs Andrew referred to the *draft Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25* and indicated that whilst the Board were not in a position to approve the accounts, she sought confirmation on the report commentary. The Board noted their approval of same and await the finalisation of the accounts for final sign off.

38.25 Policies

Raising a Concern in the Public Interest (Whistleblowing) HSC Framework, Policy and Procedure

- 38.25.1 Ms McKenna referred to the *Raising a Concern in the Public Interest (Whistleblowing) HSC Framework, Policy and Procedure* was developed in collaboration with HSC organisations and Trade Union colleagues to replace the existing regional framework and model policy. Ms McKenna presented the Framework, Policy and Procedure for formal Board approval. Ms McKenna thanked Mr Douglas for his input into the development of the paper. She highlighted Mr Douglas, Ms McKenna, Mrs Crickard and Mrs Ferguson have been nominated as advocates for whistleblowing.
- 38.25.2 Mr Douglas raised the need for training surrounding acting as advocates and also for communication to be sent to staff to inform them of who they can go to. It was agreed that Mr Douglas would speak with GSM's at upcoming learning events. Mr Douglas also confirmed he would be happy to join meetings with CCG's and administration staff for briefing surrounding the topic. The Board also discussed for the topic to be a standing item for discussion during supervisions.
- 38.25.3 The Board approved the *Raising a Concern in the Public Interest (Whistleblowing) Framework, Policy and Procedure*.

ACTION: Mr Douglas to be included in learning events to discuss Raising a Concern / Whistleblowing.

ACTION: Raising a Concern / Whistleblowing to be a standard item on supervision meeting agenda's.

Violence and Aggression in the Workplace (HSC Framework)

- 38.25.4 Ms McKenna referred to the *Violence and Aggression in the Workplace (HSC Framework)* developed in collaboration with HSC organisations and Trade Union colleagues to replace the existing regional Zero Tolerance Policy. All HSC organisations are required to adopt the Framework.
- 38.25.5 Ms McKenna confirmed that the Agency has training scheduled for 2nd July 2025 in respect of Managing Violence and Aggression (by Nick Carson).

- 38.25.6 The Board approved the *Violence and Aggression in the Workplace (HSC Framework)*.

Business Continuity Plan

- 38.25.7 Ms McKenna referred to the *Business Continuity Plan* before the Board. She confirmed this was an outstanding audit recommendation that has now been met. The HSC Leadership have assisted with the revision of the Plan and also facilitated the testing. A copy of the Test Report has been included for information.
- 38.25.8 Mr Wilson confirmed that the Business Continuity Plan is recommended by Audit & Risk Committee. The Board approved the *Business Continuity Plan*.

Complaints Policy

- 38.25.9 Ms McKenna referred to the *Complaints Policy and suite of Procedures and supporting documentation*. Mrs Crickard confirmed the updates address a number of audit recommendations and also improve the flow of the work. The Audit & Risk Committee in May 2025 reviewed the Policy where it was agreed that an additional paragraph should be included to address the process should the complaint be about the Chief Executive, Assistant Director or Head of Corporate Services.
- 38.25.10 The Board approved the *Complaints Policy and suite of Procedures and supporting documentation*. Mrs Loughran indicated staff to be notified of same. Ms McKenna confirmed communication to be shared with staff.

Time in Lieu (TOIL) Policy

- 38.25.11 Ms McKenna noted the Agency was asked to revise our TOIL Policy by NIPSA, on behalf of the staff. A review was undertaken and the Policy was updated accordingly. NIPSA have reviewed the policy and liaised with staff and no issues have been identified.
- 38.25.12 Ms Callaghan queried if there would be corporate oversight. It was agreed this could be monitored through data.
- 38.25.13 Mr Wilson confirmed the revised Policy was approved at the Audit & Risk Committee and is recommended to the Board. The Board approved the *Time in Lieu (TOIL) Policy*.

39.25 Scheme of Delegated Authority (SODA)

- 39.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Scheme of Delegated Authority (SODA)* and Mrs Andrew confirmed this has been updated to reflect the need to refer to the Standing Orders for specific/appropriate delegated authority, in line with the current HSC Procurement limits. Mr Wilson confirmed that the Scheme of Delegated Authority is recommended by the Audit & Risk Committee for Board approval.
- 39.25.2 The Board approved the Scheme of Delegated Authority (SODA).

40.25 Separate Legal Representation

- 40.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to *Separate Legal Representation (SLR)* and the Board were updated by Ms McKenna on same. She confirmed SLR and the financial burden this would place on the Agency was discussed at the End of Year accountability meeting. Mrs Loughran had previously suggested Ms McKenna link with Cafcass, which Ms McKenna subsequently did, meeting with their legal team who provided a walkthrough of processes within their organisation. Ms McKenna noted their screening processes for approving SLR are taken from the point of view of a legal lens whereas the Agency would be taking the point of view of a corporate and social work lens.
- 40.25.2 The issue of SLR arises when a competent child/young person takes a view of his/her future which differs from that of the guardian. The solicitor for the guardian must then become the solicitor for the child and that leaves the guardian without legal representation. Mrs Loughran suggested that the executive team would prepare for consideration by the Board, a draft procedure to apply where the guardian may seek SLR
- 40.25.3 Mr Douglas queried if cases should come to the Board due to cost considerations and also raised if there was a need for a separate panel of solicitors to be introduced. Ms McKenna further noted that the SLA with BSO/DLS does not cover this matter due to direct and indirect conflict of interest.
- 40.25.4 Ms McKenna highlighted the need for consistent legal advice is essential and this was raised at SCG. Following discussion, Mrs Loughran and Ms Stevenson confirmed they would prepare a paper on the legal position. and it was agreed for this item to be tabled at the next meeting of the Board on 18th September 2025.

ACTION: Mrs Loughran and Ms Stevenson to prepare a paper on the legal position of the Agency in respect of Separate Legal Representation, for the Board meeting on 18th September 2025.

41.25 Board Committee Meetings since last Meeting of the Board

Audit & Risk Committee:

Audit & Risk Committee Report - 26th June 2025

- 41.25.1 A meeting of the Audit & Risk Committee took place on 26th June 2025. Mr Wilson referred to the paper tabled providing an update on business discussed. He referred to the report provided by Internal Audit entitled *General Annual Report for HSC in 2024-25*. He reflected positively on performance and internal audit reporting of the Agency and its position in comparison to other HSC organisations.

Annual Report of the Audit & Risk Committee 2024-25

- 41.25.2 Mr Wilson referred to the *Annual Report of the Audit & Risk Committee 2024-25* highlighting the business undertaken over the last year. Mrs Loughran thanked Mr Wilson for his role as chair of the Audit & Risk Committee and also thanked Mrs Andrew for stepping up into the position of interim Corporate Services Manager.

Social Care Governance Committee:

Social Care Governance Committee Report - 26th June 2025

- 41.25.3 There was a meeting of the Social Care Governance Committee (SCG) on 26th June 2025. Ms Callaghan provided a verbal update on business discussed.
- 41.25.4 Ms Callaghan raised the nature of reports coming through the SCG Committee, noting there would be a workshop in the future to look at core contact of SCG in terms of reports and clearing timetables for when reports are required. Mrs Callaghan highlighted to the board the challenging logistics of reporting and linking with corporate functions. She noted linking with key functions especially in regards to quality and assurance is key due to a high number of ad hoc reports being required.

41.25.5 Ms McKenna noted quality assurance should take the lead on the reporting function and synchronisation of both Quality Assurance and SCG committee should then feed in with the Board as this will be essential going forward as well as an integrated governance framework.

41.25.6 Ms Crickard highlighted data analysis as a core function of SCG. She highlighted specific training taking place including specific training in SPPG. Mrs Loughran concluded this item by noting an addition on an engagement piece by GSM's on judicial feedback to guardians would be helpful and interesting. Mrs Loughran thanked Mrs Callaghan and Mrs Crickard for their extensive work on SCG.

Annual Report of the Social Care Governance Committee 2024-25

41.25.3 The Annual Report of the Social Care Governance Committee 2024-25 will come to the next meeting of the Board.

ACTION: The Annual Report of the Social Care Governance Committee 2024-25 will come to the next meeting of the Board.

42.25 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

HSC (SE) 1-2025 - Revised pay Arrangements for Senior Executives

42.25.1 The Board noted the above correspondence for information.

Cyber Security Toolkits for Board

42.25.2 The Board noted the above for information.

BSO Digital Customer Report 2024-25

42.25.3 The Board noted the above for information.

43.25 Risk

Risk Strategy and Policy 2025-27

43.25.1 Ms McKenna noted the Risk Strategy and Policy had previously been reviewed on an annual basis. The Strategy and Policy tabled has been updated for the period 2025-27. She noted no significant changes.

43.25.2 Mr Wilson confirmed the Risk Strategy and Policy 2025-27 had been to the Audit & Risk Committee where it was agreed that a section on risk appetite would be incorporated, along with the current risk appetite statements. This has been completed and is now recommended to the Board.

43.25.3 The Board approved the *Risk Strategy and Policy 2025-27*.

Risk Register

43.25.4 The Board reviewed the Risk Register in detail and gave consideration to the risk description, risk levels, and agreed the Risk Appetite for each. The following updates were made:-

- **Risk 1.25:** Inherent Risk 3 x 4, HIGH. Residual Risk 2 x 4, HIGH. Target Rating 2 x 4, HIGH. Risk Appetite: AVERSE
- **Risk 2.25:** Risk Appetite: AVERSE
- **Risk 3.25:** Risk Appetite: AVERSE
- **Risk 4.25:** Risk Appetite: AVERSE
- **Risk 5.25:** Risk Appetite: MINIMAL
- **Risk 6.25:** Reword the Risk Description. Residual Risk 5 x 4, EXTREME. Target Rate 3 x 4, HIGH. Risk Appetite: AVERSE
- **Risk 7.25:** Reword the Risk Description. Residual Risk 5 x 4, Target Rating 3 x 4. Risk Appetite: AVERSE
- **Risk 8.25:** Risk Appetite: CAUTIOUS
- **Risk 9.25:** Target Rating 3 x 4. Risk Appetite: AVERSE

43.25.5 The Board agreed the Closed Risks.

44.25 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

44.25.1 There was no other business for discussion.

45.25 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

45.25.1 There was one item of confidential business for discussion.

END TIME: 12:15pm

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 18th September 2025, 9.30am

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
35.25 Business Plan Action Plan 2025-2026 and KPI's Progress Update	<i>KPI's to be updated in the Business Plan Action Plan 2025-26 to reflect discussions.</i>	Ms McKenna	
38.25 Policies – Raising a Concern in the Public Interest (Whistleblowing)	<i>Mr Douglas to be included in learning events to discuss Raising a Concern / Whistleblowing.</i> <i>Raising a Concern / Whistleblowing to be a standard item on supervision meeting agenda's.</i>	Ms McKenna Ms Crickard	
40.25 Separate Legal Representation	<i>Mrs Loughran and Ms Stevenson to prepare a paper on the legal position of the Agency in respect of Separate Legal Representation, for the Board meeting on 18th September 2025.</i>	Mrs Loughran Ms Stevenson	
41.25 Social Care Governance Committee – Annual Report	<i>The Annual Report of the Social Care Governance Committee 2024-25 will come to the next meeting of the Board.</i>	Ms Crickard	