CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
BOARD MEETING – FEBRUARY 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*
In Attendance:	Mrs Ursula Crickard, *Assistant Director*
	Mrs Ann Andrew, *Corporate Services Manager (Interim)*
	Ms Corinne Gorman, *Guardian Services Manager*, *(via teams)*
	Ms Sinead Marshall, *Guardian Services Manager*
	Her Honour Judge McCormick KC *(Item 1.25)*
	Ms Martina Moore, DoH *(Item 1.25)*
Apologies:	Mr Lee Wilson, Non-Executive Member
Minute Taker:	Ms Roisin Clarke, PA

START TIME: 9.30am

Mrs Loughran welcomed everyone and thanked Ms Clarke for her minutes from the previous Board meeting.

1.25 SERVICE DELIVERY

1.25.1 Ms Loughran welcomed Her Honour Judge McCormick KC to the meeting of the Board.

1.25.2 Her Honour Judge McCormick KC joined the meeting in her capacity as the senior Family Care Centre judge. While expressing concern about a number of causes of delay in the family courts including our waiting list for the allocations of guardians, she was very complimentary about the work of the Agency. She acknowledged the role of all members of our staff and special focus on our Guardians.

1.25.3 Her Honour Judge McCormick KC praised the commitment and dedication of the Guardians and appointed out that in some cases a guardian has "literally changed the course of some children's lives". She went on to share that the work of the Guardian is appreciated not just by her, but by all of the FCC Judges.

1.25.4 Her Honour Judge McCormick KC finished with expressing her thanks to Guardians "for the work they do for the children whose lives are front and centre of our focus in our Family Court Centres"

1.25.5 The Board was delighted to hear such a tribute to the work of the Agency and thank Her Honour Judge McCormick KC for attending the meeting and providing her feedback.

2.25 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

2.25.1 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.

3.25 MINUTE OF THE LAST MEETING

3.25 1 Mrs Loughran referred to the minute from the last meeting of the Board on 19th December 2024. Mr Douglas asked for a minor typographical amendment to point 81.24.2, which was approved. On the suggestion of Lee and Veronica it was agreed that the following addition should be made to the minute 'Following a discussion about the reporting of complaints, it was agreed that all complaints, compliments and any issues arising from these should be reported to the Audit and Risk Committee and that all SCG specific complaints, compliments and any issues arising from these should be reported to the SCG Committee.

3.25.2 The minute from the meeting on 19th December 2024 was approved

4.25 MATTERS ARISING

4.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Action List from the last meeting of the Board and progress against each was noted.

4.25.2 Ms Callaghan confirmed that all reports relating to incidents and complaints should be reported to the Audit & Risk Committee and SCG Committee meetings.

5.25 CHAIR AND NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

5.25.1 **Non-Executive Board Member Vacancy:** Mrs Loughran formally introduced Ms Kathryn Stevenson and welcomed her to the Board. Ms Stevenson fills the position of 'legal' Board Member. The Board warmly welcomed Ms Stevenson.

6.25 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

Chief Executive's Briefing / Update Report

6.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Chief Executive Briefing* and Ms McKenna spoke to her paper highlighting some areas for specific mention.

6.25 2 Ms McKenna advised the Board that the waiting list remains exceptionally high and there continues to be limited capacity for staff to be allocated new cases. At Monday 27th January 2025 the Agency had a total of 182 unallocated cases in respect of 302 children.

6.25.3 Ms McKenna spoke to the Interim Management arrangements in place. She indicated that due to the vacant GSM position, the Agency have secured an Associate from the HSC Leadership Centre who has agreed to assist with professional supervision in the short term.

6.25.4 Ms McKenna advised on recent successful recruitment within the Agency. She noted that an evaluation of the job description of SCG Learning & Improvement Lead is awaited; this will be re-advertised as soon as possible. Ms McKenna further shared detail about upcoming interviews for two Principal Children's Court Guardians, and a further Band 7 Children's Court Guardian post being offered from the waiting list.

6.25.5 Ms McKenna shared that having met with DoH Finance and Sponsor Branch earlier in the month, she and Ms Crickard are in the process of preparing a Proposal Paper for submission to the Department regarding the 'Management of Unallocated Cases', for consideration to seek additional funding to increase our complement of Band 8A Guardians. The Agency will also lay out their plans to make use of staff who have submitted applications for flexible retirement.

6.25.6 Ms McKenna answered various questions in regard the above-mentioned proposals. It was agreed that a draft of said proposal would be shared with the Board prior to being submitted to Sponsor Branch for their consideration.

ACTION: A draft of the Management of Unallocated Cases proposal paper to be shared with the Board and comments returned w/e 14.2.25.

7.25 FINANCE REPORT

Finance

7.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Finance Report* and Mrs Andrew spoke to the report providing an overview of financial management for the financial year 2024-2025, as at Month 9 (December 2024).

7.25.2 Mrs Andrew highlighted the forecasted year-end surplus position. She provided a summary of key drivers of the underspend and referred to the report for full detail.

7.25.3 Mrs Andrew indicated and she and Ms McKenna met with the accountant in January, when it was agreed that the Agency is in a position to provide a further retraction of £150k. This has predominately been a result of continued delay in recruitment (both across Administration and Guardian workforce). Sponsor Branch have been informed and an updated allocation letter has been received.

Separate Legal Representation

7.25.4 Mrs Andrew highlighted recent expenditure in respect of Separate Legal Representation. Mrs Crickard and Ms McKenna provided background to the expenditure and the reasons why it was required. It was confirmed that the Agency is reviewing its policy and seeking a legal opinion on its uses through the Departmental Solicitors' office. It was agreed there would be a conflict of interest if BSO DLS were to represent the Agency while at the same time representing a Trust. Mrs Loughran asked the Board to note that her daughter is an assistant director at DLS although she does not see any conflict of interest in this matter.

7.25.5 Ms McKenna noted she would keep the Board updated.

8.25 OPERATIONS REPORT (QUARTER 3)

8.25.1 Ms Loughran referred to the *Operations Report for Quarter 3 (1st October 2024 - 31st December 2024)* and Ms Crickard spoke to same.

8.25.2 Ms Crickard shared that as at close on 31st Dec 2024 (Q3) the Agency held:

- 598 live cases equating to 1084 children and young people.
- 180 unallocated cases equating to 305 children and young people.
- 2 cases on hold equating to 4 children.
- 3 adoption cases on hold equating to 4 children.
- The number of new requests in Q3 totalled 209 cases equating to 315 children and young people.

8.25.3 Ms Crickard shared that all Guardians are working to capacity and some beyond. This coupled with staff changes, such as retirements, resignations and new appointments means that, the Agency can still not meet the increasing demands. To try and rectify this situation Ms Crickard advised that along with Ms McKenna they would be joining the allocation rota alongside the three remaining GSM to help ease the pressure. This will give them an understanding of where processes might be streamlined.

8.25.4 There was discussion with the Board and Ms Crickard thanked the Board for all their suggestions which would be carefully considered.

8.25.5 Ms Crickard advised the Board that Ms Teresa Fallon would be assisting with staff supervision until such times as a new GSM is appointed.

8.25.6 Ms Loughran thanked Ms Crickard for her comprehensive report.

9.25 ANNUAL REPORTS & ACCOUNTS 2023-24

9.25.1 Ms McKenna provided an update on the licence vs lease position surrounding James House.

9.25.2 Mrs McKenna confirmed that the NI Audit Office (NIAO) have made their final ruling, after conferring with other auditors aside from the Agency's external auditor Deloitte. The decision made by NIAO is now to hold all such arrangements in existence as within scope of IFRS 16. BSO Capital Accounting team are working through the accounting requirements to bring these licences onto the balance sheet and are liaising with DoH to define the associated budgetary needs. The accounting treatment will need to be agreed by individual auditors as well as NIAO before the implications on outturn with the Agency and DoH.

9.25.3 Mrs McKenna indicated that the Agency and Board will be updated by BSO as this work progresses.

10.25 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

10.25.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the following correspondence which was shared with the Board for information purposes:-

- *DoH HSC (AfC) (1) 2025 – Agenda for Change Pay Arrangements 2024-25*
- *DoH Letter to all HSC Employers – Uplift to national Living Wage (NLW) Rate for AFC Band 1 and Band 2 within HSC*

10.25.2 The Board noted the correspondence.

11.25 BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD:

11.25.1 Mrs Loughran confirmed there had been no Board Committee meetings since the Board last met.

12.25 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

12.25.1 There was no other business for discussion.

13.24 Confidential Business

13.24.1 There was no confidential business for discussion.

End of Meeting: 12noon

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 10th APRIL 2025, 9.30am

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
98.25.6	*A draft of the Management of Unallocated Cases proposal paper to be shared with the Board and comments returned w/e 14.2.25*.	Ms McKenna	