Children's Court Guardian Agency
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

QUALITY REPORT

2025-26

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE™
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FOREWORD

I am pleased to present the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland (CCGANI) **Annual Quality Report for 2025–26**.

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland is a regional arm's-length body sponsored by the Department of Health. Its primary function is to provide Children's Court Guardians who are appointed by the court to safeguard the interests of children and young people in specified public law and adoption proceedings.

As we entered year three of our Strategic Plan 2023-2028, our priorities of *Data, Improvement* and *Culture* continued to guide activity across all areas of the organisation. These priorities supported our commitment to delivering high-quality services for children and young people, supporting our workforce, strengthening organisational systems and influencing the wider family justice system.

Throughout 2025-26, our focus has remained firmly on children and young people and we strengthened the foundations that will support future service improvement. Significant progress was made in advancing the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) replacement initiative and developing a new performance reporting framework to enhance organisational oversight, assurance and decision-making. At the same time, the Agency approved and began formally embedding our Engagement and Participation Strategy, strengthening the role of our Youth Board and continuing to use feedback from children and young people to inform supervision, appraisal and service improvement. Feedback received remained strongly positive, with 98% of responses indicating a high level of satisfaction with the service.

Throughout the year, the Agency continued to operate in a challenging environment marked by increasing case complexity, ongoing court delays and sustained pressures across children's social care services. These factors continued to affect our ability to allocate cases within desired timescales. While demand reduced slightly compared to the previous year, longer case durations, workforce pressures and increasing complexity

continued to impact capacity. At 31 March 2026, 211 cases were awaiting allocation. The Agency maintained close oversight of the position, prioritised the most urgent cases and used measures including recruitment, additional hours and overtime where capacity allowed. Despite these challenges, we remained focused on maintaining high professional standards, ensuring quality service delivery and keeping the voice of the child at the centre of our practice with the Agency maintaining a high level of case allocation and closure activity, reflecting the professionalism, resilience and dedication of our staff.

Supporting staff remained a key priority. We strengthened wellbeing governance arrangements, invested in leadership development and continued to promote a positive, learning-focused organisational culture. Our annual Staff Engagement Event, and improvements to supervision and appraisal processes all contributed to fostering staff engagement and continuous improvement. The achievement of Investors in People Silver accreditation provides important evidence of the positive culture we are continuing to build. I thank every member of staff, the Agency Chair and Board, the Youth Board and our partners for their contribution during 2025–26.

Looking ahead to 2026–27, our focus will be on reducing waiting lists, progressing digital transformation, strengthening workforce planning and enhancing assurance and performance reporting arrangements. We will continue to work closely with our partners across the wider system to improve outcomes for children and young people.



Edel McKenna
Chief Executive

INTRODUCTION

The Quality Strategy for HSC in Northern Ireland, as set out in Quality 2020, is '*to be recognised internationally, but especially by the people of Northern Ireland, as a leader for excellence in health and social care'*.

This Quality Report sets out what the Children's Court Guardian Agency has achieved to improve its services under each of the five strategic goals: Transforming the Culture; Strengthening the Workforce; Measuring the Improvement; Raising the Standards; and Integrating the Care.

Our strategic context

The Agency's Strategic Plan 2023–2028 is organised around three enduring priorities: Data, Improvement and Culture. These priorities are applied across four work areas: children and young people; support to staff; systems; and influencing.

1. Transforming the Culture

Objective 1: We will make achieving high quality the top priority at all levels in health and social care.

Objective 2: We will promote and encourage partnerships between staff, patients, clients and carers to support decision making.

During 2025–26, the Agency continued to embed a culture of quality, openness, learning and participation. Quality was supported through Board and committee oversight, professional standards, audit, risk management, complaints and incident learning, staff engagement and direct involvement of children and young people.

Performance Management, Governance and Assurance

The Agency's Annual Business Plan is developed in collaboration with the Senior Leadership Team and Board and is subsequently approved by the Department of Health. Business objectives are aligned to the Strategic Plan 2023–2028 and are considered alongside the corporate Risk Register to ensure that key priorities, risks and mitigating actions are appropriately integrated. Progress against these objectives is monitored throughout the year, with performance and delivery reviewed regularly by the Board.

The Senior Leadership Team maintains the corporate Risk Register, which is routinely scrutinised by the Audit and Risk Committee and formally reviewed by the Board on a quarterly basis. This provides a structured approach to identifying, managing and mitigating risks that may impact the achievement of organisational objectives. The Social Care Governance Committee also receives regular updates on the implementation of audit recommendations and action plans, providing additional assurance regarding governance arrangements and the quality and effectiveness of the Guardian service.

During the reporting period, work commenced on the development of the Information Governance and Assurance Framework which encompasses a performance reporting structure designed to enhance the monitoring of progress against business objectives. The framework will strengthen performance analysis through improved trend reporting and more meaningful performance information, supporting enhanced Board oversight and evidence-based decision-making. This development will further reinforce the Agency's governance and assurance processes and contribute to continuous organisational improvement.

Children and Young People's Participation and Influence

The Children and Young People's Engagement and Participation Strategy continued to provide the strategic framework for Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) across the Agency during 2025–26. The Social Care Governance (SCG) Committee maintained oversight of this work, with particular focus on progressing the Strategy through the implementation of a two-year Action Plan. The Agency also sustained its partnership with the Youth Board, supported by the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC), ensuring that the views and experiences of children and young people continued to inform service development and improvement. In recognition of these arrangements, an internal audit assessment awarded the Agency *Satisfactory Assurance* for its engagement with children and young people.

The Agency continues to actively seek feedback from children and young people at the conclusion of each case. This feedback is incorporated into Guardians' annual appraisal processes and is used to celebrate positive service experiences while also identifying opportunities for professional development and service enhancement. Mid-year and year-end reports are presented to the SCG Committee, providing assurance regarding engagement activity and supporting ongoing quality improvement.

Children and young people can provide feedback through either paper-based questionnaires or a digital application. Feedback is also considered as part of Guardian supervision and appraisal discussions, helping to ensure that the voices of children and young people remain central to professional practice. During the 2025–26 reporting period, respondents consistently described Guardians as patient, calm, kind and

approachable. Overall satisfaction levels remained exceptionally high, with 98% of respondents reporting a positive experience of the service. This provides strong assurance regarding the quality of service delivery and the positive impact of the Children's Court Guardian role on the experiences of children and young people.

The Youth Board continued to play an important role in supporting meaningful engagement between children and young people and the Agency, maintaining direct engagement with the Board through its annual meeting. This provided an opportunity for Youth Board members to share their experiences, views and priorities, helping to inform service development and strengthen the Agency's commitment to participation and co-production.

During 2025, the achievements and contribution of Youth Board members were recognised through the award of Youth Achievement Awards by Volunteer Now. In addition, the Youth Board received a Highly Commended award in the Social Action Champion category at the VOYPIC Annual Care Day Awards. These achievements reflect the significant contribution made by young people in influencing positive change and improving experiences and outcomes for children and young people across the care system. Their involvement continues to provide valuable insight that supports service improvement and reinforces the Agency's commitment to ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard and acted upon.

Solicitor Reference Panel and Stakeholder Engagement

The Social Care Governance (SCG) Committee continued to receive updates from the quarterly meetings of the Solicitor Reference Panel, providing oversight of partnership working and engagement with legal stakeholders. Attendance and participation remained positive throughout 2025–26, with the addition of new Guardian representatives further strengthening collaborative engagement and information sharing between the Agency and Panel Solicitors.

The Committee also received bi-annual reports on Panel usage and service improvement activity, including initiatives aimed at strengthening the management, monitoring and

oversight of unallocated cases. These arrangements support the Agency's commitment to ensuring timely and effective legal representation for children and young people and contribute to the continuous improvement of service delivery.

During the reporting period, consultation commenced with Solicitor Panel representatives on the Agency's draft Separate Legal Representation (SLR) Practice Guidance. This engagement is intended to support the development of a robust and transparent framework for decision-making when requests for separate legal representation are considered.

The Committee approved proposals to reconstitute the Solicitor Panel, with completion anticipated by March 2027. This work will be undertaken in collaboration with the Law Society's Children Order Panel and aims to strengthen capacity and accessibility across the solicitor network. Particular focus will be placed on areas where representation is limited, seeking to improve solicitor availability and promote greater equity in the allocation of appointments.

The Annual Evaluation Report demonstrated a significant improvement in stakeholder engagement, with response rates increasing by 12% among Panel Solicitors and 63% among members of the Judiciary. These improvements provide enhanced assurance regarding stakeholder participation and the effectiveness of engagement processes. Feedback from legal stakeholders continued to highlight the high standard of Guardian practice and the positive contribution of the service to court proceedings and outcomes for children and young people. While feedback identified some variation in levels of professional experience across the workforce, these findings will be used to inform workforce development priorities and future training programmes, supporting the Agency's commitment to continuous learning and quality improvement.

Listening to Staff and Supporting Culture

During the reporting period, the Agency reviewed and refreshed its staff engagement and wellbeing arrangements through the re-branding and re-establishment of the Health, Safety Committee as the **People and Wellbeing Committee**. The revised remit reflects a

broader organisational focus on workforce wellbeing and development, encompassing health and safety, wellbeing, equality and diversity, communications, staffing, human resources, and learning and development. Membership is drawn from across the organisation at all levels, ensuring a collaborative and inclusive approach to identifying priorities and recommending improvements, with key issues escalated to the Senior Leadership Team as appropriate.

During the year, the Committee played a key role in reviewing findings from the Staff Pulse Survey, overseeing development of a targeted action plan, promoting wellbeing initiatives and supporting delivery of the Agency's commitment to creating a positive, inclusive and supportive workplace culture. Through regular reporting and oversight arrangements, the Committee has strengthened assurance around workforce wellbeing and staff experience, contributing to the Agency's wider culture and quality improvement objectives.

The Agency also continued to promote staff health and wellbeing through access to a range of support resources, including the Lena by Inspire wellbeing service and wellbeing information available through The Hub (Staff Website). These arrangements support the Agency's commitment to creating a positive working environment, promoting staff wellbeing, and ensuring employees have access to appropriate support when required. Collectively, these initiatives contribute to the delivery of a healthy, engaged and resilient workforce, supporting the provision of high-quality services to children and young people.

Accessibility and Inclusion

It is the Agency's intention to take forward further work with Autism NI following the facilitation of Awareness Raising Training, to support the development of more accessible information, feedback mechanisms, and complaints materials for children and young people. This work would include a review of language, communication methods and accessibility, particularly for children and young people with autism and other neurodivergent needs. It is hoped this work will ensure feedback and complaints processes are child-centred, inclusive and easier for all young people to understand and use. The Agency plans to take this work forward during 2026-27.

2. Strengthening the Workforce

Objective 3: We will provide the right education, training and support to deliver high quality service.

Objective 4: We will develop leadership skills at all levels and empower staff to take decisions and make changes.

The Agency recognises that the quality of its service depends on a skilled, supported and resilient workforce.

Learning and Development

The Agency remained committed to supporting the continuous professional development of Children's Court Guardians, business support and corporate services staff, and managers. During 2025-26 the Agency developed a broad Learning and Improvement Programme delivering a broad range of development opportunities designed to enhance professional practice, strengthen organisational capability and support the delivery of high-quality services to children and young people.

Professional learning activities included training on Cultural Competency, learning from a Domestic Homicide Review, Managing Violence and Aggression, Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, Autism Awareness, LGBTQIA+ Awareness, and CASP-R. These programmes enhanced staff knowledge and skills in responding to the diverse needs of children, young people and families.

Corporate and governance-focused development supported the Agency's wider assurance and leadership responsibilities, with training delivered in areas including Business Case Development, DAC Training, PRINCE2, Fire Warden and First Aid, Raising a Concern,

Senior Information Risk Ownership, Personal Data Guardian responsibilities, and Finance for Non-Finance Directors.

Leadership development also remained a key priority. One Guardian Services Manager successfully completed the *Leading Social Work: Stronger Together* programme, while all Guardian Services Managers participated in additional external learning relevant to their leadership and management roles.

The embedding of four locality-based Guardian teams, each led by a Guardian Services Manager, further strengthened supervision, performance management and workforce development arrangements. This structure has enhanced consistency in supervision, improved access to learning and development opportunities, and increased transparency in work allocation processes.

Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate the Agency's commitment to maintaining a skilled, knowledgeable and well-supported workforce. Through creating an environment where staff are supported, respected and empowered to develop their skills, the Agency enables its workforce to deliver safe, effective and child-centred services while fostering a culture of continuous improvement, learning and positive outcomes for children and young people.

Workforce Development, Learning and Wellbeing

The Agency continued to prioritise workforce development and staff wellbeing. In February 2026, the Agency undertook an *Investors in People* assessment, which included a staff survey and a series of meetings and discussions designed to gather views and experiences of working within the organisation. The feedback provided valuable insight into the Agency's culture, leadership and people management practices. As a result of this assessment, CCGANI was proud to achieve ***Investors in People Silver Accreditation***, recognising the Agency's commitment to supporting, developing and valuing its workforce.

The Staff Development Day, held in March 2026, provided an important opportunity for staff engagement, learning and reflection. The event included contributions from the

Board, Senior Management and invited speakers, alongside staff recognition activities and updates on key organisational priorities. Topics included Raising a Concern arrangements, the Children and Young People's Engagement and Participation Strategy and Action Plan, Professional Standards, the NISCC Social Work Strategy, Personal and Public Involvement achievements, and reflections on the Agency's progress during the year and priorities for 2026–27.

People-centred Culture

Investment in staff support was demonstrated through strengthened supervision and appraisal arrangements, the establishment of the People and Wellbeing Committee, and continued access to wellbeing resources and support services. Collectively, these initiatives have helped to foster a positive organisational culture, promote continuous learning and professional development, and support the wellbeing and resilience of staff.

3. Measuring the Improvement

Objective 5: We will improve outcome measurement and report on progress for safety, effectiveness and the patient/client experience.

Objective 6: We will promote the use of accredited improvement techniques and ensure sufficient capacity and capability to use them effectively.

During 2025–26, the Agency continued to strengthen its approach to quality improvement by enhancing outcome measurement and monitoring progress against key quality indicators. This supported a greater focus on safety, effectiveness and the experience of children and young people, while also building the skills, capacity and capability required to drive continuous improvement across the organisation.

Representing Children and Young People

CCGANI continued to fulfil its statutory role of representing the interests of children and young people involved in public law and adoption proceedings during a year characterised by sustained demand and ongoing workforce capacity pressures.

The wider regional context remains challenging, with the number of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland at its highest level recorded since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. This continued growth has increased demand across children's social care services, court processes and Guardian services.

During 2025–26, the Agency received 766 new case requests involving 1,185 children and young people, and concluded 755 cases involving 1,204 children and young people. Care proceedings continued to account for the majority of referrals. Demand continued to exceed available capacity, resulting in an increase in unallocated cases rising to 211 by 31st March 2026.

The Agency maintained active oversight of unallocated cases and implemented measures to strengthen monitoring and prioritisation arrangements. However, increasing demand, workforce pressures and recruitment challenges remain significant factors impacting service delivery.

Despite these challenges, the Agency remained focused on ensuring that the voices, rights and best interests of children and young people were represented throughout court proceedings, while continuing to strengthen governance, service quality and workforce capacity.

Information Systems and Service Management

The Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) remains a key component of service delivery, supporting the management and monitoring of cases throughout a child's journey with the Agency. The system supports the end-to-end process, from receipt of Guardian appointments from the courts, through case allocation, case management and progression, to case closure and the collection of feedback from children and young people.

GCIS is the Agency's critical information system which enables administrative, operational and corporate functions to work in an integrated manner, supporting effective case management, performance monitoring and governance arrangements. During the reporting period, the Agency commenced a discovery phase to inform the development of a replacement case management system. This work will ensure that future digital solutions meet evolving service, operational and management information requirements, strengthening the Agency's ability to monitor performance, support decision-making and deliver high-quality services to children and young people.

Information governance continued to be a key area of focus throughout the year. The Agency promoted good information management practices through mandatory information governance training and regular awareness activities designed to reinforce staff responsibilities in relation to data protection, records management and information security. Lessons learned exercises were also undertaken to share learning arising from information incidents and near misses, helping to identify opportunities for improvement

and strengthen organisational controls. These activities supported a culture of continuous learning, accountability and compliance with legislative and regulatory requirements.

Cyber security awareness remained an important element of the Agency's assurance framework. Staff received regular communications, guidance and training on emerging cyber threats, including phishing and social engineering risks, to support safe and secure working practices. These measures enhanced staff awareness of cyber risks, strengthened the protection of sensitive information and contributed to the Agency's overall cyber resilience. Together, the Agency's information systems, governance arrangements and security initiatives provide assurance that information assets are managed effectively and securely in support of service delivery and organisational objectives.

Complaints, Incidents and Compliments

The Agency remains committed to responding effectively to complaints and incidents, using learning, feedback and performance information to drive continuous service improvement and support informed decision-making. Complaints, incidents, audit findings, risk management activity and performance reporting are considered through the Agency's governance and assurance arrangements, enabling trends, emerging risks and opportunities for improvement to be identified and addressed.

During 2025–26, the Agency received seven complaints, compared with six in the previous year. All complaints were managed in line with the Complaints Policy, with six responded to within the required timescales and one extended by agreement due to the Christmas and New Year period. Four complaints related to ongoing proceedings and three followed case closure. No complaints were received under Section 75 equality provisions. Learning from complaints continues to inform service improvements and enhance the experience of children, young people and stakeholders.

Five incidents were reported during the year, comprising three incidents of verbal abuse, one health and safety incident and one information governance incident. Reviews identified learning opportunities relating to reporting culture, risk management, staff wellbeing and partnership working. Lessons learned were incorporated into training &

corporate communications, guidance, policy development and risk management processes to strengthen organisational learning and reduce the likelihood of recurrence.

The Agency also received 14 compliments, reflecting high levels of professionalism, commitment and responsiveness across the organisation. Positive feedback is shared with staff and used to highlight good practice and support a culture of continuous improvement.

Following the introduction of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) Model Complaints Handling Procedure in January 2026, the Agency reviewed and updated its Complaints Policy and developed supporting guidance for staff, strengthening compliance with best practice and promoting a consistent, transparent approach to complaints management.

Performance, Risk and Assurance

Strong performance, risk management and assurance arrangements continued to support the delivery of safe, effective and high-quality services. Performance information is routinely reviewed by the Senior Leadership Team, Board and Committees to monitor progress against strategic objectives, inform decision-making and identify areas for improvement.

Internal audit activity provides independent assurance on the effectiveness of governance, risk management and internal controls, while the Corporate Risk Register supports the proactive identification and management of risks that may impact service delivery.

Together, these arrangements strengthen accountability, support organisational learning and ensure that insights from performance monitoring, complaints, incidents, audits and risk management are used to drive continuous improvement and improve outcomes for children and young people.

4. Raising the Standards

Objective 7: We will establish a framework of clear evidence-based standards and best practice guidance.

Objective 8: We will establish dynamic partnerships between service users, commissioners and providers to develop, monitor and review standards.

The Agency continued to strengthen the standards and governance arrangements that support high-quality professional practice, effective complaints handling, equality, accessibility and partnership working. Assurance is provided through a framework of audit, supervision, appraisal, learning and development, and engagement with children and young people, staff and external stakeholders.

Professional Standards

The Professional Standards, introduced in September 2024, continue to provide a clear framework for Guardian practice and managerial support. The Standards promote reflective practice, accountability and consistency in professional decision-making, supported through individual and peer group supervision.

Following their first year of implementation, the Agency undertook an audit to evaluate the effectiveness of the Standards and identify opportunities for enhancement. Findings informed a programme of improvement actions, including refined policy development, targeted workforce training and strengthened reporting and assurance arrangements. A qualitative audit also provided assurance that children's wishes, feelings and experiences are routinely reflected in Guardian practice and court reporting. Findings and progress on actions were reported to the Social Care Governance Committee.

Supervision, Appraisal and Reflective Practice

Supervision and appraisal arrangements remained central to the Agency's quality assurance framework during 2025-26. A programme of quality assurance audits examined compliance and effectiveness across Supervision, Appraisals, Peer Group Supervision and Professional Standards. Audit findings have been used to drive service improvement with comprehensive action plans established and monitored through established governance and performance reporting structures. This approach ensures clear accountability, evidences continuous improvement and provides assurance that learning is translated into measurable enhancements in professional practice and service delivery.

Equality, Inclusion and Accessibility

The Agency remains committed to promoting equality, diversity and accessibility in all aspects of its work.

The expanded remit of the People and Wellbeing Committee strengthened organisational oversight of equality and diversity matters. A Disability Champion was appointed to support colleagues, promote inclusive practice and accessibility, and provide feedback to senior leadership on disability-related issues and barriers to inclusion.

Staff also benefited from disability awareness learning opportunities delivered through regional partnership arrangements, including sessions on neurodiversity and chest, heart and stroke conditions. The Agency continued to promote the Tapestry disability staff network and maintained website accessibility features, including translation functionality and an accessibility statement. Further consideration of signed video content has been identified as an area for future development.

Service User and Stakeholder Voice

The views and experiences of children and young people continue to play a central role in informing service improvement and the development of standards. The Youth Board, direct feedback from children and young people, and engagement with organisations

including VOYPIC and Autism NI all contribute to the review and enhancement of Agency policies, practice and services.

Feedback from legal stakeholders continued to provide strong assurance regarding the quality, independence and effectiveness of Guardian practice. Participation in the annual evaluation process increased by 12% among Panel Solicitors and 63% among members of the Judiciary, strengthening the robustness of stakeholder feedback. While stakeholders continued to identify delays in Guardian allocation as a key challenge, feedback also highlighted opportunities to enhance report templates and strengthen induction and development arrangements for newly appointed staff.

Collectively, these arrangements support continuous improvement, help ensure the delivery of high-quality, child-centred services and demonstrate the Agency's ongoing commitment to equality, accessibility and professional excellence.

Corporate Services Directorate

The Agency maintains robust governance, risk management and assurance arrangements to support the effective delivery of its strategic objectives and statutory responsibilities. Governance structures are underpinned by clear accountability, quarterly performance reporting and oversight by the Board and its Committees. Throughout the year, the Agency continued to review and strengthen its governance framework to ensure compliance with legislative, regulatory and departmental requirements, including the development of an Information Governance and Assurance Framework to enhance oversight, accountability and assurance in relation to information governance and security.

Risk management remains an integral component of the Agency's corporate planning and decision-making processes. The Corporate Risk Register is regularly reviewed by the Senior Leadership Team, Audit & Risk Committee and the Board, ensuring that key strategic and operational risks are timely identified, monitored and appropriately managed.

The Agency receives assurance from a range of sources, including internal audit reviews, committee scrutiny, performance reporting, complaints and feedback mechanisms, and compliance monitoring. These arrangements enable the Agency to identify areas for

improvement, strengthen controls and promote a culture of continuous learning and accountability.

Improvement Through Communication

Effective communication and engagement remained an important enabler of organisational improvement throughout 2025-26. In March 2025, the Agency launched **The HUB**, a staff intranet designed to provide easy access to key resources, guidance, policies and organisational information, helping to ensure staff remain informed, connected and supported in their roles.

Building on this commitment, the Agency introduced **NewsBytes** in 2026, a quarterly staff newsletter published in Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter editions. The newsletter provides regular updates on organisational developments, quality improvement initiatives, learning and development opportunities, information governance matters, policy changes and staff achievements. It serves as an important channel for sharing information, promoting good practice and supporting staff engagement across the organisation.

During the year, work also commenced on the development of a new Communications and Engagement Strategy, with consultation undertaken to help shape a strategic approach to communication, stakeholder engagement and organisational learning. This will support the Agency's ongoing commitment to transparency, collaboration and continuous improvement.

5. Integrating the Care

Objective 9: We will develop integrated pathways of care for individuals.

Objective 10: We will make better use of multidisciplinary team working and shared learning opportunities in the HSC and with external partners.

The Agency operates at the interface of children's social care, the family courts and legal services. Effective partnership working is therefore central to quality. During 2025–26, the Agency maintained regional, cross-jurisdictional and professional networks to support shared learning, consistent practice and system improvement.

Regional Working

The Agency continued to engage with judicial, departmental and HSC Trust partners on allocation pressures, demand, throughput and outcomes for children and young people. Waiting lists and court delay are recognised as whole-system issues that require collective solutions.

Engagement with HSC Trust Children's Services Directorates and involvement in family justice reform discussions supported shared understanding of court delay, resource alignment and specialist legal representation.

Inter-Agency Childcare Legal Issues Forum

The Agency continued to host the Inter-Agency Childcare Legal Issues Forum, which met quarterly throughout the year to promote collaboration, information sharing, and professional dialogue on developments in childcare legislation, policy and practice. Bringing together representatives from legal, social work and stakeholder organisations,

the Forum also supports the identification of shared learning and development needs, contributing to continuous improvement across services for children and young people.

Four Nations and Cross-Jurisdictional Learning

The Agency continued to actively contribute to the Four Nations Learning Forum during 2025–26, providing opportunities for leadership collaboration, shared learning, and the exploration of joint working across jurisdictions. Engagement in the Forum enabled the Agency to remain informed of emerging developments, best practice, and innovation within children's guardian services and the wider family justice system.

Solicitor Panel

CCGANI is represented on the Law Society Children Order Panel Advisory Board, supporting collaboration, professional engagement, and the sharing of information and best practice across the sector.

The Agency maintains its own Solicitor Panel, providing a dedicated resource of solicitors who work alongside Children's Court Guardians to represent the interests of children and young people. During 2025–26, the Panel comprised of 114 solicitors. A reconstitution of the Panel is now planned, with recruitment processes to be progressed during 2026–27 and a new Panel to be implemented from 1 April 2027.

Governance of the Panel is supported by a Solicitor Panel Reference Group, comprising Guardian and solicitor representatives, which met quarterly throughout the year. The Group oversees Panel arrangements, considers developments in policy and practice, identifies opportunities for joint training, and supports the implementation of the Protocol governing the working relationship between Panel Solicitors and Children's Court Guardians.

Additional guidance, ratified by the Law Society, continues to support effective practice in cases awaiting the allocation of a Guardian. The guidance clarifies the responsibilities of solicitors during this period while maintaining the distinction between legal representation

and the Guardian's independent role in ascertaining children's wishes and feelings and representing their best interests.

Integrated Quality in Practice

Partnerships with children and young people, HSC Trusts, the judiciary, legal representatives, professional bodies, voluntary organisations and regional HSC partners allow the Agency to combine independent practice with shared learning and coordinated improvement.

Priorities for 2026-27

The Agency will build on the progress achieved during 2025–26 while continuing to address operational and system pressures affecting the timely allocation of cases.

Key priorities for 2026–27 include reducing unallocated cases and waiting times, progressing the independent review and pilot of case grading arrangements, and advancing the replacement of the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) as part of the Agency's wider digital transformation programme. The Agency will also focus on embedding its performance framework to strengthen outcome measurement, performance reporting and organisational oversight.

Workforce planning and organisational development will remain central to the Agency's improvement agenda, supported by continued investment in leadership development, learning infrastructure, staff wellbeing and organisational culture. The Agency will also strengthen governance, assurance and risk management arrangements through the implementation of audit recommendations, policy refinement and enhanced assurance reporting.

Further priorities include accessibility and participation improvements through delivery of the Youth Board Action Plan, progression of accessibility initiatives and the continued involvement of children and young people in shaping services. The Agency will also continue to work with partners across the family justice system to address delay, improve throughput and support wider reform initiatives. Collectively, these priorities will support the delivery of safe, effective and child-centred services and contribute to improved outcomes for children, young people and families.

Business Plan 2026-27

Progress against the objectives set out in the Business Plan 2026–27 will be monitored throughout the year through regular Board reporting and quarterly review of the Performance Assurance Business Plan (PABP).