



**Children's Court
Guardian Agency**

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Quality Report 2024-25



Content

Foreword	3
Introduction	7
Theme 1: Transforming the Culture	8
Theme 2: Strengthening the Workforce	12
Theme 3: Measuring the Improvement	15
Theme 4: Raising the Standards	18
Theme 5: Integrating the Care	20



Foreword

This year has been characterised by significant change for the Agency, most notable across our Senior Management Team. With the retirement of the Chief Executive, the two Assistant Directors and the Corporate Services Manager, a new Leadership Team came into post with a commitment to ensure the Agency continued on its journey of transformation as we entered into the second year of our five-year strategic plan 2023-2028. During the summer 2024, we increased our complement of Guardian Services Managers from two to four in order to create clearer governance and accountability alignment across our four geographical Children's Court Guardian Teams. Change can be daunting, even unsettling however our workforce and the Agency Board have shown tremendous resilience, patience and support while we adjust and reset so that we can continue to deliver a high quality, safe, effective and compassionate service to those we serve.

Our greatest challenge this year continued to be our ability to allocate cases to a Guardian, in a timely way. The situation was compounded by a number of factors, including the continued upward trajectory of children who are looked after, so demand for a Guardian remained high. This year we had 838 requests from the Courts for Guardian appointments, involving 1,325 children which was a 4.6% increase from the previous year. The number of cases closed at the end of March 2025, was 833 cases (1,301 children), a 7.76% increase from the previous year. Of the referrals received, there were 316 cases (37.7%) which were return cases.

The number of unallocated cases remained between 128-196 cases during the year, which is unacceptably high. Despite the measures which were put in place we have not been able to reduce the number significantly.

The Agency has had a number of long-standing Guardians retire during the course of the year. We are indebted to them for the commitment, professionalism and integrity they showed throughout their many years of service to the Agency. These posts have



been recruited to and new staff commenced into post during the year and following induction have gradually built up their caseloads.

The introduction of our new Guardian role in 2023-24, with a differentiated caseload from the more experienced Guardian staff has been a resounding success. It has enabled the Agency build capacity to meet our increasing demand and created a succession planning pathway as we continue on our journey of growth and development.

The three strategic drivers within the Strategic Plan; Improvement, Data and Culture, continue to be applied across four strategic work areas; children and young people, support to staff, systems and influencing. Embedding the new Guardian role, the caseload grading initiative, enhanced functionality in our internal Guardian Case Information system and the operationalisation of the revised recording and supervision policy are all part of the improvements within the Agency during the last year.

One of our greatest achievements this year has been the introduction of our new Professional Standards, which sets out clear expectations in regards our intervention with children and young people, our case file recording, supervision and appraisal process, all of which are underpinned by our commitment to the HSC values.

The importance of involvement of children and young people in our work cannot be underestimated. The Youth Board worked closely with key personnel in the Agency to develop our new Children and Young People Engagement and Participation Strategy which was formally approved by the Board in September 2024 and which aims to promote and enhance children and young people's participation so that we can obtain their feedback individually and collectively as a group to improve our service. In the coming year we will continue to work in partnership with the Youth Board to develop an Action Plan to support the delivery of the Strategy.



In keeping with this partnership approach, the Youth Board again attended the Board meeting in December 2024. Having direct access to the Board and an opportunity to feedback on things we need to improve is invaluable as their voice matters to us.

As well as engagement with children and young people, feedback on their experiences of the Agency continues to play a pivotal role in helping us shape and inform our practice and intervention. Having included their feedback as a mandatory part of our record keeping and embedded the use a new app for younger children and children with additional needs to provide easier access to give direct feedback, has generated rich and informed data about their journey through the court process and their experience of having a Guardian. In the coming year, the Agency plans to develop Key Performance Indicators aligned to children and young people's feedback so as to be assured that we continue to deliver high standards of intervention and best outcomes.

The delay pilot commissioned by the Shadow Family Justice Board delay subgroup has now concluded. The Health and Social Care Trusts Children's Services were joint authors and the draft report is currently being considered by the Children's Services Directors. It is hoped that the adoption of the recommendations contained therein will contribute to the reduction in delay for children and young people.

If we are to successfully tackle our challenges, most notably our waiting list, a collective approach with our key stakeholders is critical. We continue to work closely with the members of the legal service and the Shadow Family Justice Board so that we retain a constant focus on allocation, including implementation of measures to ensure that the most urgent cases are prioritised and allocated. In May 2025, at our Annual General Meeting with the Judiciary, we have extended an invite to the Health and Social Care Trusts Children's Services Directors as we recognise that it will only be through close collaboration and joint working can we ensure that children and young people's voices are heard and their best interests are reflected in our decision-making processes.



I wish to pay tribute the Agency's Children's Court Guardians. Over the course of the previous year they have continued to demonstrate their commitment to children and young people and the Agency and have worked tirelessly to represent children and young people in court proceedings. Despite the ongoing pressures. I am very grateful to staff for all of their work. I also want to acknowledge the work of the Corporate and Administrative support staff who are essential in the delivery of the service and are key to supporting the allocation process.

As a small Agency, working as a team is important to the delivery of a quality service. This is part of the cultural development of the Agency and the dedication and commitment of staff in the midst of all the continued pressures is impressive.

I am also extremely grateful to the Chair and Board for their ongoing support and leadership during the last year, which has enabled the Agency to make the progress and achievements outlined in this report.



Edel McKenna

Chief Executive

[4 November 2024 – to date]



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’*. The strategy highlights five strategic goals necessary to realise this vision:

- **Transforming the culture**
- **Strengthening the workforce**
- **Measuring the improvement**
- **Raising the standards**
- **Integrating the 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.



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.

In 2024-25, the Agency has continued to build on progress made in the previous year to develop a collective approach in order to embed a culture of improvement informed by the HSC values.

Children's Participation and Feedback

Youth Board

Our key stakeholder group remains our children and young people. The Agency remains committed to promoting engagement and participation opportunities for children and young people both on an individual basis and collectively through the Agency's Youth Board.

Personal Public Involvement continues to focus on our engagement with children and young people through our Youth Board and capturing feedback from children and young people at the end of a case.

The primary driver to sustain our PPI is the Children and Young People's Engagement and Participation Strategy. This was developed in partnership with our Youth Board members and presented to the Agency's Board in September 2024.



The Agency's Youth Board is now established and is made up of a diverse group of young people who have lived experience of the Children's Court Guardian Service. Currently, the Youth Board are working on developing an Action Plan to support the achievement of the Strategic objectives and this work is supported by Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) who work collaboratively with the Agency's lead staff and our Youth Board members. The priority areas for the next 12 -18 months are:

- Developing a Terms of Reference for the Youth Board;
- Developing an Induction programme for new Youth Board members;
- Development of the Youth Board section of the recently launched updated Agency website; and
- Recognition of Achievement Awards for our Youth Board members;

In December 2024, our Youth Board again attended a Board meeting and it is now agreed that this will be an annual event.

The Agency continues to facilitate feedback from children and young people at the end of proceedings. Feedback is shared with Guardians as part of supervision and their annual appraisal to support learning and practice improvement and it continues to be reported on twice yearly to the Agency's Board. Feedback is facilitated both in hard copy version and through our Apps including our app for younger children and children with additional needs, to provide easier access.

In September 2024 the Agency launched its enhanced Professional Standards which place our children and young people at the centre of Guardian's practice. Guardians are now required to visit within new timescales and they continue to use the children and young people's own words in their reports to the Courts.

In December 2024 the Youth Board attended the Agency's Board meeting and set out their vision for how to take forward the Children and Young People's Engagement and Participation Strategy.



Growing membership and the development of an induction programme for new members is a key area set out in the action plan for the year ahead. Building out the content of the Agency's website is a further area of focus the Youth Board wishes to take forward.

The work of the Youth Board continues to be supported by a collaborative approach with VOYPIC who have facilitated a number of workshops with our Youth Board members and key Agency staff.

Feedback Forms Generated

In 2024-25, a total of 669 children were eligible for feedback. A total of 444 children and young people requested a hard copy feedback form, and 124 requested feedback using the App. Of the total number of requests, 217 returns were received, giving a return rate of 38% (an increase of 2% from 2023-24).

On occasions, it may be relevant that feedback is not actively requested. No feedback was selected for 100 children in 2024-25 which is an increase from the previous year when this was selected for 72 children.

Where disability has been selected as an option, the disability type is being reviewed as this may inform the development of resources in the future.

Feedback Responses

As in previous years, the content of feedback reflects a largely positive experience by children and young people of the service provided. 95% children and young people reported they felt listened to by the Guardian and the following comments reflect the quality of service provided:



"To tell the Judge my views and requests"

"She showed me a picture to help explain things she brought out a solicitor"

"To hear what I thought. To hear what I wanted"

"To make sure I fully understood what it was all about"

"He came to see me and asked me what I wanted to change and told me about Court"

"To work for me and make sure my needs were met"

Solicitor Feedback Responses

The Agency continues to collate feedback from solicitors regarding their experiences of working with the Guardians. There was a 39% return rate of forms generated and the comments below outlines some of the feedback collated during 2024-25:

The Agency also collates feedback from the Judiciary and solicitors regarding the wider service provision by the Agency and the comments below reflect some of the feedback during 2024-25:

"The quality of service is excellent. In my experience the Children's Court Guardian provide a high quality of service and promote the interests of the children who are subjected to the proceedings and give them a voice. They are a central part of the process"

"The quality of service provided by each individual guardian is always excellent. The only difficulty at present is the ability of the agency to allocate a guardian and quite often guardian's being allocated later in proceedings"



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.

Strengthening the workforce has been a significant area of focus during the last 12-month period.

Recruitment

The Agency has experienced a busy period in 2024-25 in terms of recruitment. The newly introduced Children's Court Guardian role has been bedded in and provides additionality in terms of workforce capacity enabling the allocation of more complex cases to our experienced Principal Children's Court Guardians.

Due to a number of retirements and partial retirements, the Agency has undertaken a series of recruitment drives. Whilst some of our Band 7 Guardians have been successful at interview progressing to Principal Children's Court Guardian roles, the Agency has also welcomed new staff to the workforce both at our Band 7 Guardian and Principal Guardian line.

The Agency appointed 2 additional Guardian Services Managers on an interim basis to support a clear managerial alignment to the 4 locality-based teams and to strengthen the Operational Leadership Team and develop a team approach.

The Senior Leadership Team continue to progress the development of a Quality Assurance, Improvement and Learning Manager role who will play a key role in terms



of driving quality service provision, facilitating targeted training and assurance reporting on compliance with practice standards.

Collaborative Training

The Inter-Agency Childcare Legal Issues Forum is hosted by the Children's Court Guardian Agency and the role of Chair is rotated amongst the representative organisations (HSCT's, Children's Law Centre, Adoption UK, Fostering Network, VOYPIC, Bar of Northern Ireland, BSO Legal Services). The forum was established to facilitate understanding and information exchange on legal issues between lawyers, social workers and relevant stakeholders in respect of childcare legislation, policy and practice in Northern Ireland.

The Agency hosted a webinar in March 2025 facilitated by Professor Jane Monckton-Smith which was extended to our members in the Inter-Agency Childcare Legal Issues Forum as well as our Judiciary stakeholders. The webinar provided training in the 8 stages Domestic Homicide Timeline.

Staff Support

Wellbeing and support for staff remain a key component of our strategy. Staff wellbeing is essential for fostering a productive, engaged and resilient workforce. To support this, a number of initiatives, and temporary arrangements, were put in place during 2024-25. This included a temporary interim management structure to support staff, a revitalised Health, Safety & Wellbeing Committee which prioritises wellbeing, and continued engagement with *Lena by Inspire*. The end of year culminated with a joint lunchtime event for all staff which focused on the importance of wellbeing. This meeting also saw the launch of *The HUB*, a new staff intranet which focuses on the needs of staff, and includes information resources and the latest news, encouraging good communication and keeping people informed. The Agency's new website was also launched at this event, finalising the rebranding for the Children's Court Guardian Agency.



Develop and Implement a Learning and Development Strategy

Two Guardian Staff completed the Stronger Together SW Leadership course and there was a further roll out of the Cultural competency training module for new staff joining the Agency.

This training was facilitated by an external provider and enabled staff to explore the ethical and value issues in working within diversity and inclusion and how to ensure good practice when working across diverse communities.

A service wide learning event took place in December 2024 facilitated by Professor Jane Monckton-Smith on the 8 stages Domestic Homicide Timeline.



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 that there is sufficient capacity and capability within the HSC to use them effectively

Allocation

2024-25 has been a very challenging year with a further increase in the Agency's demand. This correlates with the increase in the regional Looked After Children (LAC) population and consequent increase in the Agency's unallocated cases. As of the 31 March 2025, the Agency had a total of 172 unallocated cases involving 318 children.

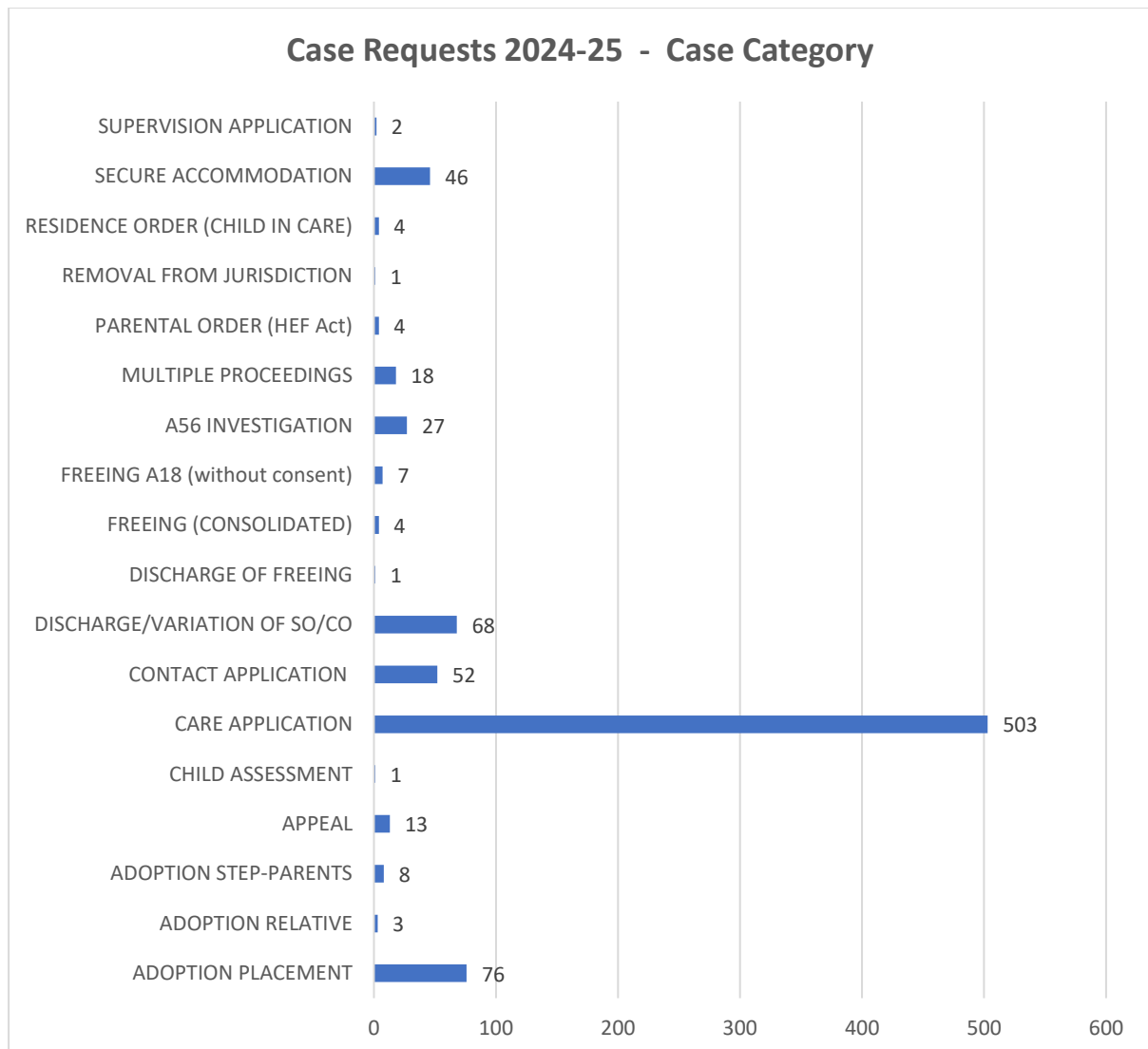
Nature of Requests

The reasons for the appointment of a Guardian to represent the interests of a child can be varied and complex. For 2024-25, the 838 new requests can be profiled by the case types detailed in **Chart 1** overleaf.

A total of 833 cases were closed in-year. This included:

- **Adoption** cases, where 123 children were successfully adopted;
- **Secure Accommodation** cases, with 45 instances where the child/young person was placed in Secure Accommodation;
- **Care** cases have the largest number of requests for a Guardian. A total of 439 cases concluded in-year, which involved 741 children.



Chart 1

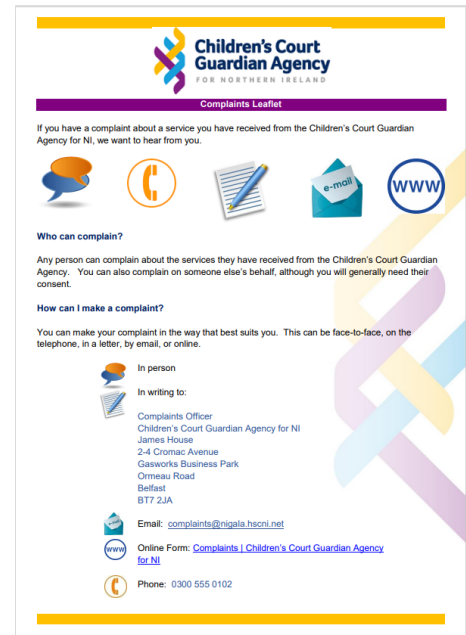
Measures have been implemented to target the Agency's unallocated cases such as offering additional hours and overtime for those cases listed for Final Hearing. The Operational Leadership team meet on a weekly basis to review the Agency's unallocated cases and during 2024-25 there have been a number of improvements to the case triage process to support a more streamlined approach to case allocation.

The Case Grading model continues to operate providing visibility of workforce capacity to ensure throughput of case work and timely allocation of new cases to the workforce.



Complaints

The Agency has updated its Complaint's Policy adding in a Local Resolution stage to the process. This should enable the Agency to manage complaints more effectively and provide more timely responses where this approach is appropriate.



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.

Professional Standards

A programme to revise the Agency's Professional Standards has been ongoing in 2024-25. The 2017 Professional Standards were revised due to changes and developments in policy and the need for clarity in Agency expectations of practice. The standards are set in a framework and are linked to wider regional policies around supervision, appraisal, recording and aligned with the NISCC standards.

Supervision and Appraisal

Guardians are professional social workers and they are required to participate with supervision, which provides a space for reflective practice as well as a mechanism for ensuring compliance with Agency Policy and practice standards.

During 2024-25 the Agency updated its Supervision and Appraisal policy aligned to the new Regional Social Work Supervision Policy. This incorporates peer group supervision for all Guardian staff. The bespoke nature of peer group supervision in the Agency continues ensuring Guardians are receiving the requisite level of supervision in compliance with regional standards as well as opportunities to reflect upon and improve practice.



Supervision provided to our most recently appointed Children's Court Guardians is bespoke to this new role in the Agency and is addressed within the revised Supervision Policy. Additional support is provided by way of peer group supervision for the group of new staff and more informal group mentoring, both facilitated by Principal Children's Court Guardians in their mentoring role. This approach will support a learning together culture across the workforce and provide opportunities for staff to develop their reflective practice.

Social Care Governance

The delivery of the statutory function of the Agency, in allocating Children's Court Guardians to cases appointed by the Courts, is to deliver a social work assessment based on the best interests and the wishes and feelings of children and young people, independent of the parties involved. All of the work of the Guardians is based on good Social work practice. The role of Social Care Governance is to provide an appropriate framework and assurance to the Agency on the quality and delivery of the service of the Guardians for Children and young people.

The Agency continues to work on the development of a Social Care Governance framework which will be an integrated framework encompassing our Corporate functions.

The Social Care Governance Committee supports the Board in all aspects of social care governance by providing an independent and objective review of the adequacy and effectiveness of control systems and processes in place to support the delivery of the Children's Court Guardian service to children and young people. The Committee met on four occasions during 2024-25. The Committee is chaired by a member of the Board and reports to the Board after each meeting.



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 opportunities for learning and development in the HSC and with external partners.

The Agency continues to benefit from working collaboratively with HSC and external partners to promote shared learning and deliver training. The Agency is uniquely placed as a regional organisation at the interface of HSCT's and Courts to engage in multidisciplinary and interagency working.

The Inter-Agency Childcare and Legal Issues Group is hosted by the Agency and comprises representatives from the voluntary and statutory organisations from social work, legal and allied professions. The group meets regularly to share information and consider childcare legislation, policy and practice and plan for the delivery of an annual seminar.

The Agency continues to be represented on a number of key strategic groups including the CSC Reform Board, SBNI, NISWLN and the Shadow Family Justice Board.

Children's Court Guardian Agency/HSC Delay Pilot

The Children's Court Guardian Agency /HSC delay pilot has now concluded and the draft report is currently with the HSCT's Children's Community Services Directors for consideration.

The key findings are similar to the recommendations emanating from the Care Proceedings Pilot 2017 with an emphasis on the need to implement many of the outstanding actions identified.



Children's Court Guardian Agency Solicitor Panel

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland Solicitor Panel was established in 2012 and was reconstituted in 2021 for a five-year term. Solicitors are required to be members of the Law Society Children Order Panel for a minimum of two years in order to be eligible to join the Panel. There are 124 Solicitors on the Panel - they nominate their first and second preference Trust location for undertaking Guardian work - the first preference is typically the Trust location within which their office is located.

The Agency is represented on the Law Society's Children Order Panel Advisory Board (COPAB), the regulatory body for Solicitors. This promotes collaborative working and information sharing.

A reference group with Guardian and Solicitor representatives meets quarterly to oversee and support the effective functioning of the Panel and the associated governance requirements.

Relevant strategic initiatives and practice developments that impact on the roles of the Guardian and Solicitor are addressed and topics for joint training are identified.

The "Protocol for the Working Relationship between Children's Court Guardian Agency Panel Solicitors and Guardians" identified mutual expectations of their respective roles and responsibilities. Given that the Agency is managing a waiting list of unallocated cases further guidance was devised to inform expectations of Solicitors assigned to a case pending the allocation of a Guardian. The guidance, which was ratified by the Law Society, identifies expectations of the Solicitor in keeping with their legal expertise and retains a clear boundary in respect of the role of the Guardian to establish children and young people's wishes and feelings and to represent their interests in court proceedings.



External Networking / influencing

The Chief Executive represents the Agency on a range of key regional groups, including the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, the Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Board and the Shadow Family Justice Board all with an over-arching aim of improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland, enhancing services and interventions and driving best practice.

The Agency has recently established relations with the new Guardian ad Litem National Service in the Republic of Ireland and plan to host a shared learning day early in the new financial year. It is hoped this cross-border forum will enable our two nations share knowledge and learning given our shared vision to deliver better outcomes for children and young people through the promotion of their best interests and representation of their wishes and feeling in the family courts.

