

## CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND BOARD MEETING – 7<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2023

- Present:** Mrs Gemma Loughran, *Chair*  
Ms Dawn Shaw, CEO  
Ms Veronica Callaghan, Non-Executive Director  
Mr David Douglas, Non-Executive Director  
Mr Lee Wilson, Non-Executive Director (*by MS Teams*)
- In Attendance:** Mr Sean Brown, Head of Corporate Services  
Ms Teresa Fallon, Assistant Director  
Mr Adrian Wilson, Green 17 (*Item 52.23*)  
Mr Steven McGuinness, Green 17 (*Item 52.23*)
- Minute Taker:** Mrs Ann Andrew, Business Support Manager

**START TIME: 9.30am**

### 52.23 SERVICE PRESENTATION

- 52.23.1 Mrs Loughran welcomed Mr Adrian Wilson and Mr Steven McGuinness from Green17. They provided a presentation to the Board in respect of the design of the new website for the Children's Court Guardian Agency. Board members were impressed at the new layout and Ms Callaghan complimented the simplicity of the new design which is user friendly but impactful. Mr Brown confirmed that the website has also been designed for use with a mobile phone.
- 52.23.2 Mrs Loughran thanked Mr Wilson and Mr McGuinness for their time; the Board wholehearted endorsed the new design of the website and work undertaken by Green 17.

### 53.23 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

- 53.23.1 Mrs Loughran provided an opportunity for the Board members to identify any conflict of interest in respect of today's agenda. None were noted.

### 54.23 MINUTE OF LAST MEETING

- 54.23.1 The minute from the last meeting of the Board on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2023 was reviewed and approved as an accurate record, proposed by Mr Douglas.

## 55.23 MATTERS ARISING

- 55.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Actions from the last meeting which were noted as complete.

## 56.23 CHAIR & NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

- 56.23.1 **Non-Executive Director Vacancy:** Mrs Loughran indicated that the advertisement for the Non-Executive Director position on the Board is aimed to be issued in September 2023. A podcast will be undertaken in respect of the vacancy.
- 56.23.2 **Meeting of ALB Chairs:** Mrs Loughran confirmed that Peter May, Permanent Secretary, indicated he may meet with the Chairs of the ALBs with an interest in children and young people. This meeting has yet to be scheduled but the Board will be kept updated.
- 56.23.3 **Complaint:** Mrs Loughran, referring to complaints to the Agency and to the DOH arising from social media and other posts by a Catholic priest that she was not a fit person to be chair of the Agency, stated that she has issued proceedings in the High Court and that the priest has undertaken not to post disparaging remarks about her and not to contact the Agency about her.
- 56.23.4 **Accounting Officer Responsibility:** Ms Shaw indicated that following correspondence from the Permanent Secretary emphasising the responsibilities of the Chief Executive as Accounting Officer, she has corresponded confirm that assurance is provided that managing the organisations budget and have taken all necessary steps to remain within that budget to not incur a deficit in this financial year.

## 57.23 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

### Chief Executive Briefing – Update Report

- 57.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Chief Executive Briefing* and Ms Shaw spoke to her paper highlighting some areas for specific mention.
- 57.23.2 **Workforce – Band 7 Guardian role:** Ms Shaw confirmed the advertisement for Band 7 Children's Court Guardians has been progressed with over 50 applications being received. Shortlisting will take place later in the week. She confirmed an independent assessor from the HSC Leadership Centre will also participate in the interview process. Ms Loughran commended Ms Shaw on the management of the consultation process.

57.23.3 **Rebranding and Website:** Ms Shaw confirming work is ongoing in respect of rebranding and referred to the website which Rebrand of the website – very modern.

57.23.4 **Workload – Allocation:** Ms Shaw confirmed that case allocation remains a pressurised situation and it is difficult to get cases allocated to staff.

The 3 new Band 8A Children's Court Guardians have commenced employment and they have all been very complimentary about the induction programme provided and the input from the administrative team.

Ms Shaw indicated that 3 staff are currently off on long-term sickness which has impacted on allocation. Ms Callaghan queried about work-related stress and Ms Shaw confirmed that the stress toolkit has been introduced to staff; support is provided by line managers and referrals to Inspire identified. Adaptations to working practices for individuals have also been implemented. Ms Shaw assured the Board that staff sickness is being managed.

57.23.5 **Learning & Development:** Ms Shaw indicated she has a meeting scheduled on 19<sup>th</sup> September with the HSC Leadership Centre to discuss taking forward learning and development within the Agency.

57.23.6 **Consultation on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services:** Ms Shaw indicated that the consultation document on the review of children's social care services will be issued on 8<sup>th</sup> September for a 13-week consultation process (closing 1 December 2023).

### **Business Plan Objectives – Update Report**

57.23.7 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Business Plan Objectives – Update Report* and Ms Shaw confirmed the business plan has been updated by SLT in terms of their responsibilities. The Board noted the update on objectives. Mr Douglas indicated that in respect of objective 1 that the RAG status could be noted as 'green' given this has progressed.

## **58.23 OPERATIONS REPORT (Q1)**

58.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Operations Report (Q1), April-June 2023* and Ms Fallon spoke to same.

58.23.2 Ms Fallon referred to unallocated cases and confirmed as at today there are 134 cases awaiting allocation. 71 of these have been triaged as 'red' requiring them to be allocated as a means of priority. The allocation manager has had

no response from staff indicating availability to take new cases and there was discussion about the varying reasons.

- 58.23.3 Ms Callaghan indicated that the managerial oversight of case allocation is commendable and the importance of reaching this point of analysis was essential. She acknowledged there will always be areas and points where it is difficult to move forward.
- 58.23.4 Ms Shaw indicated that any staff who feel overwhelmed are offered support. Expectations of practice standards need to be reviewed and clearly set for all staff to ensure everyone is clear about what is required. She indicated that appraisals this year have been extremely thorough and review of practice has taken time.
- 58.23.5 Ms Fallon indicated that the supervision policy will need to be revisited following the introduction of the Band 7 Children's Court Guardian positions.
- 58.23.6 Ms Shaw indicated this is all long-term work and will take time to complete. The Board accepted all the work being undertaken.
- 58.23.7 Mrs Loughran indicated that the number of unallocated cases which continues to rise over the year is very concerning. Ms Shaw indicated this has been circumstantial cumulative issues and the Agency is subject to the same pressures as the HSC Trusts with the same delays having an impact.
- 58.23.8 Ms Shaw reiterated that with the information we now have, it is about making a shift to a new culture. There has been great progress and hard work completed to date which should be acknowledged.
- 58.23.9 Ms Callaghan noted the need for professional accountability. Mrs Loughran requested that the SCG Committee look at this further and note the concern of the Board that no response has been received by the allocation manager from staff who have been made aware of the very severe pressure on allocations. Ms Callaghan referred to perceived capacity amongst staff and indicated this is a piece of work for everyone in the Agency. Staff will be given the opportunity to highlight any issues that are relevant. She indicated data will be required for this.
- 58.23.9 Ms Shaw advised that at the staff meetings in September/October she will provide an update, highlight all the concerns of the Board, and reinforce the role of the Guardian Services Managers and the requirement for staff to cooperate in taking cases.

- 58.23.10 Mrs Loughran indicated that the Board Members seek to visit the Armagh office early next year. She suggested that when the new Non-Executive Director is appointed that all members should meet with the guardians.

## **59.23 FINANCE REPORT**

### **Finance Report**

- 59.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Finance Report* providing an overview of financial management as at 31<sup>st</sup> July 2023. Mr Brown spoke to the report highlighting the total allocation for the financial year is made up of the initial allocation, a reduction of £17k for IFRS16 and a recurrent saving of £50k. He indicated there is no increase in allocation to address the recent increases in 'cost of living'. There is no provision for a staff pay award.
- 59.23.2 Mr Brown indicated that protracted recruitment and the move to James House has allowed for £60k to cover dilapidation costs. There was discussion about reducing self employed costs and travel expenses for the year which are likely to rise given the regional service and visits taking place.
- 59.23.3 Ms Callaghan stressed the need for keeping a strong hold on financial stewardship and the need to look carefully at what additionality comes with additional staff. Ms Shaw indicated that the savings from the move to James House will help to fund additional costs associated with new staff.
- 59.23.4 Mr Brown indicated that at the month end the Agency is showing breakeven. However, with the costing profile for the year the Agency is currently expecting to breakeven with a small underspend.

### **Allocation Letters**

- 59.23.2 Mr Brown provided copies of Allocation Letters *CCGANI 02 - 23/24* and *CCGANI 03 - 23/24*, for information purposes only.

## **60.23 DRAFT MID-YEAR ASSURANCE STATEMENT 2023-24**

- 60.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Draft Mid-Year Assurance Statement 2023-24* and Mr Brown indicated the report was in draft form in preparation for submission at the end of September by Ms Shaw. The Board agreed same.

## 61.23 RISK REGISTER

- 61.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Risk Register* which has been reformed based on discussions at the June meeting. Mr Brown indicated that internal audit also viewed the risk register and offered advice.
- 61.23.2 Mr Wilson indicated that the naming of some of the columns was incorrect. There was discussion about the heading titles and it was agreed that Mr Wilson would meet with Mr Brown to finalise the new headings and review the risks on the last page of the register to ensure they were correctly detailed.
- 61.23.3 Mr Brown indicated that Internal Audit noted there is a new matrix available which will be rolled out to all HSC bodies. These recommendations will be included in the internal audit report.

## 62.23 ANNUAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS

- 62.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23* which Mr Brown confirmed that this document was laid at the assembly this morning (8/9/23). He noted the report from the Comptroller and Auditor General confirms he is content with the annual accounts and has made no recommendations. Mrs Loughran complimented Mr Brown and his team on such a very good outcome.

## 63.23 STANDING ORDERS

- 63.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Standing Orders* which were updated and approved at the last meeting. Mr Brown indicated that the internal auditor completed an audit in the last few weeks and has suggested minor amendments to the Standing Orders. These include:-

- Change the title to *Standing Orders & Standing Financial Instructions*
- Insert a paragraph (on page 12) to detail the role of BSO
- Include a paragraph in respect of the Agency bank accounts and how they are managed.
- Delegated limits (HSC F 23-2023) have been updated and this should be replicated throughout.

The Board approved the suggested amendments.

- 63.23.2 Mr Brown referred to '6.2.7 Gifts' which currently has a value of less than £50 identified as the limit. He confirmed that the actual limit of acceptable value within HSC is set at £250 and queried if the Board would wish to adapt this

figure. The Board discussed this and indicated they felt this value was too high and it should remain at £50.

## **64.23 BOARD COMMITTEE MEETINGS SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD**

64.23.1 Mrs Loughran noted there were no Board Committees since the last meeting of the Board.

## **65.23 DEPARTMENTAL / OTHER CORRESPONDENCE**

65.23.1 Mrs Loughran referred to correspondence shared for information purposes and for noting: -

- a. DoH - Departmental Annual Business Plan
- b. HSC(F) - Guidance on Conflicts of Employment Related Legal Cases
- c. HSC(F) - Revised HSC and NIFRS Delegated Limits
- d. HSC(F) – Guidance on Irregular and Unlawful Expenditure

## **66.23 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Partnership Agreement**

66.23.1 Ms Callaghan requested an update on the progress of the *Partnership Agreement*. Ms Shaw confirmed that she and Mrs Loughran have liaised with DoH and have a draft copy of the agreement. She indicated that social care governance and the accountability around that was not included so suggestions for inclusion have been forwarded for consideration. Ms Shaw indicated that feedback is awaited.

Ms Shaw noted that she has also requested that the Agency be made aware of any circulars to HSC social work staff as this is something the Agency should be aware of. She indicated this is about tightening professional links.

### **Information Governance**

66.23.2 Mrs Loughran indicated that *Information Governance* should be looked at more closely at the next board meeting. She referred to the SCG Assurance workshop following the meeting of the Board and asked that it be discussed there.

Mrs Loughran noted it was her opinion that discussion of risk management should be exclusive to the Board who will examine how risk is being managed. Ms Callaghan noted she would like risk management as a standing item on SCG.

There was brief discussion about which Board Members sat on which committees.

## **67.23 CONFIDENTIAL SECTION**

67.23.1 There was no further business for discussion.

Mrs Loughran thanked all staff who had prepared such comprehensive reports and other material for consideration by the Board. She has also thanked Mrs Andrew for preparing the minutes.

**END TIME: 11.45PM**

**DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 2<sup>ND</sup> NOVEMBER 2023 @ 9.30am**

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**Chair of the Board**