

**CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
BOARD MEETING – 22nd FEBRUARY 2024**

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

In Attendance: Mr Sean Brown, Head of Corporate Services
Ms Patricia O’Kane, Assistant Director

Minute Taker: Mrs Colette Cronie, Personal Assistant

START TIME: 10.00 A.M.

1.24 APOLOGIES AND WELCOME

1.24.1 There were no apologies received.

2.24 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

2.24.1 There were no Declaration of Interests declared.

3.24 MINUTE OF THE BOARD MEETING OF 14TH DECEMBER 2024

3.24.1 The minute of the meeting of 14th December was reviewed and approved as an accurate record.

4.24 CHAIR AND NON-EXECUTIVE’S BRIEFING

4.24.1 Mrs Loughran updated the Board on a recent meeting which took place with Mr Peter May. There were no items of discussion relating directly to the Agency and the main discussion centred around Emergency Departments. Mrs Loughran advised that the Minister announced that he would make plans to meet with the Chairs and Board of all Arm’s Length Bodies and she agreed to keep the Board updated on any upcoming plans of such.

- 4.24.2 Discussions at the meeting also took place surrounding the financial situation and Mrs Loughran reported that unfortunately there were no changes with regards to the financial outlook.

5.24 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

CEO Briefing/Update Report

- 5.24.1 Ms Shaw provided an update to the Board on the current situation. It was noted that the Judiciary have expressed frustration about the failure of the Agency to allocate Guardians to cases. One Judge has indicated an intention to allocate a Guardian prior to appoint an Independent Social Worker to ascertain the wishes and feelings of the children. The Board noted there were a number of cases which have been timetabled for final hearing with no Guardian yet appointed. Following discussion, the Board agreed that the risk with regards to how the Agency are working with the Courts has significantly increased.
- 5.24.2 Discussion took place surrounding the number of new appointments and staff capacity. There are a number of staff approaching retirement and four staff members who have returned from sickness absence on a phased return, which therefore impact on the Allocation Managers' ability to allocate cases. Ms Shaw reported that three new Band 7 Guardians recently commenced with the Agency and an additional three are due to commence next week, however the benefits of additional resources may not be felt for some time due to the induction of the new staff.
- 5.24.3 With regards to the Assistant Director post, the Job Description has now been revised and Ms Shaw thanked Ms O'Kane and Ms Fallon for their work on this. The Job Description has been evaluated through the Agenda for Change Job Evaluation process and the Agency are now in a position to recruit.
- 5.24.4 Ms Shaw noted the information outlined in the Operations Report for Quarter 3 of the financial year 2023-24. Ms Shaw referred to the recruitment process for the Assistant Director post and the risk to the Agency and increased workload for Ms O'Kane. Ms Shaw advised that following discussion, the SLT agreed that the risk of not recruiting and managing an extremely challenging situation was a higher risk than that of managing the budget. The Board agreed and supported Ms Shaw's decision with regards to this matter.

- 5.24.5 Ms Shaw updated the Board on the work of the Youth Forum, advising that two of the young people on the Forum were recently presented with an award at QUB. The Board extended their Congratulations to the young people and also to Ms Fallon on her work with the Forum.

6.24 OPERATIONS REPORT

- 6.24.1 Ms O Kane spoke to the Operations Q3 report, and provided an update to the Board on the current situation with regards to allocation. It was noted that it remains an extremely challenging time for the Agency and is also very difficult to allocate cases due to staff on sickness absence and a number of upcoming retirements. Ms O’Kane briefed the Board on the case weighting process which will determine complexity of cases going forward and will be generated by the GCIS system once all case factors have been entered.
- 6.24.4 Discussion took place surrounding the decision by some Judges to timetable cases for final hearing despite the fact that no Guardian had been allocated. The Board agreed this was the most urgent risk currently within the Agency and Mrs Loughran suggested writing to the Judiciary to provide reassurance that where there is a final hearing listed, a Guardian will be in attendance and a report provided. It was agreed that the detail of the cases, types and length of time to allocation be taken to the Social Care Governance Committee for review and to provide assurance to the Board that appropriate actions have been taken in each case. This will inform the meeting with the Judiciary in May and any correspondence with the Judiciary about reassurance.
- 6.24.5 Ms O’Kane paid tribute to the work of Ms Savage with regards to managing case allocation through an extremely busy time. Mrs Loughran reiterated her thanks to the Agency for their work through a difficult time.

7.24 SERVICE DELIVERY PRESENTATION

Dr Tom Teggart, DoH re Overview of the NIFITC model

- 7.24.1 Dr Tom Teggart joined the meeting and provided an overview of the NIFITC model. Dr Teggart advised that the current Framework has combined contemporary work with research evidence. Dr Teggart has been involved in implementing the Framework across the five HSC Trusts alongside a Regional Strategic Steering Group which meets every three months.

- 7.24.2 Dr Teggart spoke to a presentation which he agreed to forward to the Board for further information. The Board thanked Dr Teggart for his input to today's meeting and Dr Teggart left the meeting.

8.24 FINANCE

a. Finance Report

- 8.24.1 Mr Brown spoke to the Finance Report up to 31st December 2023 and Mr Brown advised that there was a small surplus of £27k. This was due to the fact that during the 2022/23 financial year, recruitment commenced for Band 8a Guardians, however the appointments were made later than anticipated resulting in a surplus.
- 8.24.2 The paper was noted by the Board and Mr Brown agreed to advise the Board at the next meeting how monies will be spent to ensure a breakeven position at year end.

b. Scenario Planning

- 8.24.3 Discussion took place with regards to scenario planning and Mr Brown advised that a decision was made by the Department that all Arm's Length Bodies would have to make provision for the funding of pay increases for senior executives. There was a discussion as to whether this provision would be reimbursed to the Agency by the Department. Mrs Loughran requested that Ms Shaw and Mr Brown meet with Mr Wilson with regards to this matter. This will also be brought back to the Board for further clarity.

9.24 BUSINESS PLAN OBJECTIVES 2024-25

- 9.24.1 The Business Plan Objectives were brought before the Board for approval. Mr Brown reported that the Business Plan Objectives have now been submitted to the Department. Once feedback has been received from the Department, the objectives can subsequently be signed off. The objectives were noted by the Board and it was acknowledged that positive feedback has been received from Sponsor Branch with regards to same. Mr Douglas suggested amending the Timescale for Completion of Objective to 'Achieved' and 'Ongoing.' The Board agreed this amendment.

10.24 PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

- 10.24.1 The Partnership Agreement sets out the partnership arrangements between the Agency and the Department and explains the overall governance framework within which the Agency operates. The agreement was noted by the Board.

11.24 INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

- 11.24.1 Mr Brown reported that as part of the Investors in People process, the Agency has maintained a Silver status. The Agency has had an update meeting with liP at which it was highlighted that the organisation has recently experienced extremely challenging times.
- 11.24.2 The Update report outlined the progress the Agency has made despite the current challenges and this was commended by the liP Assessor following the recent meeting with SLT. The liP initiative will continue for a number of years and it is hoped that the Agency can improve upon or maintain the current status. Mr Douglas commended the Agency for the work completed to date.

12.24 BOARD COMMITTEES SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 12.24.1 There have been no Board Committees scheduled since the last meeting of the Board.

13.24 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

- a. HSC(F)41-2023 – Procurement Thresholds*
- b. HSC (SE) 3 2023 Senior Executive Pay Award 2022-23*
- c. CCGANI 04 - Allocation Letter 23 24*
- d. CCGANI 05 - Allocation Letter 23 24*
- e. SUB-1018-2024 Letter from Minister Swann to all HSC Staff*

- 13.24.1 The Board noted the above Departmental Correspondence which was circulated in advance of the meeting.
- 13.24.2 Discussion took place surrounding the final version of the Directions 2024 No. 1 Health and Social Care - The Functions of the Children's

Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland (No. 1) Direction (Northern Ireland) 2024 which came into operation on 6th February 2024.

13.24.3 The Direction sets out the functions of the Children's Court Guardian Agency including the requirement to employ or approve suitably qualified persons as Children's Court Guardians; to employ a sufficient number of guardians to ensure that in each case the Agency can provide a social work report which is based on the appointed Guardian's assessment of the best interests of the child, takes account of the child's wishes and feelings, and is independent of any other party to proceedings; and to establish and maintain liaison arrangements with the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and with statutory or voluntary agencies as required. Ms Shaw advised that she had been consulted with by the Department with regards to this and it was agreed that this provides greater clarity and that the role of the Agency will be less open to misinterpretation.

13.24.3 This was noted by the Board and it was agreed that this would be added to the upcoming Staff Meeting agendas to be shared with the Guardians. This will also be used in Strategic Planning. Ms Shaw advised that this will act as the overarching document with regards to Agency functions and will also be uploaded to the website.

END TIME: 12.30 P.M.

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 25TH APRIL 2024

ACTION LIST

Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
6.24.4 Operations Report	A report of the detail of the cases which are scheduled for final hearing and which have been timetabled for final hearing to be brought to SCG Committee for review and oversight and to inform the meeting with the Judiciary at the meeting scheduled for May 24.	Ms O'Kane	
8.24.2 Finance Report	The Finance Report was noted by the Board and Mr Brown agreed to advise the Board at the next meeting where the additional monies will be spent.	Mr Brown	
8.24.3 Finance Report – Scenario Planning	With regards to the release of funds for senior executives, Mrs Loughran requested that Ms Shaw and Mr Brown meet with Mr Wilson with regards to this matter. This will also be brought back to the Board for further clarity.	Ms Shaw Mr Brown Mr Wilson	