

**CHILDREN'S COURT GUARDIAN AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
BOARD MEETING – 25th APRIL 2024**

- Present:** Mrs Gemma Loughran, Chair
Ms Dawn Shaw, CEO
Mr David Douglas, Non-Executive Director
Mr Lee Wilson, Non-Executive Director
- In Attendance:** Ms Patricia O'Kane, Assistant Director
Ms Teresa Fallon, Assistant Director
Ms Aine Morrison, Chief Social Worker, DoH (14.24)
Ms Aoife Birmingham, Internal Audit, BSO
- Apologies:** Ms Veronica Callaghan, Non-Executive Director
- Minute Taker:** Mrs Ann Andrew, Business Support Manager

START TIME: 9.30am

Mrs Loughran welcomed the Board to the meeting, along with Ms Aoife Birmingham from internal audit who will be observing the meeting.

Mrs Loughran expressed concern about the wellbeing of Mr Brown, Head of Corporate Services, and indicated that she would write to him on behalf of the Board.

14.24 SERVICE DELIVERY

- 14.24.1 Mrs Loughran welcome Ms Aine Morrison, Chief Social Worker (DoH) to the meeting. Ms Morrison provided an overview of the how the professional roles at the DoH have changed and provided background to the departmental structure.
- 14.24.2 Ms Morrison provided an update on her areas of work and the regional approach on a number of areas. She referred to the challenges in respect of social workers and detailed the review of social work routes and the goal to increase places in Universities, along with a possible increase of places in the post graduate route. She referred to the 5-10 year plan of where they want to go. Ms Morrison indicated that DoH is also exploring international recruitment as well as encouraging students back to Northern Ireland from the other regions. Work is ongoing with NISCC to improve the attracting of people to undertake social work. Ms

Morrison referred to the challenges of retention and the need to work with employers and about how best to support staff and create a clear career pathway.

- 14.24.3 Ms Morrison referred to safer staffing which is a big agenda item at the moment. She noted the Department is planning to introduce legislation and ensure social workers have the tools and models in place to calculate what safe staffing means. She noted that evidence is pretty limited and a safe staffing group is running at the moment and reviewing literature about same; a NISCC webinar is planned for June. Key principles about how safe staffing case numbers will be worked out will be available soon with the plan to have guidance available by March 2025. She identified the need is clearly for more social workers and more funding. Consideration is also being given to skills mix and contributions to social work and thoughts about what can be done elsewhere. She noted it was imperative that other skills and professions provide services alongside social workers.
- 14.24.4 Ms Morrison referred to the Social Work Workforce Implementation Board which is building capacity on social work workforce data; there are limitations but good progress is being made.
- 14.24.5 Ms Morrison referred to coproduction and how important it was to improving this avenue and engaging with people who use the services. She indicated an action plan from 10,000 more voices is being worked through at present.
- 14.24.6 Ms Morrison referred to children's social work and updated on intercountry adoption. She noted advice for the Minister is currently being prepared in respect of the Professor Ray Jones review; there are a number of recommendations, some of which may be difficult to implement and may require substantial funding.
- 14.24.7 Ms Morrison updated on the quality standards, primary care social work and other work ongoing around domestic violence, loneliness forums and best practice guides.
- 14.24.8 Mrs Loughran thanked Ms Morrison for attending the meeting and emphasised she was very appreciative of the input given to the Board. She provided an update on the work of the Agency in relation to the revised Profession Standards, staff wellbeing and support. Mr Douglas promoted a couple of pieces of working by the Agency i.e. case management which provides good data and is a useful tool for engagement with staff, and informs safe staffing.

15.24 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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

16.24 MINUTE OF THE LAST MEETING

16.24.1 The minute from the last meeting of the Board on 22nd February 2024 was reviewed and approved as an accurate record, proposed by Mr Wilson.

16.24.2 Mrs Loughran noted her gratitude to Mrs Cronie for taking the minute of the last meeting.

17.24 MATTERS ARISING

17.24.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the Actions from the last meeting and progress on each was noted.

18.24 CHAIR AND NON-EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

18.24.1 **Meeting of ALB Chairs:** Mrs Loughran advised the next meeting of the ALB Chairs is scheduled to take place on 29th May 2024 with the Minister of Health.

19.24 CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BRIEFING

CEO Briefing/Update Report

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

19.24.2 **Workforce:** Ms Shaw updated the Board on the changes within the workforce.

- Ms Fallon's retirement at the end of April.
- Two temporary Guardian Services Managers have been appointed, Sinead Marshall and Corinne Gorman; Ms Shaw noted both are well experienced and she was very pleased with the appointments.

- Recruitment for 3 x Principal Children's Court Guardians will be progressed in the coming weeks.
- Interviews for the Assistant Director post are taking place on Friday 26th April, with a good field of applicants.
- Mr Brown retires at the end of June. The job description has been updated and will be submitted for evaluation once finalised.
- Industrial action continues.

Mr Wilson queried if there was any scope to recruit a mix of Band 8A and Band 7 guardians? Ms Shaw confirmed that the Agency had given a commitment to maintaining the 39 x Band 8A Principal guardians and how important such commitment is to the morale of existing 8A guardians.

19.24.3 **Replacement of Case Information System:** Ms Shaw advised that the Agency has been through two rounds of interviews in respect of its application to DHCNI for funding to replace the guardian case information system. The discovery phase is the next element of the application. She confirmed that she has written to Sponsor Branch seeking funds to undertake the work this entails.

19.24.4 **Finance:** The Agency is reporting break-even for 2023-24.

19.24.5 **SBNI Section 12 Audit:** Ms Shaw referred to the SBNI Section 12 Audit which the Agency completed in 2023. SBNI have confirmed the audit was assessed as having provided assurance. Mr Douglas indicated this was a good example of where we can share good practice.

19.24.6 **Youth Board:** Mrs Loughran sought clarity on the Youth Forum / Youth Board. Ms Fallon confirmed that the young people, in light of them meeting with the Agency Board, noted their preference to be known as the Youth Board going forward.

Business Plan – Action Plan 2023-24

19.24.7 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Business Plan – Action Plan 2023-24* and Ms Shaw spoke to the updates providing updated progress.

19.24.8 Ms Shaw referred to the correspondence from Mr Peter Toogood, confirming approval of the Agency's Business Plan 2024-25. Mr Douglas indicated this was a useful summary and it was helpful to see the papers.

20.24 OPERATIONS REPORT

- 20.24.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Operations Report - Q4*, for the period 1st January 2024 – 31st March 2024. Ms O’Kane spoke to the report highlighting the challenge in terms of high number of cases, as referred to in the overview.
- 20.24.2 Ms O’Kane noted the trend across the HSC Trusts noting that whilst there is a there is a reduction in cases requests in some Trusts, in comparison to the same period last year, these have not been reflective of staff and capacity.
- 20.24.3 Ms O’Kane referred to the caseload analysis and indicated that 3 members of staff are currently not available to take new cases due to retirement. There may be a number of possible case transfers required. In addition, there has been a reduction in the complement of self-employed staff, with one leaving at the end of the month.
- 20.24.4 Ms O’Kane indicated that there has been a further amendment to the guidance for solicitors. The Agency recognised the difficulty for a solicitor who has to appear in court in a case where the Agency has not allocated a guardian to that case and reinforced it is not the solicitor’s position to undertake the social work role. She indicated this updated guidance would be discussed with the judiciary.
- 20.24.5 Ms O’Kane indicated there had been considerable sickness with staff experiencing a range of complex challenges. She indicated managers engage regularly with BSO occupational health and use the stress toolkit provided, in addition to using Inspire as a preventative service. Ms Shaw indicated the need to think about staffing and what is out there in the wider HSC vs our own work about expectations. She referred to the regional workforce who are looking at what can be expected in safe staffing. Recognising the need for time for CPD, training and annual leave should all should be considered in the determination about what would be considered safe staffing. This work will provide a safe staffing formula which can then be applied to the work we have completed to date. Mr Douglas suggested that the Agency’s caseload weighting tool could perhaps inform that piece of work. He emphasised the relationship staff have with their managers cannot be underestimated. Absence targets may have not been met but it is clear that managers are working to support staff and the Agency has the necessary means to assist staff who face challenges in their personal life.

- 20.24.6 Ms Loughran noted how impressed she was with comments made about Ms Fallon at her recent retirement luncheon. Mr Douglas agreed and indicated how this defined compassion as a core value. Ms Fallon reiterated safe staffing as relating to positive outcomes for children, so it has to be related to staffing too. Ms Shaw noted she did not want to push staff to breaking point and that they needed to be supported and meet safe staffing requirements.
- 20.24.7 Mr Wilson referred to case delay and queried if anyone, on a strategic level, was reviewed case delay within Trusts, before the case gets to the Agency. Ms O'Kane provided explanation of the timeline in the life of a referral and Ms Shaw highlighted the need for a signoff from the Ethics Committee prior to any investigation; she noted it would be extremely difficult to map. She indicated that the delay pilot may be able to pick up some of that information, which may later be examined in more depth.
- 20.24.8 Ms Fallon provided an update to the Board on case grading noting that staff are expected to update their case scoring on a monthly basis. She indicated that scoring for The Principal Children's Court Guardians is 55-70, and the Children's court guardians 45-55. Part-time staff scores are adjusted accordingly. She indicated that managers now have the supporting data in order to base conversations on, also giving support to difficult considerations and safe staffing. Mr Douglas added the professional standards would also be a support.
- 20.24.9 Mrs Loughran thanked Ms O'Kane and Ms Fallon for the report.

Absence Report

- 20.24.10 Mrs Loughran referred to the *Absence Report* for noting by the Board. She acknowledged the very challenging work of guardians and the inherent stress.
- 20.24.11 The Agency's absence management target for the year was 3.04% with the year-end performance being an absence rate of 5.96%.
- 20.24.12 Mr Wilson indicated there was now more sickness than during the Covid-19 pandemic and queried if there was anything underlying. Ms Shaw indicated that the service was not being delivered the same during Covid-19 with no travel, visits, etc. She also noted the need to be mindful of the demography of the Agency and referred to a number of circumstances in which sick leave has been applied. It was also noted that anyone falling ill with Covid-19 was not recorded as being on sick leave during this time.

Mrs Loughran acknowledged the reasons and indicated it was unsurprising. Mr Wilson queried if the Agency needed to escalate a risk around staff sickness. Ms Shaw indicated the risk relates to delivery of the service and how we are supporting people. It was agreed that the risk register would be reviewed to reflect this. Mr Wilson queried when the next HSC staff survey will be issued and asked Ms Shaw to follow this up with BSO.

ACTION: Risk Register to be reviewed to include a risk in respect of staff sickness and the delivery of the service.

ACTION: Ms Shaw to seek confirmation with BSO about the timing of the next HSC staff survey.

E-Learning Report

20.24.13 Mrs Loughran referred to the *E-Learning Report*. The Board noted the recommendation from the Audit & Risk Committee to complete the following modules within the next 12-month period.

- Cyber security awareness
- Equality, good relations and human rights
- Fraud awareness
- Information Governance awareness
- Risk Management awareness.

20.24.14 It was noted the Fire Safety Awareness is due to be completed by all staff again in 2024-25.

22.24 ANNUAL REPORT & ANNUAL ACCOUNTS 2023-24

22.24.1 Ms Shaw advised that a draft of the Annual Report & Annual Accounts 2023-24 has been prepared. Feedback is sought from the Board prior to its submission on Friday 3rd May. She indicated that confirmation on the final finance figures are awaited from BSO. It was agreed that comments should be returned by Monday 28th April, 5pm.

23.24 PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

- 23.24.1 Mrs Loughran referred to the paper on the revised *Professional Standards* which were revised as a recommendation by a recent Domestic Homicide Review, and Ms Fallon spoke to same. She referred to her report highlighting how each standard has been addressed.
- 23.24.2 Ms Fallon indicated there has been consultation with the young people on the Youth Board, specifically in respect to the standard on *Engagement with Children and Young People*. The working group had presented options in the draft format of professional standards in relation to engagement with children, which reflected the range of perspectives from guardians as to the level of prescription. There were three sessions with children and young people who reflected on the expectations of the guardian role from their own experience, what worked for them, and what would work better for children and young people in the future. Ms Fallon noted that the consultation was excellent.
- 23.23.3 Mr Douglas indicated that the Professional Standards had been discussed at the SCG Committee and are now recommended to the Board. Ms Fallon noted that standards are now set in a framework in order to provide an overarching assurance framework.
- 23.23.4 The Board approved the revised Professional Standards.
- 23.23.5 Ms Shaw referred to career pathways and suggested to Ms Morrison that the specific Children's Court Guardian role might be one that could be included in her workstream. Ms Morrison suggested that talking about the role of the social worker and children's court guardian in court might be useful to include; Ms Shaw indicated she would be supportive of that.

24.24 BOARD COMMITTEES SINCE LAST MEETING OF THE BOARD

- 24.24.1 ***Audit & Risk Committee Report – 7th March 2024:*** Mr Wilson referred to the report on business undertaken at the last Audit & Risk Committee meeting and updated the Board on this. He indicated that details of those who attended should be included in the report going forward.
- ACTION:** [Audit & Risk Committee Report to the Board to include details of those who attended the meeting.](#)
- 24.24.2 ***Risk Appetite:*** Mr Wilson referred to *Risk Appetite* which was discussed at the last Audit & Risk Committee meeting. He indicated the report is recommended

to the Board for approval. The Board agreed to formally adopt Risk Appetite, as detailed.

24.24.3 **SCG Committee Report – 21st March 2024.** Ms Fallon referred to the SCG Committee Report to the Board and updated on the business discussed at the meeting.

24.24.4 **SCG Committee Annual Report 2023-24.** Ms Fallon referred to the SCG Committee Annual Report 2023-24. Mr Wilson is to be included in the report as an attendee. The risk of unallocated cases and the assurance of the arrangements in place and any associated risks were discussed.

25.24 DEPARTMENTAL/OTHER CORRESPONDENCE

25.24.1 Mrs Loughran referred the Board to the following correspondence, copies of which have been provided for information purposes. They noted same.

a. **DoH – Timetable for ALB Annual Accounts 2023-24**

b. **DoH – Final Indices 2023-24**

c. **DoH – Raising a Concern in the Public Interest (Whistleblowing).**
Mr Douglas indicated that he would be content to be the nominated Non-Executive Director in respect of whistleblowing. Mrs Loughran noted her thanks.

d. **DoH – Delegation of Approval of DAC's under £1 million**

e. **DoH – Government Advertising Programme**

f. **SBNI - Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland - Section 12 Audit**

26.24 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

26.24.1 **Ms Fallon – Retirement:** Mrs Loughran indicated this was Ms Fallon's last meeting with the Board before her retirement. The Board expressed their gratitude for all the work undertaken and for Ms Fallon's input over the last 28 years, as one of the founding guardians.

27.24 CONFIDENTIAL

27.24.1 There was no confidential business for discussion.

Mrs Loughran noted her thanks to the senior leadership team for the quality of the papers provided to the Board, along with the work undertaken by everyone.

END TIME: 11.45am

DATE OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: 27th JUNE 2024

ACTION LIST			
Ref	Action	By Whom	Progress Noted for Meeting
20.24 Absence Report	Risk Register to be reviewed to include a risk in respect of staff sickness and the delivery of the service. Ms Shaw to seek confirmation with BSO about the timing of the next HSC staff survey.	Ms Shaw Ms Shaw	
24.24 Audit & Risk Committee Report	Audit & Risk Committee Report to the Board to include details of those who attended the meeting.	Audit & Risk Lead/Chair	