



**Children's Court
Guardian Agency**
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



Business 2023-24 Plan

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Foreword

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland is the new name for the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency.

The Agency published a five-year Corporate Plan for 2017-21 to outline its approach to delivering a service to children and young people who are the subject of court proceedings. This was extended due to the impact of the Covid pandemic for the year 2021-22 and for the year 2022-23.

This Business Plan for 2023-2024 marks the first year of the new Strategic Plan for 2023- 2028. It also marks the name change of the Agency from the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency to the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland, in line with the renaming of guardians ad litem as children's court guardians following commencement of section 137 of the Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

This Business Plan has been approved by the Agency's Board. This document sets out the Agency's strategic vision and values, building on an approach underpinned by modelling a culture of collective leadership and collaborative working.

The Agency has been engaged in an extensive improvement agenda over the last two years. This has included engagement with staff, the development of an action plan process based on the feedback from staff and support from the HSC Leadership Centre. The three main themes for development were identified as Improvement, Data and Culture. The action plan which was developed to progress these areas informed the business plan for 2022-2023 and underpins this business plan.

The Business Plan was produced ahead of the Agency 5 Year Strategy 2023- 2028. It is based on the preliminary strategic planning workshop held by the Board and reflects the strategic direction of the Agency. The Business Plan objectives are aligned to the strategic drivers within the draft 5-year strategic plan.

This focus has culminated in the development of the new 5-year Strategic Plan 2023-2028.

The overarching theme for the Strategic Plan is transformation. This reflects the areas of improvement which the Agency has already commenced but also recognises the need to ensure the Agency meets the current challenges within Health and Social Care.

This also reflects the conviction of the (then) Minister for Health, Robin Swann that we need to do things differently to transform Health and Social Care. (NICON Conference speech 19th October 2022).

The Children's Court Guardian Agency is not immune to the financial and service pressure experienced across all of Health and Social Care.

Introduction

Our business plan sets out the priorities and key deliverables for the year 2023-24.

Our business plan has the following sections:

- Role of **The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland**
- Approach to Planning
- Management team and structure
- **The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland** objectives for 2023-24

The Agency's Board will monitor progress against the objectives and the effective running of the organisation through its Board meetings.

Role of Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland

The primary function of the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland is to provide children's court guardians who are appointed by the court to safeguard the interests of children in family law proceedings, including care and adoption proceedings. Article 60 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and Article 66 of the Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 govern the appointment of children's court guardians.

In carrying out its role, the Agency strives to ensure that children's court guardians fulfil their statutory duty to safeguard the interests of the child or young person, by providing an assessment of the child's needs, best interests and represent their best interests, feelings and voice in court, independently of the Health and Social Care Trusts, parents or carers.

As the children and young people they represent are some of the most vulnerable in our society, children's court guardians endeavor to ensure that the child's best interests and welfare remain the primary focus of judicial decision-making and that the outcomes for each child or young person are the best that can be achieved.

Approach to Planning

Strategic Direction

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland has agreed a strategic direction for the next 5 years.

The overarching theme is one of Transformation. The Board has identified its strategic drivers and the work areas which will deliver on its primary function to provide children's court guardians who have a statutory duty to safeguard the interests of children and young people in specified court proceedings. These strategic drivers are set out below. The business plan objectives are aligned to the identified work areas.

Transformation

Strategic Drivers

Culture

Data

Improvement

Work Areas

**Children and
Young People**

**Support
to staff**

Systems

Compliance
Efficiency
Effectiveness

Influencing

Management Structure of the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland

The Board

The Agency has a Board with a complement of 4 non-executive directors and a Chair, all appointed under the public appointments process.

The Board of the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland is responsible for;

- Setting the strategic direction;
- Monitoring the performance;
- Ensuring highest standards of corporate governance and personal behavior;
- Ensuring proper financial stewardship; and
- Appointing and appraising Senior Officers.

The Agency has a relatively small senior leadership team (SLT) who deliver the Business Plan as agreed by the Board. The SLT consists of the Chief Executive, the two Assistant Directors, the Head of Corporate Governance and the Business Support Manager.



SLT Key roles include:

The Chief Executive who:

- Is accountable to the Board of the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland for the efficient and effective management of the organisation and ensuring it fulfils its statutory functions and meets the objectives agreed by the Board;
- Is the Accounting Officer for the Agency and in that capacity is directly responsible to the Permanent Secretary of the DoH in accounting for the Agency's use of public funds; and
- Is answerable through the Agency Board, to the Minister for Health.

Assistant Directors who:

- Provide line management of the Children's Court Guardians;
- Ensure the allocation of a Guardian as requested by the Court;
- Provide supervision and support to Guardians in their case management;
- Provide oversight of the professional development and practice of Guardians;
- Provide oversight of the solicitor panel;
- Provide strategic representation for the Agency in Health and Social Care; and
- Provide Social Care Governance for the Agency.

The Head of Corporate Services who:

- Manages corporate services functions of the organisation; and
- Manages the governance framework and risk management of the organisation.

The Business Support Manager who:

- Provides secretariat to the Agency Board;
- Manages the Admin support function which provides support directly to Guardians; and
- Manages the business support functions for the senior leadership team (SLT) and the operational leadership team (OLT).

The OLT is led by the two Assistant Directors and includes the Guardian Services Managers and the business support staff who provide statistical support on the operation of the guardian services.

Guardian Services Managers

These newly appointed posts have been developed to provide additional capacity to the Social Work workforce to assist with the improvement agenda, the quality of Guardian practice and provide increased support to Guardians:

- Responsible for allocation of cases including triaging the unallocated cases;
- Facilitate the peer group supervision for Children's Court Guardians; and
- Be active participants of the Operational Leadership Team to oversee and improve the quality of practice.

Objectives for 2023-24

The Board of the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland has agreed the objectives set out below for this year. The objectives are set out under the strategic themes agreed by the Board.

Throughout the year the Agency will undertake projects and activities in addition to those referred to its business plan. This will be informed by health and social care service developments (including opportunities for collaborative working) and issues raised through engagement with the Department, other health and social care organisations and the children and young people the Agency represents. This work will be included in regular reporting to the Board, where appropriate. Where this work is considered a priority by the Chief Executive and is identified as resource intensive it will be brought to the Board for consideration in light of the agreed Business Plan objectives.

Work outside the Business Plan will include the Agency engaging regularly with key stakeholders to ensure the service provided to children and young people is based on a foundation of quality and best outcomes; this will be done by attending meetings and groupings hosted by the Department of Health (DoH), Health and Social Care Trusts, the Public Health Agency and other organisations and forums involved in the delivery of health and social care.

Examples of this work include;

- The Agency meeting its obligations as a member agency of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI);
- Being represented on the SBNI Sub Groups on Child Protection, Mental Health, Trauma Informed Practice and SBNI Governance;
- Participation in the Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Agenda (DoH, HSC Trusts, Probation Board);
- Participation in the 'Northern Ireland Social Work Leadership Network' (NISWLN);
- Professional links with Leaders in Health and Social Care and Justice through local and regional organisations and Departments;
- CEO Network for the 'Arm's Length Bodies' (ALBs);
- Information Governance Advisory Group;
- Attending Assistant Directors Forum meetings;
- Attending Principal Practitioner Forum meetings; and
- Attending Regional Signs of Safety Steering Group.

The Agency's attendance and contribution to these groups will focus on ensuring that children's court guardians can fulfil their statutory function to safeguard the interests of children and young people in Court.

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
<p>1. Children and Young People</p>	<p>We will develop and implement an engagement strategy for children and young people.</p>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-engage young people and refresh the Youth Forum following COVID 19 restrictions. 	<p>April 23</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate models of engaging children and young people to underpin the engagement strategy for the Agency. 	<p>October 23</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop mechanisms which will enable children and young people's views to influence practice development. 	<p>January 24</p>		

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
2. Support to Staff	We will support the health and wellbeing of our staff.		
	• Through continuing the Inspire program.	April 23	
	• By using Data for performance reporting on the Agency's work.	April 23	
	• Through greater transparency about workloads, to improve equity of caseloads.	April 23	
	• Through development and implementation of a case grading system.	September 23	
	• By creating succession opportunities to meet recruitment challenges through development of an entry level Guardian role.	May 2023	
	We will support staff through learning and development opportunities to provide a quality service to children and young people.		
	• Providing Learning and Development opportunities to all staff to fulfill their job role.	March 24	
	• Providing specific Social Work practice-based learning opportunities to support the delivery of high-quality practice by Guardians.	March 24	
	• Review and update the Practice Guidance for Guardians to provide clarity of expectations and improve quality.	May 23	
	We will embed the HSC collective leadership model to support collaborative working and team culture.		
	• Have an inclusive approach to involving staff in the continuous improvement agenda.	April 23	
	• Establish staff/ team meetings to help promote 'team' approach.	April 23	
	• Establish a cross functional working group to develop an internal communication strategy.	June 23	
	• Develop an internal communication strategy.	September 23	

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
3. Systems Compliance Efficiency Effectiveness	We will continually review and improve our systems and processes to ensure they are efficient and effective to support the delivery of a high-quality service to children and young people.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing duplication in how we work. 	October 23	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing committee structures. 	May 23	
	We will continue to improve the collection, collation and evaluation of our data to influence better outcomes for children.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using Data to inform improvements in what we do, evidenced in our reporting to the Board. 	April 23	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By using Data for performance reporting on the Agency's work. 	April 23	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By identifying an appropriate structure and oversight for the development of the Data function. 	June 23	
	We will seek to optimise the use of our resources to achieve a high-quality service for children and young people.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With a review of the Self-Employed Guardian contract of service. 	June 23	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With an action plan from the Admin and Corporate review. 	April 23	

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
<p>4. Influencing</p>	<p>We will use opportunities to promote the role of the agency and to influence policy and practice to improve the lives of children and young people.</p>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through connecting, collaborating and partnership working with other organisations, including Trusts, the Agency will raise awareness of its role. 	<p>April 23</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using our Data to support influencing opportunities to improve practice and policy. 	<p>March 24</p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using the Agency name change and move to new Belfast premises to widely promote the role and purpose of the Agency. 	<p>May 23</p>	



Children's Court Guardian Agency

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



Offices

James House

2-4 Cromac Avenue
Gasworks Business Park
Ormeau Road
BELFAST BT7 2JA

Spencer House

14-22 Spencer Road
LONDONDERRY
BT47 6QA

Dobbin Centre

Dobbin Street Lane
ARMAGH
BT61 7QL



0300 555 0102



admin@nigala.hscni.net



www.nigala.hscni.net