



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

Quality Report 2023-24

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Foreword

This year has been one of opportunity and challenge, this is the first year of the Agency five-year strategic plan 2023-2028, the overarching theme of which is transformation. The Agency has embarked on a journey of transformation, the name change was a significant change for the Agency and for the Guardians. The new branding has now been installed in our three office bases. One of the biggest changes was the move to our new Belfast Offices in James House which is situated in the old Gasworks site. This is a modern office base with excellent facilities and access to a range of rooms which can be booked as required, which has given us greater flexibility.

The biggest challenge we have had this year has been our ability to allocate cases which have been appointed by the Courts, to a Guardian, in a timely way. We have had a significant unallocated waiting list throughout the year. The situation has been compounded by a number of factors.

There is an increasing number of children who are looked after so the demand for a Guardian remains high. This year we had 803 requests from the Courts for Guardian appointments, which involved 1,226 children which is an increase from the previous year. The number of cases closed at the end of March 2024, was 773 cases (1,211 children), which is slightly lower than the number of case closures in 2022-23. Of the referrals received there were 295 cases (36.7%) which were return cases.

The number of unallocated cases has remained between 130–150 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 an unprecedented level of sickness absence during the year which has impacted significantly on the ability to allocate cases. The posts which became vacant due to retirements have been recruited and staff commenced into post during the year and following induction have gradually built up their caseloads.

As part of the transformation agenda, the Agency developed a new Guardian role, enabling staff to commence in post and have greater support whilst developing their



skills and experience, with a differentiated caseload from the more experienced Guardian staff. These new staff have been recruited into post and have completed their induction and will be building up their cases. It will take time for them to transition into the role and for the impact to be realised. This has increased the Guardian workforce, however, there are likely to be more changes given the demography of the workforce within the Agency.

The three strategic drivers within the Strategic Plan are Improvement, Data and Culture. These will be applied across four strategic work areas children and young people, support to staff, systems and influencing.

The development of the new guardian role, the caseload grading initiative, the improvements with the internal Guardian Case Information system and the implementation of the revised recording and supervision policy are all part of the improvements within the Agency during the last year to deliver the strategy.

The focus on quality and on social care governance has been a theme this year.

The importance of the involvement of children and young people in our work cannot be underestimated. The Youth Board has continued and has been refreshed. The young people involved have assisted with the rebranding within the Agency and in the revision of the tools which were developed originally with young people, About me and About Court. In a first for the Agency, young people attended the Board meeting in December 2023, which enabled them to give a first-hand account of their experience of having a guardian and of being in the court process. It has been agreed that this will become an annual occurrence to ensure that the youth board has direct access to the Board and an opportunity to feedback on things we need to improve.

It is also worthy of note that the young people in the Youth Board, received a Highly Commended award at this year's VOYPIC Care Day event (Voice of Young People In Care) which was held at Queen's University in Belfast. The involvement of children and young people is vital to the work of the Agency.

As well as engagement with children and young people, feedback on their experiences with the Agency is important and this year, we have refreshed the system of feedback



to ensure we increase this. This is included as a mandatory part of record keeping, feedback in their own words. We have also developed a new app for younger children and children with additional needs, to provide easier access to give direct feedback. This has been piloted and is due to be rolled out following final testing. This is an important part of improvement within the Agency and will provide additional information to assist with our focus on data and how this can be used to improve the quality of the service to children and young people, a key part of the strategy.

The delay pilot commissioned by the Shadow Family Justice Board delay subgroup is reaching a conclusion. The pressures on the wider system and the need to ensure the accuracy of the data from all five Trusts and the Agency have taken longer than anticipated. The report will hopefully contribute to the reduction in delay for children and young people. Already highlighted are the differences in the way information is collected across Trusts, which makes it more challenging to provide meaningful analysis and data which might assist in improving the experiences of children and young people within public law proceedings.

There has been a lot of work undertaken by the Agency during the last year. The main challenge has been the management of the number of unallocated cases. This is a constant concern of the Family Division Judiciary whom we meet on an annual basis. The Agency is aware of the frustration within the family courts around this challenge. The Guardian Services Managers and the Assistant Directors have retained a constant focus on allocation, including implementing emergency measures this year to ensure that the most urgent cases are prioritised and allocated.

The guardians have also 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. I want to acknowledge all of this hard work and dedication, despite the ongoing pressures. I am very grateful to staff for all of their work. I would also want to acknowledge the work of the corporate and business support staff who provide all the support to guardians 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.

Dawn C Shaw

Dawn C Shaw OBE
Chief Executive
(01.04.21- 29.11.24)



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 and**
- **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

We will make achieving high quality the top priority at all levels in health and social care. We will promote and encourage partnerships between staff, patients, clients and carers to support decision making.

In 2023-24, 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 are children and young people. The development of participation structures for children and young people to contribute to our organisation and promoting the engagement of children and young people to tell us what matters to them when their situation is before the Family Court, continues to be embedded in our culture.

Our focus in 2023-2024 has been engagement with children and young people to enhance how we capture individual feedback and the re-generation of the Agency Youth Board and its contribution to our 5yr Strategic plan.

As part of the process to improve service delivery to children and young people, the Children's Court Guardian Agency provides feedback opportunities to children and young people (aged 7 years and over) at the end of their court proceedings. Our Youth Board members have shared their experiences of our service and their experience within the Family Courts. Their contributions have had a meaningful impact upon practice, for example, their feedback has resulted in guidance on how their views should be reflected verbatim in the Agency report templates for Guardians, and has influenced practice and guidance related to the recording of information.



The Agency engaged with a design company and as part of the rebranding exercise, a group of children and young people participated with a focus group and contributed their ideas about the Agency's new branding and website design. Young people have also contributed to the choice of images which represent children and families on the Agency website as well as on leaflets and resources for engaging with children and young people. These young people were nominated for an award for social action at the VOYPIC Care Day awards for stepping up to improve policy and practice for other children and young people

Most recently the Youth Board have been consulted with in relation to the revised professional standards in relation to Engagement with Children and Young People. This has involved co working with VOYPIC.

In December 2023, members of the Youth Board attended for the first time a Board meeting which enabled them to give a first-hand account of their experience of having a guardian and of being in the court process. It has been agreed that this will become an annual occurrence to ensure the Youth Board has direct access to the Board and an opportunity to feedback on things we need to improve. This also ensures that our participation structures for young people provide a platform to influence at Board level.

Promoting the participation of children and young people's involvement in the Youth Board and promoting the culture of participation in the Agency remains an ongoing process and an objective to which we are very committed. Going forward the focus of our work with our Youth Board is to develop and implement a Children's and Young People's Engagement and Participation Strategy. The Strategy will be underpinned by the Lundy Model and benchmarking strategies for the development of Children and Young People's engagement and participation structures across other organisations continues. We will continue to collaborate with VOYPIC in this area of work and a draft Strategy is expected by the end of September 2024.

It is also worthy of note that the young people in the Youth Board, received a Highly Commended award at this year's VOYPIC Care Day event in February 2024 which was held at Queen's University in Belfast. The involvement of children and young people, is vital to the work of the Agency.



Children's Feedback

As well as engagement with children and young people, feedback on their experiences with the Agency is important and this year, we have refreshed the system of feedback to ensure we increase this. This is included as a mandatory part of record keeping, feedback in their own words. We have also developed a new app for younger children and children with additional needs, to provide easier access to give direct feedback. This has been piloted and is due to be rolled out following final testing. This is an important part of improvement within the Agency and will provide additional information to assist with our focus on data and how this can be used to improve the quality of the service to children and young people, a key part of the strategy.

GCIS functionality enables children and young people to provide feedback on the service they received both via hardcopy or via an app. A previous Quality Improvement exercise focused on improving rates of children and young people's feedback in the Agency. This is an ongoing project and was incorporated into the recent IT improvement plan by revisiting with staff the mechanisms for enabling feedback in order to improve opportunities for feedback and to continue to promote the culture of feedback across the Guardian group.

As part of our ongoing QI approach to feedback from children and young people, we have incorporated feedback from children and young people into the Supervision and Appraisal processes for reflection/evaluation, we upload feedback received onto the child/young person's file, and have embedded feedback as an essential field in the case closure systems and processes. This has been supported by promoting the accompanying narrative provided about the value of children and young people's feedback which is promoted during induction programmes for new staff for the wider staff group as part of the supervision and appraisal meetings.

The ongoing process to embed a culture of feedback highlights our commitment to placing the views of children and young people at the centre of our organisation.



Feedback Forms generated

Figures about feedback from children and young people for 2023-24 highlight improvements in levels of feedback generated by guardians. In 2022-23 there were 399 feedback forms generated by guardians to children and young people. In 2023-24 the number increased to 557, an increase of 158.

The increase in forms generated by guardians has resulted in a higher number of returns.

In 2022-2023 there was a 34% return rate and in 2023-2024 this rose to 36%. The return rate for paper questionnaires was 11% higher than returns via the app.

Feedback Responses

The feedback responses by children and young people are shared with guardians as part of supervision and appraisal processes. The content of feedback reflects a largely positive experience by children and young people of the service provided as evidenced by the following sampling of comments:

“Explained everything”

“Talked about Court and helped me to understand better”

“Took an interest in me and listened”

“Helped me to get my view to Court and explained stuff very clearly for me to understand”



Solicitor Feedback Responses

The Agency continues to collate feedback from solicitors regarding their experiences of working with the Guardians. The comments below outlines some of the feedback collated during 2023-2024:

“The Guardian was diligent, competent, professional and friendly. She was a pleasure to work with and was very clear in her communications and always available when needed”

“Whilst the overall outcome of the case was never in question, this was a difficult case given the manner in which the child had been removed from the jurisdiction. The Guardian's report greatly assisted the Court in setting out the myriad concerns regarding safeguarding”

“The CCG was highly communicative and proactive and undertook an extremely helpful and thorough analysis and report in this complicated and difficult case”

The Agency also collates feedback from the Judiciary and solicitors regarding the wider service provision by the Agency and the below comments reflect some of the feedback during 2023-2024:

“Despite the challenges in the system at present, the guardians can quickly prioritise the need of the children and give clear instructions.”

“The credibility of the guardians cannot be under estimated, due to the level and intense form of investigation they undertake.”

“The Guardians are all excellent we just need more of them.”

“The only issue with the quality of service is the backlog with allocations, otherwise the quality is excellent.”



2. Strengthening the Workforce

We will provide the right education, training and support to deliver high quality service. 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.

Introduction of the new Guardian Role

As part of the transformation agenda, the Agency developed a new Guardian role, enabling staff to commence in post and have greater support whilst developing their skills and experience. This cohort of staff are allocated a differentiated caseload from the more experienced Principal Guardian staff. 6 new staff were recruited into post in February 2024 increasing workforce capacity. Following a period of induction, they will be supported to build up their caseloads. The Agency's hope is that this new Guardian role will enable staff to consolidate their learning and knowledge and enable them to apply for Principal Guardian roles when they become available, thus creating a career pathway and succession planning within the Agency.

Induction Training

Induction training programmes for newly appointed Children's Court Guardians and Principal Children's Court Guardians have been ongoing during 2023-24. Induction is a valued process in the Agency. As well as providing an introduction to the role and information on systems and processes, the purpose of the induction programme is to support a positive culture within our Agency. The induction programme is delivered by professional staff who have specialist knowledge of the various aspects of the Children's Court Guardian role, and by Corporate and Administrative colleagues, who work together in order to ensure the induction programme is informative and supportive. Peer mentoring by an experienced Principal Children's Court Guardian is



also provided for new groups of staff, to enable connections between peers and to promote a supportive culture and group cohesion in the longer term.

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.

A webinar was hosted on 29th November 2023 "Unaccompanied Minors: Journey Through Court and Care". The webinar explored the practice challenges for those providing services to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people in public law proceedings. The updated "Working Protocol to promote a mutually enabling and collaborative working relationship between the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland and Barnardo's Independent Guardian Service" was launched at the webinar. There were inputs on the regional supports and services for separated and unaccompanied asylum-seeking young children. The legal issues were addressed alongside the reflections of two young people on their lived experience of coming to Northern Ireland and navigating the system. Workers engaging directly with unaccompanied minors addressed the importance of cultural competence and trauma informed practice.

Staff Support

Wellbeing and support for staff is a key component of our strategy. The plan is to refresh the Health and Safety Committee so that there is an enhanced focus on staff wellbeing and to be more inclusive in terms of membership. The Committee meets twice per year and oversees the Health and Safety requirements of the Agency and any new H&S requirements as advised by BSO, who support the work of the



committee. Membership will be extended to include additional business support representatives as well as Guardians who have different lengths of experiences in the agency.

Staff continue to avail of Inspire resources in line with individual needs. This is offered as appropriate on an ongoing basis. The new Supervision arrangements once implemented, will enable the Guardian Services Managers to have a fuller understanding of staff's support needs and will inform staff support plans going forward.

Develop and Implement a Learning and Development Strategy

The Agency has introduced a new online learning system called the Learning Management System. This allows staff to manage and monitor their learning. The launch of the system is focused on 9 mandatory e-learning packages. These are - Fire safety - Risk Management Awareness - Manual Handling Awareness - Fraud Awareness - Health and Safety Awareness - Information Governance - Cyber Security Awareness - Display Screen Equipment Awareness - Equality, Good Relations and Human Rights; Making a Difference Monitoring of compliance will be reported on quarterly.

The Agency has been without a learning and development post holder since May 2021. The previous Learning and improvement Job Description has been revised and been through Agenda for Change Evaluation. The recruitment for this post will commence in September 2024 when the new AD comes into post. They will be responsible for the development of the Learning and Improvement strategy and for supporting the social care governance function.

Three Guardian Staff completed the Stronger Together SW leadership course. One member of staff has completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Health Care Management. Two Guardians have been nominated for the Stronger Together leadership Course which commences in October 24.

Cultural competency training was provided to the Guardian staff group during 2023-2024 with a further session planned for those staff who were unable to attend. 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.

The Agency remains committed and engaged in opportunities for staff to avail of learning and practice development initiatives.

Investors in People

The Agency developed its new strategic plan during 2022-23. The Plan recognises “our staff, our Team of Guardians and our Corporate and business support team remain our most important asset”. Our plan’s success is underpinned by Data, Improvement and Culture.

During the year the Agency undertook the Investors in People (IiP) programme to calibrate its leadership and commitment to staff. The Agency retained its Silver award to the programme.

The aim of the programme is to use this independent, accredited framework to understand how we lead, support and develop our people at work. The outworking helps us to understand our current strengths, how we develop our people, provide a safe and healthy working environment for motivated and engaged staff, who are committed to supporting cultural change in the organisation, system and ways of working.

The programme found a number of key messages for the Agency

- Our strategic priorities and objectives describe how you will work towards your vision and meet the needs of children and young people
- Our people come to work to do a great job that makes a real difference
- Efforts are made to get the best out of people by providing clear structures within which they can operate
- People display a high level of dedication to their work, feel empowered to carry out their roles and want to do a good job



- Staff are encouraged to use their knowledge and expertise to deliver
- We support and promote learning activities
- People are proud of what has been collectively achieved through a period of great uncertainty and significant challenge
- Continuous improvement efforts are widespread

The programme also highlighted two areas to improve upon, recognising and rewarding performance and managing performance with a transparent and equitable system for allocating work.

We have already looked at these findings in our Business plan for the year and the new 5year strategy.



3. Measuring the Improvement

We will improve outcome measurement and report on progress for safety effectiveness and the patient/client experience. 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

The entry point for children and young people to our service is the Allocation process. During 2023-24 there has been an increase in children and young people waiting for a Guardian which continues to be a challenge for the Agency. In April 2023, the number of cases waiting for allocation was 97 in relation to 160 children. At the end of March 2024, the number had risen to 116 in relation to 204 children. This number spiked to 163 cases (269 children) in December 2023 and was consistently high throughout the year. These increases are set against a wider system’s pressure due to the rise in the number of Looked After Children regionally. At the end of March 2024, there were 3,999 Looked After Children in Northern Ireland. This was the highest number recorded since the introduction of the Children (NI) Order 1995.



The Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) connects all areas of our service to children and young people. This commences with; receipt of the Appointment by the Court of a Children's Court Guardian by the Administration Team, followed by the allocation of children's cases by the Guardian Services Managers, the case management of the child/young person's case by the Guardian through the Court process to case closure before finally the generation of feedback which is managed by the Corporate and Administration team. Following a previous audit and training to all staff in 2022-23, the significance of the GCIS system in supporting our service to children and young people and generating high quality data has remained a focus.

Case Grading Exercise and Improvements to the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS)

Case Grading Exercise

A case grading workstream was established following engagement sessions with staff in 2022-2023 to address equity in allocation processes and equity in caseloads.

The case grading exercise was undertaken by a group of guardians, Guardian Services Managers, and Assistant Directors with the input and guidance from the HSC Leadership Centre using the Quality Improvement approach.

The aim of the workstream was to:

- Devise a Case Grading system to support an equitable and transparent allocation process
- Identify a measure for Guardians' caseloads which reflects case complexity as well as number of cases.
- Consider how the Guardian Case Information System(GCIS) data will support and inform the case grading process

As part of the case grading process, to deepen understanding of variations in case load and case activity, an audit of cases in the system for over 300 days was undertaken which enabled identification of what is working well as well as areas where improvement was needed.



Improvements have focused on the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS), the IT system which connects our service from receipt of initial applications from Court Service through to; allocation; solicitor appointment; case management; recording of children's information; report writing and report submission to Court as well as children and young people's feedback. GCIS provides invaluable data which can be of benefit internally and externally as we are a regional organisation with oversight of pattern and trends relating to children and young people whose cases are before the Family Courts.

Using the QI framework, the workstream identified the aim for GCIS to be used consistently to facilitate the timeliness of information inputted to ensure the reliability of the data generated. Co-operation between the Professional and Corporate Leadership Teams facilitated the design and implementation of a learning and improvement plan where advantages and challenges with the system's functionality were shared, helpful changes identified and a plan to make changes to functionality taken forward.

The next step involved small group sessions to implement the use of GCIS and the use of the QI framework in this improvement plan fostered a collective approach across the Agency to improving our service.

Having embedded GCIS as a working system, the next step was to develop with the Guardian workstream the domains and weightings in the case weighting system. The formulas devised were piloted on five occasions, by an increasing number of guardians using the QI PDSA cycles. The aim was to keep the process simple in order to ensure its efficacy. In February 2024, the final version of the case weighting tool was included in the functionality of the GCIS IT system and further in person small group sessions were arranged to support the roll out.

The case grading tool went live on 5th February 2024 and a review of its effectiveness in supporting timely allocations alongside equitable caseloads, will be included in the audit plan for 2025.



4. Raising the Standards

We will establish a framework of clear evidence-based standards and best practice guidance. 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 2023-24. The 2017 Professional Standards were revised due to changes and developments in policy and the need for clarity in Agency expectations of practice. A collective approach was adopted which involved a group of Guardians from across the three office bases and a Guardian Services Manager who led on the project. The standards were set in a framework and are linked to wider regional policies around supervision, appraisal, recording and aligned with the NISCC standards. Our Youth Board have been involved in this area of work and their views and suggestions have been incorporated into a draft version which we will be shared with staff for comment and feedback. It is hoped that the final version of the Professional Standards will be implemented by September 2024. Going forward the new Standards will need to be monitored through supervision and internal social work audits to measure compliance.

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.

A programme to revise and update the Agency's Supervision Policy is also underway. The updated Policy will be aligned to the new Regional Social Work Supervision Policy and will incorporate peer group supervision for all Guardian staff. The updated Policy supports the development of improved supervision for Guardians as employed Social Workers. The frequency of supervision is compliant with the expectations as set out the Regional Policy. To support the provision of supervision for social work staff, peer



Group Supervision is an integral part of the supervision infrastructure within the Agency and is facilitated by Guardian Services Managers. The bespoke nature of peer group supervision in the Agency has been embedded to ensure that as social workers, 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 has developed a Social Care Governance framework based on the regional Guidance from the DoH on best practice for Social Care Governance. The Agency has also developed a series of improvements of practice to support staff in achieving best practice including the revision of the supervision policy which is aligned to the regional Policy on the supervision of Social Workers within HSC, the recording policy to place particular emphasis on the feedback from children and young people and the development of revised practice standards. These have been led by the Assistant Directors supported by the Guardian Services Managers. These and the compliance with the social governance assurances are reported to the Social Care Governance Committee and ultimately to the Board.



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 2023-24. The Committee is chaired by a member of the Board and reports to the Board after each meeting.



5. Integrating the Care

We will develop integrated pathways of care for individuals. 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 has benefitted 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. Given the anticipated changes in the leadership team during 2024, the new CEO will need to review membership to ensure the Agency is represented and continues to profile the work of the Agency.

Children's Court Guardian Agency/HSC Delay Pilot

The issue of delay in court proceedings and the impact on children has been the source of concern for some time. The Care Proceedings Pilot, aimed at promoting good decision making and minimising unnecessary delay for children subject of care proceedings was launched jointly by the Departments of Health and Justice in 2015. The key findings were published in October 2017.

The Shadow Family Justice Board (sFJB) established a sub-committee on delay in 2019 with a remit to



- Monitor and review case duration across all court tiers in public law Children Order proceedings with a view to drawing out relevant themes;
- To identify issues contributing to the increase in waiting times and propose appropriate remedial actions for consideration by the sFJB
- To provide regular updates and recommendations to the sFJB

The Children's Court Guardian Agency /HSC pilot was identified as a means of collecting baseline quantitative data from all the Care Order applications issued by the five HSCT's over a six-month period from 1/12/21-31/5/22. The project team (Children's Court Guardian Agency Assistant Director, Guardian Services Manager and the Principal Practitioners for Court in the five HSCT's) identified what information it would be beneficial to capture at the outset of court proceedings. The second phase of the pilot tracked cases over 300 days duration against agreed qualitative information to establish themes/issues that were contributing to delay. The sample size while small, relates to cases across each of the five Trusts. The pilot did not include Solicitors or the Judiciary and the findings are based on a social work perspective.

The key findings and recommendations remain in draft and have been shared with the Regional Assistant Director Forum for comment and feedback.

The findings need to be considered in context. The current context is challenging both in respect of workload demand and staffing pressures. The impact of Covid'19 is borne out in both the increased number of children on the child protection register and children and young people in care in Northern Ireland. The increased case numbers and associated case complexity alongside significant staffing and resources pressures across the HSCT's and within the Agency serve to reinforce the reality of systemic pressures.

Early indicators from the pilot suggest the sources of delay are in keeping with the findings from the Care Proceedings Pilot. It is likely that any final recommendations will reflect those from the 2017 Pilot 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 130 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.

A joint training event was facilitated on 25th October 2023 with an input on the role of the Official Solicitor when appointed in proceedings to represent parents who lack capacity to instruct a Solicitor.



External Networking / influencing

Children's Session at NICON

The Chief Executive chaired the parallel session at NICON, which focused on the Children's Social Care Reform. This was very successful session, it included the Director of Family and Children's Policy at the DoH, a senior policy and public affairs representative from the Reimagine Children's Collective, a group of 10 children's Charities in NI and an interim Director of Children's Services from a Trust. It was well attended including an MLA who is a member of the Health Committee. The conference was also attended by the Health Minister and both the First and Deputy First Ministers. The Health Committee had a stand this year and they confirmed that the Children's social care reform was their top priority and they were going to continue spotlight the issues.

The Chief Executive is a member of the Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland.

