



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

# Quality Report 2022-23





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# Foreword

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The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland is the new name for the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA). In this annual Quality Report, the use of the name Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland includes the period of the year the organisation was known as NIGALA.

This is the Agency's Tenth Annual Quality Report for the year 2022-23. The Report outlines a number of initiatives it has undertaken during the last year to improve the service it provides to children and young people and raise the quality of service within the Agency. The report follows the headings which align its work to the DOH vision as set out in *Quality 2020 - a 10 Year Strategy* to protect and improve quality in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland.

As Chief Executive of the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland, I am committed to the provision of high-quality standards of service in advising the courts of children's wishes and feelings and independently representing and safeguarding the best interests of children who are the subjects of Specified Public Law proceedings and Adoption proceedings in Northern Ireland.

The Children's Court Guardians (formerly known as Guardians Ad Litem) are highly dedicated and skilled Social Work professionals who play a vital role in safeguarding children's best interests at a critical point in time when state intervention in family life requires public law proceedings, including adoption. It typically involves difficult judgements in balancing the rights of the child and birth family to be together and the right of the child to be protected from harm. A commitment to quality and continuous improvement is core to the delivery of a quality service to the children and young people with whom we work.

During this second year as, Chief Executive with the Agency the focus has been on strategic changes including our name, which has been brought about with the commencement of the implementation of The Adoption and Children Act (2022), The Children's Court Guardian



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Agency for Northern Ireland (Establishment and Constitution) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 which came into force on the 6<sup>th</sup> March 2023. This changed the name of the Agency from the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency to the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland. The Guardians Ad Litem are now known as Children's Court Guardians.

Previous engagement sessions with staff, led to the development of three key priorities for the Agency; **Data**, and the use of our information to better inform ourselves and to improve the lives of children and young people; **Improvement**, actively looking at the quality of the service we provide to children and young people and how this can be further improved; **Culture**, the work of the Agency, like other organisations has been impacted by COVID, including staff isolation alongside the benefits of remote working. Culture underpins the work of every organisation and it is important that the culture is reflective of the Health and Social Care Values to which we are aligned, to ensure we optimise the work of the Agency and the quality of the service to children and young people.

These were the focus to our Action plan during the last year. It also formed the basis of the new five-year Strategic Plan. The Strategic plan was developed, consulted upon and agreed during the last year and has embedded these three key themes of Data Culture and Improvement as strategic drivers under the overarching theme of Transformation.

These will be applied to four key strategic work areas; Children and Young People, Support to staff, Systems and Influencing.

This Quality report reflects some of the work we have undertaken during the past year to actively contribute to the implementation of the five-year strategy and our commitment to improving services for children and young people. The first priority in the strategic plan is children and young people and we are committed to furthering the engagement of children and young people in our work. They have actively contributed to the development of the new logo and branding for the Agency and through the Youth Forum, will support the revamping of the information we actively use in our direct work with children and young people. Feedback from children and young people is key to how we measure the quality of the service provided and the report reflects the work we have undertaken in this area.



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The Children's Court Guardian Agency is a demand led organisation and we have a statutory duty to provide a Guardian when requested. Managing allocation and the subsequent unallocated or waiting list cases is a vital part of managing quality within the Agency. Cases involve one or more children and we need to ensure that we do not in any way contribute to delay as this is not in the best interests of children. We have built on the previous work on allocation, with a focus on the processes used in the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) using audit processes, to identify improvements to the use of the system to improve our data collection. In addition to providing up to date information internally to enable efficiency in allocation processes, the data generated by GCIS provides information on patterns and trends across the region relating to children and young people whose families are before the Family Courts.

In terms of supporting staff we are delighted we have retained our Silver Investor in People (liP) Award, given all the challenges which came with the impact of COVID 19 pandemic, the changes which the Agency has embraced including the name change and the move of our Belfast Office from Centre House to a new base in James House in the Gasworks site. The liP action plan will also support improvements to support our staff.

The most significant improvement project during the last year was the development of the Case Grading process. This was developed using QI methodology, led by one of the Assistant Directors and supported through the Leadership Centre. The aim of this is to enable an equitable workload for staff, currently there is a range in the number of cases which staff have allocated. Using only one measure for the caseload does not properly reflect the variations in the types of cases an individual will hold, including number of children, travelling distance and complexity. The QI methodology has developed the approach with direct involvement of staff, recording improvements through the PDSA cycles. This will enable a more standardised approach to our work and will also highlight situations where additional support is required and can be offered to those who require it. This will be a significant improvement in how we work, with quality at the core of the service provided.

Also included in the report is an update on our work around the professional supervision of staff and the training agenda which is key to the provision of a quality service.



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All of these elements underpin the assurances required for the Children's Court Guardian Agency Board on Social Care Governance. The focus on the improvement on Social Care Governance will be a key area for improvement in the incoming year.

The final area of note is under our interagency work, highlighted in the work of the Delay Pilot under the auspices of the Shadow Family Justice Board. This has required interagency working across the five Health and Social Care Trusts, the Agency and legal professionals. Similarly, the well-established Inter-Agency Childcare and Legal Issues Group continues to promote our interagency work.

Despite our focus on improvement especially around allocation, the Agency has seen a continual increase in the demand for our service. This has been complicated this last year with some retirements, vacant posts and staff sickness contributing to the ongoing pressures on staff. Unfortunately, this has resulted in an increase in our unallocated cases, the equivalent of a waiting list. The Agency received **768** Requests for Guardians in 2022-23. This is an increase to the requests received in the previous year, 724 requests. The number of cases closed in year was **785**, significantly down from the previous year's total of 836. At the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, we held 765 live cases in respect of 1352 children and young people and we had 97 cases in respect of 160 children and young people waiting to be allocated to a Guardian. This creates an ongoing challenging environment in which we are operating.

Continuous improvement and providing a quality service remain our over-riding objective for the next twelve months and we hope to build on our strengths in the interests of the children and young people we serve. Finally, my heartfelt thanks to everyone in the Agency, Board members, guardians, the administration and corporate team and management team for all their hard work and dedication to the service.

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**Dawn C Shaw OBE, Chief Executive  
Children's Court Guardian Agency for NI**



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# Introduction

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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.



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# 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.

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Building upon the progress made previously, in 2022-23 the Agency has continued to develop a collective approach to embedding a culture of improvement informed by the HSC values.

## Children's Participation and Feedback

### **Youth Forum**

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.

In the last year we have started to rebuild our Youth Forum. In March 23 in order to ensure we had input by children and young people into our rebranding exercise, we engaged with a group of children and young people to ensure the branding and website design reflected their wishes and views. This included the colours and designs in the branding as well as the photographic images. The selections made by the young people reflected the sense of hope they wanted in their choice of colours and the positive representations of children and young people in the photographic images they chose.

The branding and images in the website are a tangible example of the contribution by children and young people participating with and contributing to the Children and Court Guardian Agency.

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## Children's Feedback

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.

The functionality of the Guardian Case Information System enables children and young people to provide feedback on the service they received via paper questionnaire or via an app.

A previous Quality Improvement exercise focused on improving the rates of children and young people's feedback in the Agency. The messaging about the mechanisms for enabling feedback on the Guardian Case Information System as well as the importance of enabling children and young people's feedback to improve practice were incorporated into a QI improvement training exercise as part of an ongoing approach to promote and embed the culture of feedback in the Agency .

An audit in relation to engagement with children in 2022-23 highlighted areas for further improvement in relation to children's feedback. A number of process measures were identified including; a measure to increase the opportunity for children and young people to provide feedback by removing options for "No Feedback"; increasing the priority and visibility of children's feedback in the case discharge process; ensuring children's feedback is included in appraisal and mid-year review as part of the conversation about placing children at the centre of the Agency; ensuring children and young people's feedback is uploaded onto their electronic files.

## Monitoring of Levels of Children's Feedback

The Agency has provision for children and young people providing feedback by using hard copy or by a feedback app.



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During 2022-23 there was a total of 574 children eligible to complete feedback. Of the 574 children, 'none' was selected as an option for 124 children. During 2022-23 it was agreed that the "None" options would be reviewed and monitored, with a view to removing these options.

399 children had feedback generated for them to complete. The number of returned feedback forms was 137, an overall 2% increase on 2021-22.

Of the 194 paper questionnaires which were sent out, 116 were returned, representing a 60% return rate. Of the 68 questionnaires generated by the app, there were 21 returned (31% return rate). The return rate for the paper questionnaire during 2022-23 increased by 25% and there was a 5% increase in the return rate for the app.

In addition to monitoring and promoting the levels of feedback opportunities made available to children and young people, the content of feedback is shared with individual Guardians and collated and reported upon to the Social Care Governance Committee. In 2022-23 of the 137 feedback forms which were returned, 98% of children and young people said the Guardian explained why they were visiting. 96% of children and young people felt the Guardian listened to them. 84% of children and young people said the Guardian let them know what the Judge decided. On a scale of 1-5, where 5 is very happy with the Guardian, 60% of respondents said they were very happy and 30% said they were happy.

The most common themes generated in the free text question what mattered to you during the time you had a guardian include the following;

- "the guardian was someone I could talk to"
- "the guardian helped me to understand what was happening"
- "explained what was happening"
- "asked about my feelings"
- "listened and heard my views"
- "helped me understand about court"
- "spoke to the Court about what I wanted"
- "represented me in court and listened to me"



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## 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.

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### Allocation

The entry point for children and young people to our service is the Allocation process. During 2022-23 there has been an increase in children and young people waiting for a Guardian which was a challenge for the Agency. In April 2022, the number of cases waiting for allocation was 49.

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.

During 2022-23 the significance of the GCIS system in supporting our service to children and young people and generating data has been a focus.

In order to ensure the systems and processes were in place to allocate children's cases and to manage cases waiting, a number of process changes were made to the functionality of the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) to assist with triaging and prioritisation of the most urgent cases pending allocation.

An audit on the use of GCIS September 2022 highlighted inconsistent use of GCIS which impacts on the quality of information stored and generated. This resulted in a Quality Improvement exercise which involved training for professional social work staff on GCIS

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between December 2022 and March 2023 to ensure that children and young people's information is recorded and uploaded in timely fashion and that information relating to caseloads and Guardian capacity is accurately reflected across our system.

In addition to providing up to date information internally to enable efficiency in allocation processes, the data generated by GCIS provides information on patterns and trends across the region relating to children and young people whose families are before the Family Courts. This highlights the valuable nature of up to date information which enables deeper understanding of issues impacting upon children and young people and promoting positive outcomes.

### Investors in People

The Agency developed its new strategic plan for 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 your 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 5-year 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

### Quality Improvement - Case Grading Workstream

During the year we have worked with the HSC Leadership Centre to implement elements of an Action Plan developed following engagement with staff in 2021-2022. As a direct response to Guardians concerns in relation to caseloads, case allocation, equity and transparency, a workstream was set up to develop a case grading system.

A small number of Guardians volunteered initially to participate in the project, with the number of participants increasing over the time the project has been running. A consultant from the HSC Leadership Centre has provided ongoing expertise in modelling the QI approach which has provided the framework for working collectively to improve our service. The purpose of the exercise 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

Through the course of the project in 2022-23, a number of underlying areas requiring improvement have been identified including;

- The need for increased transparency and the sharing of data generated by the Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) in relation to caseloads and throughput



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across the Guardian group. The information available to Managers when allocating cases about Guardian caseloads, throughput and current activity is now shared in anonymized form in order to create transparency around the allocation process

- A stratified sample of Guardian caseloads highlighted inconsistent use of the Guardian Case Information System. The QI approach was used in order to embed a collective approach to learning and improvement across the Agency. An improvement plan was designed to provide learning on GCIS functionality and delivered in small in person groups where information was imparted and knowledge and skills were shared between staff. The learning focused on promoting consistent use of inputting information into the Guardian Case Information System, where children and family's information is stored, and from where data can be collated and shared internally as well as regionally. Improvements have included changes to GCIS as a response to the experiences of staff who are the expert users and improved use of GCIS which in addition to providing the function for case management also provides a function for generating data which can highlight patterns and trends informing greater understanding of the needs of the children and young people in our system

Following the staff wide training exercise, the Guardians who contributed to the workstream developed a template to score a case grading system which has been shared with a wider group and trialled and tested as part of the QI "Plan Do Study Act" process.

Working together with the HSC Leadership Centre in 2022-23, the QI framework has contributed to a collective approach to develop an equitable and transparent system for the allocation of children's cases and the grading of caseloads.



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## 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.

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### Supervision

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.

The Supervision Policy was revised in 2020-21 in order to comply with the Regional Social Work Policy. In 2022-23 implementation of the revised Supervision Policy reflected a further stage in a process to ensure that supervision in the Agency adheres to regional guidance. The revised Policy has set out expectations of Guardians for attendance at individual supervision and at peer group supervision which is a bespoke development within the Agency and is now part of the supervision infrastructure.

Peer group supervision is a structured session, facilitated by the Guardian Services Managers and provides a space for professional development, peer reflection and peer learning.

Within the Agency there is a limited management structure. The recently developed Guardian Services Manager posts have provided additional management provision and Guardian Services Managers have been pivotal in implementing peer group supervision.

Incorporating peer group supervision into the supervision infrastructure ensures that Guardians can comply with the level of supervision required for social workers regionally. Monitoring and review of delivery of peer group supervision was ongoing during 2022-23

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and changes were made to processes and models of delivery in response to feedback from Guardians.

A recent audit of supervision recommended additional measures to support both provision and assurance mechanisms to report upon supervision within the Agency.

The implementation of the Supervision Policy in the Agency during 2022-23 reflects the commencement of the plan as set out in the Revised Supervision Policy, the aim of which is to increase the level of supervision in order to comply with regional requirements and to strengthen accountability and assurances relating to the quality of service provided to children and young people.

### Appraisal Policy

During 2022-23, the Agency revised the Appraisal Policy in order to comply with BSO Appraisal Policy. The HSC values and the principle of staff engagement with the organisation are integrated into the Appraisal Conversation which has embedded the Agency's position within the HSC, and promoted the culture of a shared purpose within the Agency.

Within appraisal, individual achievements are highlighted as well as objectives set to measure for improvement. The Appraisal Policy in this revised form was first implemented during 2022 to 2023 and provides a mechanism for reflecting on the standard of work achieved individually and collectively as data is shared which highlights the work of the organisation.

### Social Care Governance

Throughout 2022-23 the Social Care Governance Committee had a comprehensive Agenda. In addition to the Supervision and Appraisal Policies the revised Recording Policy was also presented to the Social Care Governance Committee in 2022. The Recording



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Policy reflected specific expectations in relation to the timeframes for updating information in adherence with the Regional Recording Policy.

Audit processes within the Agency during 2022-23 included an audit of recording which addressed engagement with children and young people in addition to timeliness of recording and adherence to standards relating to Information Governance. A further audit was carried out to consider consistency of the use of the Guardian Case Information System.

Arising from the outcomes of these audits, two Improvement Plans were presented to the SCG Committee and put in place.

Training was delivered across the staff group on the Recording Policy and Information Governance and a GCIS Implementation Plan was delivered in response to the audit on consistent use of GCIS. The training exercises facilitated reciprocal feedback as to where the GCIS systems could be improved in addition to clarity of expectations in relation to recording practices and the use of the IT systems.

Further training exercises were provided as part of the Learning and Improvement Agenda have been delivered in the Agency in 2022-23.

This included training in relation to Domestic Abuse, delivered by Women's Aid; the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Legislation; the Impact of Addictions on Children and Families; the CASP-R model of risk assessment delivered by Marcella Leonard and a joint Agency/ HSC training session on Adoption Processes.

On a weekly basis notification of online training opportunities are sent out to all staff which together with opportunities provided by the Agency, contributes to Guardians maintaining their personal and professional development and supports them to maintain their professional registration.



## Complaints

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland values all the feedback it receives. A valuable source of information for all HSC organisations is the complaints they receive on the services they provide. During the year the Agency dealt with 2 complaints from service users, with a further 2 complaints received in relation to cases live before the courts. The courts were informed of these complaints. The Agency received 9 compliments from those with whom it engaged.

During the year the Agency worked to enhance its complaints process and make it more responsive to anyone it engages with who is unhappy with the service it provides, including Health and Social Care partners.



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## 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.

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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 inter-agency 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 seminar on 18/5/22 "Parental Participation: Understanding the impact of trauma" with inputs from a psychologist, a social work academic and a Judge considered the importance of facilitating and supporting parental contact from a trauma informed perspective.

The Agency is represented on the SBNI mental health committee. This has proved beneficial in developing strategic networks and accessing information and resources on emotional health and wellbeing. The Agency hosted a joint Guardian/Solicitor seminar "Overview of the Mental Health Legislation and Strategy to inform practice" on 9/2/23 with inputs from Professor Siobhan O'Neill, Mental Health Champion and Eamonn McNally, Solicitor Children's Law Centre.

The Adoption Regional Information System (ARIS) Advisory/Adoption Development Group meets quarterly and an Agency Assistant Director is the independent chair. The group provides a forum for members to share learning and experiences of changing trends and developments in adoption policy and practice. It also promotes collaborative working.



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A regional workshop was held for adoption panel members to inform practice and promote regional consistency. The Agency in conjunction with the HSC adoption leads delivered an information and skills sharing event “Working Together in Adoption Proceedings” on 8/2/23. The event, which was attended by Guardians and Trust staff, addressed the stages and relevant policies, procedure and legislation to prepare cases for best interests, freeing and adoption.

### 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 pilot will culminate in a report and key recommendations to address the systemic sources of delay.

### Children's Court Guardian Agency Solicitor Panel

The Agency oversees and support a panel of Solicitors who are appointed by Guardians to represent children and young people in public law proceedings. 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 Agency Panel. The Agency is represented on the Children Order Panel Advisory Board which regulates the Solicitors practice and provides training to support ongoing continuous professional development.

A reference group with Guardian and Solicitor representatives meets quarterly to oversee and support the effective operation of the Panel and the associated governance requirements. Joint training on issues of mutual interests are provided as identified through the reference group. The group also responds to relevant consultations.



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# Learning from COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Agency operated within its Business Continuity Plan throughout the Pandemic. The Agency's response to the Pandemic characterised its work throughout that period. The emphasis on safety and new ways of working

New ways of working were developed in line with pandemic management guidelines to protect children, families, staff and the public in a time of Covid. This included the introduction of risk assessments and PPE.

All professionals and families had to rapidly adapt to new ways of working, and in particular using remote or socially-distanced means. Hybrid working has been introduced into the Agency allowing a more flexible work environment. Virtual communication has grown and covered all aspects of our work. This virtual engagement also included partnership working with the Courts in the introduction of virtual court hearings.

The Agency has retained this learning and moved out of the pandemic looking to improve how it works. The challenges of the past few years though have highlighted the importance of engaging meaningfully with children and young people.