



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

Strategic 2023-28 Plan





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Introduction

This is the Children's Court Guardian Agency's five-year strategy for 2023- 2028.

It outlines the ambition the Agency has set for the next five years, in delivering a Children's Court Guardian service to those children who are subject to public law and adoption proceedings in Northern Ireland.

This strategy marks a watershed for the Agency and builds on a 26-year history. The Agency was established as, the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency in 1996, referred to as NIGALA, with the central office base in Centre House in Belfast.

With the commencement of the implementation of The Adoption and Children Act (2022), The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland (Establishment and Constitution) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 came into force on the 6th 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 will now be known as Children's Court Guardians.

The previous 5-year Corporate Plan was developed in 2017 – 2021 and was extended until 2022, due to the impact of COVID.

The Agency is unique, it provides a specialist Social Work service to children and young people ensuring their views, wishes and feelings are included within public law proceedings. The Children's Court Guardians provide an assessment to the court on what they view as the best interests of children and young people based on their understanding of their circumstances, the involvement of the Health and Social Care Trusts and through their own enquires directly with children young people their families and carers. They provide a view which is independent of the Health and Social Care Trusts, focussing specifically on the child or young person and representing them within the court. They are a vital element in any of the proceedings to ensure the Judiciary are provided with an independent view to inform the decision making for children and young people before the Court.

Since April 2021 the Agency has engaged in a process of review, based on engagement with staff to look at how we can improve our service to children young people and families, to ensure we are providing the right level of support to our staff and that our systems are efficient and effective.

This process of engagement 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 three core elements, Data, Improvement and Culture are our main drivers for the next five years. They sit under our core theme of **Transformation**.

This is very much in line with the strategic direction of Health and Social Care within Northern Ireland which recognises that to achieve the best possible outcomes for patients and clients, in our case children and young people, we have to transform how and what we do. This also sits within a backdrop of stringent financial pressures which means we have to ensure everything we do is efficient and effective and supports positive outcomes for the children and young people we serve.

The Strategic Plan sets out the strategic goals of the organisation for the next five years, 2023-28. It provides the overall broad, long-term outcomes the organisation wants to achieve. It describes the Agency's ambitions for the future. The organisation's objectives are set out in an annual Business Plan and demonstrate the Board approved actions which will deliver the Strategic Plan.



Vision

Our vision is...

“Better outcomes for children and young people, through the promotion of their best interests and representation of their wishes and feelings in the family courts”.

Purpose

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



Establishment and Constitution

NIGALA was originally established in 1995 by the then Department of Health and Social Services as a Special Agency using powers conferred on it by the Health and Personal Social Services (Special Agencies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1990. The constitution of NIGALA was set out in the Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency (Establishment and Constitution) Order (NI) 1995, which came into operation on 1st December 1995.

The decision to change the name of the Agency was implemented by the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland (Establishment and Constitution) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023, which came into operation on 6 March 2023.

Function of the Agency

Following commencement of section 137 of the Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 on 13 February 2023, the guardian ad litem is now known as a **children's court guardian**.

Our primary function is to ensure the availability of suitably qualified, professionally competent court guardians and their prompt allocation in public law and adoption proceedings, when an appointment has been made by the court.

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. The children and young people involved in court proceedings will have a guardian who will get to know them and understand their circumstances in order to represent their feelings and wishes and promote their best interests.

Court Rules

Article 4.12 of the Family Proceedings Rules (NI) 1996 outlines the powers and duties of a children's court guardian in the family proceedings courts.

The Agency is a special agency and as a regional organisation is constituted as an Arm's Length Body (ALB), funded by the Department of Health, with a statutory function to provide a Children's Court Guardian service within the family courts. The Agency is responsible for the recruitment management, supervision, support, professional development, competence and monitoring of social work representation by children's court guardians for children and young people who are the subject of public law and adoption applications.

The Strategy

Over the next five years the overarching direction of the Agency is one of Transformation. The Agency has agreed a number of strategic drivers on which it will focus to transform itself. The strategic themes give direction to the annual business plan in the organisation. These themes will shape what we do. The Agency has identified a number of work areas to which it will apply the themes in its business planning.

The Strategic Drivers

The three strategic drivers were identified through a process of staff engagement and review over the last two years. They are Improvement, Data and Culture, each of these will drive transformation within the Agency in the key work areas of the Agency. This is depicted in the Strategic diagram and underpins the objectives for the Agency over the next five years.

Transformation

We will transform the Agency in line with the strategic direction of health and social care services in a challenging economic environment.

Transformation will be responsive to diversity, demography, changing social work practice, developments in social work practice and structural reform.

Strategic Drivers

Improvement

Data

Culture

Key strategic work Areas

Children and
Young People

Support
to staff

Systems

Influencing

Strategic Objectives

Our objectives are set out under the four key work areas which cover the main areas of the work of the Agency.

1. **Children and young people**
2. **Our staff**
3. **The systems we use and**
4. **Our ability to influence children and young people's policy and practice.**

These key areas were agreed as part of our strategic planning process.

1. Children and Young People

Representing the best interests and voice of vulnerable children and young people is the core of the work within the Agency. We therefore seek to engage with, and learn from, the children and young people who have had the support of a guardian in order to obtain feedback on all aspects of what we do and to enable us to improve all aspects of our service.

We are building on the previous work of the Northern Ireland Youth Associates Board which met regularly to give children and young people the opportunity to tell us about what about what matters to them when their family situation is before the Family Court.

We will include them as we move forward in developing a new strategy to improve the invaluable participation of children and young people in enabling us to improve what we do. Our first objective is based on this approach.

Objective 1:

Children and Young People

- We will develop and implement an engagement strategy for and with children and young people
- We will ensure that children and young peoples voices are fully represented in Court
- We will use a co-production methodology to include children and young people's views in improving our practice and the service.

2. Support to Staff

Our staff, our team of guardians and our corporate and business support team, remain our most important asset. The co-operation between these two teams is vital to the achievement of our aims in providing a high-quality service to children and young people in the family courts. We are committed to ensuring continuing learning and development opportunities to meet the needs of our staff. Our system of support to, supervision and monitoring of staff in their challenging roles, is designed to assist our workforce in their commitment to excellence. This includes working closely with our Solicitor panel and our Trust colleagues to ensure Guardians are up to date on current practices.

We will help staff wellbeing through continuing to access the regional resources available through the Business Services Organisation, including the Inspire programme.

Our staff engagement process has identified the challenge of improving our culture and we will continue to work towards the further development of a positive and supportive culture and to embed the collective leadership approach. We have strengthened staff supervision / team meetings and we will continue to look at how we can further the development of a positive and supportive culture within the Agency. Supporting our staff is therefore our second objective.

Objective 2:

Support to staff

- We will support staff through learning and development opportunities to provide a quality service to children and young people
- We will support the health and wellbeing of our staff
- We will embed the HSC collective leadership model to support collaborative working and team culture

3. Systems and processes

We all use systems and processes to fulfil our roles. These include governance, human resources, IT, finance, policies and procedures for practice. Improvements and changes to meet requirements are continuous so we need to ensure that everything we do is as efficient and effective as possible. This reduces duplication and should improve everyone's experience of using a system or process. We need to continually review these to ensure they are fit for purpose and meet our current requirements. Having an improvement focus for all of systems and processes is our third objective.

Objective 3:

Systems and processes

- 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
- We will continue to improve the collection, collation and evaluation of our data to influence better outcomes for children and young people
- We will seek to optimise the use of our resources to achieve a high-quality service for children and young people.

4. Influencing

The Children's Court Guardian Agency is in a unique position to understand the lives of children who are subject to public law proceedings and adoption proceedings. We have links with Social Work, the legal profession and with the judiciary as part of our role, this gives an opportunity for a unique insight into the lives of the children and young people we serve. We have been developing our data and improving the efficacy of our information. Our aspiration is that this information could be used to inform

and influence policy and practice to contribute to improving outcomes for children and young people. Using our data to influence positively is our fourth objective.

Objective 4:

Influencing

- 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.

Values

The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland as an Arm's Length Body within Health and Social Care (HSC), has a shared set of values that define our culture in everything we do. Health and Social Care values provide clarity for all HSC staff, including prospective staff, on the values we live by every day, and the behaviours expected of us.

Health and Social Care Values



Working Together

We work together for the best outcome for the people we care for and support. We work across Health and Social Care and with other external organisations and agencies, recognising that leadership is the responsibility of all.



Excellence

We commit to being the best we can be in our work, aiming to improve and develop services to achieve positive changes. We deliver safe, high quality, compassionate care and support.



Openness & Honesty

We are sensitive, caring, respectful and understanding towards those we care for and support and our colleagues. We listen carefully to others to better understand and take action to help them and ourselves.



Compassion

We are open and honest with each other and act with integrity and candour.

Implementation of the Strategy

The Five-year Strategy has been agreed by the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland and will be implemented by the Senior Leadership Team and the Operational Leadership Team through the Annual Business Plan.

The Business Plans will detail how each of the Objectives will be met and the work plan for the year. The Board will monitor progress of the Business Plan as part of their Governance function.





Children's Court Guardian Agency

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



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