

NIGALA

NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency

*A voice for Children and Young People
in Family Courts*

NORTHERN IRELAND GUARDIAN AD LITEM AGENCY

QUALITY REPORT 2018-19



FORWARD



Peter Reynolds
Chief Executive

It gives me great pleasure to present the Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency's Sixth Annual Quality Report. The Report documents the journey which NIGALA has taken over the past year to give effect 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 Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA), 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 interests of children who are the subjects of Specified Public Law proceedings and Adoption proceedings in Northern Ireland.

Guardians ad litem are highly dedicated and skilled professionals and as such they play a vital role in safeguarding children's best interests at a critical point in time when state intervention in family life is deemed to be necessary. This intervention is normally to protect children from abuse and neglect and only embarked upon when other interventions have been unsuccessful. 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.

Core to the delivery of our service to children and young people is providing a quality service by skilled professionals who can implement change and improve outcomes for service users. In the past twelve months the hallmark of the work completed by the Agency has

been as much about the planning and delivery of change as change itself. At the heart of the Agency's work is a commitment to provide a consistent, safe and effective service to all children and young people who are subject of legal proceedings.

Increasingly, the Agency has strived to develop collaborative working arrangements with all our key stakeholders, including children and young people, to make improvements on how we promote the 'voice' of children through highlighting the issues which matter to them. The work of the 'Children's Board' developed by the Agency keeps the service grounded to the very real challenges facing children and young people in an increasingly complex and challenging world.

Tapping into the 'lived experience' of children and young people is crucial to the design, delivery and evaluation of the Agency's work. Developmental work on an 'app' to be launched this year will further strengthen our feedback arrangements.

Receiving direct feedback from children and young people about our service and on what 'matters' to them at a time of uncertainty and change in their lives is a humbling yet rewarding experience and one which we value. If we don't get things right first time or a child or young person feels we could have given them a better service, then we want to hear about it.

In the past year, while overall the number of new court directed appointments have dropped slightly from that reported in 2016/17, the number of cases before the courts have increased from 2017/18, meaning that avoidable 'delay' remains a substantive issue for debate and change across social care and justice. Public law applications now take on average almost one year to complete and in many other cases much longer (25% of live cases taking over 400 days). A lack of a fully collaborative model of delivery across the system continues to impact on the progress of children's cases as they move from the early stages of intervention by HSC Trusts to the point where courts are asked to make the most significant of decisions about children's lives.

This is a system-wide issue and one that is recognised independently. A system under pressure should not reflect on the dedication and professionalism of social workers and guardians, legal practitioners and Judges who work in the interests of children and families

under what are extremely challenging circumstances. In the context of the children, young people and families we work with, they are deemed to be ‘the neediest’ in our society and therefore the most demanding by way of achieving lasting outcomes.

The Agency’s primary objective and over-riding priority remains to represent children and young people in order to safeguard their interests in an ever increasing and complex world. We recognise we are not alone in this endeavour and in order to strive towards ongoing improvement, the Agency has actively engaged and collaborated with Health and Social Care Trusts, the Law Society, the Bar Library and the Judicial Studies Board as part of a network of organisational partnerships rolling out the regional implementation of the ‘Signs of Safety’ Model of Practice for Social Work in Northern Ireland.

For the first time, the Agency is extending its collaborative working arrangements to create a learning network with other like-minded regional organisations and individuals.

The Agency supports continuous improvement in a variety of ways; through participating in the ‘Quality Improvement’ regional programme in 2018/19, which focused on ‘children’s feedback’; contributing to regional training and awareness raising, most notably through the work of the ‘Inter- Agency Childcare and Legal Issues Group’ established by the Agency in 2017 and comprising representatives from academia, the voluntary sector and legal professionals. This year the group has presented two seminars, looking at ‘assessing competence’ of children in the context of long-standing neglect and ‘post adoption’ contact, which heard powerful testimonies from service users.

I am very pleased to report that much of the work undertaken by NIGALA in the past twelve months evidences its commitment to the strategic direction set out in ‘Delivering Together – Health and Wellbeing 2026’, particularly around the following strategic priorities;

- Relationship-based practice;
- Developing a Highly Skilled, Resilient and Confident Workforce;
- Continuous Learning and Improvement;
- Effective Leadership and Management;
- Collaboration and Partnership.

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.



Peter Reynolds

Chief Executive NIGALA

INTRODUCTION

Quality 2020 was officially launched in November 2011 by the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The purpose of Quality 2020 is to create a strategic framework and plan of action that will protect and improve quality in health and social care over the next 10 years.

Its vision is for the HSC *'to be recognised internationally, but especially by the people of Northern Ireland, as a leader for excellence in health and social care'*. It 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**

Quality 2020 defines quality under three main headings:

Safety – avoiding and preventing harm to patients and clients from the care, treatment and support that are intended to help them;

Effectiveness – the degree to which each patient and client receives the right care (according to scientific knowledge and evidence-based assessment), at the right time in the right place, with the best outcome;

Patient and client focus – all patients and clients are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect and should be fully involved in decisions affecting their treatment, care and support.

In line with the 'Quality 2020' principles, NIGALA agree that quality is everyone's business and is a part of everyday business and within the HSC there is never a time to be complacent and always room for improvement.



This Quality Report sets out what NIGALA 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. The Report gives a few examples of quality improvement within each of the five areas and reports on progress on goals highlighted in last year's report.

1. Transforming the Culture

Organisational culture is based on shared attitudes, beliefs, customs and rules; it is defined as the way an organisation conducts its business and it affects the organisation's productivity and performance. Not only is social care facing challenges of greater complexity than ever before, but to more effectively deal with these challenges the demands for leadership is increasing exponentially. New notions of leadership stress that leadership is not simply the domain of a few but is prevalent throughout an organisation; leadership that emphasises care for staff through leadership behaviour is more relevant than ever before.

The NIGALA seeks to place the child at the centre of its activities and to promote the behaviours required to support the delivery of the Agencies strategic objectives, service improvement and improve benefits for service users.

In 2018/19 NIGALA has endeavoured to transform its culture in a range of ways including the following –

- **Changing Culture as evidenced by Investors in People Review September 2018**

In a challenging environment, NIGALA was delighted that the Agency was recognised for its work by achieving Silver Accreditation in *Investors in People* (IiP). Congratulations from Sean Holland, Chief Social Work Officer, were gratefully received by staff and a welcome boost, as he recognised their commitment to continuous improvement.

The organisation was first assessed and recognised as an *Investors in People* organisation in 2006. It attained a Bronze award in 2009 and was successfully reviewed at this level in 2012. Following a period of Retaining Recognition (2015-2016) Bronze-level accreditation was reconfirmed in June 2016. An *Insights Assessment*, using the *Investors in People Sixth-Generation Standard* for the first time, was conducted in September 2018 and NIGALA achieved **Silver** accreditation. The Insights Assessment Report stated -

‘This is a significant accomplishment, and something which all staff should feel justifiably proud, as everyone has contributed to this successful outcome.’ (p. 5).

The Report testified that that NIGALA is characterised by a culture of engagement, continuous professional development, a challenging but supportive performance ethos and evolving focus on innovation in delivering high standards of service. The established planning cycle determines the necessary goals and action strategies; and serves as a roadmap to prioritise activities, resources and initiatives.

The Report went on to state (p. 6) that generally, people believe they are well informed, have the information to carry out their job roles and are supported and challenged to deliver. There are clear channels for communication, including IT based systems, team meetings and leadership-led planning sessions, briefings and updates. There are forums and opportunities to forward views, concerns and input suggestions for improvement; with mechanisms for staff to receive feedback on their work and to identify development needs to be addressed.

The Report went on to state –

*‘It is acknowledged that in the last two years NIGALA has made significant strides in **cultural change**. This is evidenced in the increased level of Investors in People accreditation. During the on-site assessment individuals were asked to reflect on the working environment in a few words, with the table of quotes below depicting the feedback gained from interviewees:*

“Driven, togetherness, openness, resilience, good-will”
 “Friendly, welcoming, nice place to work”
 “Open, friendly, flexible, supportive”
 “Supportive, extremely professional, enjoyable”
 “Autonomous, fragmented, flexible”
 “Dynamic, fulfilling, positive”
 “Hard, privileged, friendships”
 “Friendly, serious but a nice working environment”
 “Friendly, challenging, thought-provoking”
 “Supportive, encouraging, rewarding”
 “Supportive, good, helpful”
 “Supportive, consistent, safe”
 “Child-centred, dignity, respect, professional”

- **Health & Social Care Staff Survey**

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) conducted the Staff Survey of 2019 on behalf of the HSC. This went live on 4 March 2019 and remained open for 6 weeks with both online and paper responses being received. Of the 63 members of staff from NIGALA who were invited to participate in the Survey, 28 took the opportunity and completed this giving a 44% response rate.

Individuals were asked a series of questions; these formed the 35 Key Findings which have been reported. The Report details that NIGALA scored highest in 34% of these, which equates to 12 of the 35 Key Findings.

The following are a number of the Key Findings which NIGALA scored highest with the score from staff compared to the overall HSC score:

Key Finding	NIGALA Score	HSC Overall Score
Key Finding 1 “Staff recommendation of the organisation as a place to work or receive treatment” (1-5)	3.90	3.75
Key Finding 3 “Percentage of staff agreeing that their role makes a difference to patients/service users” (%)	92	90
Key Finding 6 “Percentage of staff reporting good communication between senior management and staff” (%)	68	29
Key Finding 11 “Percentage of staff appraised in last 12 months” (%)	96	71
Key Finding 30 Fairness and effectiveness of procedures for reporting errors, near misses and incidents” (1-5)	4.02	3.65

- **Development of the NIGALA Staff Forum**

In September 2018 the first meeting of the NIGALA Staff Forum took place. The Forum is very much driven by staff. At the outset staff did want another committee but rather a safe space to discuss cross cutting issues in NIGALA. Those involved see it as a vehicle for positive change with an emphasis on support for everyone and staff welfare. Staff are represented across all groups and sites. Membership is not fixed but fluid allowing people to engage on issues that are important to them. Each Forum has a small number of large issues for discussion which help to inform the organization on future direction. Issues discussed during the year include; communication, staff welfare, “one team” and reward and recognition.

2. Strengthening the Workforce

Health and Social Care is changing and the demand for services is rising inexorably. In these challenging circumstances NIGALA recognises the need to reshape our service and to support our workforce to deliver new and innovative ways of working. In this wider context of change NIGALA is seeking to continuously improve and raise standards of practice and service delivery.

Most successful organisations will testify that employees are the most important resource for any company. How they are treated and how much they value the organisation they work for will have an impact on how it performs. Diversity, health and safety, workplace conditions, personal development, work/life balance and remuneration are all issues that responsible employers need to address to ensure a happy, motivated workforce.

According to the book, *The Joy of Work, Jobs, Happiness and You* (Warr and Clapperton, 2009), extensive research has demonstrated links between being happier in a job and being better at a job, and companies with higher than average employee happiness exhibit better financial performance and customer satisfaction. NIGALA prioritises the need to create and maintain positive work environments and leadership that contributes to the happiness and nurturing of their staff as a potential resource.

NIGALA has many strengths in terms of its workforce. Our retention rates are amongst the highest in the HSC family (98%) in Northern Ireland with the majority of staff throughout corporate, administration, guardian ad litem and management having been with the Agency for more than 10 years. However, there is no room for complacency and, as already acknowledged, staff across all sectors are faced with unprecedented levels of change and increased workload demands.

NIGALA is working to develop both a culture which welcomes change and innovation and to develop strong leadership at all levels to support these changes. This can be achieved through strengthening and developing the workforce to enable capacity to deliver. Whilst change is inevitable, management is committed to reducing the impact on staff by improving communication of why the change is necessary or required, prioritising and staging change and ensuring that change supports the overall mission of the Agency.

It may be a cliché, but the old adage that an organisation's primary asset is its staff is particularly true for NIGALA. We are, and always have been, a lean organisation with a flat management structure whose resources are predominantly used to provide a voice for the child in court proceedings via guardian representation. Therefore, we are very aware that our workforce needs to be continuously strengthened and developed to meet the increasing demands it faces.

In 2018/19 NIGALA has endeavoured to strengthen its workforce in a range of ways including the following;

- **Staff Involvement in the HSC Collective Leadership Programme**

In early 2019, the *HSC Leadership Centre* ran its first 'new regional leading edge development programme' - '*Collective: Bringing Collective Leadership to Life*'. NIGALA was pleased to have a guardian ad litem involved in this inaugural programme. It was important for the Agency to be represented by a practitioner as opposed to a manager in line with the idea expressed above around developing strong leadership at all levels of the organisation. This programme is the first of its kind in the HSCNI and is based on the latest research in collective leadership, following the principles outlined in the *HSC Collective Leadership Strategy*. This leadership development initiative included leaders at all levels across health and social care including patients, clients and service users.

The programme was based around three modules –

- Module 1 - Compassionate Leadership
- Module 2 – Systems Leadership
- Module 3 – Shared Leadership through team based working





The evidence has shown that where a culture of collective leadership thrives it produces benefits for staff, leads to improved quality of care, results in a better experience for those who use our services and brings

greater sustainability of those services. The aim of the HSC Collective Leadership Strategy is that together we can improve the health and well-being of the people in Northern Ireland by harnessing our strengths and working collaboratively and effectively across traditional boundaries as one system. The vision is for a culture which values leaders, regardless of hierarchy or experience, location or discipline and which strives for continuous improvement and innovation. The Strategy provides a framework to achieve that ambition.

Cathy Owens, the guardian who attended the programme, thoroughly enjoyed it and found it very useful for her leadership and continued professional development. She made a presentation to a staff meeting on the learning she took away from the course and that has led to interest from other staff. The Agency is committed to providing a further place on the programme in 2019/20 and has secured a place.

Cathy's reflections on the course included the following –

'Participating in this training has increased and developed an appreciation and understanding of the importance of the leadership role within Health and Social Care organisations involving collaborative working, sharing of leadership responsibility across all levels and enabling anyone with expertise for a particular task or situation to take responsibility where there is a need. It highlights the importance of developing strengths within an experienced workforce with the ultimate aim of a shared culture and common aim. It has also introduced the concept of Boundary Spanning within the Health and Social Care

Sector, whereby leadership capability that creates direction, alignment and commitment across the organisation can achieve a higher goal or vision.'

- **A Review of the Structural Arrangements and Service Delivery in NIGALA**

In 2017/18 the Agency embarked on work involving staff to review its current operating model for staff and is currently in the early stages of progressing this work, through;

- Reviewing its Corporate Services by looking at roles and responsibilities;
- Piloting a new 'Principal Practitioner' Post with a view to supporting professional standards, service delivery and good governance; developing a culture of collaborative working, professional networking, while extending opportunities for a career progression, succession planning and arrangements for a more agile workforce;
- Developing a 'self-employed' capacity within the Agency to improve flexibility and responsiveness to regional fluctuations in demand;
- Introducing clearer boundaries to the role of the guardian improving the focus on the child.

Through 2019/20 the Agency will be piloting these changes engaging in stakeholder discussions to better communicate and share the vision for strategic change. Like any change initiative, the NIGALA Board and senior leadership team recognise the challenges we face by suggesting the need to 'do things differently' but base our approach on the following challenges;

- Increasing demand across the sector;
- children becoming more vulnerable and their lives and needs becoming more complex and challenging;
- the need to work across 'traditional boundaries' developing a collective leadership approach and reducing a silo mentality;
- Recognising the pressure on staff and;

‘building an environment where our people are supported, engaged, enabled and empowered to offer the quality of care they aspire to deliver’.

3. Measuring the Improvement

NIGALA recognises the need to evaluate the impact of service improvement initiatives on service users. Currently improvement is measured through the following mechanisms -

- Regional Quality Improvement in Social Work Programme
 - Personal and Public Involvement
 - Feedback from Children and Young People
 - Young Persons Forum
 - Feedback from Judiciary and NIGALA Panel Solicitors
-
- **NIGALA Involvement in the Regional Quality Improvement in Social Work Programme**

In 2018 two members of the NIGALA SMT, Teresa Fallon, Assistant Director and John Sheldon, Quality Assurance and Training Manager, completed the 10 month *QI in Social Work Programme*, run at the Quality Improvement Centre for the South Eastern HSCT. The aim of the quality improvement project was to improve the experience of child and young people's feedback (aged 7 and above) on their experience of the guardian ad litem service.

The rationale for the project included the following –

- NIGALA is charged with ensuring the 'voice' of children and young people is heard in the court process
- NIGALA's aim is to involve children and young people into Agency decision making
- By increasing feedback we can better hear the experiences of children and young people
- NIGALA can improve our service by incorporating these experiences into improvements in service delivery

- Baseline percentage was 20% at commencement of project and viewed as not good enough.

The QI project was successful in terms of increasing the percentage of feedback 20% to 36% by October 2018. The following were the reflections of the participants at the end of the programme -

- The project does not finish when the programme finishes. QI is dynamic and needs ongoing work/support
- It appears to be a few steps forward, a few steps back and so on
- It works!

In fact, the initial aim to increase feedback from children and young people is ongoing and the success in terms of numbers has continued to increase post programme completion.

NIGALA continues to be represented on the QI in Social Work Programme and two further members of staff are currently undertaking the programme and working on another area of quality improvement.

Personal and Public Involvement

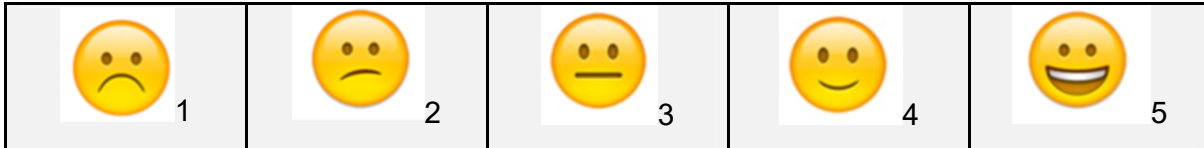
Listening to the voices of children and young people is a core element of the Agency's mission and efforts are made to actively seek to hear what they say.

Feedback

As part of the process to improve service delivery to children and young people, NIGALA provides feedback opportunities to children and young people (aged 7 years and over) at the end of their court proceedings.

During 2018/19, a total of 140 children and young people (out of 328 invitations) took the opportunity to share their views and their experience of our service, compared to 80 in the previous year. After engaging with young people NIGALA introduced a more user-friendly

method of feedback with the invitation to rate their experience across five categories, as shown below.



Of the young people and children who responded 89% (125 out of 140 responses) thought our service was excellent or good. One child or young person thought the service was poor.

In addition to rating our service we also asked three questions. These can be seen below along with some of the comments from the children and young people in their own words.

What was most helpful about having a Guardian?

- *She made our voices heard.*
- *My Guardian helped me take some of my worries away. I enjoyed drawing pictures for her. I felt happy when drawing.*
- *She gave me paper and I drew things and explained why I could not stay with my mum and dad.*
- *That I could voice what I wanted to happen to the Guardian and they would explain that at court.*
- *Because she is nice and helpful and a good guardian.*

Would you like the Guardian to have done anything differently?

- *Just for old people try and talk to them as their age instead of talking to them like kids.*
- *Yes, I would because so she could tell me more about a forever home.*
- *Yes, I feel like she shared her opinion too much.*
- *No, I feel the guardian done an excellent job and made the process as smooth as possible.*

What matters to you during the time you had a Guardian?

- *I was just more excited about the residency and how there is no more social workers anymore.*
- *My guardian said in court what I wanted and always said things I wanted when I wanted go home.*
- *The thing that mattered most was that I needed to speak to someone about stuff she needed to know.*
- *What really matter to me was finishing the process, getting though it all and knowing why all these various things were done.*

Development of Feedback App

NIGALA is currently collaborating with children and young people on new options for feedback. We have developed a mobile phone app so children and young people can provide real time feedback to ensure we are a current and relevant service and using the mediums for communication favoured by our service users.

Young People's Forum

During 2017/18 NIGALA setting up a Young People's Forum to better integrate children's feedback into how we improve our service by.

Through the Forum the young people devised a charter called *My Expectations* which highlighted what they wanted to convey to Guardians and other professionals who are involved in their lives. The Agency has adopted these into its work activities and the approach to achieving its objectives.

Through the Forum young people also drew up *Top Tips for Judges when Meeting Me* to improve their participation in court proceedings.

The Forum met three times in 2018/19 and in a spirit of co-production has redesigned the Agency website and given direction on the content for children and young people.

Feedback from the Judiciary and Solicitors

The Judiciary and solicitors are key stakeholders for NIGALA and we seek feedback on annual basis on their engagement with Guardians. Unfortunately, we did not receive any feedback from the judiciary and current arrangements based on surveys will be reviewed to determine if there are better ways to gather views.

The Agency also seeks feedback from solicitors on a case to case basis as well as on the service as a whole. In the annual evaluation we received feedback from 59 solicitors out of a total of 94 requests. The overwhelming response was positive on the contribution of guardians to a case, with 50 out of 56 responses rating the service as good at all times. The remaining six responses found the service as good the majority of time.

The continuing value of the guardian role was a theme reflected throughout the majority of feedback forms as well as reflections on the changing role of the guardian and the relevance of focusing on developments such as children's and young people's participation in the process. The following comment were noted:

- The balance and reasoning contained within guardian reports is excellent
- The guardians play a vital role in assisting the courts and I have found this with all the guardians I have worked with
- The trend for independent social work reports is pointless as the guardian is an independent voice in proceedings.
- They always make court aware of the child's wishes and feelings but guardians' views and recommendations may differ
- Nothing is perfect however the entire service works well with limited resources.

4. Raising the Standards

NIGALA has carried out key pieces of work under the Raising the Standard strategic goal including –

- Complaints about the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency
- Delivering Together – Health and Wellbeing 2026
- Collaborating with others
- The NIGALA Professional Standards
- Sources of Independent Assurance

The following are some examples of progress made in this area of quality improvement.

- **Complaints about the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency**

The NIGALA received three complaints about its services in the course of the year. Complaints are a valuable way to learn how to improve services. The NIGALA takes all feedback very seriously and is constantly reviewing the service it offers to improve the experience of children and young people and those it works with.

- **Delivering Together – Health and Wellbeing 2026**

The Agency is pleased to report that much of the work undertaken by NIGALA in the past twelve months evidences its commitment to the strategic direction set out in ‘*Delivering Together – Health and Wellbeing 2026*’, particularly around the following strategic priorities;

- Relationship-based practice
- Highly Skilled, Resilient and Confident Workforce
- Continuous Learning and Improvement
- Effective Leadership and Management

- **Collaboration and Partnership**

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.

- **Collaborating with others**

NIGALA is a member of the SBNI Board, HSC Leadership Network and works with other key stakeholders to oversee the regional roll out of 'Signs of Safety'.

NIGALA participates with stakeholders from across the spectrum of care and justice under the auspices of the Shadow Family Justice Board and has contributed to discussions on issues related to 'Experts' and private law proceedings, which are the most challenging of court business due to family break-down and family trauma.

As part of the HSC Leadership Network, the Agency is looking to explore common themes relevant to the wider social work family in areas such as retention, recruitment and promoting social work.

- **The NIGALA Professional Standards**

The NIGALA Professional Standards relate to the day to day work of the Guardian in their role as the independent representative for the child or young person. In 2018 the Agency revised these standards and to provide minimum standards of practice for Guardians to drive up a quality service and ensure that all children and young people receive a good standard of care.

- **Sources of Independent Assurance**

NIGALA obtains independent assurance from the following sources:



Internal Audit

NIGALA has a Service Level Agreement with the Business Services Organisation for the provision of an internal audit function, which operates to defined standards and whose work is informed by an analysis of risks to which the organisation is exposed and annual audit plans are based on this analysis. In 2018-19, the Internal Auditor reviewed the following systems and provided satisfactory assurance on the system of internal control:

- Financial Review;
- Performance, Absence and Complaints Management;
- Compliance with Permanent Secretary's Guidance on Travel;
- ICT User Behaviour and Application Access Control; and
- Case allocation management.

Internal Audit undertook a high-level review of the processes established within NIGALA to monitor compliance with the required standards, policies, legislation etc. previously contained within the Controls Assurance Standards and the process for providing assurance on this to the Chief Executive and the Board (and onwards to DoH in the tailored format they have requested). Internal Audit concluded that the processes adopted by NIGALA for 2018/19 should be adequate to provide appropriate assurances internally in the areas previously covered by the former Control Assurance Standards.

Follow up reviews were conducted on previous Internal Audit recommendations. There were no priority one findings. Out of 16 recommendations accepted, 13 (81%) of those examined are now deemed fully implemented, and 3 (19%) are partially implemented. Management is addressing recommendations not fully implemented, with dates set for delivery.

In her Annual Report, the Head of Internal Audit reported satisfactory assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's framework of governance, risk management and control.

External Audit

The NI Audit Office conduct an external audit of NIGALA's financial statements and provide assurance, through the audit opinion report, that the accounts are 'True and Fair' and that

the income and expenditure has been used for the purposes intended. This report is addressed to the Northern Ireland Assembly rather than NIGALA. The results of the audit and any issues that NIAO identify during the course of conducting their audit are communicated to the NIGALA Audit Committee and Management in the Report to Those Charged with Governance (RTTCWG). A representative from the Northern Ireland Audit Office is invited to attend the NIGALA Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meetings. The External Auditor is required to certify, examine and report on each of the Statements comprising the Financial Statements of the Agency.

5. Integrating the Care

The objective of the Quality 2020 strategy to integrate the care is to develop integrated pathways of care for individuals. Northern Ireland has an integrated HSC system but in order to be effective there should be seamless movement across all professional boundaries and sectors of care. This has implications for the transfer of information and how data is held.

As an *Arm's Length Body* and a small specialist service, NIGALA sits outside of the integrated health and social care service to some extent and therefore has a greater challenge in evidencing examples of compliance with this particular strategic goal of Quality 2020. However, within these constraints we offer the following examples of good practice.

- **Providing a Timely and Quality Service in the context of Increased Demand**

In the past year, while overall the number of new court directed appointments have dropped slightly from that reported in 2016/17, the number of cases before the courts have increased, meaning that avoidable 'delay' remains a substantive issue for debate and change across social care and justice. Public law applications now take on average almost one year to complete and in many other cases much longer (25% of live cases taking over 400 days). A lack of a fully collaborative model of delivery across the system continues to impact on the progress of children's cases as they move from the early stages of intervention by Trusts to the point where courts are asked to make the most significant of decisions about children's lives.

This is a system-wide issue and one that is recognised independently¹. This should not however be seen as a reflection on the dedication and professionalism of individual social workers, legal practitioners and Judges who work in the interests of children and families under what can be challenging circumstances. In the context of the children, young people

¹ 'Review of Civil and Family Justice in NI' (2017) and NIAO 'Speeding up justice: avoidable delay in the criminal justice system (March 2018);





and families we work with, they are deemed to be ‘*the neediest*² and therefore the most demanding by way of achieving lasting outcomes.

With ongoing regional variations, matching capacity continues to impact on the ability of the Agency to consistently allocate guardians in advance of a first hearing, we are nevertheless allocating a guardian in 85% of cases within 14 days³. In the past year, while working closely with our Sponsor Branch to ensure the necessary budget as a front-line service, the Agency has been working to bring about what it views are necessary changes to ensure the work of the Guardian is focused and proportionate, while being mindful of our statutory responsibilities.

The Agency’s primary objective and over-riding priority remains to represent children and young people in order to safeguard their interests in an ever increasing and complex world. We recognise we are not alone in this endeavour and in order to strive towards ongoing improvement, the Agency has actively engaged and collaborated with Health and Social Care Trusts, the Law Society, the Bar Library and the Judicial Studies Board as part of a network of organisational partnerships rolling out the regional implementation of the ‘*Signs of Safety*’ Model of Practice for Social Work in Northern Ireland.

- **Leading the Development of a Five Nations Symposium**

Supported by the new HSC values, the over-arching strategy for NIGALA in planning a ‘Five Nations Symposium’ for 2019 is aligned to four pillars of activity, summarised as follows;

Improvement	Leadership	Co-production	Outcomes
HSC Values (HSC Health and Social Care)			
 Openness & Honesty	 Compassion	 Working together	 Excellence

² ‘Reforming Care Proceedings 2: Children’s Outcomes’ (2018) – Judith Masson, Jonathan Dickens *et al.*
³ KPI established in September 2018.

A key strategic objective for NIGALA in 2018/19 was to undertake and develop regional ‘collaborative’ relationships with like-minded people and organisations to be progressed through dialogue and common understanding. Based on early discussions in 2019 with Cafcass (England) and Children 1st (Scotland) it came as no surprise that the key objectives for each organisation with respect to children and young people and associated challenges were familiar and relevant to that which faced NIGALA. The idea of creating a ‘network’ of regional organisations reflective of the ‘bigger picture’ for children based on a ‘common interest’ foundation was met with a favourable response.

The idea of hosting a ‘Five Nations Symposium’ to establish the ‘network’ and create sustainability over the next five years was developed through:

- Extending discussions with other organisations/individuals in the UK and Republic of Ireland;
- Establishing the idea of a ‘Five Nations’ type gathering, which was self-funding and sustainable in the longer-term;
- Common understanding based on a ‘Terms of Reference’ for approval.

Through this particular initiative NIGALA is delighted to report the Agency continues to place itself at the forefront of partnership discussions with the objective of improving the climate to look at better ‘outcomes’ for children and families. For the first time, it sees us extending this to new conversations across the UK and Republic of Ireland, with a view to organising a UK/ROI event in the autumn of 2019 and a Conference in 2020.

As part of a collaborative and whole system approach, the Agency has welcomed the opportunity to work with health and social care partners from across the sector to embed ‘Trauma Informed Practice’ using a trauma informed lens, while also part of other initiatives, such as the Family Drug & Alcohol Court Pilot and the implementation of ‘*Signs of Safety*’ in Northern Ireland.

CONCLUSION

NIGALA remains committed to quality improvement and continued service development. Despite the challenges of workload and continuing financial austerity, 2018/19 has proven to be a positive year for the Agency, with feedback from both Investors in People and the HSC Staff Survey being very encouraging. There is a feeling within the staff group that the Agency has returned to its core values and is seeking to put children and young people at the centre of all we do, despite the financial and governance requirements of any public sector body.

Under such conditions, the core values of NIGALA have become increasingly important. In prioritising our services, we continue to focus on safeguarding the interests of children in specified public law and adoption proceedings in Northern Ireland. Many of these children represent some of the most vulnerable in society. Maintaining the centrality of children in decision making within NIGALA along with a continued commitment to quality, accountability; and transparency will be the hallmarks of how NIGALA responds to austerity in the years ahead.

Going forward the Agency will ensure that our children and young people remain a priority alongside the continued focus on the development and support of a highly professional, qualified guardian ad litem workforce.



1,162

Number of Children we helped

NIGALA are appointed by the NI Court and Tribunal Service to represent the best interests of children and young people and support their wishes and feelings in Court proceedings.



709

Closed Cases

The number of cases which Guardians ad Litem have been involved in, which have had a decision made at a 'Final' Court Hearing and the Guardian has then been discharged. These cases involved 1152 children.

NIGALA established a **Young People's Forum**

NIGALA is proud to have established a **Young People's Forum**. The Forum meets on a regular basis and works towards improving the service provided to children and young people. The Forum involves young people who have previously been represented by a Guardian ad Litem. They provide their views and thoughts on a number of areas of work across the Agency and this assists NIGALA in enhancing services to future children and young people involved in court proceedings.



91 Children Adopted

- 75 Placement Adoptions
- 14 Step-parent Adoptions
- 2 Intercountry Adoptions



Time spent with children/young people

Guardians ad Litem meet all the children and young people involved in their caseload. They discuss their views, what their wishes are, explain the court process and represents their thoughts and best interests in Court Hearings.



NIGALA were delighted to have achieved the **Silver** Investors in People Award.



Like all HSC Trusts and Arm's Length Bodies are required to manage their budget closely. NIGALA broke even within its allocated budget of **£4.2 million**

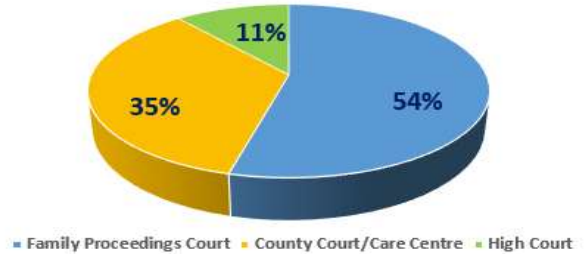




Feedback

We give every child over 7 years of age the opportunity to have a say and provide us with feedback about their experience of having a Guardian ad Litem. This helps us to improve the way we do things and make the experience for other children and young people better.

Level of Court - Requests



Some of the things children and young people said ...

"She was kind and showed an interest in me"

"She made our voices heard"

"I didn't have to go to Court and I could trust her"



"I could tell her what I didn't want changed"

"I was able to know everything that was going on"

"When I had bad things on my mind she could help me as much as she can"

Case Requests

746 requests for a Guardian Ad Litem to be appointed in a case. Detailed by Trust area and number of children involved.

