

# NIGALA

NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency

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

## NORTHERN IRELAND GUARDIAN AD LITEM AGENCY

# QUALITY REPORT 2020-21



# FOREWORD

This is the Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency's Eighth Annual Quality Report for the year 2020- 2021. It represents the work of the agency for the year prior to my appointment as Chief Executive. 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 best 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. 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. The launch of the feedback 'app' has further strengthened 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, the most significant impact on how we have worked has been the COVID 19 Pandemic. In line with Department of Health and Public Health Agency guidance services were stood down. Staff across the agency were enabled to work from home with the use of technology. This proved very successful and when services resumed the use of technology enabled children and families to be contacted virtually and for Guardians to link with other stakeholders through the use of zoom and other virtual means. When the Courts reopened using the Sightlink virtual technology the Agency was well prepared to appoint Guardians for those children subject to public law processes. The work continued during the pandemic and our admin and corporate staff were able to provide the support required to continue our work albeit in a different way. The Agency received 727 Requests for Guardians in 2020-21. This is comparable to the requests received in the previous year (748 requests). The number of cases closed in year was 524, significantly down from the previous year's total of 698 cases due to Covid. This has led to an increase in the ongoing caseload being managed by the Agency.



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.

Much of the work in the past year has focused on maintaining a high quality service during the worst disruption of societal norms we have ever known in our lifetime. The focus of the work was to maintain standards of social work practice, adhere to the public health guidance, to support staff, develop our use of technology and to continue to listen to the views of the children and young people we work with. There will be much learning from the COVID experience which will shape how we work in the future.

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**

**Chief Executive NIGALA**



# COVID PANDEMIC

The Covid pandemic crisis has brought unparalleled uncertainty for the vulnerable families, children and young people of our community and throughout the world and for those who serve them. In the words of Richard Pengelly, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health;

*'Our health and social care system has never been more needed, nor more under pressure than it is today. Right across our system, from top to bottom, people are shouldering this burden and doing all they can to prepare services for the full impact of COVID-19.'*

NIGALA implemented its Business Continuity Plan on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021. The Agency's response to the Pandemic has characterised its work for the year. New ways of working have been developed in line with pandemic management guidelines to protect children, families, staff and the public in a time of Covid. The children and young people represented by guardians are some of the most vulnerable in our society. At a time when many more are at risk than ever before of potential and actual '*significant harm*' as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic our collective responsibility and duty is to support families and specifically safeguard and protect children.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has been compounded by necessary and associated lock down measures, requiring professionals and courts to adapt to remote and socially distancing working. For children and families, lock-down meant not only additional pressures but disrupted lines of support from social workers, community Nurses, GPs PSNI, schools and the voluntary sector. Notwithstanding the significant challenges faced by the statutory services they have continued to make contact with, and provide support to vulnerable children and young people based on concerns about their welfare. In this year, all professionals and families have had to rapidly adapt to new ways of working, using remote or socially-distanced means. Due



to ongoing restrictions, concern about the welfare of very vulnerable children was highlighted by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI);

*“However, during these difficult times there are some children who may not be safe from harm at home or who will not get the level of care they need. The greatest worry is that some of these children will be ‘unseen and unheard’. It is for this reason we are asking the public to play a vital role with us, in coming together to help us support and create greater safety for these children. To do this, we are asking the public that if they have any worries about a child not being safe or not receiving the care they need to contact their local Health and Social Care Trust Gateway Services”.*

In this year our guardians have engaged with over 1300 families and have adapted impressively to the challenge of working remotely where necessary, both in engaging with children and in attending court. The prompt roll- out of technology and the support provided by the HSC have been key factors in enabling our staff to maintain the high quality of our services.



# INTRODUCTION

The quality strategy for HSC in Northern Ireland, as set out in Quality 2020, is ‘*to be recognised internationally, but especially by the people of Northern Ireland, as a leader for excellence in health and social care*’. The strategy highlights five strategic goals necessary to realise this vision:

- **Transforming the culture;**
- **Strengthening the workforce;**
- **Measuring the improvement;**
- **Raising the standards and**
- **Integrating the care**

This Quality Report sets out what 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

In line with Health and Social Care strategy NIGALA seeks to make achieving high quality the top priority at all levels in the organisation. It promotes and encourages partnerships between staff, service users and carers to support its decision making.

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 environment we work in**

The core purpose of the Agency's work is to represent the best interests of the children and young people in Court and to report to the Court the wishes and feelings of the child regarding their circumstances and preferred outcome to the court proceeding. This is done through the appointment of a Guardian Ad Litem by the Court, subsequently allocated to a child or young person by NIGALA.

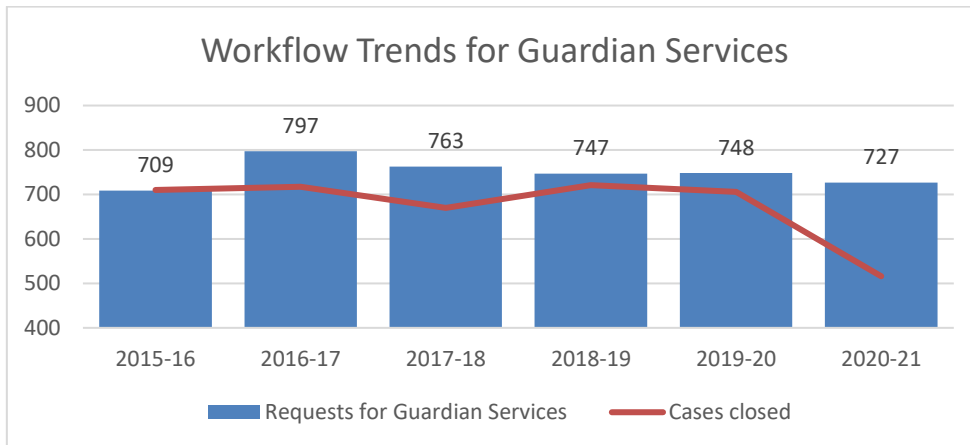
The Agency received 727 Requests for Guardians in 2020-21. This is comparable to the requests received in the previous year (748 requests). The number of cases closed in year was 524, significantly down from the previous year's total of 698 cases due to Covid. This has led to a net increase in the ongoing caseload being managed by the Agency.





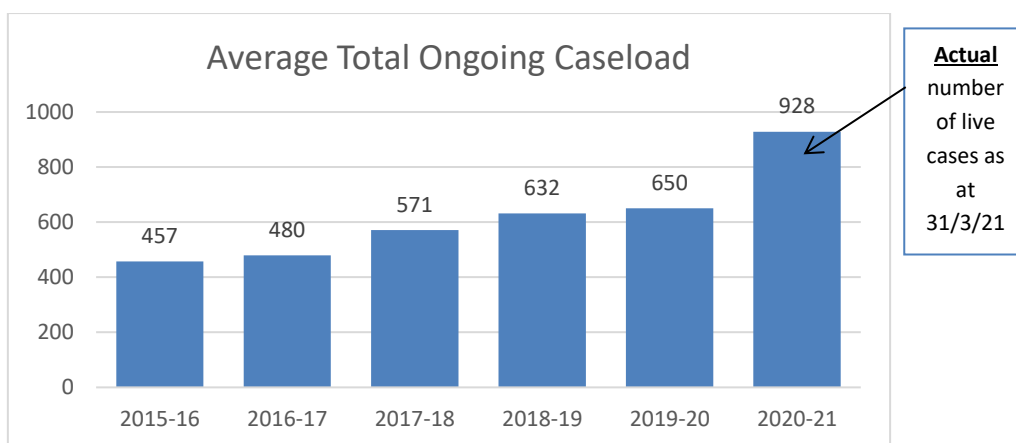
This trend for an increase in cases being managed though has established itself over the past few years but was exacerbated by Covid-19. This can be seen in *Chart 1*, which shows the comparison between more new appointment requests and fewer cases closed in each of the past six years.

**Chart 1**



The gap between new requests and cases closed has resulted in a growth in the number of cases, or caseload, being managed at any one time by the Agency. The impact Covid has had can be seen in *Chart 2*.

**Chart 2**



In the face of this increased work demand, and the resourcing challenges faced by all of HSC, NIGALA has endeavoured to continue “transforming its culture” in a range of ways including the following –

## **Governance**

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.

The Social Care Governance Committee supports the Board in all aspects of social care governance by providing an independent and objective review of the adequacy and effectiveness of control systems and processes in place to support the delivery of the Guardian ad Litem service to children and young people. The Committee met on four occasions during 2019-20. The Committee is chaired by a member of the Board and reports to the Board after each meeting

The Standing items of the Committee include;

- Assurance reporting on social care delegated functions
- Experience of children of young people
- Service delivery
- Engaging and influencing (Personal and Public Involvement)
- Training and development.

The Committee reports to the Board after each of its meetings. During the year the Committee looked at issues such as

- Supervision, a revision of the Agency Supervision Policy to meet the new social work Regional Supervision Policy
- A pilot on new reporting formats allowing a more targeted approach in the role of a guardian, focussing on the child.
- Key messages coming from the February 2020 NIGALA conference, ‘*Are We Listening?*’, in which young people eloquently expressed how



often they feel unheard, ignored and isolated and warned us all 'don't assume'.

- Learning and Improvement in NIGALA, aligned to the Department of Health's "A Learning and Improvement Strategy for Social Care and Social Workers 2017-2027".
- A review of complaints received over a five year period
- An audit of professional registration and supervision.

### **Staff Engagement**

A key tool for Health and Social Care Organisations in understanding themselves is the Cultural Assessment Tool. In year NIGALA received the results of its inaugural use of the tool. The response rate was 66.1% with 41 people responding from the 62 invited to participate.

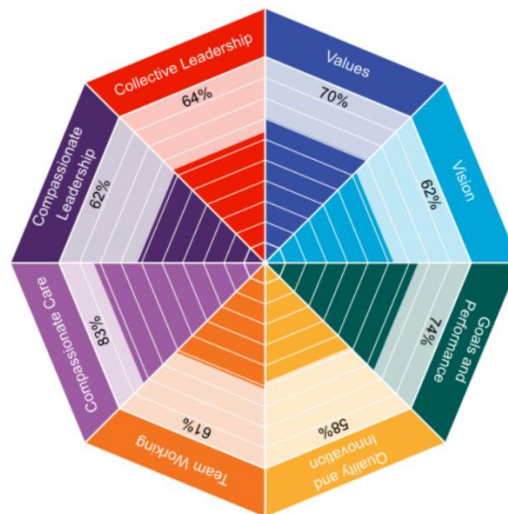
The assessment seeks to gauge where an organization is in terms of;

- Compassionate leadership
- Collective leadership
- Values
- Vision
- Goals and performance
- Quality and innovation
- Teamwork
- Compassionate care

The mean scores across the organisation for each of the dimensions of culture measured by the Culture Assessment Tool, as a percentage, are as follows:

### **Chart 3**





The Team Working dimension and Quality and Innovation scored lowest for NIGALA. Interestingly, these two dimensions have scored lowest in other organisations that have already taken part in the survey. However, although these dimensions scored lowest, they are very positive figures. It's important to note that the survey and results predate the Covid pandemic.

It should also be noted that in the 2019 HSC staff survey NIGALA had the top score in HSC on the following;

- 'Staff recommendation of the organisation as a place to work'
- 'Percentage of staff agreeing that their role makes a difference to patients/service users'
- 'Recognition and value of staff by managers and the organisation'
- 'Percentage of staff reporting good communication between senior management and staff'

A regional report and action plan will be drawn up in 2021 on the findings of the Cultural Assessment Tool. NIGALA will be able to draw from this and include local actions to improve the culture in the organisation as part of the Health and Social Care collective.

### Service User Engagement

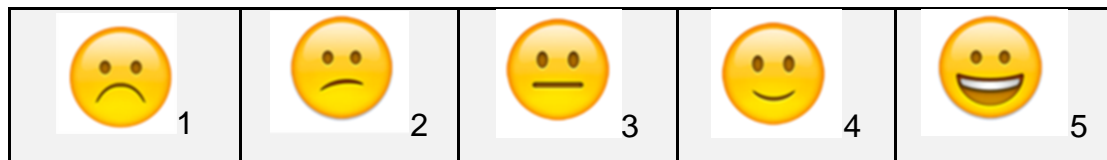


As part of the process to improve service delivery to children and young people, NIGALA provides feedback opportunities to children and young people (aged 7 years and over) at the end of their court proceedings.

During 2020-21, a total of 99 children and young people (out of 205 invitations, a return rate of 48%) took the opportunity to share their views and their experience of our service.

In addition the NIGALA children’s feedback app was made available at the beginning of February 2021. A group of 15 GALs undertook a pilot and 9 completed the feedback out of 21 invitations.

After engaging with young people NIGALA introduced a more user-friendly method of feedback in 2019-20, with the invitation to rate their experience across 5 categories, as shown below.



Of the young people and children who responded for 2020/21 87% (86 out of 99 responses) thought our service was excellent or good. Six children or young persons were not happy or very unhappy with the service. Three of these responses were from siblings from the same household and all provided feedback that they felt they were not listened to.

The Agency also seeks feedback from the judiciary on the service it provides. This is in addition to meetings with judges during the year at which Senior Management share the challenges facing the service. Three judges took the opportunity to provide feedback from an invitation list of 18. Whilst the feedback is low in terms of number, the value seen by the judiciary in the role of the Guardian and their

contribution is evident. The feedback did highlight the concerns of the judges on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the timely appointment of a Guardian to a case.



## 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.

### **Leadership**

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.

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. In seeking to measure itself NIGALA is accredited as an Investors in People Silver Award holder and during 2020-21 continued to work on the three main areas of the Framework - Leadership, Supporting & Improving.

NIGALA has many strengths in terms of its workforce. Our retention rates are amongst the highest in the HSC family in Northern Ireland, with no one actually leaving the Agency during the 2020/21 year. 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.

### **Communication**

The Agency has always placed a premium on effective communication and ensuring that staff are listened to and engaged with decision making, problem solving and innovation.



During the 2020/21 year this has been more challenging with Covid restrictions changing how we delivered our services and maintained a high degree of awareness of what was happening in HSC.

Team meetings continued but in a virtual forum. This in itself placed huge strains on the IT network and staff feedback on their user experience helped to stabilise the system. These meetings also included the Chief Executive and Senior Management Team to allow staff to share their work challenges (and frustrations) and concerns.

Weekly communications were instigated for Guardians, which sometimes became daily updates as things in the working environment changed.

On implementation of the Business Continuity Plan all staff moved to a remote working model. This was a huge challenge and required a different view of working practices to maintain our commitment to the children who come to us. This included

- Virtual court hearings, requiring NIGALA bringing together key stakeholders such as the Court Service IT, BSOIT and BSO Legal Services. A working model was agreed which allowed an effective working system to be provided to all involved in court processes.
- More emphasis on a virtual approach to meetings with tools such as Zoom for all key stakeholders.
- Staff moving into a new communication world between themselves on social media.
- Virtual team professional development meetings
- Online training and skills sharing

## **Health and Wellbeing**

Throughout the year the Agency has worked with its partners in HSC to provide support to all staff on their Health and Wellbeing. This has included regular





information on good mental health and taking care of one's physical well-being through the lockdown experience.

NIGALA has access to an Occupational Health Service. In addition, the Agency continues to fund and operate a programme of employee assistance and confidential counselling through the Inspire Workplace organisation. However during the year the Agency introduced a bespoke programme for Guardians through Inspire to provide support to small groups of Guardians. The purpose of this collaborative group experiential programme was to provide an opportunity for Guardians to explore, examine and discuss topics and themes relevant to their emotional and psychological well-being. Bringing their expertise Inspire were able to use collaborative group dynamics to deliver better work and personal outcomes by combining evidence based research with practice based evidence on a specific topic. The programme consisted of 5 sessions, each lasting two hours. The programme has been well received by those who participated and will be continued in 2021/22.

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### 3. Measuring the Improvement

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NIGALA recognises the need to evaluate the impact of service improvement initiatives on service users.

For most organisations Complaints is a valuable source of information on the experience of service users. However NIGALA receives too few complaints to identify trends. The Agency received four 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. The Agency also received 19 compliments from those it engaged with.

Currently improvement is measured through the following mechanisms -

- Continuous Professional Development
- Regional Quality Improvement in Social Work Programme
- Feedback
- Personal and Public Involvement

### **Continuous Professional Development**

As Social Workers, all Guardians are required, by law, to be registered with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council in order to practise in Northern Ireland. All registered social workers are required to develop and maintain their knowledge and skills to practise competently and safely. NISCC uses the Professional in Practice Framework recognising all learning both formal and informal; it offers flexibility and autonomy and it places practitioners in charge of their own professional development – supporting social workers to maintain their post registration training and learning (PRTL) and to continue to reflect, learn and develop throughout their careers. NIGALA provides opportunities to all Guardians to undertake training and development in support of this framework. To maintain registration Guardians have to complete 90 hours continuous professional development (CPD) within each three year registration period.

## **NIGALA Involvement in the Regional Quality Improvement in Social Work Programme**

All Senior Managers in the Agency are accredited to the Quality Improvement Programme in Social Work, Nursing & Midwifery. This now provides a methodology and tools for the Agency to approach quality improvement initiatives.

### **Feedback**

As mentioned previously NIGALA has a blended approach to feedback which involves Children and young people and the judiciary. That feedback also includes solicitors who work with Guardians in what is termed a “tandem model”.

In the annual evaluation we received feedback from 56 solicitors out of a total of 92 requests. The overwhelming response was positive on the contribution of Guardians to a case with 91% rating the service as excellent and 9% as good.

Of those who provided feedback 98% (55 out of 56) felt Guardians promoted the best interests of the child at all times with 96% (54 out of 56) felt Guardians reflected their wishes and feelings at all times. Some of the comments made included:

- Judges often comment on how much they value the insights the GAL gives on the children's wishes and feelings and their expert views on their presentation.
- Extremely comprehensive, especially in recent times. The level of extreme care taken by GALs to ensure child's views fully taken into consideration has to be applauded, given the challenges presented.
- GALs often take on very complex facts and provide an insightful explanation which Judges praise and quote in reaching a decision.
- Despite the challenges to working practices during the pandemic, GALs have continued to represent children to a very high level bringing their professionalism and compassion to bear on behalf of these vulnerable individuals.

## 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. A key part of the personal and public approach is the young people’s forum. In 2017-18 NIGALA set up a young people’s forum to better integrate children’s feedback into how we improve our service. They named themselves the Northern Ireland Young Associates Board (NIYAB).

In March 2020 and with the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, they regrouped and welcomed new members. They have met on three occasions via zoom since October 2020. The areas which the group has addressed have been “Top Tips for Guardians Meeting Me,” and “Covid Stories.” Their advice to the Agency and Guardians can be seen below:





## TOP TIPS FOR GUARDIANS MEETING ME



## 4. Raising the Standards

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

- Collaborating with others
- Learning and Development
- Sources of Independent Assurance

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

### **Collaborating with others**

NIGALA is a member of the SBNI Board, Northern Ireland Social Work Leadership Network (NISWLN) and works with other key stakeholders to oversee the implementation of 'Signs of Safety'.

The Agency's strategic focus is on the children we represent and increasingly supported through improved partnership and collaborative working arrangements with other parts of the social care and justice system both locally and regionally.

As part of the Health and Social Care Framework for Northern Ireland the NIGALA seeks to support the Department of Health's (DoH) overall duty to promote an integrated system of health and social care designed to improve the health and social wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland.

The NIGALA's performance framework is determined by the Department of Health in the light of its wider strategic aims and of current Public Service Agreement (PSA) objectives and targets. The priorities and objectives for meeting the NIGALA's overall aim are set out in its annual Business Plan, the key objectives of which are subject to approval by its Sponsor Branch in the Department of Health. In common with all ALBs, on issues of governance and assurance, the NIGALA is directly accountable to the Department of Health.



## Learning and Development

The Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA) is committed to encouraging the professional development of all staff by promoting a culture of learning linked to its overall mission statement, directly related to the achievement of its objectives and relevant to the individual's present or foreseeable work responsibilities. To support this the Agency developed an approved Learning and Development Strategy in January 2020. This strategy has been created for the period of 2020 - 2027 to align with the Department of Health's (DoH) A Learning and Improvement Strategy for Social Workers and Social Care Workers 2017 – 2027. Objectives in the strategy include:

- Continue to facilitate and support the NIGALA Professional Development Groups for Guardians
- Contribute to and support the regional Inter-Agency Childcare and Legal Issues Group
- Ensure mechanisms for knowledge exchange creating stakeholder arrangements for reflective practice and learning focusing on improved outcomes for children
- As a regional organisation NIGALA will facilitate data sharing and knowledge exchange to inform and influence strategic planning and service development initiatives in respect of Looked After Children and family and childcare
- Utilise the NIGALA Solicitor Reference Group as a mechanism for information sharing and knowledge exchange in respect of relevant legislation and practice initiatives
- Contribute to and support the 'Five Nations Network' (CAFCASS England, CAFCASS Wales, Barnardo's Guardian ad Litem Service, Ireland and Children First, Scotland)
- Provide a presence at relevant regional and UK wide conferences

Over the past four to five years, the Agency has invested in Professionals Development Groups (PDGs). There are five groups – three in Belfast and one in



each of the Armagh and Derry offices. PDGs were a feature of the early years of the life of the Agency, but had ceased to function. Every guardian is a member of a PDG

The purpose of the PDGs is to:

- Share learning and improve performance through knowledge exchange
- Ensure a process of structured peer support which drives the quality of the work of guardians
- Provide a 'safe space' outside of manager/staff relationship where guardians can learn from one another and be supported by one another.

Professional Development Groups are a key component of learning and improvement within the Agency and are prioritised in the Strategy

## **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. Annual audit plans are based on this analysis. In 2020/21, the Internal Auditor reviewed the following systems and provided satisfactory assurance on the system of internal control:

- Financial Review
- Information Governance;
- Retention of Board and Committee papers;
- Governance during Covid-19 pandemic; and
- Board Effectiveness





The Head of Internal Audit's Annual Report stated: "Overall for the year ended 31 March 2021, I can provide **satisfactory** assurance on the adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's framework of governance, risk management and control."

## 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.

Prior to the pandemic, the backdrop was one where the volume of work in the system was very high and 'delay' was an ongoing and persistent problem.

Looking more broadly, the 'Public Law Working Group' reported that despite best efforts Family Courts were not coping with the pre-COVID workload and radical steps aimed at changing professional culture and working practices about to be launched when the pandemic struck were required and necessary.

The number of public law order cases in Northern Ireland remains high with 83 more care order applications received compared to 2019-20. What is more significant is the reduction in the overall number of cases concluded (229 less) than in 2019-20. There is no doubt, the reasons for the high number of public law (care) applications and regional variations are 'complex and multiple'<sup>1</sup>, But, the ability to effectively respond and manage this very challenging area of work, as Mrs Justice Keegan has said;

*'The far greater volume of cases is, as the President observed, dealt with by the same number of social workers, care professionals, Children's Guardians, lawyers and*

*judges, if not fewer, given those who have decided to leave their chosen careers because of the incessant and overwhelming demands of the family justice system’.<sup>2</sup>*

The important role played by guardians (and social workers) in assisting courts was best illustrated in a Judgement made Mr Justice O’Hara in May 2020, when he observed;

*‘The Agency’s Guardians have the potential to exercise an important influence on the direction in which cases develop. Very often they have something extra to add or different to say compared to what the court had heard from the Trust’.*

The interests of the child or young person require that the Court has the best possible information about the present experience of the child or young person and his/her family together with recommendation(s) for the future. The voice of the child or young person is an important source of information about family life. A return to normal face to face communication and engagement remains a challenge at present but is a real and necessary objective. It is also important to ensure that meaningful participation of family members in the court proceedings in order to vindicate the right to family life and to a fair hearing.

### **Partnership Working**

NIGALA is unique in being able to provide crosscutting data on the children it represents in the court process. NIGALA has shared data on case duration with Health and Social Care Trusts and the Shadow Family Justice Board on the delays which children and young people are experiencing. As a result of this approach the Shadow Family Justice Board has set up a “Delay Committee” to look into the reason cases are delayed and to explore how the process can be changed to give more timely outcomes for children and young people. In addition the NIGALA Assistant Directors have implemented regular meetings with their counterparts in the Trusts to share information on cases which are running over 400 days and also how these cases can be progressed.





# Looking back at 2020-21

## 1147 Children

have had a Guardian ad Litem appointed to represent their best interests and ensure that the Judge is aware of their wishes and feelings.



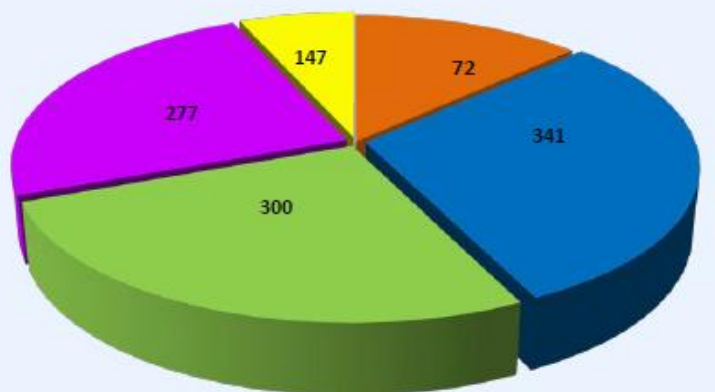
**70**

## Children Adopted

- 57 – Adoption Placement
- 12 – Adoption Step-parents
- 1 – Adoption Intercountry



Like all HSC Trusts and Arms' Length Bodies, we are responsible for our resources and required to manage our budget closely. NIGALA broke even within the allocated budget of £4.3 million.



- Under 1yr
- 1yr - Under 5yrs
- 5yrs - Under 10yrs
- 10yrs - Under 16yrs
- 16yrs - Under 18yrs

## Age Profile

Children and Young People of all ages are involved in a range of Specified Public Law and Adoption Proceedings. The majority of children are under 10 years of age.





Every child over 7 years of age is given the opportunity to provide feedback on their experience.

NIGALA recognises the importance of children and young people having a say on the services they receive.

There has been a **17%** increase this year on the number of feedback forms returned from children and young people who have used the service.



### What was the most helpful thing about a Guardian?

*Feedback from children and young people who used the service ...*

- ✎ I could tell her my worries
- ✎ The way she explained everything that would happen with courts.
- ✎ She helped get done what needed done. She is fair and reasonable as well.
- ✎ Listening to my views
- ✎ To speak for me in court
- ✎ To have someone to listen to me and explain everything
- ✎ My voice was heard in court
- ✎ They explained everything so that I could understand and they listened to me
- ✎ She listened to what I wanted.
- ✎ Telling us about what's going on
- ✎ I could tell her stuff

### Case Requests By Trust Area

**727** Case Requests for a Guardian ad Litem to be appointed. Detailed by HSC Trust and number of children.

