



NORTHERN IRELAND GUARDIAN AD LITEM AGENCY

ANNUAL QUALITY REPORT 2015/16



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FOREWORD



Peter Reynolds
Acting Chief Executive

It gives me great pleasure to present the Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency's third Annual Quality Report. The Report documents the journey which NIGALA has taken over the past year to give effect to the DHSSPS 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 Acting 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 the provision of safeguarding children's best interests at a critical point in the State's intervention in family life. 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.

During 2015/16, NIGALA took part in the RQIA *Review of Quality Improvement Systems and Processes in Health and Social Care*. As an Agency I believe we have worked to improve the quality of our service for many years. However, Q2020 and this Review seek to achieve a more systematic quality improvement approach and NIGALA welcomes this and looks forward to playing its part in this process.

Not only are organisations facing challenges of greater complexity than ever before but they are doing so in a climate of financial austerity and diminishing resources. As such, all

of those charged with providing leadership are having to cope with a myriad of challenges in which the rate of change is accelerating. How an organisation maximises the potential of its staff such that they can perform their best and deliver the greatest impact for children, is crucial. Guiding and supporting an organisation to encourage new ways of working in which *connectedness* is absolutely the key NIGALA began the implementation of an integrated programme of change in 2014/15 which included the introduction of a revised Professional Development Framework, a new Leadership and Management Framework, a Professional Accountability Framework and a Learning and Development Strategy. This work was continued in 2015/16 and I believe these initiatives are supporting the sustainable behaviours required to ensure the delivery of the Agency's strategic objectives and to promote service improvement and improved benefits for service users.



Peter Reynolds
Acting 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
- 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 under '*Next Steps*' in last year's report.

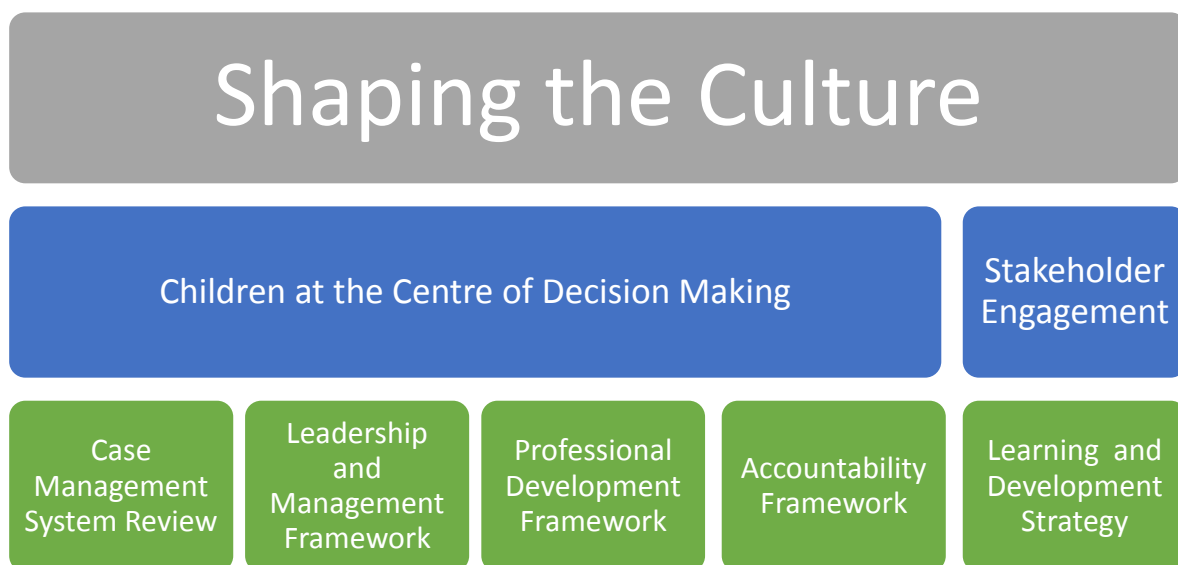


1. TRANSFORMING THE CULTURE

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 Agency’s strategic objectives, service improvement and improve benefits for service users. This can be seen in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1



In 2015/16 NIGALA has endeavoured to transform its culture in a range of ways including the following:

- Culture and Climate Survey
- Growing a Culture of Continuous Improvement
- Implementation of the NIGALA Accountability Framework
- Development of a Coaching Culture

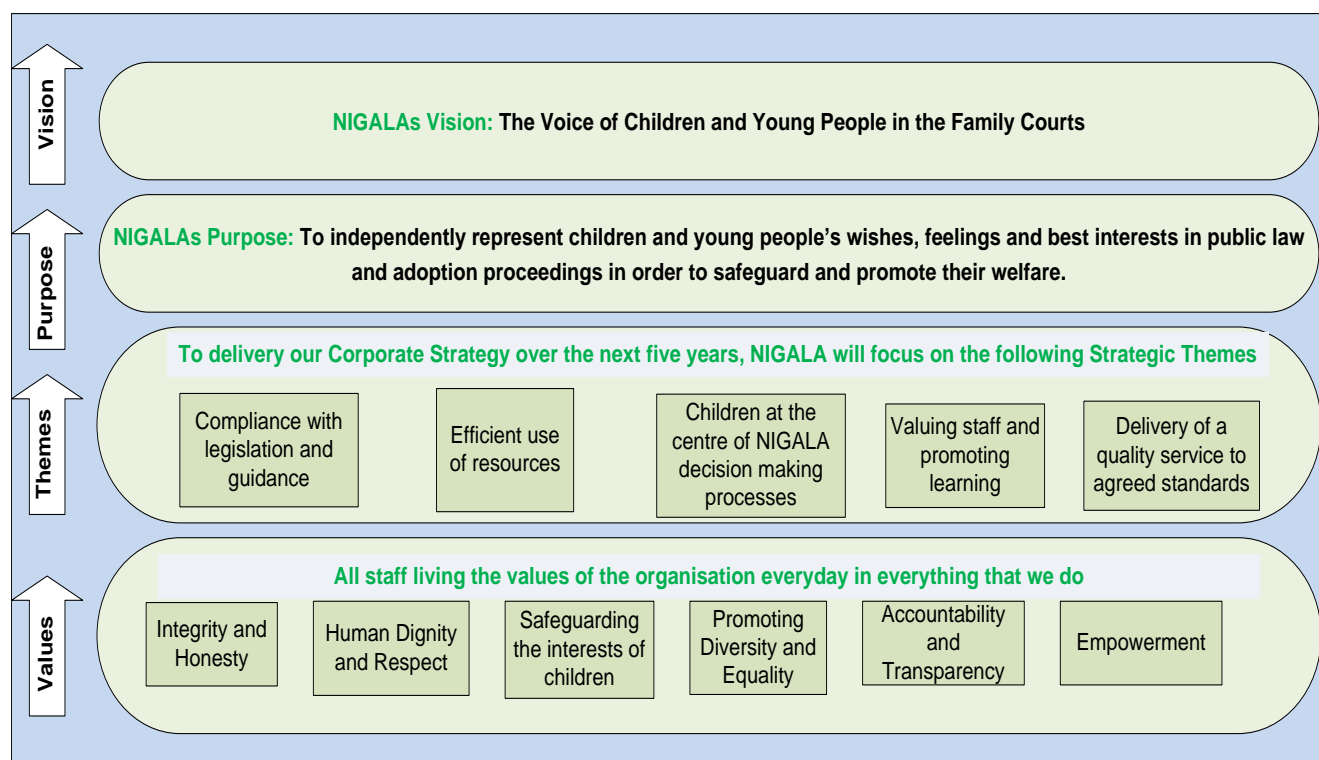
Culture and Climate Survey

In 2015/16 NIGALA completed a series of workshops with all staff as part of a Culture and Climate Survey and the corresponding action plan has assisted in strengthening the internal corporate identity, refocused performance and provided additional impetus in involvement and engagement exercises with staff which form part of key internal decision making. The following key tasks took place as part of the action plan from the Culture and Climate Survey work:

- Review of the NIGALA Vision and Mission Statement
- Review of the NIGALA Values and Principles
- Implementation of the Strategic Map for 2016

During the year NIGALA completed a consultation exercise with staff in the form of focused workshops which assisted in redefining the **NIGALA Vision, Mission Statement, Values and Principles**. Workshops with staff in December 2015 and March 2016 enabled the organisation to re-focus and implement its new strategy map which outlines the key strategic themes which are underpinned by NIGALA’s revised values which all staff have signed up to endorsing as part of their role within the Agency (See Figure 2).

Figure 2



Growing a Culture of Continuous Improvement

'A service that is well led and wants to improve, will encourage staff to raise concerns without fear of reprisal'.¹

Creating the right culture for listening and reflection is a key objective for NIGALA. Part of such a culture is to embrace 'comments, compliments and complaints' seeing these as opportunities to improve the quality of the service we provide to children and those charged with making life changing decisions about their futures.

Throughout February and March 2016 NIGALA ran a series of workshops with staff in all offices in order to review the process in place for the management of *Comments, Compliments and Complaints*. The purpose of these workshops was to grow a culture of continual improvement through staff engagement and communication and ensure that staff views were gathered to support the delivery of effective investigation and reporting processes that would inform a learning lessons approach to improving delivery of the guardian ad litem service to children.

The objectives of the workshops were:

- To discuss how we can learn from our service users comments and complaints
- To build more openness and transparency around how we respond to issues when things may go wrong (and learn from it)
- To support our Culture of Continual Learning and reassert our Culture of Improvement (not fault or blame)
- To help staff to be the best they can, so NIGALA can be the best it can be

The *HSC Leadership Centre* are supporting NIGALA in providing an independent report and recommendations which are now being taken forward as part of the Culture and Climate Survey Action Plan for 2016/17.

Next Steps

- Review of the procedure for the management and investigation of Comments, Compliments and Complaints
- Development of feedback mechanisms on learning from Comments, Compliments and Complaints to support the continuous development of staff in their provision of a high quality service to children

¹ Care Quality Commission – *Complaints Matter*, 2014

Implementation of NIGALA Accountability Framework

In response to an RQIA recommendation that a system of quality assuring live reports produced by guardians be introduced, the Agency has developed the *NIGALA Accountability Framework*. While guardians exercise professional independence in making a recommendation to the court, premised on their assessment and analysis of the child's needs, circumstances and best interests, they are accountable to the Agency for the quality of their work. Increased workload demands in a climate of austerity require clear accountability arrangements to evidence quality standards. In last year's Quality Report the Agency stated it would implement this Framework and progress to date is set out below and the actions have been linked to the strategic themes as identified in Figure 2 (above).

1. Efficient Use of Resources

Case Allocation Pilot

The identification of criteria to inform caseload weighting has assisted guardians to reflect on the importance of achieving timely allocation of cases alongside the challenges of managing a demand led service. The finalised GCIS case allocation specification will support an equitable and transparent process based on case complexity and objective factors relative to the existing numerical KPI (average live caseload of 11 per WTE). Caseload weighting points will be retained at case conclusion for one month to support administrative case closure. Points will be integrated to reflect involvement in non-case related activity and training and professional development. A guardian can track their individual performance against Agency averages thereby promoting equity and transparency.

2. Delivering a Quality Service to Agreed Standards

The Guardian Case Information System (GCIS) developments will support the tracking of KPI's against averages/benchmarks with relevant alerts in place. Tracking case duration against the timelines in the *Guide to Case Management* and case throughput will refine the existing data in respect of average live caseload per year. Alerts to identify non-compliance with KPI's will cite issues that require discussion between the guardian and their manager/case co-ordinator.

The existing KPI's are quantitative measures which require to be supported by qualitative data. Significant work has been undertaken in revising report formats in line with the consultation on the refined guardian role. A review of a sample of reports, following the 2015/16 file audits for annual appraisals, will be undertaken by the Assistant Directors to consider standards and any inconsistencies.



The *Children's Participation Workgroup* facilitated a *Swap Shop* event in February 2016 demonstrating a range of materials and techniques for engaging with children. The group has identified a number of practice areas for development and established dedicated work streams to devise standardised assessment tools and frameworks to promote consistency of approach amongst guardians in undertaking their assessments. Four work streams have been established and are scheduled to provide a review of progress by 21 April 2016. The work streams are progressing work on:

- Revisiting and developing resources and tools for engaging with children to elicit their wishes and feelings during proceedings and provide feedback at the conclusion of proceedings. Devising a children's court diary and booklet to chart wishes and feelings work are being considered
- Collating tools and materials to promote work with children with a disability and reflect the application of *Makaton* and *Talking Mats*
- Developing skills, tools and resources in relation to the assessment of attachment and observation and assessment of contact
- Collation of a resource pack on child development

Other areas for consideration are risk assessment and developing culturally competent practice in light of the changing demographics of the children who are the subject of proceedings.

The work streams focus on qualitative measures which complement the existing qualitative KPI's in monitoring and reviewing the standard of guardian's professional practice.

The integration of guardian/solicitor reciprocal feedback at the conclusion of all relevant proceedings provides an additional source of assurance as to the standard of the guardian's practice aligned to the expectations in the protocol informing the working relationship between the guardian and the solicitor.

3. Valuing Staff and Promoting Learning

The establishment of the *Professional Development Groups* (described fully under 'Strengthening the Workforce') will embed knowledge exchange and peer support. The integration of points in the caseload weighting system for professional development and involvement in non-case related activities clearly signal the Agency's commitment to promoting ongoing professional development. Emphasis has been placed on guardian's registering with the *NISCC Post Qualifying Framework* to achieve credits associated with training and development.

A *Supervision Policy Review* will be undertaken by a working group. An action plan and timeline has been devised for completion of the review. Options to promote mechanisms for group/peer supervision, mentoring and peer support will also contribute to recognition of guardian expertise as a valuable resource in the promotion of reflective practice.

4. Children at the Centre of NIGALA Decision Making Processes

The work being progressed by the *Children's Participation Workgroup* will greatly assist in ensuring that the added value of the guardian role is evident in the application of standardised tools/templates. The active engagement and involvement of children and review of feedback will give prominence to the voice of the child.

5. Compliance with Legislation and Guidance

While all of the aforementioned initiatives will support standardisation of professional practice the focus of overarching thematic audits by the Quality Assurance and Training Manager will add an additional assurance mechanism. Themes emerging and issues identified will inform the annual *Learning and Development Plans*.

Effective governance arrangements are contingent on staff being clear about the standards and expectations of their professional practice supported by robust information and audit systems. It is imperative that guardians have the requisite knowledge and skills to make professionally independent assessments that are compliant with legislation, policies and procedures. The additional dimension of peer support and review should enhance the quality of performance. User feedback provides objective information from a range of stakeholders that further informs what works well and what could be improved upon or developed.

Coaching

In last year's report, NIGALA reported on the development of a 'coaching culture' within the Agency and undertook to develop a strategy for further embedding a coaching approach in 2015/16. NIGALA has undertaken work in the past two years introducing a coaching culture into the Agency with the objective of including coaching behaviours into all areas of its business. This process has been successful and has now moved to a level which includes the Senior Management Team and the NIGALA Board. Key to developing high performance within the Executive Team is to better understand each individual's strengths and complementary skills committed to a common goal. Meeting identified quality and performance objectives requires developing and promoting the growth of the whole leadership team, realising its full potential for high performance in challenging times. So how has NIGALA approached this quality objective?



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- By using a facilitated coaching approach bringing together the NIGALA Chair, Non-Executive Directors and the Executive Team to consider and develop a shared understanding of what we mean by ‘good’ outcomes across the wider Agency including the ‘child’s voice’
 - Shaping a shared understanding across the Agency how we best ‘live and breathe’ shared values
 - How we ‘model a coaching style of leadership’ building ‘richer’ communication across the whole organisation for all staff
 - How best to develop and utilise supportive coaching & mentoring approaches and practice across all processes

NIGALA is pleased to announce a leadership style and culture which is developing positively and where senior managers are seen to be open and accessible, willing to listen to new ideas and open to new approaches where appropriate. Meaningful communication and engagement based on personal qualities of integrity, emotional intelligence, intellectual flexibility, openness and resilience is necessary to an organisation which is adaptable and able to respond positively to internal and external demands. In this regard NIGALA is moving to a position where its senior managers are able to coach their staff, building on a shared vision underpinned by positive staff engagement and ways of working in which *connectedness* is absolutely necessary. NIGALA is on a journey which places the emphasis on how its senior managers connects and individually and collectively with its critical stakeholders. This process is ongoing and subject to review.

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 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 2015/16 NIGALA has endeavoured to strengthen its workforce in a range of ways including the following;

- The Development of NIGALA Professional Development Framework
- Continuing to prioritise Staff Development within the climate of Austerity
- Developing a revised Communication Strategy and Human Resources Strategy

Professional Development Framework

The *Professional Development Framework* is aligned with the key business objectives of NIGALA and supports the Agency's *Learning and Development Strategy* which was reported on in last year's Quality Report.

The purpose of the Framework is to provide structure and guidance for the professional social work workforce within NIGALA. It takes account of the NIGALA *Professional Standards* as well as the reform of the Northern Ireland Post Qualifying (NIPQ) Framework, which resulted in the launch of the revised PQ framework called *Professional in Practice* (PIP) in June 2015.

The Framework is a demonstration of NIGALA's commitment to workforce development and further supports our efforts to continually improve in line with the *Investors in People* Review recommendations in July 2015. The inclusion of coaching within the Framework offers an innovative solution to develop NIGALA professional staff and introduce a coaching approach to the organisation. It also takes account of a recommendation from RQIA which said –

'NIGALA should facilitate a structured system of peer support for guardians ad litem which is underpinned by robust management oversight of social work practice standards'.

Aims of the Professional Development Framework

The Framework provides the foundations to enhance the quality of service delivery. It aims to:

- Drive up performance and knowledge exchange
- Ensure a process of structured peer support through Professional Development Groups (PDGs) which drives the quality of the work of guardians
- Establish a coaching culture within the Agency

The Agency provided a one day introduction to coaching for all NIGALA staff between January and April 2015 in order to provide a basis for practice within the PDGs. This was provided by Niamh Shiells and Debbie Cousins from *Advance Coaching*.



It was agreed that there would be five PDGs throughout the Agency – three based in Belfast and one in each of the two offices in Armagh and Derry. The Armagh group has been meeting very successfully for a number of years and has in many ways provided a template for the development of the other groups. Staff in Belfast were consulted on the membership of the three groups in the summer of 2015 and there was no objection to the make-up of the groups which aimed to provide a range of experience and expertise within each group.

Progress to Date

An initial meeting of each of the Belfast groups was arranged in October 2015. Niamh Shiells from *Advance Coaching* attended the first meeting to help facilitate the direction of the groups and assist in setting any ground rules that members felt would be helpful for the future success of the groups. Advance Coaching provided information on a model for case discussions, the facilitator role and thinking rounds (an approach used in coaching practice where each member of a group has one minute to voice their opinion and the others commit to careful listening).

The Agency made it clear that the PDGs are to be owned and run by the members of the group and that we were starting with a blank page. The groups took this invitation and have developed and tailored their group to meet their needs. For example, it had originally been suggested to the groups that they meet four times a year but all the groups felt this was too little and two have opted for six weekly meetings with the other going for every two months. Two of the Belfast groups will facilitate the groups themselves whilst one opted to have an Assistant Director facilitate theirs.

The Agency is pleased to report that PDGs are now an established and important part of the NIGALA professional development culture. There are now five groups – three in the Belfast office and one each in our regional offices in Armagh and Derry. All social work qualified staff have committed themselves to regular attendance at PDGs which meet between six and eight times a year, depending on the group. Initial feedback has been very positive as guardians share learning and experience with one another which is vital in a job where the statutory independence of the role could possibly lead to isolation.

Next Step

- NIGALA will develop a discussion forum within the revised NIGALA staff intranet whereby each PDG can post information from their group thereby disseminating the learning and development

Staff Development

Each year a series of internal training activities are arranged for all staff. The majority of training is largely driven by the need for guardians to be kept up to date with developments in child protection, family support and adoption. In order to ensure that training is effective and good value for money an annual report on *Effectiveness of Training Delivered within NIGALA* is produced each year and reviewed by the NIGALA Social Care Governance Committee.

Progress on 2015/16 Learning and Development Plan

The vast majority of training planned for 2015/16 was delivered in year. Of the 27 planned events, 17 were completed in full, three are ongoing, one is scheduled for early in 2016/17 (*Facing up to Facebook – Social Media Awareness*), and one was postponed at the request of the trainer with the other five events not completed.

Effectiveness of Learning and Development Programme

Training is evaluated at the end of the event. On some occasions events are evaluated both in house and by the training provider. Experience has shown that obtaining evaluation at the end of the training event is much more successful than seeking it afterwards, for example via electronic means.

With regard to training where significant time and resources were invested, the Agency ran a series of training events on *Substance Abuse*, *Mindfulness* and *Growing a Culture of Continual Improvement*. Each of these events were run at least twice in the Belfast office as well as the Armagh and Derry offices.

The Substance Abuse training was run by Rebecca Roberts from FASA and catered for Panel Solicitors as well as guardians. Four sessions were run with two in June 2015 and two in October 2015. The events catered for around 90 guardians and solicitors. Most who attended the training rated it overall as very good or excellent and the following comment was typical of many of the comments made –

‘Very engaging speaker, very knowledgeable, excellent delivery, good structure and overall engagement’.

Mental Health Awareness Week in May 2015 highlighted mindfulness as the topic of focus. In line with this, NIGALA commissioned *Carecall* to provide mindfulness training and they in turn appointed Anne Costello to carry out the awareness raising sessions. The trainer subsequently provided four sessions – two in Belfast and one in each of the Derry and Armagh offices. This training was for all staff, guardian and administration, and again was well attended and strongly evaluated.



In March 2016 David Shemmings returned to the Agency to provide two days of training. Professor David Shemmings, OBE, PhD, is the Director of the Attachment and Relationship-based Practice programme, Co-Director of the University of Kent's Centre for Child Protection and Visiting Professor of Child Protection Research at Royal Holloway College, University of London. He is the author of more than 60 articles, books and chapters on relational-based social work practice, theory and research.

The two day training objectives were around the following areas:

- Introduction on disorganised attachment and child protection
- Contact – looking at the theory in the context of observation, tools and observation of contact
- Court Report – utilising the theory in the context of court reports – to include direct work with children in terms of assessment

The turnout at this training was excellent with more than 50 guardians and managers attending at least one day and most attending both. Evaluation was very positive. With regard to the overall assessment of the training by 38 attendees, 20 rated it as excellent, 14 as very good and four as good.



Professor Shemmings with Deidre Allen (left) & Anne McKeown, guardians and Teresa Fallon- Assistant Director (far right)

Whilst Professor Shemmings was with us, initial discussions took place about follow up 'surgeries' where guardians could meet again with him and discuss the practical implications for practice. He also offered to liaise with staff via email and telephone in the interim. The development of a pro forma for observing contact will be progressed and led by the Children's Participation Group in consultation with their guardian colleagues and Professor Shemmings.

Peer support and knowledge exchange are an important aspect of learning and development in any organisation and this is an area that NIGALA has been keen to develop in recent years and made some inroads in 2015/16. The development of the PDGs and coaching has been mentioned above and another avenue for peer support/knowledge exchange was evidenced in February 2016 via a 'Swap Shop' event run by guardians for guardians, initiated by Teresa Fallon and Patricia O'Kane, Assistant Directors, in collaboration with the Agency's *Children's Participation Group*.

The idea was that a number of practitioners set up stalls around a large room and demonstrated their own way of working when engaging with children and young people. This was an excellent event which was highly evaluated with a desire to have similar events in the future.

2015/16 was a busy and productive one for learning and development. NIGALA has always had a strong internal training programme providing bespoke training for guardians at the level they require and the evaluations of training would indicate that this continues to be the case. A positive development this year has been the introduction of the NISCC Professional in Practice (PiP) post qualifying awards. NIGALA's social work practitioners can now gain credit for training that is routinely provided and a workshop was provided by Brenda Horgan from NISCC in October 2015 explaining how this works.

Next Step

- NIGALA is committed to promoting PiP within its Social Work Qualified staff in 2016/17

Communicating and Consulting with Staff

Building effective communication and consultation processes between management and staff has been a focus in 2015/16. The *Culture and Climate Survey* provided very useful feedback to the management team in terms of how staff regarded communication and consultation, highlighting the need for improvement in these areas. The Survey illustrated there was the need to strengthen the communication channels between management and staff, with management being more accessible and staff having meaningful input into the direction of, and decision-making in, the Agency.

Given the issues raised in the Culture and Climate Survey in regards to communication and consultation, much time has been dedicated by the management team to working with staff to understanding how communication and consultation can be bolstered, developed and improved. This learning process required the Communication and HR Strategies for 2015/16 and 2016/17 to be put on hold to ensure both strategies going forward are able to dually fulfil the needs of the Agency and staff.

Already established formal communication channels in NIGALA have continued throughout 2015/16, with regular staff meetings taking place in Armagh, Derry and Belfast and management continuing to meet on a quarterly basis with the trade union NIPSA through the Joint Consultative Committee. Furthermore, a staff newsletter was published in December 2015, detailing developments within NIGALA and the wider HSC / family justice areas, staff social activities, training initiatives and conferences that have been attended. This was very well received by staff and they can contribute to the content of the newsletter. This publication is available electronically and in hard copy.

An output of the Culture and Climate Survey was the recognition from management that there needed to be regular communication with staff regarding the business of the Agency. This led to NIGALA's Acting CEO issuing regular *Briefing Emails* to staff following NIGALA Board meetings or on key issues in the Agency. This initiative has been well-received by staff as it promotes openness and transparency, whilst also providing the rationale for some key decisions and changes which have occurred in 2015/16.

NIGALA continues to use *Metacompliance* software to consult with staff in relation to policies and procedures. There continues to be work in streamlining this process, including the labelling of policies and procedures, to ensure staff are aware if it is for consultation or information.

Next Steps

- NIGALA will put in place a Communication Plan and HR Strategy, both of which are aligned to the Corporate and Business Plan of 2017-2021. The HR Strategy will demonstrate the Agency's commitment to enabling staff as its greatest asset to deliver a high quality service. The Communication Plan will ensure there are formal and informal mechanisms for communicating with internal and external stakeholders, including the use of digital signage and social media
- The consultative and communication process in relation to policies and procedures will continue to be refined and improved, to include exploring the use of Executive Summaries and developing a schedule for the review and dissemination of policies

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:

- Service User Engagement and Personal and Public Involvement (PPI)
- Service User and Stakeholder Feedback
- Developing Methods of Engagement with Children and Children's Participation.
- Introduction of NIGALA Revised Guardian Court Report

Core themes for NIGALA in 2015/16 were:

- To enable stakeholders to influence and actively contribute to the strategic direction, effective operation and on-going development of the Agency
- To put in place a mechanism for the effective engagement of children and young people into relevant NIGALA policy development and decision making processes
- To ensure effective feedback from service users and stakeholders

To further these aims a number of initiatives were undertaken in 2015/16 and include the following:

Stakeholder Events

During 2015/16, NIGALA has co-ordinated two events with stakeholders as part of the Care Proceedings Pilot Study. These events were held in Belfast and in the North West and were attended by the Judiciary, representatives from the Department of Health and Northern Ireland Court Service, as well as social workers from the relevant Health and Social Care Trusts, solicitors and guardians. In addition to presentations from the Department of Health and NIGALA there was also input from Dr Mandi McDonald, Queens University, who provided a visual portrayal of a child's timescales which set the scene for the purpose of the pilot study.

Consultation with the Judiciary

During 2015/16 the Agency has continued to be involved in stakeholder events and meetings involving members of the judiciary focusing almost exclusively on the jointly sponsored DOH/DOJ Care Proceedings Pilot.

In addition, the Agency continued to collaborate with the judiciary through attendance of the Chief Executive at the *Children Order Advisory Committee (COAC)* meetings and attendance of operational managers at regional *Family Court Business Committees*.



Developing Methods of Engagement with Children and Children's Participation

Placing children at the centre of NIGALA decision making is at the heart of the culture of the NIGALA, as well as a key strategic objective for the Agency. The two components for placing children at the centre of decision making are:

- How guardians carry out their duties with children during the court process
- The goal to integrate children's views into planning for service delivery

These aims are reviewed and monitored as part of the work of the Social Care Governance Committee.

Previous initiatives in this area have included the establishment of a *Children's Participation Group* and engagement with children and young people directly in collaboration with the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC).

The work of the *Children's Participation Group* culminated in a document which outlined the various methods used by guardians when working with children – essentially a child participation audit. The recommendations from this exercise included:

- The facilitation of knowledge exchange and discussion fora to share guardian resources and experience
- The development of a final letter/record outlining the final decision and the plan for the child to promote further transparency
- Explore information technology options for engagement with children and young people
- Identified training needs to be pursued in appropriate format and availability

The Agency engaged with VOYPIC and a group of young people which resulted in a document entitled *Proposals for Children's Participation in NIGALA*.

The recommendations/ proposals for an Action Plan arising from this report included:

- Developing external communication and publications (review of leaflets, review/ update website, explore *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts)
- Develop Youth Advisory Group/User forum
- Hold events/activity days with/for children
- Inclusion of young people in NIGALA's organisational practices
- Include children in the 21st anniversary celebrations for NIGALA (2017)



Some examples of how these improvements have been progressed are outlined below:

Knowledge Exchange Events

The session consisted of the sharing of skills/knowledge and resources in an informal workshop model. Guardians involved in the *Children's Participation Group* shared and demonstrated activities, games, books, which they use when engaging directly with children of different age groups and ability. These presentations included resources for children with a disability. In addition the group presented literature for practitioners relating to theories of child development, brain development and attachment and trauma.

The *Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS)* resources for practitioners working with children were available for guardians to consider and discuss. Suggestions arising from this day included developing tools/resources for addressing contact attachment as well as training in relation to working with children with a disability, including training on *Makaton*. Other resources were made available through links to resources and for working with children with autism as well as the *Mellow Parenting Project*.

Resources for Working with Children to Explore Wishes and Feelings and Feedback

A Working Group was established in year to revisit the NIGALA resources for engaging children and young people and benchmarking them to CAFCASS resources.

The group plans to develop resources for practitioners which are tailored to the two tenets of the guardian role:

- Ascertaining children's wishes and feelings
- Developing children's participation in court as well as developing a process for effective feedback (research shows that feedback is more meaningful when it is part of a process)

Next Steps

- In relation to ascertaining wishes and feelings a resource entitled '*About Me*' that contains a compilation of techniques to open up a dialogue with children and young people will be developed
- '*My Court Diary*' is the proposed title of a resource which provides a framework for the guardian to help with the child's understanding of the Court proceedings
- A suite of professional resources for guardians will be available for download from the NIGALA website

Consultation on the Revised NIGALA Report Format

In the context of safeguarding and promoting children's interests, primarily safety and well-being, it is recognised that social workers have a dual mandate to support families and protect children. The statutory obligation of the guardian ad litem is clear, to safeguard the interests of the child and to have regard to the child's welfare being paramount. In the context of increasing demand NIGALA is mindful of the challenges of reduced timescales for determining cases in a climate of financial austerity.

Currently in process is a Care Proceedings Pilot jointly sponsored by the DOH and DOJ. In the event that proceedings are foreshortened as a consequence of changes to the system of family justice in Northern Ireland, decision making for children, taking account of the 'child's time-frame', those of the Courts and the Trust's capacity to intervene, is likely to be significantly impacted. In this changing context, prioritising the child's needs and safety will take on a new, more pressing imperative but no less challenging.

In line with this changing environment, NIGALA has embarked on a process of stakeholder consultation on its revised court report templates to seek views on whether by making such changes, guardian's reports are:

- More analytical, focused and where possible, shorter avoiding lengthy description
- Less repetitive to guard against duplicating what is contained within Trust/expert court reports
- To ensure there is information available to court at the earliest stages of a case and to provide an early/preliminary analysis of the child's circumstances, needs and what is safe for the child

NIGALA is mindful of the Ofsted inspection reports (2007/08) in which the following comments were made about social work court reports:

- Many reports contained unnecessary material
- There was often too much description and not enough evaluation
- Insufficient differentiation between fact and opinion
- Significant facts not verified
- Opinions not linked to evidence
- Reports not given a reasoned assessment
- Important to link information to the child's welfare
- The strong areas of reports were on assessing children's needs, issues of harm and reporting children's wishes and feelings
- Good reports represented the voice of children and based on evidence of children's needs using the welfare checklist

NIGALA is also mindful of the views of the judiciary in respect of what information the court requires, taking account of the following:

- Any harm or risk of harm
- The child's views
- The family context including advice relating to ethnicity, language, religion, denomination and culture of the child and other significant others
- The Trust work and proposed care plan
- Advice about the court process including timetable
- Identification of work that remains to be done for the child in the short and longer term
- Recommendations for outcomes in order to safeguard and promote the best interests of the child in the proceedings

The emphasis is on the guardian providing an 'analysis' to court relying on the relevant facts and evidence. There is a statutory requirement that the 'welfare checklist' as set out in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 has to be the paramount consideration in determining the child's upbringing.

Analytical writing while not relying on lengthy descriptive content, does not displace the requirement to provide a narrative of the child(ren) and family circumstances which adequately tells the 'child's story'.

NIGALA has undertaken part one of a consultation with stakeholders which will be repeated in late 2016.

Service user and stakeholder feedback

Full details of service user and stakeholder feedback can be found in the *NIGALA Annual Report 2015/16*. A few examples of key feedback are given here.

Feedback from Children and Young People

NIGALA sent out 207 hard copy questionnaires to children and young people. Of those 53 were completed. Of the children who provided written feedback 51% were male and 49% female.

- 74% of the children answered 'yes definitely' to the question, *Did you understand what your guardian said to you?*, whilst 17% replied 'most of the time.'
- 64% found their guardian easy to talk to, 24% found that they were mostly easy to talk to
- 91% of children and young people found that the guardian listened to what they had to say, 6% found that the guardian mostly listened



- 58% found the guardian understood how they felt, 30% felt they understood most of the time

Overall 81% were happy with their guardian ad litem with 64% rating their guardian as 'excellent', 17% rating their guardians as 'very good'.

One of the options available for children and young people to give feedback on their experience of the guardian service is with the assistance from an advocate from Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC). The following are some comments received by young people regarding their guardian.

'She was really supportive of my decisions'.

'She was really nice I liked seeing her'.

'I would like to have seen her more. Sometimes I could answer the questions and sometimes I couldn't'.

'He is just really helpful'.

'She is amazing'.

Evaluation of the Guardian Ad Litem Service by the Judiciary

Six out of 16 members of the Judiciary returned feedback and indicated the following -

I invariably find that the reports of the Guardian are of immense assistance to me in reaching a determination in cases. The quality of the work is very impressive'.

'The GAL service is key to making the best decisions we can for children. It is a wonderful service and inspires me to do my best too!'

4. RAISING THE STANDARDS

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

- Introduction of the new Guardian Case Information System
- Learning from Comments, Comments and Complaints
- Raising Standards of Health, Safety and Wellbeing

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

Introduction of the new Guardian Case Information System (GCIS)

November 2015 saw the introduction of the new version of the *Guardian Case Information System* (GCIS) which was first implemented in May 2008. The new version followed a two year period of developments which provided enhanced functionality and accountability across the guardian ad litem case management process.

Revisions included better visibility of the child within the case management process, improved integration with the daily work of the guardian and the need for accountable recording and report writing. In the area of solicitor appointment there were increased controls to ensure fairness and equity of solicitor's case appointments across the *NIGALA Solicitor Panel*. In supporting feedback from children a revised children's feedback process was developed which ensures every child has the option to provide feedback in every case.

To support the *NIGALA Accountability Framework* (detailed under *Transforming the Culture*) a new *Supervision and Appraisal* module is being implemented in 2016/17 and work is currently progressing.

Further work is also planned to effectively integrate the new Microsoft *Surface Pro* tablet technology into the daily work of a guardian. Technology to enable the guardian prepare reports and intervention recording without being linked to the network is under development along with potential applications to support child feedback and case working with the child using tablet technology.

Next Steps

- Implementation of the GCIS Supervision and Appraisal Module to support Staff Supervision and Appraisal
- Implementation of the off line GCIS intervention form and reports
- Implementation of additional applications on the Surface Pro tablet to support Guardian ad Litem work with children

Learning from Comments, Compliments and Complaints

A key element with regard to raising standards within the Agency is the NIGALA *Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy* and reporting system. During the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016, NIGALA received a total of 38 Comments, Compliments and Complaints; 16 arriving by email, 19 by formal letter, 0 in person and 3 via telephone. These are outlined in the table below:

	Email	Letter	In Person	Phone	Total
Comments	1	2	0	1	4
Compliments	15	16	0	1	32
Complaints	0	1	0	1	2
Total	16	19	0	3	38

Comments

A total of four comments were received during 2015/16.

Two of these comments were initially received as complaints, however as the complaints related to case matters which were still live before the court, the complainants were advised the issues being raised could only be dealt with in the court arena. One of these resulted in being recorded as an incident due to the aggressive manner displayed by the complainant, however was offered the opportunity to follow up upon conclusion of live proceedings. The second complaint recorded as a comment was made by a non-party during live proceedings. The non-party was offered the opportunity to discuss the issues raised upon conclusion of proceedings.

Compliments

NIGALA received a total of 32 compliments during 2015/16. The compliments received by NIGALA during 2015/16 are categorised as follows:

Token of thanks	3
Letter of thanks	11
Positive feedback	17
Verbal thanks	1
Total	32

The compliments received included positive feedback from members of the judiciary and

solicitors upon conclusion of cases regarding the work of the guardian ad litem. Thanks were received from a number of parents regarding the work of the guardian during cases in achieving positive outcomes for children. A number of compliments were made by staff at NIGALA which included thanks for positive feedback about training events.

Complaints

NIGALA received two case-related complaints during 2015/16. As the live proceedings had ended, NIGALA could review these in line with the complaints procedure.

One complaint was made by parents in a case raising a number of issues regarding the guardian ad litem including withholding information from the court and harassment. Despite numerous attempts by NIGALA to make contact with the complainants via phone calls, letters arranging visits the complainants did not communicate/cooperate with NIGALA and as such the matter was unable to be taken any further.

A complaint was received by NIGALA from a parent who reported they had felt the guardian had not shown due diligence in their assessment and had based their report largely on the Trust's perspective. Due to the parent's ill health it has been deemed inappropriate to proceed at this time.

Lessons Learned

A range of workshops facilitated by the *HSC Leadership Centre* between January and March 2016 enabled the dissemination and learning from all comments, compliments and complaints received. A number of recommendations for improvement will be actioned in 2016/17. A few examples are highlighted below

- Learning should be shared from Complaints, Compliments and Comments frequently through team meetings and other additional communication forums
- After every complaints process is completed the Executive Team should have a debrief with the staff member from a supportive perspective
- External coaching support should be made available to staff going through a complaints process

Raising Standards of Health, Safety and Wellbeing

In last year's Quality Report, NIGALA undertook to revise the Agency's *Health and Safety Policy Statement*. In April 2015 the revised NIGALA Health and Safety Policy Statement and associated bulletins were approved by the NIGALA Board. During 2015/16 the following initiatives were undertaken:

- Annual review of Health, Safety and Wellbeing Committee Terms of Reference



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- Completion of annual office risk assessments and reporting to the Department
 - DSE risk assessments continuing for staff
 - Defibrillators purchased for each office and a number of staff trained in the operation of the device
 - Fire, Legionella, and Asbestos Risk Assessments conducted by external contractor
 - Oversight of the NIGALA Sustainability Action Plan
 - Oversight of the NIGALA Property Asset Management Plan
 - Mindfulness training for staff
 - Staff completion of annual Fire Awareness eLearning module
 - Annual review of fire safety and health and safety compliance via Departmental Controls Assurance Standards in which substantive compliance in both areas has been achieved

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 *Carecall* organisation.

NIGALA has recently been through a period of significant change and work is underway to incorporate a stress management plan into an overarching health and wellbeing strategy.

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.

- Participation in the Regional Care Proceedings Pilot
- Programme for Government (PFG)
- Evaluation of Black Minority Ethnic Practice

Care Proceedings Pilot

The regional *Care Proceedings Pilot – Improving Children's Lives* commenced in January 2016 and NIGALA, as a key stakeholder, is inextricably linked to the management and operation of the *Care Proceedings Pilot* which is set to run until March 2017. The pilot is in place to promote good decision making and minimise unnecessary delay for children and young people subject to public law proceedings, thereby improving outcomes for children by achieving permanence for them at the earliest point. The *Pilot* objectives are to:

- Examine the Implementation of the COAC Guide to Case Management in Public Law Proceedings (2009)
- Identify the barriers to successful implementation
- Develop solutions to address the barriers identified

The *Pilot* is also intended to assist in determining whether legislative changes are required similar to those introduced in England and Wales under the Children and Families Act 2014, which among other things, introduced a statutory time limit of 26 weeks for Care Proceedings; removed the duration of Interim Care Orders by inserting a timetable for final hearing to which eight week extension periods can be made through specific justification; and introducing judicial control of expert evidence to the extent that it is necessary to assist the Court in justly resolving proceedings.

NIGALA is the identified stakeholder with responsibility for collection of the monthly statistics on each Care Proceedings Pilot case and is required to prepare reports and data for each Steering Group meeting and on an ad hoc basis for the Department of Health.

Inter-disciplinary quarterly case reviews, aimed at facilitating the sharing of learning and enabling the provision of feedback on the process of care proceedings also form part of the pilot process. Individual guardians for these identified cases will be present at each inter-disciplinary review where qualitative data will be collected to inform eventual Pilot outcomes.

Next Steps

- Continued Monthly data collection of the Care Proceedings Pilot Cases from the participating HSC Trusts and Courts
- Quarterly reporting of Care Proceedings Pilot information to the Steering Group
- Continued involvement of all relevant Guardians ad Litem in the Care Proceedings Pilot Case Reviews

The Programme for Government (PFG)

The Programme for Government (PFG) sets out 14 outcomes as identified by the Northern Ireland Executive, which represents a vision for our society. The outcomes are supported by 42 indicators which are clear statements of change. The PFG contains an indicator: *to improve support for looked after children* (Indicator 10). The associated measurement is the percentage of care leavers who, aged 19, were in education, training or employment.

The identified outcomes (5) include:

- We are an innovative, creative society where people can fulfil their potential
- We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other
- We care for others and we help those in need
- We have high quality public services
- We give our children and young people the best start in life

The importance of NIGALA as an enabler to actively assist deliver these outcomes can be considered as follows:

- NIGALA plays a vital role in the lives of children and young people, ensuring their best interests are met in accordance with a care plan which is relevant to their needs and gives them the best start in life
- NIGALA will be proactive in ensuring that proceedings are timely and outcomes are relevant to children and young people's time-lines

- As a regional organisation, NIGALA plays a vital role in connecting the five HSC Trusts to the issues concerning children and young people as part of public law and adoption
- Guardians ad litem working across multidisciplinary areas will continue to alert and escalate risks for children and young people to the relevant authorities to ensure effective resources are put in place
- NIGALA will provide key information on children and young people who come before the family court in order to support and assure the provision of services and resources across Northern Ireland
- NIGALA will engage and consult with users and stakeholders as part of its personal and public involvement strategy (PPI), to ensure the delivery of a high quality child and young person focused representation service in the Family Court
- NIGALA will continue to innovate and deliver supporting technology that will facilitate the guardian role, maximising the opportunity for guardians to work directly with children and young people and stakeholders to achieve the best start in life for the children and young people who come before the Family Court

Black Minority Ethnic (BME) Evaluation

An evaluation of working practices within NIGALA in working with children and families from Black Minority Ethnic (BME) communities was undertaken based on 2014/15 statistics. Since then the dissemination of this work has continued. Dr Patricia Devine, Research Officer, and John Sheldon, Quality Assurance and Training Manager, were invited to the 9th *BASPCAN International Congress* in April 2015, held at the University of Edinburgh. Later that same month they repeated this exercise at the *NICON Annual Conference* during the 'café conversations' series. This allowed for an interesting discussion with other members of the HSC family around the challenges of working within an increasing diversified community where the number of ethnic minorities has more than doubled between 2001 and 2011.



The evaluation of the work on BME practice was submitted and subsequently accepted for publication in the academic journal *Child Care in Practice* and this will be published in the autumn of 2016. To coincide with this publication, NIGALA plans to launch the findings of the research to the Agency's various stakeholders and other interested parties.

Dr Patricia Devine, NIGALA Research Officer & Declan McAllister, Corporate Services Manager, at the NICON Annual Conference, 2015

CONCLUSION

Throughout the body of this report, reference has been made to the challenges of change, financial austerity, increased demand within the family courts, greater complexity and more accountability and scrutiny from outside. None of this however is of much interest to the children, young people and families that NIGALA works with day in day out.

The Agency works with some of the most disadvantaged and traumatised children and young people within our society and by the time a case is allocated to a guardian, things have generally reached a point of crisis, requiring intervention necessary to safeguard a child or young person's welfare. Therefore despite all the above, NIGALA remains committed to quality improvement and continued service development to ensure that children and young people that come to the attention of a guardian receive the best possible service. The law is clear that the child's welfare is paramount and overrides parent's rights and in this regard, the Agency continues to keep its focus on the importance of understanding the needs and risks for children within a framework of the 'child's whole world and wellbeing'. In so doing we commit to continually looking at what we do, reflecting on it and where we believe we can do this better, make the necessary improvements.

Throughout this year's Quality Report we trust we have given a number of examples of striving to continually place children at the core of our daily business. Communicating and sharing the vision of a service which is credible and achievable in a world where the demands for increased efficiency are ever more vocal will doubtless pose continued challenges for the Agency.