

NORTHERN IRELAND  
GUARDIAN AD LITEM AGENCY

**BUSINESS PLAN**  
**2019-20**

**NIGALA**

NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency

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

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# Foreword

**‘Work across traditional boundaries to address the ever increasing complexity and demands on our services’:** *Health and Social Care Collective Leadership Strategy 2017*

The Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency published a four year Corporate Plan for 2017 -21 to outline its approach to delivering a service to children and young people who are the subject of court proceedings. The preparation for this Business Plan, for 2019-20, has been done in line with the Department of Health budget period for 2019-20. This Business Plan has been the subject of stakeholder consideration and comment and approved by the NIGALA Board. This document sets the Agency’s strategic vision and values, building in an approach underpinned by modelling a culture of collective leadership and collaborative working.

## CHALLENGES & PRIORITIES

The challenges outlined in *‘Health and Wellbeing 2016 – Delivering Together’* published in May 2017 by the then Minister of Health, Michelle O’Neill MLA, placed an onus on us all to embrace *‘change’* which in her words, is inevitable. Without new approaches or thinking about how to deliver health and social care in the face of ever growing demand *‘we will increasingly struggle’*.<sup>1</sup>

Responding to the changing needs of a growing and ever complex population presents a major challenge when faced with increases in demand and the associated staff pressures. Research indicates that the numbers of referrals to the Police and Social Services in Northern Ireland have increased by more than 70% in five years<sup>2</sup>. More recently, it confirms the number of calls from the public and professionals worried about children has substantially increased as has the number of child protection investigations doubling since 2008<sup>3</sup>. The picture outlined is one of increasing pressure

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle O’Neill MLA, Foreword to *‘Health and Wellbeing 2016 – Delivering Together’*.

<sup>2</sup> NSPCC, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Research published as reported by Alison Holt, Social Affairs Correspondent, and BBC News.

on health and social care in a climate of financial constraint where while work is underway<sup>4</sup> more resource is required to develop ‘*trauma informed*’ approaches for children who in early childhood are suffering ‘*Adverse Childhood Experiences*’ (ACEs).<sup>5</sup>

Balancing the needs and time-frames of all children while re-focusing the role of the Guardian to ensure we achieve child focused, and where possible ‘*best outcomes*’, is a key objective for the forthcoming year. Going forward and reflecting on the unique role of the Guardian, it is imperative for NIGALA to prioritise our activities, based on capacity and available resources, in order that all children are adequately represented and involved in decision-making about their lives. Building on our commitment to ensure our service to children and the courts is delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible, requires collaborative and relationship based working arrangements. It is necessary to create a shared vision of the future characterised by a culture of engagement and continuous professional development underpinned by staff support.

Working ‘*collaboratively*’ is the cornerstone of how health and social care is to be delivered. The best example of this is the implementation of ‘*Signs of Safety*’, ACEs and ‘*Building Better Futures*’ by the five HSC Trusts (Children’s Services) in Northern Ireland. The focus is very much based on compassionate care and working with children, families and other professionals to be solution focused, balancing family strengths as well as possible dangers. This radical change in practice is one which requires all professions to work together to achieve lasting outcomes for children.

NIGALA’s journey has been one of developing a collective leadership culture with an emphasis on quality and continuous improvement and learning. Working across organisation and professional boundaries can be challenging but requires a commitment by all stakeholders to achieve improved and timelier outcomes based on robust decision making for children and young people. Strengthening the commonality of our work and our shared objectives is a key part of our strategic priorities going into 2019 and we look forward to this shared journey.

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<sup>4</sup> Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) SBNI has adopted a ‘trauma informed’ approach to safeguarding (2017)

<sup>5</sup> ‘No Child Left Behind’, June 2016, Cllr Peter Martin (DUP)

## QUALITY OF SERVICE

NIGALA's aim is to meet its statutory duty by listening to children and young people and seek to safeguard their interests in Court.

Mindful of the challenges which face us moving into 2019, NIGALA will continue to strive to deliver a quality service based around our 'Strategic Themes', focusing on placing children at the centre of our decision making and seeking to learn from what they tell us, while valuing staff and promoting learning. Our commitment to strengthening relationships with stakeholders is fundamental to our planning going forward into 2019-20. Co-producing on a partnership basis with other HSC organisations will be the foundation of how we meet our statutory and performance objectives for children and young people in the future.

In setting out our Business Plan objectives for 2019-20, we recognize the need to work more collectively, maximizing available resources to achieve, where possible, improved outcomes through shared learning.

# Introduction

Our business plan sets out the NIGALA priorities and key deliverables for the year 2019-20.

Our business plan has four sections:

- Role of NIGALA
- Background to NIGALA
- Management team and structure
- NIGALA objectives for 2019-20

The NIGALA Board will monitor progress against the objectives and the effective running of the organisation at each of its Board meetings.

# Role of the NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency

The Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA) is an Arm's Length Body (ALB) of the Department of Health (DOH) and was established under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

As an organization, NIGALA has a statutory responsibility to safeguard and promote the 'voice' of children and young people in the court arena. It provides an independent representation for children and young people subject to potential and actual 'significant harm' and whose futures are to be decided by the Courts in the respective arenas of Public Law and Adoption.

As these children represent some of the most vulnerable in our society, Guardians Ad Litem endeavor to ensure the needs of children and young people remain the primary focus of judicial decision-making and that the outcomes for them are the best that can be achieved.

## **Our Vision**

To be the "Voice for Children and Young People in Family Courts".

## **Our Purpose**

To independently represent children and young people's wishes, feelings and best interests in court for adoption and care proceedings in order to safeguard and promote their welfare.

## **Our Values**

NIGALA has a shared set of values that define our culture in everything we do. These values commit us to;

- Working to Safeguard the interests of children;
- Promoting Human Dignity and Respect;
- Promoting Diversity and Equality;
- Working with integrity and Honesty;

- Empowerment through promoting a ‘*collaborative leadership*’<sup>6</sup> approach;
- Promoting Accountability and Transparency.

## **Our Duty**

The overall aim of NIGALA is to provide a service to children that contributes to the Department of Health strategy, to “create a high quality health and social care system, in particular one that is driven by, and responsive to, the needs and wishes of patients and clients”.

This aim is delivered through NIGALA’s statutory duty to listen to children and young people and through safeguarding their interests in Court.

## **NIGALA’s Role within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care**

As part of the Health and Social Care Framework for Northern Ireland, NIGALA seeks to support the Department of Health’s (Department) overall plan to promote an integrated system of health and social care designed to improve the health and social well-being of the people of Northern Ireland. NIGALA seeks to do this by representing the interests of children and young people in legal proceedings and Family Courts and promoting their participation in decisions which impact on their lives.<sup>7</sup>

NIGALA’s performance framework is determined by the Department in the light of its wider strategic aims and objectives and targets. The priorities and objectives for NIGALA are set out in its annual business plan, the key objectives of which are subject to approval by its Sponsor Branch in the Department. In common with all Arm’s Length Bodies (ALBs), on issues of governance and assurance, NIGALA is directly accountable to the Department.

NIGALA’s relationship with other health and social care bodies is characterized by, on the one hand, its independence from health and social care bodies in representing the interests of children and young people in court and, on the other, the need to engage with the wider health and social care in

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<sup>6</sup> HSC Collective Leadership Strategy (Health and Wellbeing 2026 Delivering Together)

<sup>7</sup> Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

a positive and constructive manner to ensure that it is able to efficiently and effectively discharge its statutory function on behalf of children and young people.

# Approach to Planning

The Business Plan sets out the objectives of NIGALA for the year 2019-20. The Plan has been written to meet

- An Outcomes Based Approach, which monitors and evidences progress towards desired '*outcomes*'<sup>8</sup> as set out in the Northern Ireland (Draft) Programme For Government;
- Department of Health priorities;
- NIGALA Corporate Plan 2017-2021.

## Outcomes Based Approach

The Business Plan is aligned to the strategic direction determined by the Northern Ireland Executive (Draft) Programme for Government and its outcomes and indicators and the strategic aims of the Department of Health.

## Draft Programme for Government

The (Draft) Programme for Government sets out the main issues facing our society and the challenges that have to be addressed. It sets out a different way of working which NIGALA supports.

Namely:

- Focusing on outcomes to improve the wellbeing of people;
- Seeking to make a difference to the things that matter most to people;
- Contributing to a system that works across boundaries, groups organisations and communities for the common good; and
- Collaboration between the public sector, local government, private sector, community sector and voluntary sector and beyond to maximise what can be achieved collectively.

NIGALA contributes to the (Draft) Programme for Government by fulfilling its statutory functions.

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<sup>8</sup> Based on work of Mark Friedman, Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA)

## Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together

For the overall health, social services and public safety system, the following key priority areas, underpinned by Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together, seek to deliver a new model of **person-centered care** focused on prevention, early intervention and supporting independence and wellbeing:

- To ensure the most vulnerable in our society, including children and adults at risk of harm, are looked after effectively across all our services;
- Work to improve the life chances for children in the care system;
- Work with the courts to secure permanence for children more quickly, helping their mental and emotional wellbeing, educational attainment and health in particular;
- To be an employer of choice, investing in the health and wellbeing of its staff; and
- Develop leadership at all levels to create a collective leadership.

This Business Plan has been drafted to allow for flexibility which may be required as Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together is implemented.

## NIGALA Corporate Plan

The NIGALA Board has approved a Corporate Plan for 2017-2021.

This corporate plan sets out a number of strategic themes which all NIGALA's activities should contribute to. These are;

1. Putting Children at the Centre of NIGALA Decision Making;
2. Efficient Use of NIGALA's Resources;
3. Valuing Staff and Promoting Learning;
4. Delivery of a Quality Service to agreed standards; and
5. Compliance with Legislation and Guidance.

The Board has approved an additional strategic theme for its Corporate Plan, specifically;

6. Work in partnership with stakeholders to improve outcomes and the experience of children in the court process

# Management Structure of NIGALA

## **The Board**

NIGALA has a Board with a complement of 4 non-executive directors and a Chair, all appointed under the public appointments process.

The Board of NIGALA is responsible for;

- Setting the strategic direction for NIGALA;
- Monitoring the performance of NIGALA;
- Ensuring highest standards of corporate governance and personal behaviour;
- Ensuring proper financial stewardship; and
- Appointing and appraising Senior Officers.

NIGALA has a relatively small staff team who deliver the Business Plan as agreed by the Board.

Key roles within the organisation include:

## **The Chief Executive:**

- Is accountable to the Board of NIGALA for the efficient and effective management of the organisation and ensuring it fulfils its statutory functions and meets the objectives agreed by the Board;
- Is the Accounting Officer for the NIGALA and in that capacity is directly responsible to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health in accounting for our use of public funds; and
- Is answerable through the NIGALA Board, to the Minister for Health.

## **Assistant Directors:**

- Lead the GAL operations in the delivery of the annual operating plan.

**Head of Quality and Training:**

- Promotes quality and good practice in all aspects of NIGALA's activities and work.

**The Head of Corporate Services:**

- Manages corporate services functions of the organisation;
- Manages the governance framework and risk management of the organisation.

# NIGALA Objectives for 2019-20

The NIGALA Board has agreed the objectives set out below for this year. The objectives are set out under the strategic themes agreed by the Board for 2017-2021. The focus of the Plan is to deliver on the core responsibilities of NIGALA.

Throughout the year NIGALA will undertake projects and activities in addition to those referred to in its business plan. This will be informed by health and social care service developments (including collaboration requests) and issues raised through engagement with the Department, other health and social care organisations and the children and young people NIGALA speaks and listens to. This work will be included in regular reporting to the Board, where appropriate. Where this work is considered a priority by the Chief Executive and is identified as resource intensive it will be brought to the Board for consideration in light of the agreed Business Plan objectives.

Work outside the Business Plan will include NIGALA engaging regularly with key stakeholders to ensure the service provided to children and young people is based on a foundation of quality and best outcomes; this will be done by attending meetings and groupings hosted by HSC organisations, including the Department, Health and Social Care Trusts, the Regional Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency and other organisations and forums involved in the delivery of health and social care. Examples of this work include;

- NIGALA meeting its obligations as a member agency of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI);
- NIGALA being represented on the SBNI Sub Group on Child Protection;
- Participation in the Social Work Research and Continuous Improvement Agenda (HSC Trusts, HSC Board, Probation Board);
- Participation in the HSC Leadership Network;
- Professional links with the HSC Executive Directors of Social Work;
- CEO Network for the 'Arm's Length Bodies' (ALBs);
- Being represented on Local Engagement Partnerships (LEPs- Social Work Strategy);

- Information Governance Advisory Group
- Attending Assistant Directors Forum meetings;
- Attending Principal Practitioner Forum meetings;

NIGALA attendance and contribution to these groups will focus on fulfilling its statutory function to represent the interests of children and young people in Court.

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
<b>1.0 Putting Children at the Centre of NIGALA Decision Making NIGALA will:</b>	<b>1.1</b> Represent the interests of children in court. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ NIGALA will seek to represent the interests of all children and young person in courts, within its resourcing capacity. This will be delivered in line with Board approved Key Performance Indicators and reported on at each Board meeting.</li> </ul>	March 2020	Senior Management Team
	<b>1.2</b> Listen to the views of young people through its feedback system to improve its services. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ NIGALA will collate the views of the young people it helps and provide an annual feedback report to the Board on children and young people’s experience of NIGALA’s services.</li> </ul>	February 2019	Operations Directors
	<b>1.3</b> Implement fully Signs of Safety and use of its principles and methodologies in its work. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ All Guardians will be trained in Signs of Safety</li> </ul>	December 2021  December 2020	Operations Directors  Quality and Training Manager

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
<b>2.0 Efficient Use of NIGALA's Resources</b> <b>NIGALA will:</b>	<b>2.1</b> Manage its people resources effectively, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Improve or maintain sick absence rates from 2018/19 levels</li> <li>○ Pilot the role of Principal Guardian Practitioner to provide a more efficient and effective way to deliver NIGALA services;</li> <li>○ Managing its staff complement within agreed headcount</li> </ul>	March 2020	Senior Management Team
	<b>2.2 .</b> Maintain the ongoing review of its accommodation requirements and ensure they provide value for money and meet public sector key performance indicators, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Preparing a Property Asset Management Plan for NIGALA.</li> </ul>	September 2019	Head of Corporate Services
	<b>2.3</b> Meet its breakeven target <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ NIGALA will not exceed its surplus by more than £20,000.</li> </ul>	March 2020	

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
<b>3.0 Valuing Staff and Promoting Learning</b> <b>NIGALA will:</b>	<b>3.1</b> Develop and strengthen its staff development at all levels. This will include; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hosting Professional Development Groups</li> <li>○ Each Guardian to participate in a minimum 2 supervision sessions as part of a learning and improvement framework.</li> </ul>	January 2020	Senior Management Team
	<b>3.2</b> Maintain an appropriate staff communication framework on NIGALA and HSC issues. This will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hosting a minimum of two staff Forums</li> <li>○ Producing a monthly information publication for staff</li> </ul>	Feb 2020	Head of Corporate Services
	<b>3.3</b> Seek opportunities for joint learning within HSC and with other key stakeholders. This will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Delivering a minimum of two social-legal seminars in 2019-20</li> </ul>	Feb 2020	Operation Directors
	<b>3.3</b> Develop a Health and Wellbeing Strategy to reflect NIGALA's corporate responsibility and HSC commitment as set out in Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together	Dec 2019	Head of Corporate Services
	<b>3.4</b> Develop and implement an action plan for its 2018/19 Investors In People accreditation	Feb 2019	Senior Management Team

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>Compliance with Legislation and Guidance</b></p> <p><b>NIGALA will:</b></p>	<p><b>4.1</b> Ensure it has appropriate financial management arrangements in place including those for planning, forecasting, procurement and prompt payments. It will also ensure achievement of its breakeven target and presentation of its annual accounts within timescales set out by the DoH.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ NIGALA will pay 95% of its bills within 30 days</li> <li>○ NIGALA will prepare and lay its accounts in line with Department guidance</li> </ul>	<p>Jul 2019</p>	<p>Head of Corporate Services</p>
	<p><b>4.2</b> Meet its Equality and Disability obligations as set out in its Equality Scheme.</p>	<p>Mar 2020</p>	<p>Head of Corporate Services</p>

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
	<p><b>4.3</b> Meet its obligations as an Arms-Length Body. This will include producing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Governance statements;</li> <li>○ Effective business planning arrangements</li> <li>○ Appropriate business continuity plans;</li> <li>○ Audit reports on its activities; and</li> <li>○ A dynamic risk register that deals with the primary risks to delivery of the business plan.</li> </ul>	Mar 2020	Chief Executive

<b>Strategic Theme</b>	<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Timescale for completion of objective</b>	<b>Owner</b>
<p><b>5. Delivery of a Quality Service to agreed standards</b></p> <p><b>NIGALA will:</b></p>	<p><b>5.1</b> Deliver its service in a consistent and equitable way. This will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Producing an Annual Quality Report</li> <li>○ SMT will complete an accredited Quality Improvement programme</li> <li>○ Developing a ‘Quality Improvement Strategy’ which sets out a clear picture of the Agency’s aims and ambitions to deliver a high quality ‘child-focused’ service which is safe, effective and positive.</li> <li>○ Sharing with key stakeholders information on case delays and in particular cases which are running over 400 days.</li> </ul>	<p>February 2020</p> <p>December 2019</p> <p>December 2019</p> <p>February 2020</p>	<p>Senior Management Team</p> <p>Operation Directors</p>

Strategic Theme	Objectives	Timescale for completion of objective	Owner
<p><b>6.0 Work in partnership with stakeholders to improve outcomes and the experience of children in the court process.</b></p> <p><b>NIGALA will:</b></p>	<p><b>6.1</b> Strengthen links and develop opportunities for co-production with HSC organisations, Court services, Judiciary, Solicitors and the voluntary sector via the Shadow Family Justice Board, solicitors, strategy for LAC to include the provision of capacity for measuring regional performance and outcomes;</p> <p><b>6.2</b> Promote and enhance current partnership working arrangements and critically review opportunities for sharing ideas and thinking about children and families and seeking joint training initiatives.</p> <p>This will include attendance at key forums such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Safeguarding Board for NI (SBNI).</li> <li>○ Association of Executive Directors of Social Work (AEDSW),</li> <li>○ Assistant Directors (AD) Forum,</li> <li>○ Local Engagement Partnerships (LEPs),</li> <li>○ Principal Practitioners (PPs) meetings;</li> <li>○ NICON</li> </ul>	<p>February 2019</p>	<p>Senior Management Team</p>



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