

CHILDREN'S LAW CENTRE (NORTHERN IRELAND)

TRUSTEES' REPORT (INCLUDING DIRECTORS' REPORT)

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

The trustees present their annual report and financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2025.

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the accounting policies set out in note 1 to the financial statements and comply with the Companies Act 2006 and "Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) (effective 1 January 2019)".

Objectives and activities

The Children's Law Centre (CLC) was established to help children and young people in need and to promote their human rights in Northern Ireland. CLC provides legal information, advice, advocacy, assistance and representation for children and young people, their parents and carers and others working with and on behalf of children and young people. We raise public awareness of children and young people's rights and provide training to children, parents and carers and others working with and on behalf of children and young people. CLC gives a voice to children by facilitating and supporting a children and young person's advisory and peer advocacy group, Youth@CLC. In partnership with Youth@CLC we raise children and young people's rights with duty bearers.

The trustees have paid due regard to guidance issued by the Charity Commission in deciding what activities the charity should undertake.

Achievements and performance

The challenges facing children in Northern Ireland in accessing their rights to services and support have not diminished since our last report in 2023-24. In the last year we continued to vindicate the rights of children in multiple instances where their access to fundamental children's service entitlements were denied as a result of continuing inaction by duty bearers. As we continue to navigate the impacts of Brexit, Covid, and the economic crisis, the return of the NI Assembly to its functions in February 2024 had little impact on the decisions affecting access to services for most children in Northern Ireland during 2024-25.

The number of issues dealt with by our free advice service – CHALKY – crossed the 3,000 threshold for the first time in Children's Law Centre's history. We responded to 2,884 issues at Tier 1, which focused on special education needs and disability (SEND), access to health and social care, family law, human rights and justice issues. The continuing challenges in securing critical services and support for children with special educational needs and disability continued to be a focus of our Tier 2 advocacy and legal assistance. In total, we provided advocacy and specialist legal support in 230 cases which included representing the interests of children with special educational needs and disability to improve access to suitable educational placements and provision, ensuring access to health and social care for children with complex medical and mental health needs, with a particular emphasis on respite provision and community care support. The increasing complexity of our legal interventions and casework on behalf of children continues to require substantial input from our legal advisers to achieve resolution and practical outcomes for children and their families. We initiated 13 Tier 3 cases seeking formal adjudication and legal remedy for children through the Courts – this is the highest number we have undertaken since the peak of the Pandemic.

Whilst CLC has continued to support children and their families, we have found the response from duty bearers and decision makers consistently falling short of meeting the needs of children, particularly those with the most severe and complex health presentations. One key area has been the failure by Health and Social Care Trusts to provide access to respite services for children with disabilities and multiple health and social care needs. During the pandemic, many respite services across all trust areas were either closed or re-purposed, reducing the availability of this vital support to children and families in need. Three years on, the situation has deteriorated, with service availability less now than what it was before the pandemic. In consultation with National Autistic Society NI (NAS), which is a CLC member and represented on our Board, we agreed to join forces to advocate on this issue. BBC NI 'Spotlight' produced the 'I Am Not OK' programme in September 2024, highlighting the devastating impact that the lack of respite services has had on children and their families. Our work included contacting the Health Committee of the NI Assembly and the Health Minister who, in response, arranged for the release of an additional £2M in year to support respite services and agreed a recurrent budget of £13M annually going forward. By March 2025, there was no marked improvement in service availability. Together with NAS, we supported families with lived-experience to meet with members of the Health Committee and tell their personal stories prior to attending an evidence session the Committee was holding with representatives of Trusts and the Department of Health, where they were asked to explain why no significant progress had been made. We have continued to work with these families and liaise with the Health Committee and Minister to monitor how additional resources are being utilised by health trusts to improve service delivery.

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FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

Other cases that CLC took to law this year include:

- Continuing delays in hospital discharge planning for children exiting the Iveagh Unit. In the most extreme case, we have been working on behalf of a young person who is now in their 7th year of detention and has become institutionalised as a result of the delays in securing a suitable community placement.
- Percutaneous Endoscopic Gastrostomy (PEG) Feeding Tube Cases – CLC initiated proceedings on behalf of four children who experienced delays in surgery to have a PEG feeding tube fitted. All four children have since received the surgical intervention they needed as a result of the initial Pre-action Protocol letters issued by CLC. All have responded positively to treatment and one child is receiving support from a specialist in Great Ormond Street Hospital.
- CLC's SEND Specialist Adviser provided expert representation in a complex SENDIST appeal relating to identification of a child's bespoke special school placement and specifying SEN services required to be included in an amended statement. After lengthy negotiations with the Education Authority solicitor and counsel, a settlement was agreed in respect of the school placement and cooperation between education and health providers to deliver multi-disciplinary support within school.

Our website, which includes access to the REE Rights Responder chatbot, continues to act as the biggest window into CLC services with over 55,000 page views during the year. The publication section has grown considerably, with the addition of all briefing and position papers and consultation responses produced through our Policy and Public Affairs Team. We previously reported on the development of new education and disability strands for the chatbot. In August 2024, we held a one-day event in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings with over 80 young people who critically reviewed the information that had been gathered. The new strands are now live on the REE Rights Responder and we are grateful to PriceWaterhouseCoopers whose staff volunteered to assist us through their 'Into Tomorrow' programme.

We were delighted to secure Lottery funding through Empowering Young People in August 2024, to secure our comms work, support advice work and recruit a new Youth Participation and Advocacy Worker, enabling us to recruit a new cohort of young people to the Youth@CLC advisory panel. We were even more delighted to receive over forty applications from a diverse group of young people, recruiting 24 to the new panel who commenced planning work in February 2025. This group set to work to identify their key objectives and are keen to utilise video, podcasting and blogging to act as peer advocates and communicate their children's rights messages to a wider audience of children and young people.

Following a successful funding application to the Clothworkers Foundation we have been able to purchase equipment to enhance our communications output through increased video production and introducing podcasting. This will greatly enhance our comms output both for the charity and enable the development and boost its presence on TikTok and other media platforms, including for Youth@CLC. The first project undertaken using the new equipment focused on giving voice to some young people who wanted to share their experience of school and in particular those who had experienced chronic absence due to anxiety and other issues. Working with young people from Larne YMCA and Barnardos in Armagh we produced five videos presenting the stark reality of school and how it has impacted their lives. We are grateful to the young people who shared their stories and LFT Charitable Trust who supported this project. The use of video and podcast has become an increasingly popular vehicle for promoting our work and enabling young people to contribute. Youth@CLC will be using both mediums to raise awareness of children's rights issues in the coming year.

In September 2024, we attended and presented at the Rights of the Child UK Conference in Edinburgh which was an opportunity to share our recent work with sister organisations in Scotland, England and Wales. Organisers of the conference asked if we could assist with recording and streaming of the conference and this gave us an opportunity to live test the new equipment we had purchased.

Our policy and public affairs work continued at pace. This included providing evidence to the Education, Health and Justice Committees of the NI Assembly, all of which were preceded by briefings to MLAs outlining our position on the range of issues being investigated or reviewed. The submissions we developed included:

- Covid Inquiry Submission Paper: in relation to Covid Inquiry Module 8 which will examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic *on children and young people including education and early years provision, health, wellbeing and social care*. (Unpublished)
- Policy Submission: United Nations Committee on the rights of the Child's call for submission on General Comment Number 27 – Children's Rights to Access to Justice and Effective Remedies. <https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/?mdocs-file=7506>

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FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

- Policy Submission: NI Assembly Committee for Education Inquiry into Relationships and Sexuality Education <https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/?mdocs-file=7667>
- Consultation Response: Department of Health consultation on commencement of provisions under the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016 relating to "Acts of Restraint".
<https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/?mdocs-file=7781>
- Policy briefing/Stakeholder event: in partnership with the National Autistic Society to members of the NI Assembly Committee for Health in support of the stakeholder engagement event with NI Assembly Committee for Health at Parliament Buildings, Stormont which focused on respite and residential provision and broader family support issues (March 2025)
<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/news-and-media/press-releases/session-2024-2025/provision-of-respite-care-a-priority-for-assemblys-health-committee/>

We continue to promote best practice in children's rights and maintain an open dialogue with policy and decision makers in the NI Assembly and Departments.

In 2023, CLC wrote to Secretary of State for Northern Ireland outlining the failures in the budget setting process for 2023-24 and highlighted his responsibility to apply the principle of equality, including assessing whether the cumulative impact of the budget cuts was disproportionately affecting disadvantaged children. In January 2024, leave was granted to judicially review the budget setting process against the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), Department of Finance (DoF), and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI). The ECNI were joined to the case under their duty to ensure government departments uphold the requirements of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 including in all policy decisions.

Over the year we returned to Court as this case progressed towards hearing. This included the ECNI undertaking to develop Departmental equality advice, which was subsequently published in October 2024. The case against the Department of Finance was heard across October - November 2025. This process has now extended over two years and CLC is grateful to the commitment of its staff team in bringing the case to its conclusion, to our junior and senior Counsel who provided exceptional advocacy on a pro bono basis, and to PPR (Participation and the Practice of Rights) for the support they gave us during this period.

In the budget setting round for 2024-25, all Departments were instructed by the Department of Finance to conduct Equality Impact Assessments as part of the process. CLC responded to consultations by both Education and Health departments, highlighting our continuing concerns on the lack of consultation directly with young people and the Departments' overall approach to the consultation process.

CLC continued to offer a range of legal training programmes to support the work of professionals in the children's sector, duty bearers, the legal professions and for the first time in a number of years to parents and carers. Our programmes include

- Article 21 – Rights of Homeless Young People
- Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards and Mental Capacity Act
- Legal Rights of Children with SEN
- Parental Engagement with SEN
- Unpacking NI Mental Health Law
- SEN Tribunals Training
- Understanding Child Protection Case Conferences

The uptake in our training has more than doubled to 482 people showing the growing interest in acquiring knowledge and understanding children's rights.

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FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

We continued to grow our presence with organisations who know our work and extended our engagement with new groups and communities working with 640 people in the year. This included

- Magpies on the Pylon (Roma Community)
- ROCK Conference
- Children in Northern Ireland Anxiety Based School Absence Event
- PwC Into Tomorrow Insight Event

Many were shocked at the outbreak of violence toward refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families that first occurred during the summer of 2024. CLC has been engaged in work to support access to health, education and suitable accommodation for these children, challenging both the Home Office and its private accommodation provider. This has included supporting disabled and traumatised children to get access to health services, supporting children to access appropriate supports in school, and campaigning to ensure there are proper safeguards in place so that accommodation providers understand their safeguarding duties toward this vulnerable group. In response to the violence and unrest CLC reached out to provide support directly to representative groups providing advice and guidance in support of children's rights and this work continues.

In 2021-22 CLC with the support of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation undertook an organisational and governance review to develop fit for purpose approaches that would assist the charity moving forward. Staff, Youth@CLC and our Board of Trustees worked collaboratively on developing a new strategic plan and in this year, we have continued to implement changes and improvements. This has included a review of governance processes including terms of reference for our sub-committees, role descriptions and code of conduct for trustees and the Scheme of Delegation. Our Trustees have continued to direct the charity both through their participation in Board and Committee meetings but also advocating our purpose and services to a wider audience across the children's, voluntary and community, and statutory sectors. We would like to thank them for their continued interest and support.

Our funding environment remains volatile, and this year considerable work has been undertaken in identifying and submitting funding applications to a range of charitable trusts, foundations and with the statutory sector. This year we seen new funding from the Lottery Empowering Young People, Magill Family Charitable Trust, Sainsbury Family Charitable Trust, Community Foundation Ireland, Belfast City Council Discretionary Fund, Justice First Fellowship, the Legal Education Foundation, LFT Charitable Trust and the Clothworkers Foundation. We also received continuing funding from AB Charitable Trust, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, Department of Education, SPPG, Dormant Accounts, BBC Children in Need, Angel Eyes and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. As the year ended, we received confirmation of new funding for 2025-28 from the NI Human Rights Fund. We could not do our work without the support of all our funders, and we are grateful for their continuing support and trust in our work.

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TRUSTEES' REPORT (INCLUDING DIRECTORS' REPORT) (CONTINUED)

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

Financial review

The results for the year are set out in detail on pages 14 to 35. The Centre returned net surplus of £137,261 (2024 – net deficit £142,940) of which £93,686 related to a net increase in restricted funds and £43,575 related to a net increase in unrestricted funds.

The prior year results include exceptional movement in pension provision expenditure of £45,060. The equivalent figure in the year ended 31 March 2025 was £1,987.

At 31 March 2025, the total funds of the charity amounted to £843,832, comprising restricted funds of £414,753 and unrestricted funds of £429,079. The unrestricted fund balance includes unrestricted general funds of £421,400, designated funds of £60,000 and a deficit on the pension reserve of £52,321. The vast majority of income received by the Centre is earmarked by the donor for specific purposes (restricted income). Only small amounts are received as free monies (unrestricted income) which can be allocated according to organisational needs, including core running costs.

The unrestricted fund is considered to be essential to the Centre as restricted funds are not always sufficient to meet all costs. Furthermore, in the current economic environment, the level of funding may fluctuate from one year to the next. The unrestricted fund will therefore be essential to finance working capital, continue the charity's activities in the short term and fulfil its legal responsibilities to employees and creditors for a three month period. Current running costs for the charity are £90,000 per month and the level of free reserves at the year end, excluding fixed assets and designated funds, was £286,176. The charity has significant funds secured for the forthcoming year and budgets have been prepared that show that the charity has sufficient resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future.

Restricted funds represent funds which are to be used in accordance with specific restrictions imposed by donors. The balance of restricted funds at 31 March 2025 was £414,753.

The trustees have assessed the major risks to which the charity is exposed, and are satisfied that systems are in place to mitigate exposure to the major risks.

Plans for future periods

In November 2024, Paddy Kelly, founder and Director of the Children's Law Centre, advised the Board of Trustees that after 27 years of continued service she was planning to stand down from her role leading the Centre. The Board of Trustees undertook a recruitment process resulting in the appointment of a new CEO. We would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to Paddy for her foresight in recognising the need to protect the rights of children in Northern Ireland and her courage and commitment in doing so.

As we move forward the environment in which we are working is no less volatile than it has been over the last number of years. We continue to work against a background where legal support to get children appropriate access to health, education and accommodation services is needed more now than ever, where we continue to campaign against the erosion of their rights with duty bearers and decision makers who are experiencing continuing economic, social, and political challenges. Final thanks goes to our dedicated staff team whose years of experience and commitment will assist CLC to continue to meet the needs of children, to our recently appointed Youth@CLC group of young people eager to assist us on this journey and to the public for continuing to believe in and support our work.

Structure, governance and management

The Centre is a charitable organisation and a company limited by guarantee governed by its Articles of Association.

The Centre is a membership organisation which is governed by a board of trustees (which is also the board of directors) elected for one year at the organisation's AGM. According to the Centre's constitution, additional board members can be co-opted. The board elect a Chair, Vice Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. Training is provided as required. All Centre staff are answerable to the board through the Centre Director, Mr John O'Doherty, who is responsible for the day to day management of the Centre. The board of trustees ensures the good governance of the organisation by setting its strategic objectives and policy direction through the Centre's three year strategic plan and monitoring progress on this through the annual operational planning process.

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TRUSTEES' REPORT (INCLUDING DIRECTORS' REPORT) (CONTINUED)

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

The trustees, who are also the directors for the purpose of company law, and who served during the year and up to the date of signature of the financial statements were:

Ms A Toal	
Ms A Stewart	
Mr D Farrell	(Resigned 6 December 2024)
Mr J Finnegan	
Ms S Stewart	(Resigned 22 September 2025)
Ms T Canavan	
Mr B D Moss	
Dr D J Drury	(Resigned 22 September 2025)
Mr C Haugh	

Statement of trustees' responsibilities

The trustees, who are also the directors of Children's Law Centre (Northern Ireland) for the purpose of company law, are responsible for preparing the Trustees' Report and the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice).

Company Law requires the trustees to prepare financial statements for each financial year which give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charity and of the incoming resources and application of resources, including the income and expenditure, of the charitable company for that year.

In preparing these financial statements, the trustees are required to:

- select suitable accounting policies and then apply them consistently;
- observe the methods and principles in the Charities SORP;
- make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent;
- state whether applicable UK Accounting Standards have been followed, subject to any material departures disclosed and explained in the financial statements; and
- prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charity will continue in operation.

The trustees are responsible for keeping adequate accounting records that disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charity and enable them to ensure that the financial statements comply with the Companies Act 2006. They are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the charity and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

Auditor

In accordance with the company's articles, a resolution proposing that GMcG BELFAST be reappointed as auditor of the company will be put at a General Meeting.

Small Companies Exemption

In preparing this report, the directors have taken advantage of the small companies exemptions provided by section 415A of the Companies Act 2006.

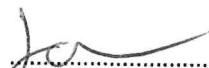
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Disclosure of information to auditor

Each of the trustees has confirmed that there is no information of which they are aware which is relevant to the audit, but of which the auditor is unaware. They have further confirmed that they have taken appropriate steps to identify such relevant information and to establish that the auditor is aware of such information.

The trustees' report was approved by the Board of Trustees.



Mr J O'Doherty
Company Secretary

Date: 26/11/2025