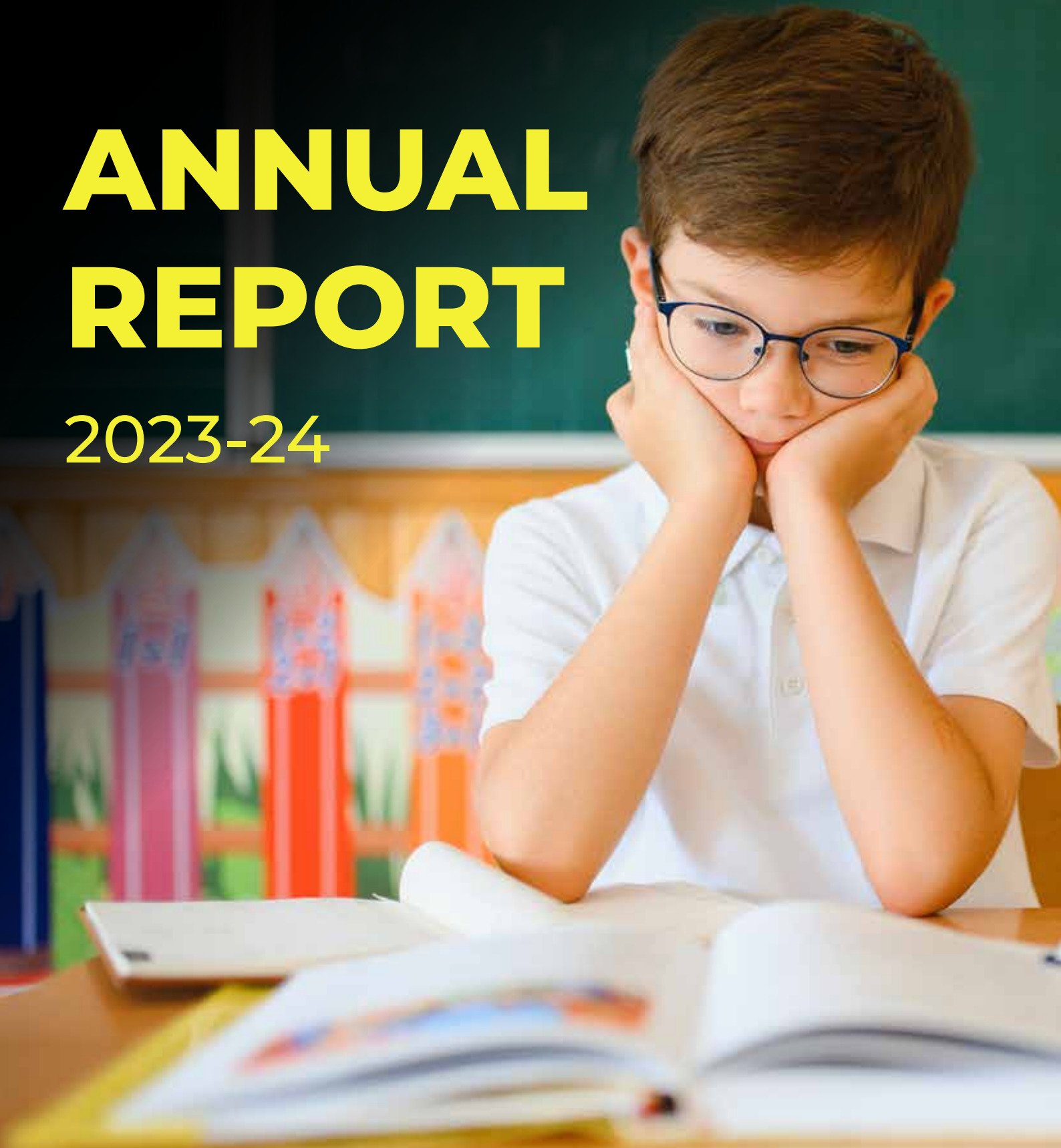


Children's Law Centre

ANNUAL REPORT

2023-24



childrenslawcentre.org.uk



children's law centre

Children's Rights
Change Children's Lives

Contents

Vision Mission Values	4
Chairperson's Report	5
Director's Report	6
Year in Numbers	8
Impact at a Glance	9
Advice and Information	10
Legal	13
Policy and Public Affairs	20
Youth Participation and Advocacy	27
Communications	28
Training	29
Admin, Finance and Operations	30
Accounts Overview	31
Thanks	33
Acknowledgements	34

Vision Mission Values

Vision

Children's rights are guaranteed without discrimination.

Mission

Ensuring children's rights are respected, realised and vindicated through participation, partnership and representation.

Values

- We are child centred
- We have integrity
- We are accountable
- We are rights based
- We are independent
- We promote equality



Chairperson's Report

While it was another busy year for everyone involved in the Children's Law Centre, the team can be very proud of what it achieved.

The advice team once again increased the number of advice queries it dealt with, helping more children than ever before.

The policy and public affairs team was able to achieve influence at the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and at a newly reformed NI Assembly.

The legal team commenced the most significant legal proceedings in the history of the Centre, challenging the lack of a cumulative equality impact assessment of the 2023/24 'punishment budget'.

The Centre secured new funding from Dormant Accounts NI, allowing the appointment of a new Training and Engagement Co-ordinator enabling the return to a full training function. This was a priority identified in the previous year's strategic planning process.

Youth@CLC played a significant part in securing a strong set of Concluding Observations and Recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, following the UK examination. Youth@CLC also led the way in raising awareness of the Concluding Observations among a wider group of young people, working with a variety of other youth organisations.

Meanwhile, the Board of Trustees continued to lead the development of the organisation, while overseeing the Strategic Plan 2022-25



and capitalising on support provided by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

We recruited and appointed two new members from the public and private sectors to the Board of Trustees who brought additional skills and experience to the organisation.

I would like to thank all the Trustees, staff, volunteers and youth members for their hard work throughout the year. Not only have they made a significant impact on the lives of children and young people, they have also worked to ensure the Centre remains in good health going into the future.

Alicia Toal
Chairperson

“I would like to thank all the Trustees, staff, volunteers and youth members for their hard work throughout the year. Not only have they made a significant impact on the lives of children and young people, they have also worked to ensure the Centre remains in good health going into the future.”

Director's Report



I am in no doubt that if it wasn't for the work of the Children's Law Centre and its staff, children in Northern Ireland would have been much worse off in the year 2023/24.

The environment in which the Centre operated has continued to be challenging, dealing with the denial of children's rights as a result of inactions or actions of duty holders, including in response to the ongoing impact of the Covid pandemic. The situation was further aggravated by the ongoing impact of Brexit, the absence of the devolved administration in this jurisdiction and the continuing socio-economic crisis resulting in draconian cuts to children's services.

Budget cuts also impacted on availability of funding to the voluntary and community sector from statutory sources with the knock on effect of increased competition for funding from trusts and foundations.

Given all of those challenges, what the Centre and its staff achieved in the year is all the more remarkable.

As Alicia has highlighted in her Chairperson's report, every aspect of the Centre overachieved, resulting in a hugely positive impact on the lives of children and young people.

There were many highlights from the

year, however, one of those that stands out is the work that achieved a strong set of Concluding Observations and Recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the CRC Committee).

The work brought together expertise from every function of the Centre. The advice team were able to identify rights breaches and supply evidence to the CRC Committee. The legal team provided solutions, developed through expertise in the field. The policy and public affairs team worked with the wider NGO sector to make sure the CRC Committee members were informed of the full range of challenges facing children and young people in Northern Ireland. Youth@CLC were able to advocate in Geneva for children and young people from across NI due to their 'Rights Here, Right Now' research. Their presence in Geneva also undoubtedly had a huge impact on the Committee. Finally, the work was amplified through a consistent communications strategy.

The result of this work has left a lasting legacy, with strong recommendations that the Centre has already been using to advocate for change at all levels of government. This has included a comprehensive series of meetings and events to raise awareness of the recommendations among stakeholders, decision makers, public bodies and critically with children and young people.

Among the Concluding Observations was a recommendation made to the UK government to withdraw the 2023/24 NI budget. Drawing on this recommendation, CLC garnered the support of over 200 organisations and academics in highlighting the cumulative harm being caused to the most vulnerable children through cuts to budgets for children's services.

In May 2023, CLC wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland asking him

to reconsider the decisions made in the 2023/24 budget, and to take into account the equality and human rights impacts it would have. Unfortunately, in the absence of his assurances that he would properly discharge his duty to carry out a cumulative equality impact assessment of the budget, we reluctantly decided that we had no option but to commence legal proceedings.

In January 2024, CLC was granted leave to proceed to a full Judicial Review hearing against the Northern Ireland Office, the Department of Finance and the Equality Commission NI in respect of the setting of the 2023/24 NI budget. Legal proceedings are ongoing. In the long term, the case could have a significant impact on future processes undertaken when setting budgets in Northern Ireland and help mitigate against high level financial decisions negatively impacting on our most vulnerable children.

With the return of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in February 2024, CLC's expertise in children's rights in education, special educational needs and disability (SEND), health and social care, mental health and housing were in much demand.

Members of CLC's policy and legal team were invited to present evidence at Stormont's Education Committee and the Executive Office Committee. The Committees expressed their thanks for the briefings and were highly receptive to the evidence presented, particularly the opportunity to hear the views of children and young people.

During an evidence session to the Education Committee, CLC spoke about a young client's lived experience in trying to access their right to education when transferring to post-primary school. This resulted in a request from the Committee to meet the young client and hear their story first hand.

Partnership working remained a key focus for the Centre at a local, UK, Ireland and

“Among the Concluding Observations was a recommendation made to withdraw the 2023/24 NI budget.”

EU level. This included work with the Child Law Network and the Civil Society Alliance on the threat to the Human Rights Act and with the Child Rights Alliance in Dublin on the impact of Brexit on the rights of children across Ireland. CLC continue to work with STEP on breaches of the rights of refugee and asylum-seeking children as they relate to their ability to access education, health and disability services and housing. CLC worked closely with Include Youth, VOYPIC, the NI Youth Forum and the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, Children's Rights Alliance for England, the Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group and Together Scotland, in leading delegations of young people to Geneva for the UK's examination by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

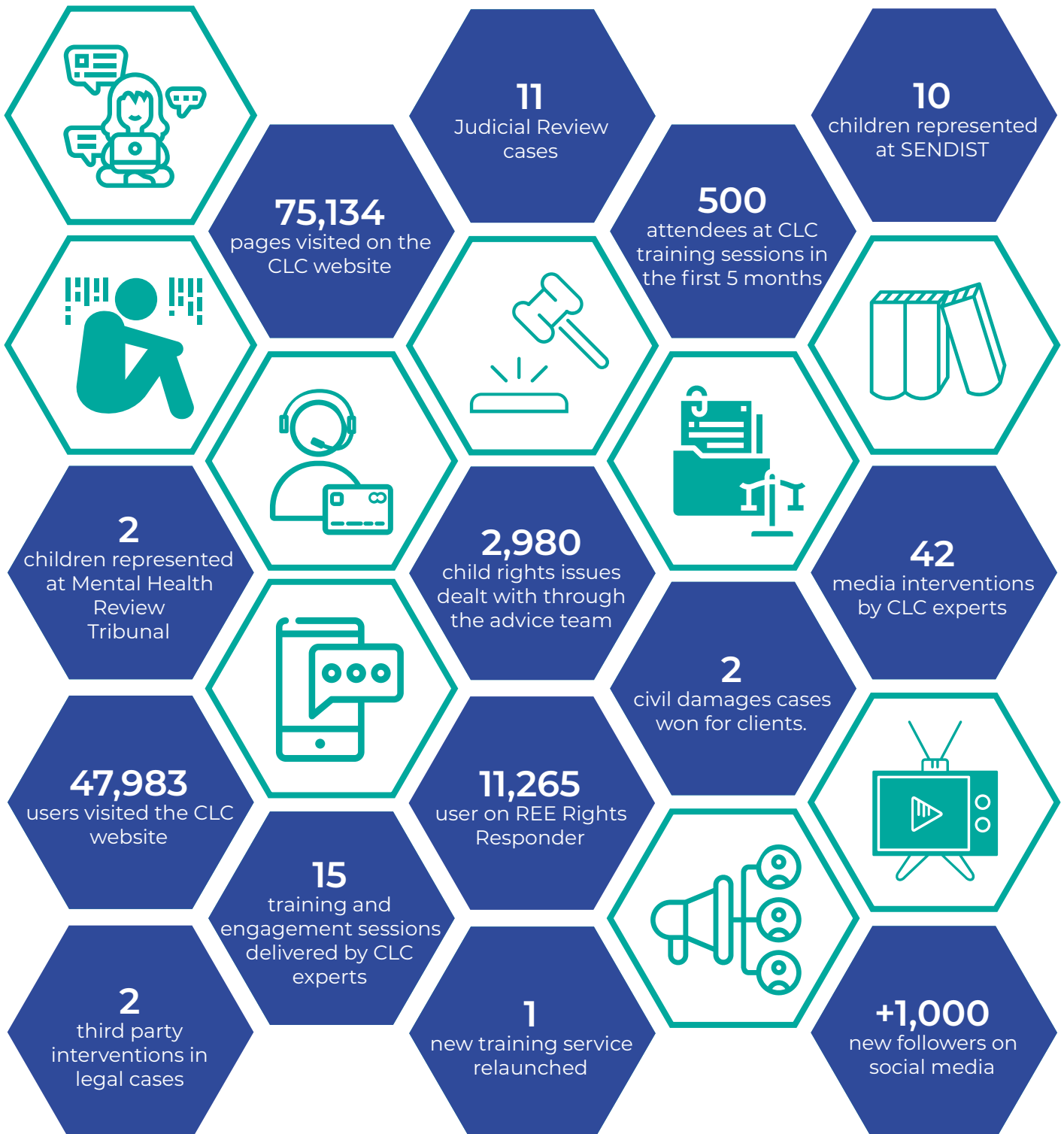
All of this excellent work was conducted under challenging circumstances. Cuts to children's services increased the need for support from CLC, while the availability of funding to the voluntary and community sector from statutory sources reduced.

I want to thank all of the staff team, Trustees and volunteers for their hard work in these circumstances. Not only has the work had a significant impact on the lives of children and young people, it has also resulted in the continued financial stability of the Centre. Finally, I want to thank Youth@CLC for continuing to advise the Centre and for being such a powerful voice for all children and young people in this jurisdiction.







Paddy Kelly
Director

Year in Numbers



Impact at a Glance

 <h3>Secured Recommendations</h3> <p>CLC and Youth@CLC secured strong Concluding Observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.</p>	 <h3>Protected Child Services</h3> <p>Having led a campaign against budget cuts to children's services, CLC went on to legally challenge the 2023-24 NI budget process.</p>
 <h3>Supported Newcomers</h3> <p>Secured greater scrutiny of conditions for asylum seeker and refugee children, including those in contingency accommodation.</p>	 <h3>Challenged Strip Searches</h3> <p>Having uncovered the practice of PSNI strip searching children and young people, CLC went on to secure changes to PSNI policy.</p>
 <h3>Gave a Voice to Children</h3> <p>From leading a delegation of young people to the UN, to supporting clients to advocate for themselves, CLC helped give a voice to children.</p>	 <h3>Provided Expertise</h3> <p>Through policy submissions, media interventions and public affairs work, CLC staff made sure others are aware of child rights obligations.</p>
 <h3>Training Service Launched</h3> <p>Having identified a gap in training support, CLC successfully secured funding to enable the launch of expert training opportunities at CLC.</p>	 <h3>Influenced Policy Responses</h3> <p>CLC helped inform and influence a wide range of responses to a consultation on raising the age of criminal responsibility.</p>

We continued to increase our reach and impact

In the period 2023-24, CLC reached more people through our advice, legal, digital communications and public affairs work.



Advice and Information



During the year 2023-24 the advice service dealt with 2,980 issues across a wide range of areas. This represented yet another year of increased queries for the advice service, which continues to act as a last resort for young people suffering due to continued cuts to services and rights regressions.

The crisis in special educational needs and disability (SEND) services was again prevalent in advice queries, with almost half of all advice queries relating to SEND. Of those SEND queries, the majority related to statements, pre-statement and placements.

17% of tier one queries related to family law, with contact / residence making up 36% of those queries and family support / respite making up 30%.

Of the 265 advocacy interventions, the main areas included family support / respite (17%), placements (16%), transport (12%), statements (17%) and homelessness (5%).

Our CHALKY Advice Team Made A Difference

Last year CHALKY, our freephone advice line, dealt with 2,980 children's rights issues. This included queries relating to:



1,984

Disability discrimination in education



512

Family Law



90

Human Rights and Justice



151

Care



243

General Issues

“The CLC support was so important to our family, and has helped J get the best possible start to his education, and his life.”

- Parent of a child assisted by the CHALKY advice team

REE Rights Responder

In the year 2023-24, REE Rights Responder provided legal information to children and young people online, reaching them at a time that suits them and where they live their lives:



11,265

Users



11,714

Sessions



29,612

Messages



81

Live Chats

**WHATEVER YOUR QUESTION
ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS, ASK REE.**

Always there, always safe, always right,
always anonymous, always confidential, never judgemental.

REE
Rights
Responder



Advice in Action

Statement of Special Educational Needs

In July 2023, a parent contacted CLC for advice and assistance relating to her son's school placement. He was recently identified as having special educational needs (SEN), multiple learning difficulties and social and behavioural difficulties.

The child was due to start primary seven in September of that year but could not read or write. The Educational Psychologist stated that the child needed a small special school placement with intensive support. However, the mum had literacy difficulties and was struggling to understand the information.

With the mum's permission, CLC reviewed the documentation, contacted the Education Authority to secure the final statement of SEN and emphasise the primary choice of placement.

Outcome

After extensive contact with the Education Authority a placement in a unit in the preferred school was secured and named in the final statement of SEN without the need for the child to appeal the decision.

Special School Placement

CLC was contacted when a child with severe learning difficulties was placed in a mainstream school, despite it being clear this was an inappropriate placement.

An appeal was lodged at the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal, while CLC made representations to the Education Authority.

Outcome

CLC was able to secure a more suitable placement in a special school. The SENDIST appeal was withdrawn.

"The Children's Law Centre really helped us during our son's tribunal. We had an extremely anxious six or seven months waiting and preparing for the tribunal, feeling like we were on our own... After just one conversation with Liam from CLC we quickly felt much more reassured and that our feelings had been justified all along."

- Parent of child who was helped by the CHALKY advice team

"Only for yourself we may not have been in the position we are now and finally getting our daughter the support she needs in school. Thanks a million for everything!"

- Parent of child who was helped by the CHALKY advice team

Legal

The Centre's legal team had a busy year supporting and protecting the human rights of children and young people.

The Centre commenced one of its most significant Judicial Review cases ever in challenging the 2023/24 NI budget setting process.

In total, the legal team commenced 15 new legal cases in the year, working to ensure the human rights of children were upheld.



Protecting Children and Young People

Our legal team fought to protect children and young people’s human rights and ensure they could access services. Key issues included:



Respite Care Services

We took legal action against the failure to provide respite services for severely disabled children.



Disability Discrimination

We continued to represent children with special education needs and disabilities to access education.



Delayed Discharge

We challenged the failure to discharge severely disabled children from hospital due to a lack of community support.



Equality Screening

We challenged the failure to conduct a cumulative equality impact assessment when setting the 2023/24 budget.



Contingency Hotels

We supported newcomer children living in contingency accommodation to access vital services.

Strategic Legal Issues: Health and Social Care

In the year 2023-24, the CLC legal team continued to encounter systemic failures affecting children in the health and social care system. Lack of planning, cuts to services and disability discrimination caused the situation for many disadvantaged children and young people to deteriorate.

Family Support

The CLC legal team continued to encounter systemic failures in relation to the assessment of needs of children and families in relation to community support packages for children with complex needs. Families have encountered issues with the content and delivery of agreed support services.

The CLC legal team provided advice and support to children and families in relation to family support packages, but also continued to take a number of cases to law.

The Centre's legal team liaised with health and social care trust (HSCT) staff to secure an assessment of needs and a suitable support package. Despite assessed needs being agreed, there have been significant difficulties with delivery of the required supports. This is symptomatic of the systemic issues facing children and families.

Respite Care

Linked to family support is the systemic failure to provide short break respite care. The CLC legal team have continued to take legal challenges to law where families have seen respite services closed, withdrawn at short notice, and been offered no alternative community provision for daytime services.

The repurposing of respite units for residential placements, a lack of alternative services, staff shortages and an overall lack of planning have all contributed to the complete collapse of respite services.



While CLC has been unable to secure a strategic judgment to remedy the respite crisis in Judicial Review proceedings, the legal team has settled a number of civil cases in the year 2023-24, securing substantial damages for clients.

Direct Payments

In cases where direct payments have been allocated, many families with children with complex needs have struggled to recruit staff. The current direct payments system is not providing any resolution for families of children who require specialist care.

The direct payment rate is insufficient to attract trained and experienced staff to provide care in the community and most families that engage with CLC's legal team are unable to recruit staff themselves. Financial awards are often unspent so HSCTs are offering an impractical solution that does not result in the needs of the children and families being met.

Extra Contractual Referrals

The Centre provided advice and assistance to the families of children with complex needs who were offered out of jurisdiction care through Extra Contractual Referrals (ECRs). ECRs should only be offered where there is a

treatment required which is not available in NI and never when the only issue is that of a residential placement.

CLC is concerned around the HSCTs willingness to offer ECRs in respect of some vulnerable children and continues to provide advice and assistance to families.

Contingency Hotel Accommodation for Refugee Families

Following work carried out in the previous year to expose issues facing children of refugee families in contingency hotel accommodation, CLC received increased contact for advice and support from refugee and asylum seekers.

While the Centre's policy and public affairs team worked alongside STEP and a number of other organisations to highlight the wide ranging issues facing newcomer children in hotel accommodation, the Centre's legal team focused on newcomer children with severe and complex needs. This included giving advice and support to access education, health and social care and suitable accommodation.

Successful legal representation was also provided, securing suitable accommodation for a disabled child and provision of school transport to ensure the child could remain in education.

The Centre's legal team worked with Anaka Women's Collective to deliver an outreach legal information session for families to ensure they were aware of their children's rights.

Homelessness

The Centre continued to provide legal advice, support and representation in relation to homelessness as a result of Trusts' breach of



Article 21 of the Children (NI) Order 1995.

CLC remained concerned that HSCTs were failing to adequately discharge their Article 21 duties. The legal team also worked closely with the Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) to ensure that suitable accommodation and support is provided to young people requiring bail addresses on discharge from custody.

The Centre's staff worked to ensure that Article 21 and the Regional Good Practice Guide was invoked in these cases.

In order to address procedural inconsistencies and HSCT non-compliance with statutory responsibilities under Article 21, CLC was asked to deliver training sessions to HSCT and NI Housing Executive staff. Outreach clinics were also held in the JJC to provide children with information and advice on their Article 21 rights.

Delayed Discharge

Serious delays in hospital discharge planning remained a significant area of work for the legal team.

The team continued to raise solutions to address the significant delays in planning, but they are yet to be taken forward by the Department of Health or HSCTs.

CLC remains concerned about the lack of progress to improve future service planning and outcomes for children.

Strategic Legal Issues: Special Education and Disability

Inequality and discrimination in the education system continues to rise, with dramatic cuts to budgets impacting the services available.

Systemic breakdown in the SEND system has also continued, with pressures on SEND places, failures to provide reasonable adjustments and a lack of early planning all making the situation worse.

The Centre continued to secure a 100% success rate in appeals taken to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST).

Breakdown in School Placements

CLC is concerned that many children are being disadvantaged due to the unsuitability of their school environments and school placements.

Issues encountered by the CLC legal team included a lack of physical space and supported learning opportunities, lack of specialist training and staff cover, decreasing resources, and an inflexibility in approaches to reintegration of children to school environments.

As a result, CLC witnessed an increase in school placements irretrievably breaking down and children disengaging from learning, sometimes for lengthy periods.

There was a sharp increase in absences due to school based anxiety, with the needs and learning environment of children not being properly met. The legal team also encountered placement breakdown where children were placed in mainstream education but clearly required specialist provision.

Other issues encountered included, failures to provide for disability access, failures around access to services like therapeutic support and disruption to school transport for children with medical needs.



The Centre's legal team worked to co-ordinate parties, negotiate ways forward, secure suitable statements, assist with school placements and secure suitable transport for clients. The Centre also ensured the views of the child were considered when challenging decisions.

Refusal of Statutory Assessments

The Centre witnessed the impacts on children in education suffering through a lack of early intervention through SEND support. This included escalation of behavioural difficulties, reductions in school timetables, informal school exclusion from trips and activities and prolonged periods of time spent outside classrooms.

The Centre's SENDIST Representative took a number of cases to Tribunal to secure statutory assessments. The Centre's team also provided advice and assistance to enable parents to self represent in cases.

Content of Statements

CLC worked with parents and schools to assist them in securing appropriate supports specified within the content of children's

statements, including securing specialist provision, adult assistance and literacy support. This included representing in strategic cases at SENDIST.

School Transport

In the year 2023-24, CLC noticed a significant increase in the number of school transport applications being refused by the Education Authority. In particular, there was a rising number of children with statements being refused transport provision or special arrangements to meet their individual needs.

The Centre worked to ensure transport was reinstated in a number of cases. This

included ensuring the Education Authority took into account medical needs, provided a suitable means of transport and provided transport to the most suitable school or address.

The Centre commenced legal proceedings in one case to secure suitable transport to the school specified in the child's statement. The case was listed for hearing when a settlement was agreed and the child was awarded transport to a suitable school nominated by their parents.

Impact in Focus: Aurelia, Child Rights Defender

In a case relating to access arrangements of one young disabled child transferring to year eight, CLC put the voice of the child at the heart of considerations.

This resulted in the child, Aurelia Cahalan, a young wheelchair user with Cerebral Palsy, going on to become a child human rights defender by taking her story directly to the NI Assembly.

After hearing about Aurelia's fight to get a suitable school place, the NI Assembly's Education Committee invited her to speak with them in Stormont's Parliament Buildings.

Aurelia was able to articulate the hurt it caused her to miss out on the critical early months of her new school. She told members of the committee how she felt "isolated and alone" and that she should have been able to start her new school with excitement and anticipation like the rest of her peers.

Aurelia would go on to meet the Minister for Education and tell her story to the BBC's education correspondent, highlighting the systemic issues facing children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

[You can watch a short documentary of Aurelia's visit to Stormont on CLC's YouTube channel.](#)



CLC Legal Case Challenges 'Punishment Budget'

In January 2024, a leave hearing in a legal challenge taken by the Children's Law Centre relating to the Secretary of State's 2023/24 budget was heard in Belfast's High Court.

Speaking ahead of the hearing, the Centre's Policy and Public Affairs Manager warned that a repeat of the 2023/24 so called punishment budget should not happen again.

Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at the Children's Law Centre, said: "The impact of the Secretary of State's punishment budget was plain for everyone to see. The Children's Law Centre, along with a wide range of other voices, consistently warned about the impact it would have on children and young people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

"Ourselves, the wider voluntary and community sector and even the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child repeatedly called on the Secretary of State to rethink the 2023/24 budget and protect children from harm. Unfortunately, those concerns were ignored and we were left with no option but to take legal action.

"We want to be as clear as possible – a repeat of the so called punishment budget must never happen again."

CLC was granted leave and the challenge remains ongoing.

[Watch this short video](#), filmed ahead of the High Court leave hearing.



Support from the Sector:

"I 100% support this action from @ChildLawCentre."
- Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick

"A significant next step on @ChildLawCentre's legal challenge relating to Secretary of State's budget - ensuring children & young people's rights are upheld."
- NICVA

"A really important legal challenge that could have implications for future budgets. Thank you @ChildLawCentre for fighting for Children's Rights."
- Children in NI

"We're supporting @ChildLawCentre today as they fight to uphold the rights of our children, young people and their families."
- Parenting NI

"The first substantive judicial review challenge to the running of NI under indirect rule - specifically the opaque budget processes and the cursory consideration of equality impact."
- Professor Colin Murray



Event: Annual Lecture

At the 2023 CLC Annual Lecture, Mr Bragi Guðbrandsson, Vice Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, highlighted the need for the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive 'without further delay'.

During the lecture, Mr Guðbrandsson said: "The lack of progress in legislation being brought forward and delays implementing existing legislation and strategies to improve children's lives in Northern Ireland require a solution to the political crisis in Northern Ireland without further delay."

He continued by reflecting on the current context facing children and young people, stating: "Alarming rates of child poverty, a profoundly difficult economic context, lack of financial support to meet the true cost of living, the complexity of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic still not fully known – all compounded by a budget which failed to give any hope of meaningful intervention."

Mr Guðbrandsson concluded his lecture by repeating the need for the restoration of local decision making: "While there has no doubt been progress in some areas, we have regrettably concluded that a vast number



of children are being let down because of the continued failure to implement key measures and protections as laid out in the UNCRC."

Impact in Focus: Stakeholder Engagement

During Mr Guðbrandsson's visit in November 2023, CLC convened a range of stakeholder meetings with human rights experts, decision makers, members of the judiciary and young people to talk about children's rights.

At the meetings, Mr Guðbrandsson was able to outline key recommendations within the recently published Concluding Observations. CLC is grateful for the support of the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast which enabled

us to host a number of key engagements. We are also grateful to the young people and their supporting organisations (VOYPIC, Include Youth, NI Youth Forum and NICCY).



Policy and Public Affairs

A Year of Influence

In 2023-24, the CLC policy and public affairs team had a significant impact on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the newly reformed Assembly and Executive and the child rights sector.

May 2023 - Budget Cuts Opposition

After the NI Secretary of State passed his 'punishment budget', CLC led a 'Cuts Harm' campaign to raise concerns around the impact on children and young people.

Outcome

- Over 200 organisations signed up to CLC's 'Cuts Harm' campaign.
- Departmental equality impact assessments commenced as a result.
- Some cuts to education services were reversed.

May 2023 - Geneva

A delegation, led by CLC, which supported eight young people including from partner organisations Include Youth and VOYPIC travelled to Geneva to raise concerns about breaches of children's rights.

Outcome

- Informed and influenced the CRC Committee's examination of the UK government and NI Executive.

June 2023 - Concluding Observations

Secured a strong set of Concluding Observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Outcome

- Strong Concluding Observations with key NI specific recommendations.
- Committee's budget recommendation covered in BBC politics programme.

June 2023 - Strip Searches Report

In March 2023 CLC secured a human rights review into strip searching of children and young people. The NI Policing Board published the review in June 2023, including ten recommendations for change.

Outcome

- CLC's work on the issue directly referenced in the report's introduction.
- Key human rights informed changes secured to protect children and young people.

October 2023 - Stormont Briefing Event

Key decision makers and politicians attended a children's rights briefing event in Parliament Buildings, Stormont, to discuss implementation of the CRC Committee's Concluding Observations and Recommendations.

Outcome

- Decision makers briefed on child rights gaps and priorities in NI, with the impact of Stormont's collapse highlighted.
- Voices of children and young people raised directly with politicians.

November 2023 - Bragi Guðbrandsson Visit

Mr Bragi Guðbrandsson, Vice Chair of the CRC Committee, accepted an invitation from CLC to visit Belfast. During the visit Mr Guðbrandsson engaged in a series of meetings with senior officials, key decision makers, duty bearers, judicial members,

children, young people and child rights experts.

Outcome

- Meetings held with senior officials in key departments to highlight actions needed to fulfil child rights commitments.

March 2024 - Education Committee

When invited to brief Stormont's Education Committee on SEND issues, CLC highlighted the story of young disabled CLC client Aurelia who could not get a suitable school place.

Outcome

- MLAs briefed on SEND issues.
- Duties under Children's Services Co-

- operation Act (NI) 2015 highlighted.
- CLC client, Aurelia, invited to speak with committee members to highlight her lived experience.

March 2024 - The Executive Committee

CLC was invited to join the NI Human Rights Consortium in presenting evidence to the committee on human rights gaps in Northern Ireland.

Outcome

- Children's rights put at the heart of discussions around improving human rights protections in NI.
- Collaborative work with the NI Human Rights Consortium and Disability Action.

Policy Submissions

- Youth@CLC Submission to the APG on Reducing Gambling Related Harm - April 2023
- Education Authority Plan of Arrangements Response - May 2023
- Department of Health Budget EQIA Response - July 2023
- The Executive Office Budget EQIA Response - August 2023
- Department of Education Budget EQIA Response - August 2023
- Northern Ireland Policing Board Engagement Strategy Response - Sept 2023
- Department of Education Restrictive Practices Guidance Response - Nov 2023
- Department of Education RSE Consultation Response - Nov 2023
- Department of Health Review of Children's Services Response - Dec 2023
- Human Rights Review of Policing Children and Young People Response - Dec 2023
- NI Affairs Committee Inquiry on Integrated Education Evidence - Jan 2024
- Special Educational Needs and Disability - Investment and Transformation Briefing - Feb 2024
- Children's Services Cooperation Act Briefing - March 2024
- NI Assembly Committee for Education SEND Briefing - March 2024
- Department of Justice and Department for Communities Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour Response - March 2024

In Focus: Cuts Harm



In May 2023, over 200 organisations and individuals jointly signed a letter written to the Secretary of State for NI raising concern around the impact of budget decisions and cuts to services. The letter urged the Secretary of State to reconsider the budget decisions and immediately assess the impact on children and young people.

After submitting the letter, Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at the Children's Law Centre, said:

"The budget and the cuts to services flowing from it will cause active harm to a generation of children and young people. We have had weeks of announcements signaling cuts to children's support and early intervention services that will cause significant long-term harm to many.

"The way in which these decisions are being made is an affront to children's rights and equality. Despite having a statutory duty to

assess the impact and to protect children, particularly children who are disadvantaged or have additional needs, these services are the first to go.

"Many children and young people, as well as their parents, guardians and carers, are already at breaking point. There is a crisis in mental health for our young people, a complete failure around SEND services, and unacceptable numbers of children living in poverty. Yet, budget decisions are targeting these groups of children directly.

"Rather than cutting children's services, we must look at how we better protect our children and young people. We should be strengthening laws to ensure they have full access to services that support their survival and development. We should be making decisions that are in their best interests, rather than knowingly subjecting them to future harm."

The letter gained widespread support and attention, triggering a number of late equality screening exercises by NI Executive departments and a reversal of some cuts to education services.

In the absence of an appropriate or adequate response, CLC would later go on to commence legal proceedings against the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Finance.

Support from Across the Sector

"Standing with Children's Law Centre as they advocate for the protection, promotion, and respect of Children & Young People's rights in Northern Ireland." - **Include Youth**

"Our food banks provided a record 16,659 food parcels for 8,409 children living in families who could not afford the essentials from April to September - a 24% increase compared to the same period last year. This can't continue. Thanks @ChildLawCentre for your work on this." - **The Trussell Trust Northern Ireland**

Key Issues



UNCRC Reporting Process

Engaging with and supporting the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's examination of the UK government and devolved regions was a major focus of CLC's work throughout 2023.

Having carried out an extensive piece of research work in the previous year, alongside sector experts and children and young people themselves, CLC travelled to Geneva in efforts to secure a strong set of Concluding Observations and Recommendations.

The work was a success, with the final Concluding Observations containing a wide range of priorities highlighted by CLC. Major recommendations included raising the age of criminal responsibility, legislation to protect under 18s from age discrimination, the PSNI ending the use of plastic bullets against children and the introduction of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, all of which had been included in previous recommendations.

Other recommendations, including scrapping the 2023/24 Northern Ireland budget, ending PSNI strip-searches of

children and ending the use of contingency accommodation for asylum seeking children were new and had been raised directly by CLC throughout the reporting process.

Other issues raised by CLC, which resulted in key recommendations, included the right to withdraw from religious worship in schools, relationships and sexuality education (RSE), restraint and seclusion, abortion, stop and search, protecting children from paramilitaries, and ending the hostile environment for refugee and asylum seekers.

After the publication of the Concluding Observations, CLC moved on to working to ensure decision makers are implementing the recommendations.

[Watch this short video](#) produced ahead of the visit to Geneva.

Outcome

- Strong recommendations secured to protect children and young people in NI.
- CRC Committee's Vice Chairperson visited NI to outline key priorities.
- Meetings secured with the Vice Chairperson of the CRC Committee and NI decision makers.

Human Rights and Equality

Ensuring that human rights and equality is at the heart of decision making remains a central focus of all of CLC's work.

Through consultation responses, briefings and meetings, public bodies are reminded



of their statutory duties and international human rights obligations towards children and young people.

Outcome

- Invited to join the NI Human Rights Consortium at Stormont's Executive Committee to outline the imperative to deliver on human rights commitments to children and young people.

Refugee and Asylum Seekers

Alongside South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP), CLC continued to research issues impacting refugee and asylum seeking children in contingency and dispersal accommodation.

Alongside STEP, CLC policy and public affairs team engaged at Ministerial, Permanent Secretary and Non-Departmental Public Body CEO level to ensure they were carrying out their legal duties towards newcomer children.

Outcome

- Secured scrutiny of the conditions children were living in, as well as raising serious safeguarding concerns.
- Referred families to CLC legal support to ensure rights were protected.

Policing of Children and Young People

The policing of children and young people continued to remain a focus of CLC's

policy work. Working alongside Amnesty International NI, Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), and Include Youth, CLC continued to challenge the use of spit hoods on children.

Following on the previous year's work to secure a human rights review of the practice of strip searching children, the NI Policing Board published recommendations benchmarked against human rights legislation.

CLC continued to raise a number of other concerns around policing practices in NI, including the continued use of plastic bullets, and the systemic misuse of stop and search powers on children and young people.

Outcome

- Human rights recommendations secured and published by the NI Policing Board.

Special Educational Needs and Disability

With the return of a functioning NI Assembly came the return of Stormont scrutiny committees. It wasn't long before CLC were invited to present evidence on the crisis facing SEND children in NI.

At the committee, CLC highlighted the crisis in accessing school placements for disabled children, referencing client Aurelia Cahalan. CLC also took the opportunity to highlight existing duties and to ensure Education Committee members were robust in challenging failures to realise the full potential of the Children's Services Co-



operation Act (NI) 2015.

Outcome

- The Education Committee requested a briefing on the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015.
- CLC Client Aurelia Cahalan was invited to speak with the committee about her lived experience.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

When engaging with children and young people directly about the issues they are most concerned about, RSE is consistently near the top of the list.

The 'Rights Here, Right Now' research conducted by Youth@CLC highlighted that only 35% of children and young people feel they are given adequate information about RSE. Children and young people also raised the issue of RSE at a conference for children and young people in September 2023.

CLC continued to ensure that human rights obligations, as well as the voices of children and young people, were included in policy discussions around RSE in schools.

Outcome

- The voices of children and young people heard during policy discussions on RSE in schools.
- CLC briefing paper referenced during a debate in the NI Assembly chamber.
- Secured a mini committee enquiry to be held by the Education Committee.



"The policing of children and young people continued to remain a focus of CLC's policy work"

Children's Rights Briefing Event in Stormont



In October 2023, key decision makers and politicians were warned, at an event organised by the Children's Law Centre, that a generation of children and young people will be harmed unless a reformed Executive and Assembly delivers key children's rights recommendations.

Delegates heard from leading children's rights experts, as well as children and young people themselves, during a briefing event on the recent UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's Concluding Observations and Recommendations report – a report previously described as 'damning'.

The UN report raised concern around the treatment and protection of children and young people, as well as a long list of recommendations. These included a recommendation to withdraw the harmful 2023/24 budget for Northern Ireland.

Speaking at the event, Paddy Kelly, Director at the Children's Law Centre said: "There is a real and serious risk of long-term damage to our children and young people. The list of challenges facing them today is growing and becoming endless.

"There can be no doubt that decision makers are failing to look after their best interests.

The proof is in the report from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and in the endless stream of cuts to children's services.

"It is past time for change. A restored Assembly and Executive should be working to implement these recommendations but instead we are seeing decisions being made at Westminster that are compounding the problems.

"We need a return to local decision making, followed by urgent Executive action, before the long-term damage to our children and young people becomes even more severe."

The event also heard from Dr Deena Haydon, an independent research and policy consultant who CLC commissioned to compile and write the NI NGO report submitted to the CRC Committee, Chris Quinn, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at CLC, and Youth@CLC member Ruby Campbell. The event was attended by MLAs, senior departmental officials, leading children's charities and a wide range of human rights organisations.

At the event, Youth@CLC member, Ruby Campbell, addressed delegates as a young rapporteur from the Youth@CLC children and young people's conference held in September 2023, ensuring the voices of children and young people were heard loud and clear.

Watch it Back

The event was recorded in full and available to [watch on CLC's YouTube channel](#).

You can also [watch a video from Youth@CLC](#) used to update the delegates on their priorities.

Youth Participation and Advocacy



The year 2023-24 was an important year for Youth@CLC. Having submitted their 'Rights Here, Right Now' report and attended the children's meeting of the CRC Committee, a delegation of Youth@CLC members travelled to Geneva in May 2023 and secured a strong set of recommendations from the CRC Committee.

When the Concluding Observations and Recommendations were published in June 2023, they evidenced the impact of Youth@CLC engagement.

Youth@CLC then turned to raising awareness of the new Concluding Observations and Recommendations. This included a series of

meetings with decision makers to outline recommendations relevant to key NI Executive departments.

Raising awareness of the Concluding Observations and Recommendations among other children and young people was also a key priority. To assist in this work, CLC launched a youth friendly version of the Concluding Observations, alongside a learning resource for teachers and youth workers to help teach more children and young people about children's rights.

Youth@CLC also organised a youth conference at Ulster University to discuss the Concluding Observations.

Resources:

- [Concluding Observations: Children and Young People's Summary.](#)
- [Change Makers - Resource for Teachers and Youth Workers.](#)
- [Watch: Rights Here, Right Now conference](#)

Event: 'Rights Here, Right Now' Children and Young People's Conference

In September 2023, led by CLC, seven leading youth organisations held an event for children and young people to discuss and learn more about the Concluding Observations and Recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The event also gave children and young people a chance to question a panel of duty bearers in key roles who are responsible for making decisions that impact on children and young people's lives.



Communications



children and young people, as well as video content to ensure maximum impact when raising children's issues.

The 2023 Annual Lecture livestream reached more people than ever before. Other events were recorded for an online audience, including a youth conference at Ulster University and a children's rights briefing event in Stormont's Long Gallery.

2023-24 saw the continued expansion of communications at CLC, with an impetus on raising awareness of key children's rights issues among stakeholders, duty bearers, decision makers, the wider public and with children and young people themselves.

CLC's media presence continued with interventions on policing issues, cuts to services, SEND services, immigration and the Concluding Observations.

The communications team assisted Youth@CLC in developing accessible resources for

In February 2024, CLC launched a new e-zine 'Child Rights Matters', ensuring people can get the latest news from CLC straight to their inbox.



Impact

In 2023-24, CLC reached people across NI to highlight key child rights issues.



42

media interventions



75,134

website page views



47,983

users on the website



+1,000

increase in social media followers

Training

Training at CLC Relunched

In November 2023 CLC relaunched its training offer with a mission to provide quality training courses delivered by experts in children's rights.

Speaking ahead of the launch, CLC's new Training and Engagement Co-ordinator, Paul Hamilton said: "There has never been a more important time to ensure people are aware of and understand children's rights, whether that's parents and carers, professionals and practitioners, or most importantly children and young people themselves.

"At CLC we believe children's rights change children's lives. Our training will aim to give people the knowledge and skills they need to use the rights framework as a tool to change the lives of children and young people."



Training Sessions Delivered

CLC delivered 15 training sessions in the five months between October 2023 to March 2024. The training sessions were attended by 500 people.

These included:

- **DOLS and the impact of the Mental Capacity Act in education settings** - Oct 2023
- **Advocating on behalf of children in need** - Nov 2023
- **Article 21 - Rights of homeless young people** - Nov 2023
- **Voice of the child in legal proceedings** - Nov 2023
- **Introduction to education in NI and**

special education - Nov 2023

- **SEN training** - Dec 2023
- **Community and wellbeing for parents of children with disabilities** - Feb 2024
- **DOLS and mental capacity of young people** - March 2024
- **Protecting children's education rights** - March 2024

"Get the right advice to make sure you are meeting the rights of the child. Attend training at CLC, advise parents to contact CLC, advise SENCOs to attend"
- Fran Murray, SENCO

Admin, Finance and Operations

In a particularly volatile funding environment and with considerable work undertaken in identifying and submitting funding applications, CLC has been fortunate to end the year within budget.

As the Centre moves into the next financial year the funding environment is even more volatile as the economic crisis impacts on the availability of statutory funding and increases competition with trusts and foundations whose own resources are now being stretched.

While the fundraising context for the Centre has become more challenging, successive cuts to services for children and young people has resulted in services becoming more stretched, resulting in significant rights breaches.

It is in this challenging context that the



Centre is having to work, delivering more for less.

However, a determined staff team have worked to make sure they continue to support children and young people while also maintaining the future sustainability of the Centre.

Operations

CLC completed its first full year of monitoring of a new operational plan following the development of its current strategic plan for 2022-25. This work included revising the approach to one-to-ones and a particular focus on developing outcome measures that better represent the Centre's efforts in assisting children and young people.

In line with the strategic plan this year CLC also completed a review of job descriptions as part of a wider benchmarking exercise to ensure CLC remains competitive within the sector and an employer of choice. This has included developing wellbeing support to ensure CLC staff have the opportunity to recharge from what is a busy and challenging environment. CLC has continued to offer hybrid working which commenced in the wake of the pandemic and has proved to be popular with the staff team.

An objective within the current strategy is to extend the reach of CLC, with the Centre commencing this work through identifying and engaging with new groups and communities of young people in Northern Ireland. This engagement in turn has opened new conduits to support for children and families who were previously unaware of CLC's work. This work has complemented the efforts through policy and public affairs, training, digital communications and Youth@CLC.

Key to the success of CLC is the input from its Board of Trustees. The Board has continued its review of governance systems and processes commenced in 2021-22, including the recruitment of two new Trustees.

Now, entering the final year of the current strategy, CLC will soon commence work with the Board of Trustees, staff and stakeholders on development of the next strategy for 2025-30.

Accounts Overview

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES INCLUDING INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2024

	Unrestricted funds 2024 £	Restricted funds 2024 £	Total 2024 £	Unrestricted funds 2023 £	Restricted funds 2023 £	Total 2023 £
Income from:						
Donations and legacies	2,284	-	2,284	50	-	50
Charitable activities	189,710	520,174	709,884	71,715	680,149	751,864
Investments	49,273	-	49,273	38,404	-	38,404
Movement in pension provision	(45,080)	-	(45,080)	613	-	613
Total income	196,207	520,174	716,381	110,782	680,149	790,931
Expenditure on:						
Charitable activities	187,603	671,718	859,321	50,327	841,043	891,370
Net incoming/(outgoing) resources before transfers	8,604	(151,544)	(142,940)	60,455	(160,894)	(100,439)
Gross transfers between funds	(172)	172	-	-	-	-
Net income/(expenditure) for the year/						
Net movement in funds	8,432	(151,372)	(142,940)	60,455	(160,894)	(100,439)
Fund balances at 1 April 2023	377,072	472,439	849,511	316,617	633,333	949,950
Fund balances at 31 March 2024	385,504	321,067	706,571	377,072	472,439	849,511

The statement of financial activities includes all gains and losses recognised in the year.

All income and expenditure derive from continuing activities.

The statement of financial activities also complies with the requirements for an income and expenditure account under the Companies Act 2006.

A full copy of the accounts can be made available on request

Accounts Overview (continued)

BALANCE SHEET AS AT 31 MARCH 2024

	2024		2023	
	£	£	£	£
Fixed assets				
Intangible assets		1,435		7,770
Tangible assets		231,138		241,194
Investment properties		214,000		214,000
		<u>446,573</u>		<u>462,964</u>
Current assets				
Debtors	51,749		52,500	
Cash at bank and in hand	495,710		553,265	
	<u>547,459</u>		<u>605,765</u>	
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	(99,818)		(57,650)	
Net current assets		<u>447,641</u>		<u>548,115</u>
Total assets less current liabilities		<u>894,214</u>		<u>1,011,079</u>
Creditors: amounts falling due after more than one year		(127,354)		(141,814)
Provisions for liabilities				
Defined benefit pension liability	60,289		19,754	
	<u>(60,289)</u>		<u>(19,754)</u>	
Net assets		<u><u>706,571</u></u>		<u><u>849,511</u></u>
Income funds				
Restricted funds		321,067		472,439
<u>Unrestricted funds</u>				
Designated funds	55,000		55,000	
General unrestricted funds	390,793		341,826	
Pension reserve	<u>(60,289)</u>		<u>(19,754)</u>	
		<u>385,504</u>		<u>377,072</u>
		<u><u>706,571</u></u>		<u><u>849,511</u></u>

These financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the provisions applicable to companies subject to the small companies regime.

Thanks



CLC would like to thank everyone involved in supporting the work of the Centre through the year.

From the staff who work daily to secure and vindicate the rights of children and young people, through to the Board of Trustees who have worked hard to ensure the good governance and future sustainability of the Centre.

In particular, the Centre would like to recognise the extraordinary achievements of Youth@CLC in their work to advocate on behalf of all children and young people in Northern Ireland including when visiting the CRC Committee in Geneva.

The Centre has also relied on a number of volunteers and independent consultants who have contributed to specific pieces of work throughout the year. Without this external support, CLC could not have achieved everything it has done.

Finally, CLC would like to thank Mr Bragi Guðbrandsson for delivering this year's annual lecture and taking the time to meet with a wide range of stakeholders during his visit.

We would like to pay particular thanks to our funders for the year:

- Department of Health
- DOH/HSCNI Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG)
- Department of Education
- BBC Children in Need
- Angel Eyes / The National Lottery
- The Legal Education Foundation
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- The National Lottery Community Fund
- Dormant Accounts Fund NI
- Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
- AB Charitable Trust

Acknowledgements

Staff

- Emma-Rose Duffy (Solicitor)
- Paul Hamilton (Training and Engagement Co-ordinator)
- Diane Hammond (Advice Worker)
- Rachel Hogan (SENDIST Representative)
- Paddy Kelly (Director)
- Claire Kemp (Policy Officer)
- Liam Mackle (Advice Manager)
- Catherine Maguire (Advice Worker)
- Sarah McAuley (Receptionist / Admin Assistant)
- Fergal McFerran (Policy and Public Affairs Manager)
- Eamonn McNally (Mental Health Solicitor)
- Sam Nelson (Communications and Marketing Manager)
- Helen Rafferty (Head of Administration and Finance)
- Kathryn Stevenson (Head of Legal Services)
- Trevor Wright (Head of Operations)

Youth@CLC

- Ruby Cambell
- Rebecca Moore
- Zoe O'Hare
- Fahriye Onur
- Conor Reilly
- Evan Scollan

Independent Consultants

- Brenda Kelly
- Deirdre McAliskey

Board of Trustees

- Alicia Toal
- Amanda Stewart
- Duane Farrell
- Jerome Finnegan
- Shirelle Stewart
- Trása Canavan
- Brian Moss
- Deborah Drury (appointed 22 February 2024)
- Chris Haugh (appointed 22 February 2024)





Children's Law Centre

Rights House
2nd Floor
127 - 131 Ormeau Road
Belfast, BT7 1SH

Tel: 028 9024 5704
Fax: 028 9024 5679
Email: info@childrenslawcentre.org

CHALKY Freephone Advice Line:
0808 808 5678
chalky@childrenslawcentre.org

REE Rights Responder
#Ask REE at reerights.com

The Children's Law Centre is a charity and can accept donations to support our work.

If you are a UK taxpayer, Gift Aid your donation and we can claim back an extra 25p from your taxes for every £1 you donate. Donate securely online at www.cafonline.org by selecting Children's Law Centre under 'find a charity' or send your donation directly to Children's Law Centre.

Children's Law Centre is a company limited by guarantee.

Charity Registration No. NIC101148
Company Registration No. NI033998 (Northern Ireland)

