

# Children's Law Centre

EVENT PROGRAMME

## FROM PROMISE TO PRACTICE:

REALISING THE VISION OF  
THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES  
CO-OPERATION ACT

DATE: MONDAY 24<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER  
TIME: 10 AM - 4 PM  
VENUE: THE GREAT HALL  
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST

children's law centre



[childrenslawcentre.org.uk](http://childrenslawcentre.org.uk)



QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST

CENTRE FOR  
CHILDREN'S  
RIGHTS

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# WELCOME

Thank you for joining us as we mark 10 years of the Children's Services Co-operation Act. Today's event, *From Promise to Practice: Realising the Vision of the Children's Services Co-operation Act*, is being delivered by the Children's Law Centre in partnership and with the generous support of the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast.

This anniversary offers an important opportunity to reflect on why the Act was introduced, to assess the progress made over the last decade, and to examine how effective co-operation can better support the wellbeing of children and young people. Throughout the day, we will hear from those who helped shape the Act, those responsible for implementing it, and those working with children who continue to feel the impact of its unrealised potential.

We hope this event provides space for honest reflection, constructive dialogue and renewed commitment to fulfilling the vision of the Act as we look ahead to its second decade.

## Children's Rights Change Children's Lives

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# AGENDA

## 10:00 - 10:30    **Arrival and Registration**

Refreshments will be available

### *Session One: Setting the Scene*

## 10:30 - 10:40    **Welcome and Opening Remarks**

- Professor Bronagh Byrne, Director, Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast
- John O'Doherty, CEO, Children's Law Centre

## 10:40 - 10:50    **Ministerial Remarks**

A message from Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt MLA

## 10:50 - 11:00    **Children's Services Co-operation Act: Origins and Context**

Steven Agnew, former MLA who sponsored the Bill that became the Children's Service Co-operation Act

## 11:00 - 11:30    **Children's Services Co-operation Act: Impetus and Intention**

Rachel Hogan BL, SEND Specialist Legal Advisor, Children's Law Centre, with Carla Kingsman, previous CLC client

## 11:30 - 12:00    **Demystifying the 'System'**

Peter May CB in conversation with Fergal McFerran

## 12:00 - 12:15    **Comfort Break**

### *Session Two: Looking Back and Assessing Progress*

## 12:15 - 13:15    **Panel Discussion: A View from Duty Bearers**

- Stephen Martin, Youth Justice Agency
- Jeff McGuinness, Department of Finance
- Martina Moore, Department of Health
- Paul Brush, Department of Education

**Panel Chair:** Kathryn Stevenson, Children's Law Centre

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**13:15 - 13:45      Lunch**

**13:45 - 14:45      Panel Discussion: A View from Children's Advocates**

- Natalie Whelehan, Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI)
- Sara McCracken, Angel Eyes NI
- Deirdre McAliskey, South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)
- Alicia Toal, Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC)

**Panel Chair:** Eamonn McNally, Children's Law Centre

***Session Three: The Second Decade of the Children's Services  
Co-operation Act***

**14:45 - 15:45      Working Together to Achieve the Benefits of Co-operation**

Facilitated table discussions with feedback

Chaired by Fergal McFerran, Children's Law Centre

**15:45 - 16:00      Closing Remarks**

Chris Quinn, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People will provide reflections on the day

**16:00                  Event Ends**

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## SPEAKER INFORMATION



**Professor Bronagh Byrne**

Bronagh Byrne (with Hearing Dog Robyn) is Professor of Disability and Children's Rights at Queen's University Belfast where she is also Director of the Centre for Children's Rights. Bronagh's research expertise is on the rights of children and young people with disabilities, and the implementation of the UNCRC and UNCRPD in domestic law, policy and practice. With colleagues Professor Laura Lundy and Professor Ursula Kilkelly (UCC), she has developed a body of research evidencing the ways in which the UNCRC has been given legal effect in countries across the world. Bronagh was Principal Investigator on the Reporting on Best Practice in Cross-Departmental Working Practices for Children and Young People project for NICCY.



**John O'Doherty**

John O'Doherty is the Chief Executive Officer of the Children's Law Centre, leading its mission to ensure children's rights are respected, realised and vindicated through participation, partnership and representation. He provides strategic leadership, oversees operations, and works with the Board to ensure long-term sustainability. John previously served as Director of Policy and Public Affairs at the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and as Director of The Rainbow Project.



**Mike Nesbitt MLA**

Mike Nesbitt MLA was appointed Minister of Health for Northern Ireland on 29 May 2024. Mr Nesbitt previously served as the Assembly Private Secretary to the Health Minister.

Before his appointment as Minister, Mr Nesbitt represented the Ulster Unionist Party on the NI Policing Board and Economy Committee. He was also party leader from 2012 to 2017, having been first elected as an MLA in 2011.

Mr Nesbitt is a former broadcaster, private sector CEO, and Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.



**Steven Agnew**

Steven Agnew is Head of Policy for RenewableUK, the voice of the renewable electricity industry. His role covers markets, planning and environment, trade and supply chain. He led RenewableNI for six years and previously served as MLA for North Down and Leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland. He has two teenage children and lives in Bangor, County Down. During the 2011-16 Assembly Mandate, Steven was the MLA sponsor of the Bill that became the Children's Service Co-operation (Northern Ireland) Act.



**Rachel Hogan, BL**

Rachel has worked within the legal team at the Children's Law Centre as a Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal Representative since 2008. Rachel provides legal advice and information to parents and children, professionals and external agencies working with children in the complex area of children's rights to special educational provision and freedom from disability discrimination within education. In strategic cases, she provides free legal representation in Tribunal hearings to ensure enforcement of children's legal rights to provision and the prevention of disability discrimination by schools and the Education Authority. The child affected by the lack of provision may attend meetings and hearings along with Rachel to ensure their voice is properly heard. Rachel provides training on behalf of Children's Law Centre to lawyers, health and social care professionals, education professionals, parents and colleagues on Special Educational Needs, Disability Discrimination and Human Rights. She works together with the Children's Law Centre's policy and legal teams in relation to legislation and policy relevant to equality of access to education. This includes writing consultation responses, giving evidence at Committees and providing legal analysis in relation to children's rights compliance.



**Peter May**

Peter was Permanent Secretary across 4 Government Departments from 2013 until his retirement from the Civil Service in April 2025. Latterly, he led the Department of Health and before that Justice, playing a leading role in tackling some of the most deep-rooted problems facing our society today. He was both Diversity Champion and Policy Champion for the Northern Ireland Civil Service and led the work to put an outcomes-based Programme for Government in place.



**Fergal McFerran**

Fergal McFerran is the Policy and Public Affairs Manager at the Children's Law Centre, a post he has held since 2022. In this role he is responsible for achieving CLC's policy and legislative priorities to ensure children's rights are respected, realised and vindicated. Fergal holds a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from Queen's University Belfast. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Consortium and a former Trustee of the National Children's Bureau.



**Stephen Martin**

Stephen was appointed Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Agency on 17 May 2021. He joined the Northern Ireland Civil Service in 1996 and for most of the last 25 years has worked on the development and delivery of social policy across a number of Departments.



**Jeff McGuinness**

Jeff has worked for the Department of Finance for over twenty years on public expenditure matters including the Northern Ireland Budget. His current role as director of Budget Sustainability involves strategic improvements to the wider Budget process as well as supporting departments in the development of longer-term financial sustainability plans.





### **Martina Moore**

Martina is Director of Family and Children's Policy in the Department of Health and has lead responsibility for policy and legislation relating to family support, child protection and looked after children. Previously, as Director of ICS she led on the closure of the Health and Social Care Board and its migration to the Department of Health in March 2022 and the subsequent development of ICS NI, the new framework for planning health and social care services. Martina has retained policy oversight of the ICS framework. Martina has extensive experience in organisational change having undertaken lead roles across a number of high-profile public-sector reform programmes including Brexit and the restructuring of NICS.



### **Paul Brush**

Paul Brush started his career as a Government Statistician at the Department for Economic Development. In 2000, he moved to head up the analytical unit within the Industrial Development Board and subsequently Invest Northern Ireland. In 2010, he was appointed Head of European Programmes within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. In September 2016 he moved to a newly created post within the Executive Office to coordinate Northern Ireland's preparations for Brexit and support the First and deputy First Ministers on EU Exit issues. In October 2019 he was appointed Director of Early Years, Childcare and the Children and Young People's Strategy at the Department of Education with a focus on developing an Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy which is due to be published in autumn 2025. Since June 2025, Paul Brush has taken up post of Acting Deputy Secretary for Inclusion, Improvement and Workforce Group at the Department of Education.





**Kathryn Stevenson**

Kathryn Stevenson was called to the Roll of Solicitors in Northern Ireland in 1997. She worked in private practice and developed a special interest in child and family law before joining the Children's Law Centre as Education Solicitor in 2000, acquiring expert knowledge of education law and children's rights. In 2009, she was appointed Head of Legal Services, with lead responsibility for operational planning, management and strategic development of CLC's in-house legal team, delivering a child-rights focused specialist legal advice and representation service for children and young people. She is currently a member of the Department of Health's stakeholder group for the Adoption and Children (NI) Act 2022 and the Department of Justice's stakeholder group for Enabling Access to Justice and Civil Legal Aid Reform. In January 2025, Kathryn was appointed by the Minister for Health as non-executive legal member of the Board for the Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland.



**Natalie Whelehan**

Natalie Whelehan is Chief Executive of Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI). A dedicated children's rights advocate, she has spent her career challenging inequality and driving policy change to improve outcomes for children and families. Before joining CiNI, Natalie held senior roles with Housing Rights, NSPCC Northern Ireland, NICCY, and the Children's Law Centre. She holds a Law degree and Master's in Law from Queen's University Belfast, and a Diploma in Social Research Skills from the University of Ulster. Natalie is committed to building a society where every child's rights are respected, protected, and realised.



**Sara McCracken**

Sara McCracken is Founder and Chief Executive of Angel Eyes NI, established after her twins were born with visual impairment and she struggled to find the support they needed. Today, the charity provides comprehensive services for children and young people with visual impairment across NI, supporting and identifying gaps in provision. Working with clinicians, Sara developed Empatheyeyes, virtual reality software that improves understanding of sight loss. She is passionate about collaboration, believing that only through joined-up working can we create real change for children and families.



### **Deirdre McAliskey**

Deirdre McAliskey has over 25 years' experience working with and for marginalised children, families and communities in policy, practice and participation roles. She is currently Policy & Engagement Manager at South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) and leads the CLC-STEP partnership project on the rights and experiences of children seeking international protection in Northern Ireland.



### **Alicia Toal**

Alicia has led Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) as Chief Executive since 2019. With three decades of experience in Northern Ireland's Voluntary and Community Sector, Alicia has spent her career advocating for marginalised and disadvantaged children and young people. She has specialised in building the capacity of children and young people to participate in structures and processes that shape the world around them. She has developed VOYPIC's participation and policy advocacy services, creating new and innovative models of user involvement, ensuring that children and young people living in and leaving care inform legislation, policy and practice. Alicia has been Chairperson of the Children's Law Centre since 2022. She is also a member of the Safeguarding Board NI.



### **Eamonn McNally**

Eamonn qualified as a solicitor in 2002 and worked in private practice until 2008, when he joined the Children's Law Centre as a Mental Health Solicitor. He provides legal advice information and representation for children and young people, their parents and carers who are impacted by mental health issues. He also represents children and young people at Mental Health Review Tribunals and takes strategic judicial reviews on behalf of children. Eamonn provides training on behalf of the Children's Law Centre to lawyers, health and social care professionals, parents and colleagues on mental health access and children's rights. Eamonn is a Member of the Board of Trustees of Victim Support NI, Legal Member of the Police Appeals Tribunal, and a Member of the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal.



## **Chris Quinn**

Chris took up his appointment as the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in September 2023, and he was recently elected as Secretary by the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC). He has extensive experience of engagement with children and young people, and facilitating making their voices heard. He has represented their interests locally, regionally, and internationally, and has championed children and young people's direct participation in decision-making. Chris lives with his wife and four sons, is a keen Manchester United Supporter and enjoys running.

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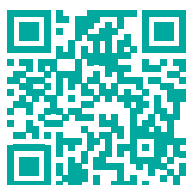
# CLC STAKEHOLDER SURVEY 2025

**The Children's Law Centre is developing its new strategy and wants to hear from the people who know us best.**

Your insights will help shape our future direction in advocacy, legal representation, policy work, campaigning, training and youth engagement.

This survey is anonymous and should take no more than 10 minutes.

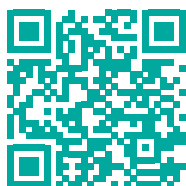
Simply scan the QR code below to access the survey.



← Scan this QR code to take the  
adult's stakeholder survey

A further Young People's Stakeholder survey has been developed for children and young people available at the link below. Please share this with any young people you work with to help inform our future direction.

Simply scan the QR code below to access the survey.



← Scan this QR code to take the  
young person's stakeholder  
survey

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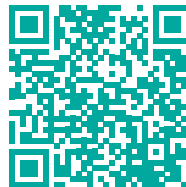
## TRAINING AT CLC

**We deliver expert training in children's rights to support you and the children and young people you work with.**

We currently have two upcoming training opportunities. If you have any particular training needs, just get in touch with our team to discuss.

### VOICE OF THE CHILD IN LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

DATE: THURSDAY 27 NOVEMBER  
TIME: 1:30 PM - 4:30 PM  
CPD HOURS: 3 HOURS (GROUP STUDY)  
FORMAT: ONLINE



**FIND OUT MORE**

### ADVOCATING ON BEHALF OF CHILDREN IN NEED

DATE: TUESDAY 2 DECEMBER  
TIME: 1:30 PM - 4:30 PM  
CPD HOURS: 3 HOURS (GROUP STUDY)  
FORMAT: ONLINE



**FIND OUT MORE**

## BECOME A MEMBER

Becoming a member of CLC has never been easier. You can now support our work and access exclusive membership offers by joining on the new membership area of our website. All the same perks with none of the hassle.

Find out more at: <https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/membership/>

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**REE Rights Responder**  
#Ask REE at [reerights.com](https://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](http://www.cafonline.org) by selecting Children's Law Centre under 'find a charity' or send your donation directly to Children's Law Centre.

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