

Children's Law Centre

ANNUAL REPORT

2024-25



childrenslawcentre.org.uk



Children's Rights
Change Children's Lives

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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

This past year has once again underscored the vital importance of the Children's Law Centre's (CLC) work in defending and promoting the rights of children across Northern Ireland. Despite the restoration of the NI Assembly in early 2024, little progress had been made in improving access to essential services for children. Against this challenging backdrop, our team continued to deliver outstanding results through advice, advocacy and legal intervention.

A particularly urgent issue was the collapse of respite services for children with disabilities. CLC worked in partnership with the National Autistic Society NI, supporting families to share their experiences directly with the NI Assembly's Health Committee. While this led to an additional £2 million released in-year and a recurring £13 million budget, the lack of tangible service improvements remained deeply concerning. CLC has continued to hold authorities to account.

Alongside casework, we have strengthened our policy influence, submitting evidence to NI Assembly Committees, government consultations and the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, and continuing our legal challenge against the Department of Finance on equality grounds in the 2023-24 budget process.

Our youth participation work flourished through a new National Lottery funded Youth@CLC panel, involving 24 young people developing podcast planning, videos, and peer advocacy initiatives. With new equipment funded by the Clothworkers Foundation, CLC has expanded its communications capacity and visibility.



I would like to thank Paddy Kelly, our founding Director, who stepped down after 27 years of exceptional leadership. Her vision and courage created a lasting legacy. We warmly welcome our new CEO, who will lead CLC into its next chapter with determination and innovation.

Finally, I extend my sincere gratitude to our dedicated staff, trustees, funders and young people. Your commitment ensures that CLC continues to stand as an unwavering voice for children's rights in Northern Ireland.

Alicia Toal
Chairperson

“Our team has continued to deliver outstanding results through advice, advocacy and legal intervention”

CEO's Report



The 2024–25 year was one of both progress and persistence for the Children's Law Centre (CLC). While the return of devolved government offered some hope, children in Northern Ireland continued to experience systemic barriers in accessing their rights to education, health and social care. Our work in this year focused on addressing those failures through legal intervention, advocacy and direct support.

Our freephone advice service dealt with more than 3,000 queries, a record number. Most Tier 1 cases involved special educational needs and disability (SEND), access to health and social care and children's justice issues. Through Tier 2 cases, we secured improved

placements, respite provision and access to care for children with complex needs.

We took 44 cases to formal legal proceedings, marking the busiest year since the pandemic. These included challenges on delayed hospital discharge from the Iveagh Unit, delayed PEG feeding tube surgeries and complex SEND Tribunal appeals. These interventions resulted in tangible improvements in care and education for affected children.

The collapse of respite services remains one of the most urgent children's rights crises. Working with the National Autistic Society NI, CLC raised this issue through the BBC Spotlight programme "I Am Not OK" and before the NI Assembly Health Committee. While additional government funding was secured, service provision has yet to recover. CLC continues to monitor implementation and support families through legal and advocacy routes.

Our policy and public affairs team delivered extensive engagement across education, health and justice. Key submissions included evidence to the Covid Inquiry on the pandemic's impact on children; a paper to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on access to justice; and responses to NI Assembly inquiries on Relationships and Sexuality Education and Mental Capacity Act provisions.

We also advanced our judicial review against the Department of Finance for breaching equality duties in budget setting. This work exemplified our commitment to using the law to achieve systemic change.

CLC's commitment to child participation has been reinvigorated through a new Youth@CLC advisory panel. Funded by the National Lottery Empowering Young People, this panel of 24 diverse young people is planning podcasts, videos and online content to promote children's rights. New media equipment funded by the

"The collapse of respite services remains one of the most urgent children's rights crises. Working with the National Autistic Society NI, CLC raised this issue through the BBC Spotlight programme "I Am Not OK" and before the NI Assembly Health Committee."

Clothworkers Foundation has enhanced our communications capacity, allowing us to launch projects with young people on school absence and mental health, and to support Youth@CLC's presence on social media.

We continue to expand our digital reach. Our website received 80,000 page visits.

CLC trained 482 professionals - double last year's figure - across a range of children's rights and legal topics, including SEN law, mental health, and child protection. We also engaged 640 community members, including Roma and refugee groups and partnered with organisations such as PwC, Barnardo's and Larne YMCA. Our response to rising anti-refugee violence included direct support to children and families, advocacy with accommodation providers and safeguarding guidance.

Following the governance review supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, we continued to modernise governance structures, review trustee roles and strengthen oversight. Trustees have provided active leadership in both governance and external advocacy.

In November 2024, Paddy Kelly, our founding Director, announced her departure after 27 years of leadership. I am delighted to have been appointed to lead the organisation forward into the future. Paddy's pioneering work leaves an enduring impact on children's rights in Northern Ireland.

The funding environment remains volatile, but CLC secured new and renewed support from a broad range of sources including the Lottery Empowering Young People, Magill Family Charitable Trust, Sainsbury Family Charitable Trust, Community Foundation Ireland, BBC Children in Need, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Angel Eyes, LFT Charitable Trust, Clothworkers Foundation, and the NI Human Rights Fund (2025-28).

We remain deeply grateful to all funders for

their partnership and trust.

The pressures on children's rights remain severe. Access to essential services, adequate education provision and equality in public spending are all under threat. CLC's role as an independent, expert advocate for children is therefore more crucial than ever.

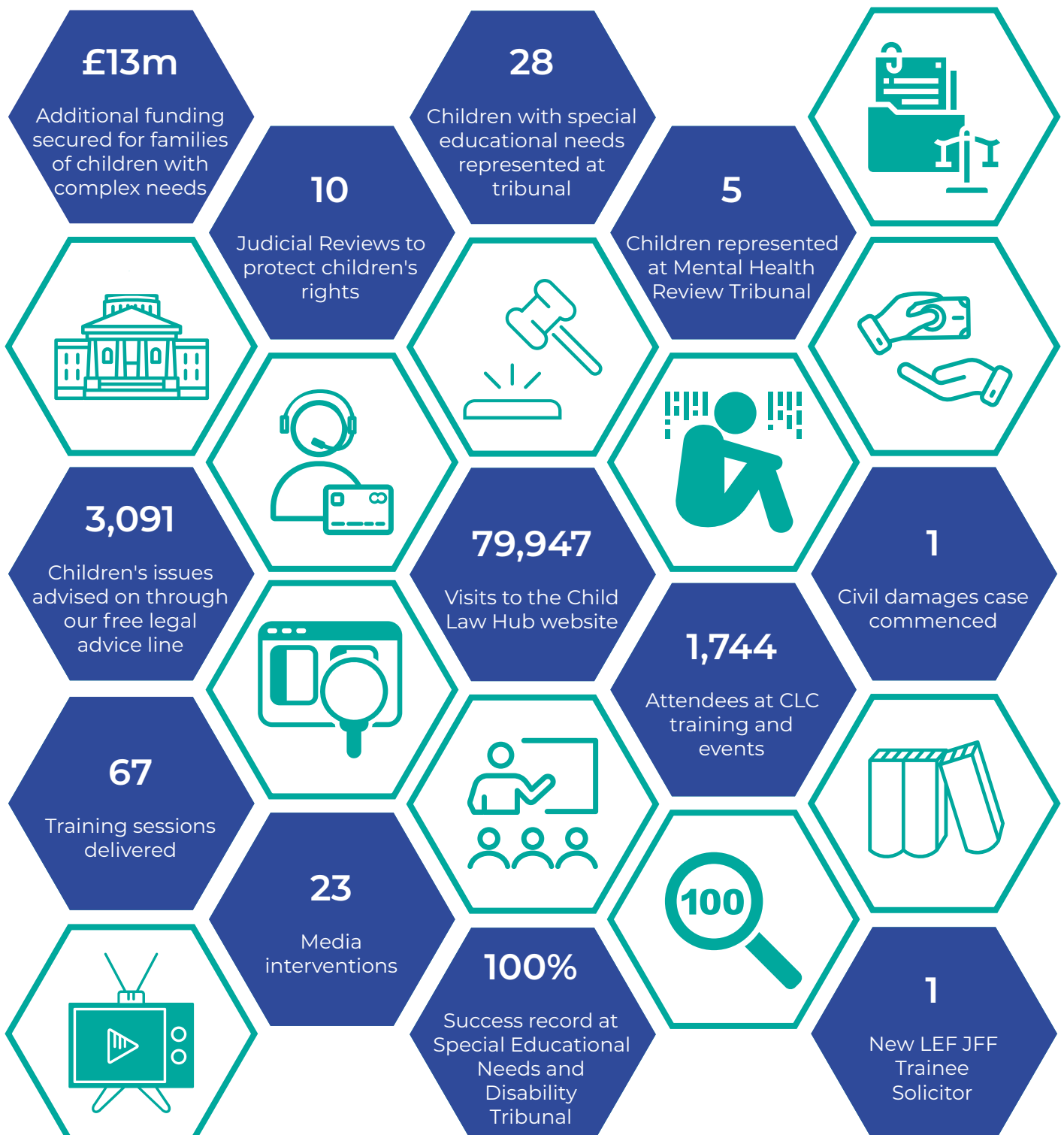
We will continue to challenge systemic failings, empower young voices and ensure that every child in Northern Ireland can realise their rights in practice, not just on paper.



John O'Doherty
Chief Executive Officer

"The pressures on children's rights remain severe. Access to essential services, adequate education provision and equality in public spending are all under threat. CLC's role as an independent, expert advocate for children is therefore more crucial than ever."

Year in Numbers



Impact at a Glance

Frontline Help and Advice



Our frontline advice service supported children and young people in over 3,000 children's human rights issues.

Reduced Waiting Lists



We took decisive legal action to improve the lives of many children stuck on long waiting lists for PEG feeding tubes.

The Right to Education



We secured the right to education for hundreds of children by securing suitable school placements and school transport for pupils.

£13m for Respite Services



We worked alongside the National Autistic Society to secure £13 million in recurrent funding for respite services in Northern Ireland.

Human Rights in Policing



We influenced the findings and recommendations in a number of reviews into human rights and policing in Northern Ireland.

100% Support for Children



We achieved a successful outcome in 100% of our special educational needs and disability cases taken to tribunal.

Human Rights Defenders



We supported Youth@CLC to use their voice in advocating for children's human rights on behalf of all children and young people.

Upskilling Professionals



The Centre significantly increased the number of professionals engaged in child rights training to inform child rights approaches.

We Increased Our Impact

In the period 2024-25, CLC reached more people through our advice, legal, public affairs and training work.

+111

issues through the advice team compared to 2023/24

+4,813

additional visitors to the Child Law Hub website



+21

children represented at tribunal

+882

people attended CLC training and events

Advice and Information



In the year from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025 CLC's advice and information service responded to 3,091 issues across all the areas of law which impact on children. Another year on year increase in the queries the service is dealing with.

The advice team dealt with significant challenges across all areas in respect of the realisation of children's rights and the Centre's advisers continued to offer legal advice and advocacy to help resolve issues of increasing complexity.

Once again the challenges within special educational needs and provision for disabled pupils was the main area of concern for people contacting the service. Almost half of the issues dealt with by the advice service concerned some aspect of special educational provision.

The advice team secured a 100% success rate in cases they advised on relating to appeals at the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal.

Our CHALKY Advice Team Made A Difference

Last year our freephone advice line dealt with 3,091 children's rights issues. This included queries relating to:



1,515

SEN /
Disability



437

Family Law



72

Human Rights
and Justice



150

Care



626

General
Education



290

General Issues

"We won the tribunal appeal, thank you so much for the support – advice we got was invaluable."

- Parent of a child assisted by CLC's advice team

Advice in Action

Securing the Right to Education

In one case during the year the CLC advice team successfully represented a pupil at the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal to secure their right to education.

The child had severe Dyslexia and should have already been in primary one but had not started and was not receiving any education.

The child had been allocated a place in a primary school through the normal enrolment process, as a statement of special educational needs had not been issued at that point. This is despite a proposed statement being issued in July with a recommendation for specialist provision in a social and communication unit.

The school refused to let the child attend as they could not meet their special educational needs. There were no further places available despite the Education Authority consulting with a number of schools.

Outcome

CLC's legal adviser wrote to the Education Authority citing the failures to allocate a place, failure to provide any education and failure to finalise a statement of special educational needs.

The advice team also represented the child at tribunal, ensuring that direct one to one literacy support was set out in the pupil's statement of special educational needs. This support would only stop if the child made sufficient progress in literacy.

Following the intervention the matter was resolved, and the child was allocated a place in a social and communication unit attached to a primary school.

"We have received [child's] proposed statement which we are happy with and are now just awaiting the final statement to be drawn up and put in place.

Only for [the Children's Law Centre] we may not have been in the position we are now and finally getting our [child] the support [they] need in school."

- Parent of child who was helped by CLC's advice team

Legal



The legal team at the Children's Law Centre continued to challenge systemic failings resulting in significant breaches to children's human rights.

While legal challenges around respite care services, delayed discharge and school placements continued, new issues emerged such as escalating waiting lists for disabled children accessing life improving surgery.



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:



Access to Education

We secured school placements for disabled children through a range of legal interventions.



Article 21 Homelessness

We ensured suitable accommodation and support was provided for vulnerable homeless children.



Access to Healthcare

We challenged failures to provide life changing surgery for disabled children and tackled long waiting lists.



Respite Care Services

We continued legal action against the failure to provide respite care services for disabled children and their families.



Delayed Discharge

We continued challenging the failure to discharge children with severe complex needs from hospital.

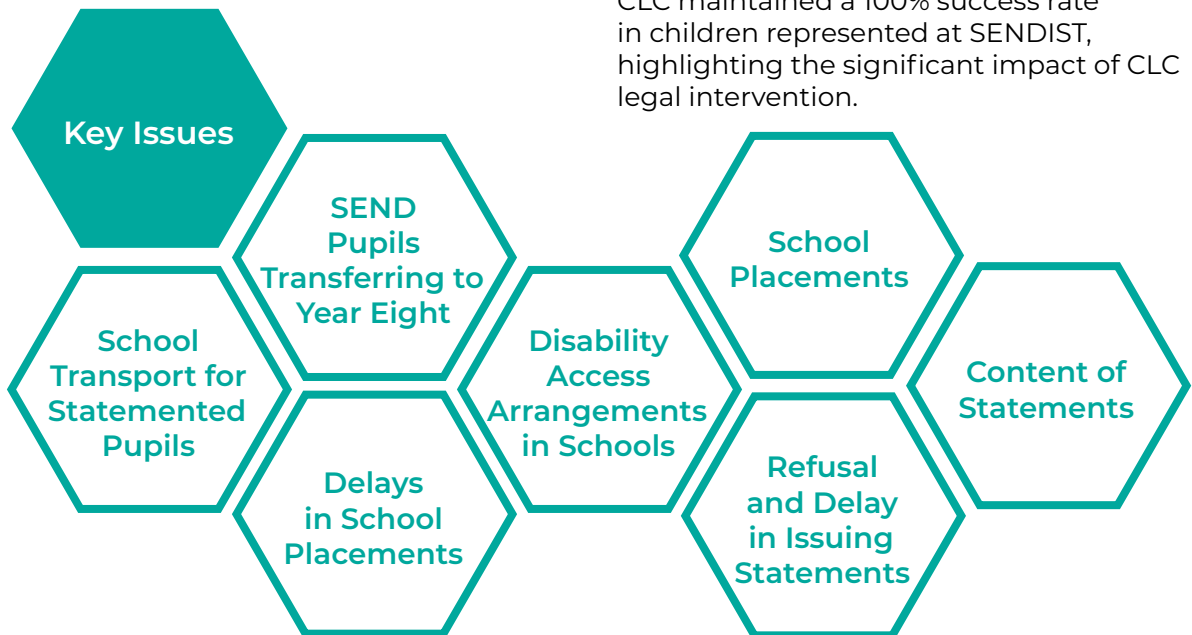
Special Educational Needs and Disability



Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) remained a key focus for CLC's legal team, with ever increasing child rights breaches for many SEND children.

Problems around statutory assessments continued, with the Centre representing 28 children at the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST).

CLC maintained a 100% success rate in children represented at SENDIST, highlighting the significant impact of CLC legal intervention.



In Focus:

Suitable School Placements

The Centre's legal team challenged the escalating failures by the Education Authority (EA) to provide suitable school placements for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

The Centre was often able to secure suitable placements for children before the start of the academic year through pre-action correspondence.

In one case, the legal team challenged the EA's failure to provide a specialist early years nursery unit placement

for a child who had had significant developmental delay, speech, language, social and communication needs.

The child was due to be placed in a mainstream nursery, contrary to a prior educational psychologist's report.

CLC challenged the decision through pre-action correspondence, stating that the child's needs would not be met, that parental consultation was denied and that an appropriate placement was not allocated.

The challenge was successful. The child was placed in a suitable specialist unit.

Health and Social Care

Pressures on children's health and social care services remains a key area of work for the CLC legal team.

Among a wide range of pressures, access to family support services such as respite remained a key focus, with work alongside the National Autistic Society successfully securing a £13m uplift in recurrent funding to respite services.



In Focus:

Tackling Waiting Lists

The CLC legal team was contacted by a number of parents of children who were being denied access to life changing surgery due to systemic failings and long waiting lists.

The majority of children on the waiting list required straightforward, minor surgery to provide a PEG feeding tube to assist with severe feeding and breathing difficulties.

The Centre issued pre-action correspondence on behalf of a number of families. This resulted in surgery being

awarded without the need to proceed to the High Court.

The children responded well to treatment with a vastly improved quality of life. CLC's intervention also had a wider impact by creating a renewed focus from the Department of Health and Health and Social Care Trusts to address service issues and tackle the waiting list.

Systemic service failures and lengthening waiting lists for intervention continues to increase as a key barrier to the realisation of children's rights, with CLC legal intervention often seen as a vital last resort for children and families.

Impact: Shining a Spotlight on Respite Services

The Children's Law Centre and the National Autistic Society (NAS) successfully secured millions in new support for children and families seeking respite services.

The announcement included £2m up front, with a further £13m recurrent annual funding. It came in response to additional public scrutiny on respite services following a BBC Spotlight documentary and years of campaigning by both CLC and NAS.

A solicitor at the Children's Law Centre who represented numerous children in legal challenges to secure respite provision welcomed the announcement, but highlighted the need to see meaningful improvements for children and their families.

Eamonn McNally, a solicitor at Children's Law Centre, said: "The systemic failures around respite services have been ongoing for years and have had a devastating impact on disabled children and their families.

"At the Children's Law Centre we have seen the impact it is having on our clients first hand. We have seen children taken into residential care, family break down and families placed at risk, all because of a failure to provide for the assessed needs of children.

"I want to pay tribute to the families involved in securing this announcement, as well as the work of the National Autistic Society. Their bravery in telling their story, while also battling the everyday challenges they are dealt with must be recognised.

"It is now absolutely critical that the Trusts use the additional resources effectively and start to deliver meaningful change for



children and families. We need to see an immediate impact on the current pressures, as well as long term stability around services. This will require effective accountability mechanisms to scrutinise implementation by the Health Trusts and ongoing consultation with families affected, as well as pooling of resources between Trusts.

"We look forward to continued work with the Minister, his Department and the health trusts to address the crisis."

"We have seen children taken into residential care, family break down and families placed at risk, all because of a failure to provide for the assessed needs of children."

Policy



The challenges faced by children and young people had multiplied and become increasingly complex following years of collapse at the NI Assembly. In that time, the gap between children's rights and what happens in practice had grown significantly wider.

With the return of the NI Assembly in 2024, it was a busy year for the policy team, working to highlight systemic failures, demonstrate how the gap in children's rights had grown wider and work to provide solutions to decision makers.

As leading experts in children's human rights, the policy team presented evidence to NI Assembly committees on Special Educational Needs and Disability; children's services co-operation; children's respite services; relationship and sexuality education; and the Northern Ireland Justice Bill.

CLC also collaborated with children's rights organisations across the UK and Ireland on key issues.

Key Achievements

In the year 2024-25, the CLC policy team influenced change and ensured children's rights were being considered in all matters affecting them:



Post Brexit Experiences

CLC worked with Children's Rights Alliance Ireland to publish two post Brexit reports highlighting the impact of Brexit on children and young people across the island of Ireland.



Rights Across the UK

The Centre contributed to the ROCK conference which saw organisations from across the UK come together to discuss key child rights matters and propose policy solutions.



NI Justice Bill Evidence

The Children's Law Centre submitted evidence to the NI Justice Committee outlining human rights recommendations such as raising the age of criminal responsibility and problems around bail and remand.



Funding Respite Care

Following a BBC Spotlight documentary into respite care services, CLC met with the Minister for Health alongside the National Autistic Society to secure £13m in funding for respite services.

Impact: Embedding Children's Rights in Policing

The Children's Law Centre secured a thematic new review of children and young people and policing, published by the NI Policing Board. The report highlighted the scale of human rights breaches facing children and young people when in contact with the police.

The report highlighted a range of issues of serious concern, repeatedly raised over many years by the Children's Law Centre, including concerns around uses of force, misuse of police powers, the lack of disaggregated data, issues around arrest and custody arrangements, the practice of strip-searching children, the low age of criminal responsibility and much more.

The report represented the most substantive effort by the NI Policing Board to examine the human rights implications for children of policing practice in Northern Ireland in over a decade.

Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at the Children's Law Centre said: "This report clearly demonstrates that the foot had well and truly come off the pedal in terms of scrutiny of these issues over the last decade. As a result, when the PSNI should have been embedding human rights protections for children and young people in how they operate, they have instead regressed.

"Increased scrutiny over the last number of years, driven by the Children's Law Centre and others, has highlighted a growing range of concerns, with children's human rights too often looking like an afterthought, if at all.

"The Children's Law Centre welcomes this attempt to catalogue the range of children's rights issues and breaches. That includes efforts to highlight international obligations and best practice, as well as the views of children themselves. However, and worryingly, the range and seriousness of the challenges which exist are too often not reflected in the final recommendations.



"What is absolutely clear is that significant improvements in policing practices are urgently required. This includes getting back to the core of human rights centred policing, a change of attitude from police towards children and young people and the need for the PSNI, and others responsible for policing, to genuinely listen to the views and experiences of children and young people and act on the concerns they raise."

The report represented the most substantive effort by the NI Policing Board to examine the human rights implications for children of policing practice in Northern Ireland in over a decade.

Training and Engagement



The financial Year 2024-25 was a period of steady growth and expanded reach in training and engagement. Total training and events delivered increased from 22 in the previous year to 67 in 2024-25

Core training delivery focused primarily on practical legal guidance, with a high concentration on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Children's Education Rights.

Engagement sessions included youth workshops, network meetings and collaborative policy circles, such as the Anxiety Based School Avoidance (ABSA) guide editing group.

Evaluation data collected across key cohorts, including Voice of the Child, SEND and Protecting Education Rights, reflects high levels of participant satisfaction with the vast majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that learning objectives were clear, the session structure was logical and the facilitators possessed deep subject knowledge.

Overall, the qualitative feedback demonstrated that participants gained clear, practical tools. Respondents frequently noted that the training gave them the necessary information and confidence to advocate effectively for children's rights in their respective fields.

"Good tips for working with children... [CLC is filling in a] complete dearth in training for lawyers in this area." - Solicitor

"[The session helped me] learn about this wonderful service which supports children." - Parent

"[CLC training] boosted my confidence in supporting families and the children we work with." - Family Support Worker

"Very insightful, very beneficial to all." - Senior Teacher

We Increased Our Training and Engagement

In the period 2024-25, CLC doubled our reach in training and engagement.

22

training sessions delivered. Double on the previous year.

1,172

people attended CLC events. 626 more than last year.



572

people attended CLC training. An increase of 81%.

43

events held. 33 more than the previous year.

Youth Participation

The Children's Law Centre was pleased to secure funding from The National Lottery's Community Fund to support growth in our youth participation and advocacy work as part of the new Rights Here, Right Now project.

The Centre welcomed Julie Graham into the role of Youth Participation and Advocacy Worker in December 2024, with work commencing straight away on recruiting a new youth panel.

The Centre recruited 24 new young people to Youth@CLC, who held their first meeting in February 2025. Initial sessions focused on building an understanding of children's rights among the group so they could begin to plan their priorities and plan their peer advocacy work moving forward.

This work complemented other activities with outside organisations to make sure children and young people from all backgrounds are aware of their rights and how to advocate for them.



Accounts Overview

CHILDREN'S LAW CENTRE (NORTHERN IRELAND)

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES INCLUDING INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

	Notes	Unrestricted funds 2025 £	Restricted funds 2025 £	Total 2025 £	Unrestricted funds 2024 £	Restricted funds 2024 £	Total 2024 £
Income from:							
Donations and legacies	3	204	-	204	2,284	-	2,284
Charitable activities	4	177,118	833,991	1,011,109	189,710	520,174	709,884
Investments	5	40,466	-	40,466	49,273	-	49,273
Movement in pension provision	6	(1,987)	-	(1,987)	(45,060)	-	(45,060)
Total income		215,801	833,991	1,049,792	196,207	520,174	716,381
Expenditure on:							
Charitable activities	7	171,520	741,011	912,531	187,603	671,718	859,321
Net incoming/(outgoing) resources before transfers		44,281	92,980	137,261	8,604	(151,544)	(142,940)
Gross transfers between funds		(706)	706	-	(172)	172	-
Net income/(expenditure) for the year/							
Net movement in funds		43,575	93,686	137,261	8,432	(151,372)	(142,940)
Fund balances at 1 April 2024		385,504	321,067	706,571	377,072	472,439	849,511
Fund balances at 31 March 2025		429,079	414,753	843,832	385,504	321,067	706,571

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)

CHILDREN'S LAW CENTRE (NORTHERN IRELAND)

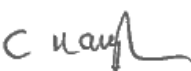
BALANCE SHEET
AS AT 31 MARCH 2025

	Notes	2025 £	£	2024 £	£
Fixed assets					
Intangible assets	12	-		1,435	
Tangible assets	13	235,457		231,138	
Investment properties	14	214,000		214,000	
			449,457		446,573
Current assets					
Debtors	15	58,322		51,749	
Cash at bank and in hand		654,328		495,710	
			712,650		547,459
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	17	(154,319)		(99,818)	
Net current assets			558,331		447,641
Total assets less current liabilities			1,007,788		894,214
Creditors: amounts falling due after more than one year	18		(111,635)		(127,354)
Provisions for liabilities					
Defined benefit pension liability	20	52,321	(52,321)	60,289	(60,289)
Net assets			843,832		706,571
Income funds					
Restricted funds	21		414,753		321,067
Unrestricted funds					
Designated funds	22	60,000		55,000	
General unrestricted funds		421,400		390,793	
Pension reserve		(52,321)		(60,289)	
			429,079		385,504
			843,832		706,571

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

The financial statements were approved by the Trustees on 26 Nov 2025


Ms A Toal
Trustee



Children's Law Centre

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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)

