

IN THE FAMILY CARE CENTRE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

COUNTY COURT

NOTES OF GUIDANCE FOR LISTING FOR EARLY RESOLUTION
HEARINGS IN PRIVATE LAW CHILDREN'S ORDER CASES

[1] Early Resolution Hearings will be convened in the Family Care Centre in Laganside Court with the primary objective of improving the welfare of the child(ren) who are the subject of proceedings before it. The purpose of an Early Resolution Hearing is to identify the issues in a case at an early stage through judicial case management and by focusing the parties on the impact on the child(ren) of the dispute before the court seeking early resolution of specific matters as appropriate.

[2] This purpose will be achieved by the application of the provisions of Children (Northern Ireland Order) 1995¹, by reducing delay and by acknowledging that agreement between parents as to the future well-being of a child is clearly beneficial for that child.

[3] Listing of cases will be at the sole discretion of the Laganside Family Care Centre judge. At the First Directions Hearing in the Care Centre, the judge will determine whether the case is suitable for referral to the Early Resolution Court and cases deemed suitable will be listed through the standard listing process.

[4] Where a First Directions Hearing has already taken place and a case is referred by practitioners to the Laganside Family Care Centre for inclusion in the Pilot, an administrative review will be carried out by the Judge to determine suitability.

[5] The Early Resolution Court will take place one day per month, commencing on Wednesday 4th March 2026, and will be supported by Court Children Officers (CCO), they will be available on Early

¹ [Article 4 of the Children \(NI\) Order 1995](#) applies - particularly for the purposes of the Court Children's Officers participation and their subsequent reports to the court.

Resolution Hearing Days to resource and support the Pilot. CCOs will be allocated to a case for the duration of the Early Resolution Hearing only.

[6] If a case is deemed suitable for inclusion in the Early Resolution Hearing Pilot the judge will direct the following should be completed and lodged with the court office no later than 2 weeks in advance of the hearing date (NB: any documents received outside of this timeframe will be listed for consideration at the next scheduled Early Resolution Court);

- referral form (Annex 1) the judge will direct which party should submit the referral form to the CCO and Laganside Family Care Centre;
- a position papers;
- the grounding application.

[7] On the Early Resolution Hearing Day parties are required to arrive at court by 9:30am. A preliminary meeting will take place between the judge, CCO, and the profession (excluding parties). The purpose of the meeting is to establish an initial pathway, with a clear emphasis on promoting the best interests of the child.

[8] Following the initial discussion, the parties will be invited to participate in resolution discussions. It is expected that no direct evidence from any party will be required during an Early Resolution Hearing.

[9] The case will be listed as an 'Early Resolution Hearing' on the court list. No party-party costs shall be ordered in relation to any Resolution hearing.

[10] For the removal of doubt any statement contained in a bundle directed to be lodged for the Early Resolution Hearing can be used at a subsequent hearing by agreement. The judge, either on his/her own motion or on application from a party, can refer anything said or heard at an Early Resolution Hearing to an appropriate authority should it, in

the view of the judge, raise a safeguarding issue in relation to any child. In such circumstances that information, should it relate to a child who is the subject of the proceedings, can be used at a subsequent hearing.

[11] An Early Resolution Hearing is not a Financial Dispute Resolution scheme and will not be conducted as such. There will be no potential costs penalty attaching to any party concerning same.

[12] The Early Resolution Hearing will focus on the early determination of single issues identified by the parties. The Early Resolution Hearing will be conducted in the courtroom and the For the Record (FTR) will be in operation during the hearing.

[13] It shall be the duty of solicitors and counsel to advise their clients as to the content of this Guidance and to seek agreement from their clients for their cases to be included in the Early Resolution Court Pilot before making the application to the court. Practitioners are required to confirm parties consent to the Trusts reviewing case information to assess the suitability of the case in advance of the Early Resolution Hearing.

[14] The operation of the pilot for the Early Resolution Hearings will be monitored on an ongoing basis, a short, focused review will take place after six months and a formal review after 12 months.