

KEY MESSAGES

Children First National Guidance 2011

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Ms Frances Fitzgerald TD today launched Children First, National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children.

The Guidance deals with the recognition, reporting and management of child safety concerns. It sets out a number of key messages relating to the duty to protect children. Among these are that the safety and welfare of children is everyone's responsibility; that children will have safer lives, where everyone is attentive to their wellbeing; and that people who work with children across a range of areas understand their personal responsibility for safe practice in their organisation, the reporting of concerns and co-operation with statutory bodies.

What is it?

Children First is National Guidance that promotes the protection of children from abuse and neglect. It states what organisations need to do to keep children safe, and what different bodies and the general public should do if they are concerned about a child's safety and welfare. The Guidance sets out specific protocols for HSE social workers, Gardaí and other front line staff dealing with suspected abuse and neglect. The scope of *Children First* extends beyond reporting to statutory bodies. It emphasises the importance of multi-disciplinary, inter-agency working in the management of concerns about children's safety and welfare. Key to this is the sharing of information between agencies and disciplines in the best interests of children and the need for full co-operation to ensure better outcomes.

Who is it for?

The *Children First* document can be read by anyone but is primarily for HSE social workers, Gardaí and designated *Children First* staff working directly with children in different settings across schools, the health sector, clubs and the leisure sector.

Children First provides direction and guidance to the two organisations with statutory responsibilities:

- HSE social workers and other professionals involved in the assessment and management of cases of alleged abuse or neglect, and
- the Gardai in undertaking investigations.

What responsibility do organisations have?

All organisations including Government Departments, schools, health services, religious bodies, public sector agencies, clubs and leisure sector, funded organisations, private and voluntary bodies that are in contact with or providing services to children have an overall corporate duty and responsibility to safeguard children by:

- promoting the general welfare, health, development and safety of children;
- adopting and consistently applying a safe and clearly defined method of recruiting and selecting staff and volunteers;
- developing tailored guidance and procedures, in accordance with *Children First: National Guidance*, for staff and volunteers who may have reasonable grounds for concern about the safety and welfare of children involved with the organisation;
- identifying a designated liaison person to act as a liaison with outside agencies and a resource person to any staff

member or volunteer who has child protection and welfare concerns. The designated liaison person is responsible for reporting allegations or concerns of child abuse to the HSE Children and Family Services or to An Garda Síochána;

- ensuring that the organisation has clear written procedures on the action to be taken if allegations of abuse against employees/volunteers are made;
- raising awareness within the organisation about potential risks to children's safety and welfare;
- developing effective procedures for responding to accidents and complaints.

Organisations should contact the HSE where they are concerned about a child's welfare and co-operate with the statutory bodies in the ongoing assessment and management of the case.

Why do we need a new or revised set of Guidance?

Children First was first published in 1999. The principle and substance of the document (2011) are unchanged. The Guidance has been updated to reflect new policy, legislation and organisations (HSE, HIQA, DoCYA). It incorporates lessons from investigations, reviews and inspections over the past decade. The document reflects the growing awareness of the impact of ongoing neglect on children; it also includes bullying as a feature of abuse. The Guidance has been edited to ensure there is no confusion within agencies regarding individual roles or steps to be taken in the identification and management of concerns.

How will this Guidance make children safer?

A review undertaken of the original *Children First* concluded that the Guidelines were fit for purpose. However some deficits were identified in terms of consistent implementation of the guidelines and co-operation of staff across relevant organisations in the

recognition and reporting of concerns and with the ongoing management of cases.

The Minister intends putting *Children First* on a legislative basis to ensure, as far as possible, compliance by all organisations working with children, including statutory, private, community and voluntary organisations. The legislation means that all organisations will:

- (i) have a duty to comply with Children First;
- (ii) have a duty to share relevant information in the best interests of the child;
- (iii) have a duty to cooperate with other relevant services in the best interest of the child.

The HSE will be publishing a Child Protection and Welfare Handbook which will provide a practical guide to assist social workers and other relevant practitioners in dealing with child protection and welfare cases.

How will we know if everyone is working within the new legislation?

The operation of *Children First* will be supported by an assurance system – a framework setting out the responsibilities of each Government Department and sector working with children.

HIQA is currently developing child protection standards. It will monitor/inspect all health (including social care) funded services to ensure they are in compliance with *Children First*. It will also inspect how HSE Child and Family Services undertakes its specific statutory function under the Child Care Act 1991.

Other Government Inspectorates, for instance in the Department of Education and Science, will, in the course of schools inspections, look to see how *Children First* is being implemented across the schools sector.

In the case of statutory or non-statutory organisations not monitored by an inspectorate, the Minister proposes that the legislation will provide the necessary power to allow the HSE (and the new Child and Family Services Agency

to be established) to carry out audits/inspections on compliance and also to investigate complaints of organisational failure to comply.

Overall implementation of *Children First* will be monitored by an interdepartmental committee to be established for that purpose.

Where can I get more information?

One hard copy of the *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* will be provided to each garda station, General Practitioner, primary school, secondary school and registered pre-school in the country over the coming weeks.

Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children is available on the websites: www.dcyia.ie and www.hse.ie.

A summary leaflet on *Children First* will be available for the general public in the near future.

Our ‘Duty to Care’ is a helpful tool for organisations providing helpful advice on good recruitment and staff

management practices in relation to child protection. The document is available on www.dcy.a.ie

The HSE will conduct briefing for HSE staff over the coming months and information on this is available from Mr Phil Garland, the HSE's National Specialist on Children First.

Non-HSE organisations should contact the HSE's Children First Information and Advice Officers for information on how to receive briefing on *Children First* 2011. A full list of contact names and details are attached to the FAQs which are available on the websites: www.dcy.a.ie and www.hse.ie.

What should I do I am concerned about a child?

As a member of the public, if you have concerns about a child's safety or welfare, you should contact your local HSE Children and Family Service office for advice.

Professionals and those involved in organisations working with children who have concerns about a child should discuss these with the *Children First* designated person in their organisation, or contact the HSE Children and Family Services office for advice.

If you are worried about a child's safety or welfare, you should contact the HSE Child and Family Services Social Work Service.

If you think a child is in immediate danger and you cannot contact the HSE Child and Family Services, you should contact the Gardai at any Garda Station.

Contact details for HSE Child and Family Offices are in Appendix 2 of Children First, or available on www.dcyia.ie or www.hse.ie