Department of Social Protection  
Children First Guidelines  
Implementation Plan  

July 2013  

1. SECTORAL GUIDANCE  

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Department of Social Protection</th>
<th>Background</th>
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<td>Context</td>
<td><em>Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children</em> was introduced in 1999 (revised 2011) to set out clearly how child protection must be placed at the core of any organisation working with children. Every Government Department or publically funded body that delivers or funds services to children, whether directly or indirectly through bodies or agencies under its aegis has the responsibility to ensure that there is an awareness within the organisation of the <em>Children First</em> National Guidance and that the standards in relation to child protection and welfare set out are adhered to in the delivery of these services.</td>
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**The Department of Social Protection (DSP)**  
The main functions of the Department of Social Protection are to:  
- advise Government and formulate appropriate social protection and social inclusion policies;  
- design, develop and deliver effective and cost efficient income supports, activation and employment services, advice to customers and other related services;  
- work towards providing seamless delivery of services in conjunction with other Departments, Agencies and bodies; and  
- control fraud and abuse.

**The Scale of the Department's Business**  
The Department of Social Protection serves a wide and diverse group of customers including families, people in employment, unemployed people, people with disabilities, carers, and older people. The Department also provides a range of services to employers. The Department administers over 70 separate schemes and services which impact on the lives of almost every person in the State.
It is not responsible for direct service delivery to children and would not in the course of its work have unsupervised contact with children. The Department does however have contact with the public through the work of its employees and agents with the possibility of information being disclosed or observed that may give rise to concern regarding child protection.

In this context, the Department in May 2008 introduced *Children First* Guidance and procedures to facilitate the reporting by Departmental staff of instances which they may have observed or were disclosed that gave rise to child protection concerns. All staff were advised of the *Children First* procedures, training was provided to the Department’s Inspectorate and a *Children First* webpage was set up on the Departmental staff intranet ‘STÓR’. The webpage links to the *Children First National Guidance*, the Departmental reporting *Guidelines*, the referral form in electronic format and a list of contact details for Designated Liaison Officers.

The Department has undergone an expansion in recent years with the integration of the Community Welfare Service (CWS) from the HSE (January 2011), Redundancy and Insolvency payments (January 2011) and the Community (CS) and Employment Services (ES) from FÁS (January 2012) which has amounted to, in total, an additional 2,000 staff and the incorporation of additional services that are impacted by the *Children First Guidelines*.

**Procedures (2011)**

Designated Liaison Officers are located within the Department’s Regional Structure, to whom staff refer child welfare concerns. These Designated Officers refer cases to the Principal Social Worker of the HSE and receive confirmation that the case was received. Note: in some instances, cases are referred to local designated *Children First* Social Workers or the Duty Social Worker.

The Designated Liaison Officers collate cases presented to them; forward to the Department’s Regional Support Unit, where they form the basis of an Annual Review of the operation of *Children First Guidance* within the Department which has been facilitated by Barnardos since 2008. The annual review also presents an opportunity to update and renew training for the Designated Officers.

An annual report is produced and published on the Departmental intranet ‘STÓR’. This process will continue for 2012.

It should be noted that all former Community Welfare Officers as employees of the HSE and former FAS staff involved with Community Education (CE) programmes, who have regular or ongoing unsupervised
contact with children or vulnerable adults all received training while with their former organisations.

Relevant Community Education (CE) project sponsors are subject to Garda Vetting requirements and participants recruited to work on Community Employment Projects (CE) are Garda Vetted.

2. OVERSIGHT / ASSURANCE MECHANISM/ ENFORCEMENT

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<td>The Department has undertaken a review of the existing guidance and procedures having regard to the review of the Children First Guidelines in 2011, and the integration into the Department of the staff from the Community Welfare Service and Community and Employment Services in FAS.</td>
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**The Objectives of the Children First Guidelines Implementation Plan**

1) To audit the existing guidance to ensure consistency with the revised Children First Guidelines (2011)

2) To set out the Departmental structures and procedures and outline the mechanisms in place to support the implementation of the guidelines

3) To establish mechanisms for reporting on child welfare issues to the Management Board

A revised Implementation Plan has been devised as follows:

- **Children First Guidelines Guidance and Procedures**

  The Children First guidance and procedures are being reviewed and updated. The revised procedures will be issued to all staff by end quarter 3, 2013.

- **Children First Guideline Departmental Structures**

  The Department’s regional structure has been reviewed and there are now 13 Divisions nationwide through which frontline services are delivered to the Department’s customers.

Seven additional Designated Liaison Officers (DLOs) have been appointed, bringing to 14 the total number of DLOs within the Department. Training has been provided to the new designated officers.
• It is intended that former Community Welfare Service and Community and Employment Service (former FAS) staff will align with the regional procedures in place within the Department. In future they will refer cases of concern to their Designated Liaison Officer for referral onwards to the HSE.

• The Garda vetting arrangements in place for Community Employment (CE) projects and programmes will remain.

• **Children First Guidelines Training**

  **Training for Designated Liaison Officers**
  The existing 7 Designated Liaison Officers initially underwent 2-days training with Barnardos and as part of the Annual Review receive a 1-day training review each year. This annual training regime will continue.

  More intensive training was provided to the 7 additional in quarter 4 2012.

  A networking group for DLO’s has been established and quarterly meetings are held.

  **Training for frontline staff**
  The *Children First* training currently offered to frontline staff, in particular to staff who undertake home visits to customers will be reviewed by end Quarter 3 2013.

  General awareness training on the *Guidelines* will be included as part of induction training for all new staff from 2013.

• **Children First Guidelines Awareness Raising**

  *Children First* was be included as an agenda item at the Information Officers Seminar for Quarter 1, 2012.

  The Department’s *Children First* Guidance and procedures will be re-issued to all staff during 2013.

  Information on *Children First Guidance* is available on the Departmental staff intranet website, STÓR.
An awareness notice has been added to the Department website; Report Suspected Social Welfare Fraud page, stating: *The Department of Social Protection is required to report all child protection concerns to the Health Service Executive.*

- **Support/Oversight**

  A Children First Oversight Group, involving the Human Resources Division, the Regional Support Unit and Staff Development Unit, has been established within the Department to:

  - Provide general oversight responsibility for the implementation of the Children First Guidelines
  - Support and co-ordinate the Department’s *Children First* structures and processes.

### 3. REPORTING OF COMPLIANCE TO THE MANAGEMENT BOARD

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<th>Department of Social Protection</th>
<th>Compliance with the <em>Children First Guidelines</em> will be reported in the following way:</th>
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<td>• The Annual review process will continue to be undertaken, with the production of an Annual Report.</td>
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<td>• The Annual Report will be forwarded for the consideration of the Department’s Management Board.</td>
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<td>• The Annual Report will be made available to all staff through the ‘STOR’ <em>Children First</em> page</td>
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### 4. DETAILS OF RELEVANT AREAS
The Department does not provide direct services to children. However staff of the Department, who undertake home visits as part of their duties may observe or may be advised of issues for concern which through the procedures in place are reported to the HSE. The staff involved includes Social Welfare Inspectors and Higher Executive Officers involved in the Community Welfare Service. Training will be provided to all staff who undertake outdoor duty.

5. INTERACTION WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITY

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<th>The Departmental structures in place to interface with the HSE are well-established.</th>
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<td>The procedure facilitates all staff wishing to report concerns in relation to a child witnessed by them in the course of their duties to their Designated Officer in an electronic format.</td>
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<td>The procedures specify that Designated Officers are responsible for reporting these cases to the appropriate HSE Local Health Officer (Duty Social Worker) or to An Garda Síochana.</td>
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<td>The additional staff and services of the Community and Employment Services and the Community Welfare Service who are now part of the Department have been incorporated into this structure and will be covered by the procedure</td>
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