An Roinn Coimirce Sóisialaí
Department of Social Protection

Children First Guidelines Sectoral Implementation Plan

March 2023 – March 2026

1. SECTORAL GUIDANCE

Department of Social Protection	***Background*** Child welfare and protection policy is based on a legal framework provided primarily by the Child Care Act 1991 and the Children First Act 2015. The policy and practice that applies in this area is outlined in the *Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* and this Guidance is a primary reference for all citizens to report concerns and includes the new legislative obligations. Children First National Guidance describes the four main types of abuse and sets out the steps which should be taken to ensure that the child or young person is protected from harm. It includes information about the Children First Act 2015 and specific information for the professionals and organisations that now have legal obligations to keep children safe. The focus of this Guidance is to help a general audience recognise child abuse and report a reasonable concern about a child's welfare or protection. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has established **a Children First *Implementation Inter-Departmental Group (CFIDG)*** to bring central government oversight to the implementation process and

	DSP has a representative on this Group. The direct responsibility for implementation rests at organisational level in line with the Guidance. Each Department represented on the Group is required to prepare a ***Children First* Sectoral Implementation Plan**. These Implementation Plans are designed to be high level documents setting out implementation requirements for the parent Department and for agencies under its aegis which have contact with children and young people. Every Government Department or publicly 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 *Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* and that the standards in relation to child protection and welfare set out are adhered to in the delivery of these services. These guidelines are intended to assist people in identifying and reporting child abuse and to improve professional practice in both statutory and voluntary agencies and organisations that provide services for children and families. **Department of Social Protection** **The main functions of the Department are to:** • advise Government on legislation and policies about employment services, the labour market, social protection and inclusion; • formulate policies on employment services, labour market, social protection and inclusion; • design, develop and deliver effective and cost-efficient income supports; • provide employment services; • provide comprehensive and accurate information to all its customers; • provide seamless delivery of services with other Government departments, agencies and bodies; and • investigate and prosecute suspected fraud and abuse within the social protection system.

Scale of the Department's business

The Department serves a wide and diverse group of customers including families, people in employment, unemployed people, people with illnesses and disabilities, carers, older people and employers. Its remit also requires a significant level of engagement with employers and it has invested significantly in developing relationships with employers to position itself as the preferred partner for recruitment and employment service support.

The Department administers over 90 separate schemes and services, which affect the lives of almost every person in the state. Key services include:

- Payment of a wide range of social insurance and social assistance income support schemes such as child benefit, jobseeker payments, illness benefits, pensions and supplementary welfare allowances;
- through Intreo, the integration of employment services and income supports to ensure that people who do not have a job are supported through the provision of income supports and, at the same time, in their pursuit of employment, training and education opportunities to improve their life chances;
- the provision of a range of supports, guidance and placement services to help jobseekers find and secure employment;
- the delivery of a range of employer services including recruitment services, online publication of job vacancies, employment supports (for example, wage subsidy schemes for people with disabilities), and redundancy and insolvency services;
- a range of community services to promote social inclusion and provide a pathway to employment for those who are unemployed;
- supporting and leading analysis and the development of policy in areas including income distribution, social transfers, pension provision, social inclusion, labour market participation, public employment services; and
- participation in the implementation of government strategies for social inclusion under the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025;

The General Register Office (GRO) manages the Civil Registration Service which facilitates the registration of births, stillbirths, adoptions, marriages, and deaths in the State.

	Some of the Department's functions are discharged by four bodies under the aegis of the Department - the Citizens Information Board (including MABS), the Pensions Authority, the Pensions Council and the Social Welfare Tribunal. The Department works in partnership with a number of third-party organisations in the delivery of services to those seeking work or in receipt of long-term social protection payments. These organisations are separate legal entities registered as companies, co-operatives or incorporated charities. The programmes and initiatives require that these organisations provide defined services for which the Department provides funding for implementation and fees for delivery. The organisations operate independently of the Department in the delivery of these programmes and initiatives and within parameters set out in the programme or initiative, rules or guidelines. The programmes and initiatives include: • Intreo Partners National Employment Service – Employment services for Jobseekers primarily for those who have been on the Live Register for between 12 and 24 months and 36 to 48 months. • Community Employment Programme & Job Initiative (community based sponsor organisations, public bodies). DSP has incorporated the legal obligations under the Children First Act 2015 in the Employment Programme contracts for these organisations. • Tús – the community work placement initiative (local development companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta). • Rural social scheme (local development companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta) • Intreo Partners Local Area Employment Service – Employment services primarily for Jobseekers on the Live Register for between 24 and 36 months. • European Fund for Aid to the Most Deprived – provision of supplies of food and non-food material goods to organisations working to alleviate poverty (community organisations and charities). It should be noted that the Department or its Agencies are 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 officials and agents with the possibility of information being disclosed or observed that may give rise to concern regarding child protection.

While DSP officials are **not mandated persons** under the Children First Act 2015, the Department has procedures in place to facilitate the reporting by Departmental staff of instances which they may have observed or if they have received information or disclosures that gave rise to child protection concerns.

- Training is provided to the Department's outdoor staff and front-line staff,
- A *Children First* webpage on the Departmental Intreo Management Support site on 'STÓR'. The webpage links to the Children First National Guidance for the protection and Welfare of Children, the Departmental reporting Guidelines, and the contact list of the Designated Liaison Persons.
- In addition, all new staff of the Department are informed of the Children First Guidelines and Procedures at Induction Stage.

These procedures will continue in line with the provisions of the Children First Act 2015 and the *Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*.

***Children First* - Departmental Structures**

The Department delivers schemes and services locally through a network of Intreo centres and Social Welfare Branch Offices. Local services are managed through a regional management structure.

- Across the Regions, a number of staff have been nominated as Children First Designated Liaison Persons (DLPs).
- Specialised Children First Training has been provided to these Designated Liaison Persons.
- A networking group for DLPs is in place. The group hold bi-annual meetings to discuss issues arising relating to Child Protection concerns. This will continue during the duration of this Sectoral Implementation Plan.

	Reporting Procedures Staff members who have child welfare concerns make a report to their local Designated Liaison Persons (DLP). Staff in the centralised scheme areas also make reports through these DLPs. In addition, anonymous or confidential reports of child protection concerns by the public which are received in the Department are also referred to the DLPs. The DLPs refer reported child welfare concerns to TUSLA via the ***TUSLA Portal*** and a unique submission reference number is received for each report from TUSLA. An Annual Review for Designated Liaison Persons is facilitated by Barnardos or other appropriate organisation and this presents an opportunity to update DLPs and renew training.

2. OVERSIGHT / ASSURANCE MECHANISM

Department of Social Protection	**Data Sharing Agreement (DSA)** • A Data Sharing Agreement between DSP and TUSLA has been signed by both parties and specifically covers the exchange of data for the reporting of child protection concerns by DSP DLPs and requests for information from TUSLA. This agreement sets out the framework for the sharing of personal data between DSP and TUSLA and defines the principles and procedures that the parties shall adhere to and the responsibilities the parties owe to one another. This DSA is required to ensure that any sharing of personal information between DSP and TUSLA is carried out in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. **Children First Training & Awareness** • An overview of the Children First Guidelines and Procedures is provided to all new staff assigned to the Department as part of induction training. • Child Protection Awareness training is currently provided by Barnardos to staff that are responsible for carrying out home visits to customers.

	• All Designated Liaison Persons attend specialised Children First training and an annual training review each year. • Access to the *e*Learning training module developed by TUSLA is available to staff • An awareness notice for staff is displayed on the Department's Stór site and circulated to all staff on an annual basis. **Programmes/Initiatives delivered by third party organisations** The rules and conditions for funding for the delivery of programmes and initiatives by independent third party organisations provide that such organisations comply with legislation relevant to their operation. Any failure in this regard would result in withdrawal of funding. Third party organisations who receive funding from the Department and who provide services directly to children will be required to prepare a Child Safeguarding Statement.

3. COMPLIANCE

Department of Social Protection	**Compliance with the Children First Guidelines** • An official of the Department has been nominated by the Minister to participate on the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group. • The Annual review process will continue to be undertaken by the DLP group and facilitated by Barnardos or other appropriate organisation. • If requested the Department will furnish such information that may be sought by the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group in preparation of its Annual Performance Report. • The Department will review and revise its Sectoral Implementation Plan as required.

4. INTERACTION WITH TUSLA

Department of Social Protection	• Representatives from DSP and TUSLA will review the operational mechanisms of the Data Sharing Agreement (DSA). • Departmental procedures facilitate all staff to report concerns in relation to a child's welfare witnessed by them in the course of their duties to the Designated Liaison Persons. • Anonymous and confidential reports of child protection concerns by the public which are received in the Department are also referred to the Designated Liaison Persons. • The Departmental procedures specify that Designated Liaison Persons are responsible for reporting child protection concerns cases to TUSLA and where appropriate to An Garda Síochana.