

BRIEFING NOTE FOR EDITORS

GOVERNMENT REFORM PROGRAMME – CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES

1. New Child and Family Support Agency

In line with the Programme for Government commitment, Minister Fitzgerald is establishing a new Child and Family Support Agency to assume full statutory responsibility for services for children and families early in 2013.

The establishment of a single agency, separated out from the HSE, underpinned by legislation and incorporating key children and family services is at the heart of the Government's reform programme and will provide a focus for the 'change agenda' already underway in the child and family services.

The Minister established a Task Force to advise on establishment of the new Agency. The Task Force has undertaken a considerable body of work in preparation for the new Agency and will be submitting a final report shortly. The Minister will bring establishing legislation before the Oireachtas in the Autumn

The National Director Gordon Jeyes has been identified as the first Chief Executive of the new Agency assuring continuity and consistency of approach over the critical period of transition. An open recruitment process is underway for the other key senior personnel to lead the new Agency.

2. Ongoing 'change agenda' in HSE Child and Family Services

In addition to these structural and governance changes, implementation of a comprehensive 'change agenda' is already underway under the leadership of Gordon Jeyes, HSE National Director of Child and Family Services. The change programme is designed to significantly enhance the level and consistency of child welfare and protection services.

Key elements of the 'change agenda' in children and families services include:

- A service delivery model that will address a multi-agency, albeit differentiated, approach to managing the child welfare and protection system;
- A nationwide consistency-of-approach in practice and implementation of Children First and child welfare and protection services generally;
- Use of standardised definitions, criteria and thresholds for reporting and referrals including prioritisation of cases;
- Greater reliance on real-time data on social work referrals and alternative care collated through HSE performance management indicators and the ongoing development of the National Child Care Information System;
- Improved resource allocation responsive to changing needs;
- Clearer management and budgetary accountability;
- Better workforce planning, training and induction of new staff.

In support of this 'change agenda', the 2012 budget allocation for HSE Child and Family Services includes a €21 million increase on last year's provision.

3. Recruitment of additional social workers

Since the Government came to office, 63 additional social workers have been recruited in the most recent phase of recruitment as recommended by the Ryan Report. This brings to 263 the total number of additional posts recruited in line with the recommendations of the Ryan Report

The total number of social workers employed in Child & Family Services was 1,197 at end of March 2012.

However, in recent months a number of vacancies have arisen, primarily as a result of 31 retirements but also due to other reasons, including career breaks and extended leave. The HSE is currently recruiting 57 social workers to fill recent vacancies across all care groups.

The HSE has received funding to recruit an additional 10 social workers in 2012 as part of the establishment of a specialised, multi-disciplinary team for children in high-support and special care and in detention.

4. Out-of-hours social work services

The HSE currently provides out of hours emergency services for children who are at risk. In the greater Dublin area this is provided through the crisis intervention service. Outside the greater Dublin area this is provided by the 'emergency place of safety service' through which Gardai can access emergency placements for children who are found to be at risk out of hours

The HSE has piloted two out-of-hours projects, one in Donegal and the other in Cork. The Donegal pilot project commenced in mid 2011 and the Cork project in the third quarter of last year. Both projects are still running and involve the provision by local HSE staff of social work support out-of-hours where deemed necessary by Gardai. HSE social workers are on call out of hours to respond to referrals.

The HSE commissioned an independent external assessment of the projects which was undertaken by Trinity College. These evaluations are currently being reviewed by the HSE and this will inform future decisions by the Minister on the further rollout of out-of-hours services. Further announcement will be made shortly.

5. Child Death Review Mechanisms

In 2010 HIQA published guidance for the HSE on the review of serious incidents, including deaths of children in care. Arising from this guidance, the HSE established a National Review Panel under the independent chairmanship of Dr. Helen Buckley of Trinity College Dublin. The review panel includes in its composition professionals

from across a range of disciplines and agencies with relevant expertise along with representation from outside the jurisdiction (Northern Ireland).

Under the HIQA guidance to the HSE the Chairperson of the National Review Panel is required to review the facts of each case and ascertain the extent and nature of the review required. The Chairperson may determine that a national review is required in a particular case or alternatively that the case be reviewed at local level. To date the panel has published a series of reports into individual cases.

6. New HIQA National Standards for the Protection and Welfare of Children

Central to Government's reform programme for child protection services will be the introduction of a standards-based approach to ensuring quality, effectiveness and accountability in service provision.

In March HIQA published its *Draft National Standards for the Protection and Welfare of Children - for HSE Children and Family Services*. These draft Standards set out the key features of an effective child protection service. They clearly put the needs of children at the heart of that service and promote the principles outlined in *Children First*, the national guidance for the protection and welfare of children.

The public consultation process has been completed and the Standards have been submitted to the Minister. These will be published by HIQA next months

The new standards will require:

- Timely and effective action is taken to protect children;
- All concerns in relation to children are screened and directed to the appropriate service;
- Children who are at risk of harm or neglect have written plans put in place to protect and promote their welfare;
- Children's protection plans and interventions are reviewed in line with requirements in *Children First*;
- The service has a robust and secure information system to record and manage child protection and welfare concerns;
- Interagency and inter-professional cooperation supports and promotes the protection and welfare of children;
- Child protection and welfare case planning is managed and monitored to improve practice and outcomes for children.

Inspection of services is to commence later this year.

7. Children First

Minister Fitzgerald launched the revised Children First National Guidance on 15th July, 2011. The Guidance deals with the recognition, reporting and management of child safety concerns. Key messages 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 responsibility for safe practice and the reporting of concerns.

It provides greater clarity and guidance for individuals and organisations in identifying and responding appropriately to child abuse and neglect.

In line with the Programme for Government commitment and the recommendations of the Ryan Report, work is continuing on legislation to place *Children First* on a statutory basis.

The heads of the *Children First* Bill are currently being considered by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health, Children and Youth Affairs.

The development of the *Children First* legislation is part of a suite of developments to strengthen child protection (which includes the National Vetting Bureau Bill and the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information) Bill). The Ministers and officials from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Justice and Equality are working closely to ensure that the legislative elements are well-integrated and complementary.

8. Constitutional Referendum on Child Protection

In line with the Programme for Government commitment, the Government is committed to bringing forward a referendum in respect of an amendment to the Constitution to acknowledge and affirm the rights of children, their best interests and their safety and protection.

The Department is engaged in ongoing consultation with the Attorney General's Office in relation to the wording of the proposed amendment.