



**FIGHTING  
WORDS**

The write to right.

# **Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy**

## **Policy and Procedures for Staff and Volunteers**

*This policy is implemented in line with the Fighting Words  
equal opportunities policy*

## Foreword

This document sets out the requirements for working with children and vulnerable adults at Fighting Words in accordance with the Children First Act 2015, the Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017 (with the 2019 addendum to cover online safety and 2025 addendum to cover adult retrospective disclosures ) and Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse. It is distributed as part of the information pack for all volunteers, interns and staff. This document will also be made available to teachers, parents/guardians and other responsible adults working with children and vulnerable adults on Fighting Words projects and programmes. It is also published in PDF format on the Fighting Words website, [www.fightingwords.ie](http://www.fightingwords.ie).

This document makes reference to two other documents that are also available in either hard copy or electronic copy:

- Health and Safety Policy
- Volunteer Supervision Policy
- Staff Terms and Conditions

It is hoped that this policy will prove a practical and useful addition to best practice in working with children and young people and to help the staff, volunteers, interns, writers and artists who work with Fighting Words.

Fighting Words welcomes feedback on this document – please send comments and suggestions to Sara Bennett, Operations Director, at [sara@fightingwords.ie](mailto:sara@fightingwords.ie).

**Colm Ó Cuanacháin**  
Executive Director

**Sara Bennett**  
Operations Director



## **Section 1: POLICY**

### **Introduction**

We at Fighting Words are committed to safeguarding the well-being of children and vulnerable adults who are participating in events run at our centres, online and at off-site locations.

Our aim is to create a safe, creative and enjoyable environment where children and vulnerable adults of all abilities can engage in storytelling and creative writing and where their protection and welfare is paramount. To this end, we adhere to the Children First Act 2015 and all associated guidelines, as well as Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse: National Policy and Procedures, published by the Health Service Executive.

Everyone working with children and vulnerable adults has a responsibility for their well-being and protection, including those working as staff members or volunteers at Fighting Words through the organisation's educational programmes and activities. We have a collective responsibility to ensure that the children and vulnerable adults we work with are encouraged and helped in their creative work and that this should take place in a safe and protected environment.

This document contains the Fighting Words' policy and guidelines for child and vulnerable adult protection and promotes codes of behaviour so that everyone is aware of the standards of behaviour of both children and adults. All staff and volunteers are required to adhere to this code.

All staff and volunteers at Fighting Words will be made aware of the policy and procedure and child/vulnerable adult protection will be covered in detail as part of the induction and training programme.

As part of their terms of employment, all staff will be required to report any concerns over behaviour or other evidence that may potentially indicate the presence of child or vulnerable adult abuse.

## **Policy Statement**

Fighting Words' child and vulnerable adult protection policy stems from the following principles:

The safety and welfare of children and vulnerable adults is everyone's responsibility.

- The best interests of the welfare of the child and vulnerable adult is paramount. This is the guiding principle underpinning all our work with children and vulnerable adults.
- Per the Child Care Act 1991, a child is defined as a person under the age of 18 years, This definition includes the term young people.
- A vulnerable person is defined as an adult who may be restricted in capacity to guard themselves against harm or exploitation or to report such harm or exploitation. The restriction of capacity may arise as a result of physical or intellectual impairment. Vulnerability to abuse is influenced by both context (e.g. social or personal circumstances) and individual circumstances.<sup>1</sup>
- All children and vulnerable adults, regardless of age, any disability they may have, gender, race<sup>2</sup>, family status, marital status, religious belief, sexual orientation, membership of the Traveller community, geographical location, or socio-economic status<sup>3</sup> have a right to protection from abuse.
- The need to comply with current statutory requirements and guidance on the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

**The primary functions of this policy are the promotion of a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults, the prevention of abuse and the protection of staff and volunteers through the application of a Code of Behaviour.**

- **Safe and protected environment:** The safety and welfare of children and vulnerable adults is paramount. The most important function of this policy is to create a safe and protected environment for children and vulnerable adults to enjoy storytelling and creative writing.
- **Prevention and education:** This policy also aims to prevent abuse from occurring and to educate staff and volunteers on the subject and to build their capacity to pre-empt abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> *Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse: National Policy and Procedures, FAQ*, December 2014, p.1

<sup>2</sup> While the term 'race' is used here as it appears in Ireland's equality legislation, Fighting Words recognises that it denotes a biological or scientific difference in human beings, a theory long discredited and to which the organisation does not subscribe.

<sup>3</sup> These are the nine protected grounds outlined in the Fighting Words Equal Opportunities Policy and in line with the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 and the Equal Status Acts 2000-2015.

## Scope

This policy is applicable to all staff employed by Fighting Words. It also applies to all **volunteers and contractors, including visiting writers and artists**, as well as at both centre-based programmes, online and external Fighting Words-sponsored events and activities.

It is the responsibility of the Operations Director to ensure that every **new** staff member and volunteer:

1. Receives a copy of the Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy<sup>4</sup>
2. Understands and signs the Code of Behaviour
3. Receives training on the subject matter

All staff members and volunteers will:

1. Be provided with an adequate level of supervision, support and review of work practice
2. Be provided with child protection training at induction
3. Writers, artists and volunteers doing one-off or sessional work will be issued with an information pack and required to sign a copy of the child and vulnerable adult protection policy
4. **All volunteers, including visiting writers and artists, will agree to abide by the Fighting Words Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy**

Fighting Words has implemented policies and procedures covering the following with regard to child and vulnerable adult protection:

1. Code of behaviour for all staff and volunteers
2. Reporting of suspected or disclosed abuse
3. Confidentiality
4. Recruitment and selection of staff

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<sup>4</sup> Copies of the policy will be sent out with the offer of employment or volunteer information pack (as applicable), which must be signed and returned with the contract of employment or volunteer agreement.

5. Management and supervision of staff and volunteers
6. Involvement of parents/carers
7. Staff allegations
8. Complaints and comments
9. Accidents
10. Garda vetting

### **Child Safeguarding Statement: Relevant Service and Relevant Person**

The Children First Act 2015 defines a 'provider' as "a person—

- (a) who provides a relevant service, and
- (b) who, in respect of the provision of such relevant service—
  - (i) employs (whether under contract of employment or otherwise) one or more than one other person to undertake any work or activity that constitutes a relevant service,
  - (ii) enters into a contract for services with one or more than one other person for the provision by the person of a relevant service, or
  - (iii) permits one or more than one other person (whether or not for commercial or other consideration and whether or not as part of a course of education or training, including an internship scheme) to undertake any work or activity, on behalf of the person, that constitutes a relevant service".

Under the Children First Act 2015, Fighting Words is a relevant service providing creative writing programmes to children and young people. As such, we will ensure, as far as practicable, that all children are safe from harm while availing of our services.

### **Per the Children First Act 2015, Fighting Words has:**

- Performed **assessment of any potential for harm** to a child while availing of our services
- Prepared a written **Child Safeguarding Statement** specifying the service being provided and the principles and procedures to be observed to ensure as far as practicable, that a child, while availing of the service, is safe from harm for use at all Fighting Words locations
- Appointed a Relevant Person

- **Displays the child safeguarding statement** in a prominent place where the relevant service concerned relates or is provided, or both, as may be appropriate.

### **Relevant Person**

The relevant person is the first point of contact in relation to the Child Safeguarding Statement; their name and contact details should be included in the Child Safeguarding Statement.

**The Relevant Person is Sara Bennett, Operations Director.**

## Section 2: CODE OF BEHAVIOUR – STANDARDS OF BEHAVIOUR

We expect everyone working with children and vulnerable adults in a paid or voluntary capacity for Fighting Words to take every possible precaution to avoid situations that could be misinterpreted and/or a breach of either the Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy or Health and Safety Policy.

By setting out appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, this code will not only help to protect children, but also staff, interns and volunteers at Fighting Words. Our two guiding principles are **creativity** and **respect**. In other words, **respect for everyone's creativity**.

|    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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| Do | Treat all children and vulnerable adults equally.                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Do | Listen and hear – and give time to the child or vulnerable adult to say what they want to say. Thoughts and words are important and they deserve respect.                                                                                                           |
| Do | Promote the atmosphere of creativity, openness, acceptance and fun in the centre. Be friendly and approachable.                                                                                                                                                     |
| Do | Respect a child or vulnerable adult's right to personal privacy and personal space.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Do | Be aware of situations that present risks and manage these risks appropriately – always ask a member of staff if you are unsure.                                                                                                                                    |
| Do | Safeguard the best interests and welfare of vulnerable adults where it is recognised that they are unable to make their own decisions and/or protect themselves, their assets or their bodily integrity and ensure appropriate and accountable protection for them. |
| Do | Use only appropriate language in working with children and vulnerable adults – no cursing or swearing.                                                                                                                                                              |
| Do | Always treat children and vulnerable adults with respect - don't embarrass them. Do not ridicule, insult or make little of anyone during an activity.                                                                                                               |
| Do | Recognise that caution is required, particularly sensitive moments such as dealing with a child or vulnerable adult who becomes upset or feels unwell.                                                                                                              |

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|    | Always seek support from another team member, staff or a teacher/carer if required.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Do | Ensure, in so far as possible, that the building and/or facilities used for activities with children and vulnerable adults are safe and secure for the people in it. All occupied parts of the building should be monitored and parts not in use should be isolated or secured, e.g. the door to the office should be shut if not in use. |
| Do | Plan activities so that they involve more than one person being present or at least in sight or hearing of others. A minimum of two adults should be present at all times.                                                                                                                                                                |
| Do | Carry identification when attending a school or other location on behalf of Fighting Words.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Do | Make sure that a responsible adult, e.g. a teacher, is always present for group programmes, both at the Fighting Words centre, when visiting a school or conducting programmes in outside venues on behalf of Fighting Words.                                                                                                             |

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| Avoid | Doing things of a personal nature that children and vulnerable adults can do for themselves. Staff members and volunteers are not responsible for the personal hygiene needs of children and vulnerable adults. Notify the la staff member or location coordinator if a child or vulnerable adult needs assistance. |
| Avoid | Allowing yourself to be drawn into inappropriate attention-seeking behaviours.<br>Do your best to always remain calm.                                                                                                                                                                                               |

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| Do not | Physically punish or be in any way verbally abusive to a child or vulnerable adult.                                                                                                        |
| Do not | Use alcohol, tobacco or drugs in the company of children or vulnerable adults. Staff and volunteers must not attend any Fighting Words programmes under the influence of alcohol or drugs. |
| Do not | Arrange external meetings or contact children or vulnerable adults outside the group or project.                                                                                           |

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| Do not | Offer lifts to children of vulnerable adults in your car.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Do not | <p>Permit abusive peer activities such as bullying.</p> <p>Bullying is targeted, repeated behaviour (online or offline) that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Causes harm (physical, emotional, or social).</li> <li>• Involves an imbalance of power (e.g., age, size, social status, disability, race, gender or other factors).</li> <li>• Is deliberate and unwanted by the person experiencing it.</li> </ul> <p>Report any incidents or suspected incidents of bullying behaviour to the Designated Liaison Person<sup>5</sup> immediately.</p> <p>Bullying will be addressed in accordance with the Fighting Words anti-bullying policy, found in Appendix C.</p> |
| Do not | <p>Allow or engage in suggestive remarks, gestures or touching of a kind which could be misunderstood. If you have to touch a child or vulnerable adult, ask their permission where possible. In some cases, you may not have time to ask permission, for example, preventing fingers from being caught in a door.</p> <p>In these cases, always explain your actions after the event. See the “Physical Contact” section below for more information.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Do not | Allow any physically rough or sexually provocative games, or inappropriate talking or touching, by anyone in any group for which you have responsibility.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Do not | Allow conversations with children or vulnerable adults that encourage personal comments or show favouritism.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Do not | Talk about the children in front of the children. If you have a question about how best to work with a particular child, excuse yourself away from the child and ask a member of staff.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Do not | Allow unsupervised access to the Fighting Words wireless internet (Wi-Fi) connection and/or computer network.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

<sup>5</sup> At Fighting Words, the Designated Liaison Person is the Operations Director, Sara Bennett (087 274 6621 or sara@fightingwords.ie). In the event that the Operations Director is unavailable, e.g., due to illness or holiday, the Deputy Designated Person is Colm Quearney, Development and Outreach Officer (087 396 2089 or colm@fightingwords.ie).

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| Do not | Allow children or vulnerable adults to use dangerous equipment without supervision, e.g. scissors.                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Do not | Share your personal items.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Do not | Allow use of mobile phones during workshops unless absolutely necessary.                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Do not | <b>Under any circumstances attempt to deal with any problems or challenging behaviour alone.</b> If an activity – the event itself or peer activities between children – is getting out of hand or unsafe, notify the group leader or a member of staff immediately. |

### **Online Workshops –Code of Behaviour**

|        |                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Do     | Always dress appropriately (no pyjamas, please!)                                                                                                  |
| Do     | Ensure that you are in a public/common area of your home OR change the background of your screen by adjusting the settings of the chosen platform |
| Do     | Keep your microphone muted unless you are in a speaking role to keep down on background noise                                                     |
| Do     | Turn off your video if your attention is needed elsewhere during the workshop                                                                     |
| Do not | Use your mobile phone during workshops - your attention is essential!                                                                             |

### **Physical Contact**

Physical touch should only occur when it is appropriate to the age/development of the child and in response to particular needs of the child. There will be instances when physical contact is unavoidable and in fact necessary.

#### **Appropriate:**

- Context-dependent touch within a controlled and supervised environment (e.g. demonstration of dance, positioning, supporting a lift, demonstrating a breathing technique)
- Preventing injury (e.g. catching a falling child, appropriate restraint)

- Handshake, fist bumps and “high fives”
- Fitting safety equipment (e.g. harness, safety restraint)

**Inappropriate:**

- Touch which is unnecessary, unexplained, out of context, without consent
- Any touch to breast, groin or buttocks areas
- Kissing or hugging
- Slapping/hitting (even in jest)
- Holding hands
- Sitting in lap

Young children particularly will often demonstrate affection. Staff and volunteer training and induction will include best practices and methods of how to best respond when a child tries to hug, wants to hold hands, etc.

**Technology – Code of Behaviour at Fighting Words for Staff and Volunteers**

- Never send/receive private calls or texts while supervising children or young people
- Never contact children or young people (e.g. by phone, text, email or social media) without prior parental consent. In the case of volunteers, never contact children or young people without the knowledge of Fighting Words staff
- Never give your personal phone number or contact details to children or young people
- Never befriend children/young people on social media sites
- Never take a photograph/video of a child without prior documented parental consent
- Fighting Words will ensure photographic/video content is appropriate
- Fighting Words will avoid naming the child/young person when using the photograph/video unless documented parental consent is confirmed

### **Breaches of the Code of Behaviour by Staff and Volunteers**

Any breaches of the Code of Practice will be raised with the individual concerned. In the case of staff, serious breaches of the code or policy will be dealt with under the disciplinary procedure and could result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal.

In the case of volunteers, serious breaches of the code or policy will be dealt with under the Complaints Against Volunteers procedure in the Volunteer Policy and could result in disciplinary action up to and including a termination of the volunteering relationship.

If you have a concern or complaint that is related to Code of Behaviour you can speak to the **primary designated contact, the Designated Liaison Person<sup>6</sup>**. The Designated Liaison Person will liaise with the Executive Director and assess the situation and conduct an investigation if necessary.

Any allegation will be investigated confidentially in order to safeguard the rights of the person against whom allegations have been made. Investigations will be carried out quickly to see whether a prima facie case is established. All investigations will be conducted in accordance with the principles of natural justice:

- The right to a fair hearing
- The rule against bias

If so, the issue will be handled according to the Complaints Against Volunteers procedure or, in the case of staff, the disciplinary procedure in the Staff Terms and Conditions.

If not, the complainant will be told the outcome of the investigation and that the matter will not be taken any further. The individual will retain the right to pursue the matter under the complaints procedure, or grievance procedure as appropriate.

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<sup>6</sup> At Fighting Words, the Designated Liaison Person is the Operations Director, Sara Bennett (087 274 6621 or [sara@fightingwords.ie](mailto:sara@fightingwords.ie)). In the event that the Operations Director is unavailable, e.g. due to illness or holiday, the deputy designated liaison person is the Programmes Manager, Mark Davidson. Contact [mark@fightingwords.ie](mailto:mark@fightingwords.ie) or 086 046 1891.

Following a complaint, the handling of the complaint will be subject to a review by an independent, external third party to ensure that all complaints are dealt with in line with best possible practice. During the course of such a review, all names and identifying details will be removed.

## Section 3: REPORTING PROCEDURES - WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK A CHILD MAY BE BEING ABUSED

THE ONE THING YOU MUST NOT DO IS NOTHING

**All staff and volunteers (including students on placement or work experience) have a responsibility to safeguard children and young people and to report any concerns they may have for the protection or welfare of a child/young person.**

### Staff Responsibilities at Fighting Words

#### Designated Liaison Person

*Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* refers to the role of the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and Deputy DLP. Best practice in child safeguarding indicates that organisations working with children/young people or their families should appoint a DLP to be the resource person to any staff member or volunteer who has child protection concerns and to liaise with outside agencies. The role of the DLP is to receive child protection and welfare concerns from workers/volunteers and to report concerns which meet the threshold of 'reasonable grounds for concern' to Tusla.

- **The Designated Liaison Person is Sara Bennett, the Operations Director.**
- **The Deputy Designated Liaison Person is Mark Davidson, Programmes Manager.**

#### Mandated Persons

Under the Children First Act 2015, Mandated Persons have a statutory obligation to report concerns which reach or exceed a legally defined threshold (see section 14 of the Children First Act 2015) and to cooperate with Tusla in the assessment of mandated reports, where requested to do so.

**Sara Bennett, the Operations Director, is a Mandated Person under the Children First Act 2015.<sup>7</sup>**

The term 'harm' is used as defined in the Children First Act 2015: 'harm' means, in relation to a child—:

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<sup>7</sup> The Mandated Person at Fighting Words is determined per Appendix 5 – Schedule of Mandated Persons under the Children First Act 2015 – Tusla Child Safeguarding: Guidelines for Policy, Procedure and Practice 2018

(a) assault, ill-treatment or neglect of the child in a manner that seriously affects or is likely to seriously affect the child's health, development or welfare, or  
(b) sexual abuse of the child,  
whether caused by a single act, omission or circumstance or a series or combination of acts, omissions or circumstances, or otherwise.

Section 14(1) of the Children First Act 2015 states:

"...where a Mandated Person knows, believes or has reasonable grounds to suspect, on the basis of information that he or she has received, acquired or becomes aware of in the course of his or her employment or profession as such a Mandated Person, that a child—  
(a) has been harmed,  
(b) is being harmed, or  
(c) is at risk of being harmed,  
he or she shall, as soon as practicable, report that knowledge, belief or suspicion, as the case may be, to [Tusla]."

Also, Section 14(2) of the Children First Act 2015 places obligations on Mandated Persons to report any disclosures made by a child:

"Where a child believes that he or she—

(a) has been harmed,  
(b) is being harmed, or  
(c) is at risk of being harmed,

and discloses this belief to a mandated person in the course of a mandated person's employment or profession as such a person, the Mandated Person shall, ... as soon as practicable, report that disclosure to [Tusla]."

### **Retrospective Disclosures**

Some adults may disclose abuse that took place during their childhood – a **retrospective disclosure**. Such disclosures may come to light when an adult attends counselling or is being treated for a psychiatric or health problem.

The reporting requirements under the Children First Act 2015 apply only to information that the Mandated Person receives or becomes aware of since the Act came into force, whether the harm occurred before or after that point.

Per the 2025 Addendum to Children First 2017 legislation - Dealing with Adult Retrospective Disclosures of Childhood Abuse, if the Mandated Person, receives a retrospective disclosure of childhood abuse from an adult, **if there are reasonable grounds to believe the alleged perpetrator may still pose a risk to children (e.g.,**

**they still work with or have access to children), a report must be made to Tusla and/or An Garda Síochána.<sup>8</sup>**

Here is the formal text ready to be inserted directly into the Legal Framework or Reporting Procedures section of your **Fighting Words Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy**. It is written in standard, professional compliance language tailored for Irish voluntary and educational organisations. [1, 2]

## **Statutory Obligations for All Staff and Volunteers**

In addition to obligations under the **Children First Act 2015** and **Children First: National Guidance**, all staff, board members, interns, and volunteers at Fighting Words must be aware of their distinct personal legal responsibilities under Irish criminal law regarding child endangerment and the withholding of information.

### **1. Reckless Endangerment of Children**

Under Section 176 of the **Criminal Justice Act 2006**, it is a criminal offence for any person who has authority or control over a child, or authority over a person who has control over a child, to intentionally or recklessly leave or place that child in a situation that creates a substantial risk of serious harm or sexual abuse.

At **Fighting Words**, this means:

- Every adult supervising an activity has a strict duty of care to maintain a safe, supervised environment.
- Failing to take active steps to protect a child from a known, foreseeable, or obvious risk of harm or abuse constitutes an offence under this Act.
- A person found guilty of this offence can face severe penalties, including substantial fines and imprisonment for up to 10 years.

### **2. Criminal Justice Act - Withholding of Information on Offences against Children and Vulnerable Persons**

Under the **Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information) Act 2012**, it is a personal criminal offence to withhold information from the authorities regarding serious crimes committed against children or vulnerable adults.

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<sup>8</sup> Mandated persons are not required to report the childhood abuse of a person who is now an adult if there is no current or suspected risk of harm to a child.

At **Fighting Words**, this means:

- **Obligation:** If a staff member, volunteer mentor or intern knows or believes that a serious scheduled offence (including sexual assault, physical abuse, exploitation, or reckless endangerment) has been committed against a child or vulnerable person, they are legally required to disclose this information to An Garda Síochána.
- **Material Information:** You must pass on any information that you know would be of material assistance in arresting, prosecuting, or convicting the person responsible.
- **Timeline:** This information must be disclosed "as soon as practicable."
- **Reporting:** While any concern must be raised immediately with the Fighting Words Designated Liaison Person (DLP) in line with our internal reporting procedures, the legal obligation under the 2012 Act rests on you personally.
  - If the Fighting Words DLP has already reported the matter to An Garda Síochána, you do not need to make a duplicate report, provided you have confirmation that all relevant material information has been passed on.
  - If the DLP chooses not to report the matter, or if you do not have confirmation that the Gardaí were notified, you must then report it to An Garda Síochána directly.
- **Reasonable Excuse:** Failure to report is an offence unless a person has a "reasonable excuse" recognised by law. Fearing a breach of personal confidentiality or organisational loyalty is not an acceptable legal excuse for withholding information.

## Types of Child Abuse and How They May Be Recognised

Child abuse can be categorised into four different types: **neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse**. A child may be subjected to one or more forms of abuse at any given time. Abuse and neglect can occur within the family, in the community or in an institutional setting. The abuser may be someone known to the child or a stranger and can be an adult or another child.

In a situation where abuse is alleged to have been carried out by another child, you should consider it a child welfare and protection issue for both children and you should follow child protection procedures for both the victim and the alleged abuser.

The important factor in deciding whether the behaviour is abuse or neglect is the impact of that behaviour on the child rather than the intention of the adult against whom an allegation may be made.

A child/young person will sometimes confide in a staff member or volunteer that they have been abused or someone may witness incidents which suggest that a child/young

person is being harmed. Often it is a case of a staff member/volunteer feeling worried and concerned about certain signs they are picking up on, such as poor hygiene; a child/young person always appearing hungry, listless and tired; a lack of suitable clothing; or unexplained physical injuries.

Other indicators may be related to the child/young person's behaviour, such as being aggressive, impulsive or withdrawn. A cluster or pattern of signs is more likely to be indicative of neglect or abuse.

Definitions of the four types of abuse are found in Appendix A.

### **Identifying Reasonable Grounds for Concern**

Tusla should always be informed when a staff member or volunteer has **reasonable grounds for concern** that a child may have been, is being, or is at risk of being abused or neglected.

If you ignore what may be symptoms of abuse, it could result in ongoing harm to the child. ***It is not necessary for you to prove that abuse has occurred to report a concern to Tusla.*** All that is required is that you have reasonable grounds for concern.

It is Tusla's role to assess concerns that are reported to it. If you report a concern, you can be assured that your information will be carefully considered with any other information available and a child protection assessment will be carried out where sufficient risk is identified.

Reasonable grounds for a child protection or welfare concern include<sup>9</sup>:

- Evidence, for example an injury or behaviour, that is consistent with abuse and is unlikely to have been caused in any other way
- Any concern about possible sexual abuse
- Consistent signs that a child is suffering from emotional or physical neglect
- A child saying or indicating by other means that they has been abused
- Admission or indication by an adult or a child of an alleged abuse they committed
- An account from a person who saw a child being abused.

### **The guiding principles on reporting child abuse or neglect may be summarised as follows:**

1. The safety and well-being of the child must take priority over concerns about adults against whom an allegation may be made

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<sup>9</sup> Tusla, *Child Safeguarding: A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice*, p 25.

2. Reports of concerns should be made without delay to Tusla via the Designated Liaison Person.

### **Protection for Making Reports in Good Faith**

The Protections for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act 1998 protects you if you make a report of suspected child abuse to designated officers of Tusla, the Health Service Executive (HSE) or to members of the Gardaí as long as the report is made in good faith and is not malicious. Designated officers also include persons authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Tusla to receive and acknowledge reports of mandated concerns about a child from mandated persons under the Children First Act 2015.

This legal protection means that even if you report a case of suspected child abuse and it proves unfounded, a plaintiff who took an action would have to prove that you had not acted reasonably and in good faith in making the report. If you make a report in good faith and in the child's best interests, you may also be protected under common law by the defence of qualified privilege.

See [www.tusla.ie/children-first](http://www.tusla.ie/children-first) for full details.

### **Questions That May Help When Staff or Volunteers are Concerned About a Child's Welfare<sup>10</sup>**

- Is the child behaving normally for his or her age and stage of development?
- Is what the child has written/drawn appropriate to his or her age?
- Has something happened that could explain the child's behaviour?
- Is the child showing signs of distress? If so, describe (e.g. behavioural, emotional, physical signs).
- Is the child suffering?
- Does the behaviour restrict the child socially?
- What effect, if any, does it have on others (e.g. other children)?
- What are the child's parent(s)' views, if known?

### **If a child tells you that they are being abused<sup>11</sup>**

A child or young person may disclose to a staff member or volunteer mentor that they have been or are being harmed or abused. Children/young people will often have different ways of communicating that they are being abused.

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<sup>10</sup> Source: Based on Barnardos (2010) Barnardos Ireland Child Protection Information Pack

<sup>11</sup> Tusla, *Child Safeguarding: A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice*, p 34

If a child or young person hints at or tells a staff member or volunteer mentor that they are being harmed by someone, be it a parent/carer, another adult or by another child/young person (peer abuse), it should be treated in a sensitive way.

Remember, a child may disclose abuse to you as a trusted adult at any time during your work with them. It is important that you are aware and prepared for this.

- Be as calm and natural as possible.
- Remember that you have been approached because you are trusted and possibly liked. Do not panic.
- Be aware that disclosures can be very difficult for the child.
- Remember, the child may initially be testing your reactions and may only fully open up over a period of time.
- Listen to what the child has to say. Give them time and opportunity to tell as much as they are able and wish to tell.
- Do not pressurise the child. Allow the child to disclose at their own pace and in their own language.
- Conceal any signs of disgust, anger or disbelief.
- It is important to differentiate between the person who carried out the abuse and the act of abuse itself. The child/young person quite possibly may love or strongly like the alleged abuser while also disliking what was done to them. It is therefore important to avoid expressing any judgement on, or anger towards, the alleged perpetrator while talking to the child/young person.
- It may be necessary to reassure the child that your feelings toward them have not been affected in a negative way as a result of what they have disclosed.

#### *When Asking Questions*

- Questions should be supportive and for the purposes of clarification only.
- Avoid asking leading questions, such as asking whether a specific person carried out the abuse.
- Avoid asking about intimate details or suggesting that something else may have happened other than what you have been told. Such questions or suggestions could complicate the official investigation.

#### *Confidentiality – Do Not Promise to Keep Secrets*

At the earliest opportunity, tell the child that:

- You acknowledge that they have come to you because they trust you.
- You will be sharing this information only with people who understand this area and who can help. There are secrets which are not helpful and should not be kept because they make matters worse. Such secrets hide things that need to be known if people are to be helped and protected from further ongoing hurt.

- o By refusing to make a commitment to secrecy to the child, you do run the risk that they may not tell you everything (or indeed, anything) there and then. It is better, however, to do this than to tell a lie and ruin the child's confidence in yet another adult. By being honest, it is more likely that the child will return to you at another time.

*Think Before You Promise Anything – do not make promises that you cannot keep*

At the earliest possible opportunity:

- Record in writing, in a factual manner, what the child has said, including as far as possible the exact words used by the child.
- Inform the local supervisor/manager immediately and agree measures to protect the child, i.e. report the matter to the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency via the Designated Liaison Person.
- Maintain appropriate confidentiality.

## Responding To A Disclosure

| Things To Say                                                             | Things Not To Say                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| I want to listen to what you have to say                                  | Wait until I get my manager so you can tell them too |
| I am going to do my best to help you                                      | I can't do anything                                  |
| You did the right thing by telling me, this is what I am going to do next | I can't believe it, I'm shocked                      |
| You are not to blame                                                      | This is your fault                                   |
| Is there anything else you want to share?                                 | Don't tell me anymore                                |

## Ongoing Support

Following a disclosure by a child, it is important that the staff member or volunteer continues in a supportive relationship with the child. Disclosure is a huge step for a child.

Staff members or volunteers should continue to offer support, particularly through:

- Maintaining a positive relationship with the child
- Keeping lines of communication open by listening carefully to the child
- Continuing to include the child in the usual activities

Any further disclosure should be treated as a first disclosure and responded to as indicated above. Where necessary, immediate action should be taken to ensure the child's safety.

## **Bullying<sup>12</sup>**

It is recognised that bullying affects the lives of an increasing number of children and can be the cause of genuine concerns about a child's welfare. Bullying can be defined as repeated aggression – whether it is verbal, psychological or physical – that is conducted by an individual or group against others.

It is behaviour that is intentionally aggravating and intimidating and occurs mainly among children in social environments such as schools. It includes behaviours such as physical aggression, cyberbullying, damage to property, intimidation, isolation/exclusion, name calling, malicious gossip and extortion.

Bullying can also take the form of abuse based on gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and religious factors. With developments in modern technology, children can also be the victims of non-contact bullying, via mobile phones, the internet and other personal devices. While bullying can happen to any child, some may be more vulnerable. These include children with disabilities or special educational needs; those from ethnic minority and migrant groups; from the Traveller community; lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBTQ+) children and those perceived to be LGBTQ+; and children of minority religious faiths.

There can be an increased vulnerability to bullying among children with special educational needs. This is particularly so among those who do not understand social cues and/or have difficulty communicating. Some children with complex needs may lack understanding of social situations and therefore trust everyone implicitly. Such children may be more vulnerable because they do not have the same social skills or capacity as others to recognise and defend themselves against bullying behaviour.

Bullying in schools is a particular problem due to the fact that children spend a significant portion of their time there and are in large social groups. In the first instance, the school authorities are responsible for dealing with such bullying. School

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<sup>12</sup> Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children, p. 12

management boards must have a code of behaviour and an anti-bullying policy in place. In cases of serious instances of bullying where the behaviour is regarded as possibly abusive, Fighting Words may need to make a referral to Tusla and/or An Garda Síochána.

**Please refer to Appendix C for the Fighting Words Anti-Bullying Policy.**

**If in doubt, check it out!**

If you really are uncertain whether your concerns are well founded, or what to do for the best, you can get advice from a Tusla duty social worker.

The Tusla Duty Social Work Team for the North Inner-City area can be contacted on **01 856 6856**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

**UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD A CHILD BE LEFT IN A SITUATION THAT EXPOSES THAT CHILD TO HARM.**

In out-of-hours or emergency cases, if you think a child is in immediate danger and you cannot reach a duty social worker, you should contact the Gardaí on 999/112.

**Procedure for Making A Formal Referral to the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency**

If you identify a child as being at risk of harm – you must act.

Paragraph 3.7.3 of National Guidance (2017) states that “it is the responsibility of all agencies working with children and for the public to recognise child protection concerns and share those with the agencies responsible for assessing or investigating them, not to determine whether the child protection concerns are evidenced or not.”

In the first instance, if possible, make telephone contact with the Duty Social Worker, or if out-of-hours or in an emergency, with the Gardaí.

The following procedures should be followed:

- The Designated Liaison Person should make a referral to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency by using the **Standard Report Form**. There are copies available in the office of the main centre and the shared computer drive.

- The Standard Report Form can be accessed directly from the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency at <http://www.tusla.ie/children-first/publications-and-forms>

If you believe the concern is urgent and that there is imminent risk to a child, make the report by telephone and then follow it up with the completed form. The quality of the information you provide will influence the ability of the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, to respond.

The completed Standard Reporting Form must contain as much of the following as possible:

**Accurate identifying information** – including all known full names and surnames, addresses, date of birth, age, name of the child's school, disability if applicable, ethnicity, first language (need for interpreter, if known) of the child(ren) and all the known members of his or her family and other adults living in the household. In cases of suspected abuse and neglect, family members should not be used as interpreters.

**The report should also include:**

- Names and addresses of the parents/carers of the child
- The relationship to the child of the person making the report
- The name, address and details of the person allegedly causing concern in relation to the child or children
- The names and addresses of other personnel or agencies involved with the child or children, e.g. GP, social worker, public health nurse, Gardaí, etc.

**Details of the concern, allegation or incident** – outline the exact nature of the concern: include dates, times and names of persons present. It is important to describe any observed injuries or behaviours that may be linked to the incident. In cases where neglect or abuse is indicated over time, the reporter should be encouraged to provide a chronology of the evidence or symptoms in the child that gave rise to the concern. The report should include the name and contact details of the person reporting the concerns and whether that person is a professional, a person working with children or a member of the public.

- Views of the parent/carer and views of the child (where age appropriate) – the reporter must provide any accounts of the parents' or child's views about the concern that are known to them.
- Any other relevant information
- A copy will be kept for Fighting Words' records and the original sent to Tusla.

## **Cases Not Reported to Tusla or An Garda Síochana**

In those cases where Fighting Words decides not to report concerns to Tusla or An Garda Síochana, the individual staff members or volunteers who raised the concern will be given a clear written statement of the reasons why the organisation is not taking such action. For example, the Tusla duty social worker may advise that the concern does not meet the threshold for reporting.

The staff member or volunteer will be advised that if they remain concerned about the situation, they are free as individuals to consult with, or report to, Tusla or An Garda Síochana. The provisions of the Protections for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act 1998 apply once they communicate “reasonably and in good faith.” (see Paragraph 3.10.1)

## **Allegations Against a Staff Member or Volunteer**

If an allegation is made against a staff member or volunteer, there are two procedures that Fighting Words will put in place:

- The reporting procedure in respect of the child/young person
- The procedure for dealing with the staff member/volunteer

These procedures, according to *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* should be followed in the event of suspicion or disclosure of abuse against a staff member or volunteer. In this situation, Fighting Words must have due regard for the rights and interest of the child on one hand and those of the person against whom the allegation is made on the other hand.

The Executive Director of Fighting Words (currently Colm Ó Cuanacháin) will deal with the staff member/volunteer in question, while the Designated Liaison Person will have the responsibility of dealing with reporting the issue and supporting the child. Staff members and volunteers may be subjected to erroneous or malicious allegations; therefore, any allegation of abuse should be dealt with sensitively and support provided for staff as well as the child, including counselling where necessary. The primary goal, however, is to protect the child while taking care to treat the staff member/volunteer fairly.

When the Executive Director of Fighting Words becomes aware of an allegation of abuse of a child or children by a staff member or volunteer, he will inform that person of the following:

- The fact that an allegation has been made against them

- The nature of the allegation

The staff member/volunteer will be afforded the opportunity to respond. The Executive Director will note the response and pass on the information if and when a formal report is made to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

It is important to note that The Protection for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act, 1998 applies equally to organisations provided they report the matter “reasonably and in good faith.”

Fighting Words accepts the possibility that a number of factors may have a bearing on the organisation and will need to be considered:

- Possible reactions of other members of staff/volunteers, including anger, disbelief, doubt, fear, shock, guilt, anxiety and confusion.
- The effects on the alleged abuser of the internal disciplinary proceedings, the child protection investigation and the criminal investigation.
- The reactions of other staff/volunteers and other children/young people towards the child/young person who has been abused or whose allegation is being investigated.
- The reaction of parents/carers and other family members of the child/young person.

**NOTE:** Should an allegation be made against the Executive Director of Fighting Words, the Chair of the Board will deal with all aspects of the situation.

If an allegation is made against a staff member or volunteer, the following steps will be taken:

- The Executive Director of Fighting Words will deal with all aspects of the case relating to the staff member/volunteer. It may be necessary for the Executive Director to seek legal advice for any action following an allegation against a staff member/volunteer. A meeting may need to be arranged with the Tusla or the Gardaí to discuss the allegation.
- The allegation will be assessed by the Designated Liaison Person to establish if there are reasonable grounds for concern and whether a formal report will be made to the statutory authorities at that point. The Designated Liaison Person may wish to contact Tusla, the Child and Family Agency for advice on the issue.
- The safety of the child/young person is the first priority of Fighting Words and all necessary measures will be taken to ensure that the child/young person is safe. The measures taken will be proportionate to the level of risk.

- Fighting Words will ensure that no other children/young people are at risk during this period and will inform other relevant agencies or parents/carers as appropriate.
- Pending the outcome of the investigation by the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and/or the Gardaí, the measures which can be taken to ensure the safety of children and young people can include the following: suspension of duties of the person accused (with pay in the case of a staff member), re-assignment of duties where the accused will not have contact with children/young people, working under increased supervision during the period of the investigation or other measures as deemed appropriate.
- Fighting Words will notify the staff member/volunteer that an allegation has been made and what the nature of the allegation is. The staff member/volunteer has a right to respond to this and the response should be documented and retained.
- Fighting Words will ensure that the principle of 'natural justice' will apply whereby a person is considered innocent until proven otherwise.
- Fighting Words will work in co-operation with An Garda Síochána and the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and any decisions taken in regard to the staff member/volunteer will be taken in consultation with these agencies.
- The person against whom the allegation is made will need support during this period and Fighting Words will provide advice on how to access the relevant support services.
- Parents/guardians of the child will be informed of the allegation, concern or disclosure unless doing so is likely to endanger the child.

### **And lastly**

If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this child protection policy and procedures document or obtain further information, please refer to the list of useful contacts contained in Appendix F.

## **Section 4: CHILD PROTECTION AND FIGHTING WORDS ACTIVITIES**

### **1. Visits to Outside Organisations**

Most of Fighting Words' activities take place at the Fighting Words centre in Dublin or at designated regular locations where established Fighting Words teams operate. We do, however, send staff and volunteers to schools, cultural institutions and other education centres and festival sites from time to time.

Staff and volunteers should always wear a "Fighting Words Team" badge at programmes at external venues and the Child Safeguarding Statement must be available and displayed.

### **2. Events: Both at Fighting Words and External Venues**

Staff and volunteers organising events that include children and young people *must* abide by this policy to ensure the safe participation of children and young people in Fighting Words activities.

Event organisers for one-off events should contact the Designated Liaison Person when planning events and consider whether it is necessary to have a disclaimer saying Fighting Words expects parents/primary carers, guardians, teachers and/or carers to keep responsibility for their children while taking part in Fighting Words activities.

The parents of children and young people attending Fighting Words summer camps and other ongoing programmes will be issued with the Positive Behaviour Policy, which sets out the standards of behaviour expected of participants, including ICT usage.

Staff and volunteers should keep records in certain circumstances at events and workshops involving children and young people<sup>13</sup>:

- Any allegations a child makes against you or other staff/volunteers, e.g. "you're always picking on me," "don't touch me," etc. Take a note of the date and time and report to the Designated Liaison Person.
- If a child touches you or talks to you in an inappropriate way, record what happened and tell another adult. Ignoring this or allowing it to go on may place you in a very difficult position.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix C of this document for a sample form. Forms are available from the Operations Director.

- In the case of a child speaking to you or behaving inappropriately, that you advised the child in question directly that they were speaking or behaving inappropriately.
- In the event of an injury, ensure that it is recorded in the Fighting Words Health and Safety Log and that the record is witnessed by another adult.

### 3. Guidelines for Young People in Photography and Film

Inviting young people to Fighting Words events is part of getting them involved in the creative writing process. It is important, however, when we use children and young people in photo shoots and/or take pictures of them in the centre's activities that we consider how the images are used.<sup>14</sup>

When selecting a range of images for use in Fighting Words promotional material (either print-based or web-based) for each photograph consider the following:

- **Is the image clear?** Does the image convey a message that can be clearly understood by the child? Is the photograph of sufficient quality and clarity?
- **Is the image dignified?** Are the subjects of the image presented in a manner in which they would wish themselves to be portrayed? Are vulnerable people presented sensitively?
- **Is the image authentic?** Is the photograph authentic or do you think it has been cropped or edited in a way that distorts the actual facts?
- **Is the image balanced?** Do the images used present a balance of ethnicities and role models, as appropriate to the setting? Do the images show the diverse realities of everyday life and challenge prevailing expectations?

### The Right to Privacy

Children and young people, as well as adults, have a right to privacy and therefore their consent should be sought in relation to use of personal data, including images. In the case of children (up to 18 years of age) parental consent will be sought and information provided on how and for what purpose images will be used.

This is known as **informed consent**.

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<sup>14</sup> Please refer to the Dóchas Code of Conduct on the Use of Images for more information: [www.dochas.ie](http://www.dochas.ie)

### ***Parent/Guardian Consent***

Photographs or images are defined as data and therefore come within the scope of the Data Protection Acts 1998/2003.

- Parental/primary carer permission is required for the use of images of children/young people in group shots before photographs are used for promotional material and/or the website.
- Parental/primary carer consent is required for the use of an image of an individual child or young person who is clearly identifiable.

### ***General Guidelines<sup>15</sup>***

- Children and young people should be asked if they mind before pictures are taken or filming takes place. This is good practice for adults as well.
- A letter will be made available from the Operations Director to parents/teachers/other responsible adults advising what will happen to the pictures/film and what they/it will be used for during and after an event.
- If pictures are taken or filming takes place informally at Fighting Words or other event, then this needs to be covered in the general parental/primary carer permission letter issued (as above).
- It is occasionally acceptable to obtain consent after pictures have been taken or filming has taken place, but this **must** be before their publication or use.
- Recorded images should only be made, kept and used where there is a valid reason associated with the activity involved.
- Recording of images should be supervised as would any other activity.
- Children, young people and parents should be informed as to how and where images will be used.
- Images should only be used for the purpose(s) agreed.
- Images should only be used in the intended context and should not be used out of context.
- **In general, individual children should not be identified, with the exception being where they are being publicly acknowledged (e.g., an award, performance, achievement) for which consent has been given.**
- For publicity purposes, group photographs are preferable to individual ones.
- Ensure all children or young people are appropriately dressed.
- Ensure that images do not contribute to or expose children to embarrassment, distress or upset.
- Use images that represent the diversity of children and young people participating in any given activity or setting.

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<sup>15</sup> *Guidelines for Taking and Using Images of Children and Young People in the Arts Sector*, published by The Arts Council, 2009

- Do not use images of children or young people who are considered vulnerable or whose identity may require protection.
- Permission to take and use images of children and young people can be requested as part of their registration process for an activity, programme or event.
- Where images are kept for future use, relevant names, dates and other contextual information should be stored with them as well as signed consent for their usage.
- Images should be carefully stored, with consent attached or cross referenced.
- Images should only be passed to third parties for their use where this has been agreed as part of the consent process.

## **Section 5: SAFEGUARDING VULNERABLE ADULTS**

### **1. Introduction**

Fighting Words is fully committed to safeguarding the well-being of adults by protecting them from physical, sexual, psychological, financial, discriminatory abuse and neglect. Fighting Words accepts that in all matters concerning vulnerable adults, the welfare and protection of such adults is paramount.

The Fighting Words policy is based on guidelines and advice from [Safeguarding Ireland](#) and the HSE. Fighting Words is a signatory of the **Safeguarding Ireland Adult Safeguarding Charter**.

Per the Health Service Executive's *Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse: National Policy and Procedures*, a vulnerable person is defined as:

“an adult who is restricted in capacity to guard themselves against harm or exploitation or to report such harm or exploitation. This may arise as a result of physical or intellectual impairment and risk of abuse may be influenced by both context and individual circumstances.”<sup>16</sup>

Abuse of vulnerable adults can constitute the physical, psychological, emotional, financial or sexual maltreatment or neglect of a vulnerable adult by another person. The abuse may be a single act or repeated over a period of time and it may take one form or a multiple of forms. The lack of appropriate action can also be a form of abuse.

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<sup>16</sup> *Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse: National Policy and Procedures*, Health Service Executive, 2014, p. 5

### ***Key Principles in Vulnerable Adult Protection and Welfare***

- **Citizenship** confers a status on an individual whereby their fundamental right to dignity and respect and other basic human rights as well as their rights to participation in society are upheld and supported by the Constitution, by Ireland's human rights treaty commitments and by the laws of the State.
- **Person-centredness** is that principle which places the person as an individual at the heart and centre of any exchange requiring the provision or delivery of a service. Services are organised around what is important to the person from their perspective.
- **Empowerment** is that principle which recognises the right of the individual to lead as independent a life as possible and that supports the individual in every practical way to realise that right.
- **Self-directedness** recognises the right of the individual to self-determination to the greatest extent possible, including where this entails risk. Abiding by this principle means ensuring that risks are recognised, understood and minimised as far as possible, while supporting the person to pursue their goals and preferences.
- In accordance with the principles set out in this policy, it is recognised that **adults have the right to self-determination and to make decisions**, even if this means that they remain at risk. Where there are concerns regarding diminished capacity, consideration should be given to requesting a specialist assessment of the person's decision-making capacity in the context of the abuse allegations and the risk posed to the person.
- Equity should be applied in relation to transactions with and services to vulnerable adults. Resources and services should be provided to vulnerable people on the basis of need, using the principle of proportionality.
- **Safeguarding best interest** recognises the vulnerability of individuals where they are unable to make their own decisions and/or protect themselves, their assets or their bodily integrity and ensures appropriate and accountable protection for them.

### **2. Defining Abuse**

Fighting Words understands the definition of abuse in accordance with Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse National Policy and Procedures (p. 8):

"Any act, or failure to act, which results in a breach of a vulnerable person's human rights, civil liberties, physical and mental integrity, dignity or general wellbeing, whether intended or through negligence, including sexual relationships or financial transactions to which the person does not or cannot validly consent, or which are deliberately exploitative. Abuse may take a variety of forms."

Types of abuse are outlined in Appendix A of this document.

### **3. Barriers for Vulnerable Persons Disclosing Abuse**

Barriers to disclosure may occur due to some of the following:

- Fear on the part of the service user of having to leave their home or service as a result of disclosing abuse.
- A lack of awareness that what they are experiencing is abuse.
- A lack of clarity as to whom they should talk.
- Lack of capacity to understand and report the incident.
- Fear of an alleged abuser.
- Ambivalence regarding a person who may be abusive.
- Limited verbal and other communication skills.
- Fear of upsetting relationships.
- Shame and/or embarrassment.

### **4. How to Respond to a Disclosure of Abuse**

A vulnerable adult may carefully select a person to confide in. That chosen person will be someone they trust and have confidence in. It is important that a vulnerable adult who discloses abuse feels supported and facilitated in what may be a frightening and traumatic process for them. A vulnerable adult may feel perplexed, afraid, angry, despondent and guilty. It is important that any negative feelings they may have are not made worse by the kind of response they receive. A vulnerable adult who divulges abuse has engaged in an act of trust and their disclosure must be treated with respect, sensitivity, urgency and care.

**It is of the utmost importance that disclosures are treated in a sensitive and discreet manner. Anyone responding to a vulnerable adult making such a disclosure should take the following steps:**

- Take what the vulnerable adult says seriously.
- React calmly, as over-reaction may intimidate the vulnerable adult and increase any feelings of guilt that they may have.
- Reassure the vulnerable adult that they were correct to tell somebody what happened.
- Listen carefully and attentively.
- Never ask leading questions.
- Use open-ended questions to clarify what is being said and try to avoid having them repeat what they have told you.
- Do not promise to keep secrets.

- Advise that you will offer support but that you must pass on the information.
- Do not express any opinions about the alleged abuser to the person reporting to you.
- Explain and make sure that the vulnerable adult understands what will happen next.
- Do not confront the alleged abuser.

## 5. Reporting Procedures

Following a disclosure of abuse, staff/volunteers should:

- Write down immediately after the conversation what was said, including all the names of those involved, what happened, where, when, if there were any witnesses and any other significant factors and note any visible marks on the individual making the report or any signs you observed. The **Standard Reporting Form** is available for this purpose.
- Record the event, sign and date all reports and indicate the time the notes were made.
- Ensure that the information is treated with the utmost confidence.
- Allegations should not be investigated by employees/volunteers.
- Staff/volunteers should pass that report to the Designated Officer.

Under no circumstances should a vulnerable adult be left in a situation that exposes them to harm or to risk of harm.

In the event of an emergency where you think a vulnerable adult is in immediate danger you should contact the Gardaí in the first instance. The nearest Garda station to the Fighting Words centre in Dublin is Fitzgibbon Street Garda Station or ring 999/112.

### **Do you have a reasonable ground for concern that a vulnerable adult is being abused?**

Try to ensure so far as is possible that no situation arises that could cause any further risk to the vulnerable adult.

Record the facts as you know them. Staff and volunteers should pass that report to the Designated Officer using the Standard Reporting Form.

Include the following information:

- Person's name
- Address
- The nature of the concern, allegation or disclosure

Further advice about reporting concerns is available from Safeguarding Ireland:  
<https://www.safeguardingireland.org/reporting/>

## 6. Designated Officer(s)

In accordance with *Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse National Policy and Procedures* (p. 41) Fighting Words has appointed a Designated Officer and Deputy Designated Officer, who are responsible for:

- Receiving concerns or allegations of abuse regarding vulnerable persons
- Collating basic relevant information
- Ensuring the appropriate manager is informed and collaboratively ensuring necessary actions are identified
- Ensuring all reporting obligations are met (internally to the service and externally to the statutory authorities)
- Supporting the manager and other personnel in addressing the issues arising.
- Maintaining appropriate records.

Designated Officer:

**Sara Bennett**

Telephone: 087 274 6621

Email: [sara@fightingwords.ie](mailto:sara@fightingwords.ie)

Deputy Designated Officer:

**Mark Davidson**

Telephone: 086 046 1891

Email: [mark@fightingwords.ie](mailto:mark@fightingwords.ie)

## 7. Confidentiality

All information regarding concern for a vulnerable adult should be shared on 'a need to know' basis in the interests of the person concerned. The provision of information to the statutory agencies for the protection of a vulnerable adult is not a breach of confidentiality or data protection.

Staff/volunteers should not give any undertakings regarding secrecy.

## **Consent**

The consent of the vulnerable adult should be sought prior to reporting any matter to the statutory authorities and on to family and care service providers. Sometimes adults do not want civil authorities to take action to investigate or protect them from harm. If upon receipt of the concern, where the vulnerable adult does not give consent to reporting, and it not clear that a criminal act has taken place, and where the Designated Officer believes that others may also be at risk of harm, consultation should take place with civil authorities as to the best course of action in the absence of consent.

In considering the capacity of the vulnerable adult to give consent, the following factors should be taken into account:

- The adult has the capacity to understand what is being asked of them.
- Sufficient information is given, in a way that the person understands, to enable them to make an informed decision.
- Consent is not received through any form of coercion.

If the vulnerable adult is unable to give informed consent, discussions should take place with their carer/guardian/close family member about reporting concerns/allegations and, where appropriate, discussions should also take place with any medical or social work personnel. There may need to be a determination as to who can give consent on behalf of the vulnerable adult. In some cases, there may already be provision in place; consultation may be required with legal advisers and statutory authorities.

**Please note that the Designated Officer should not make determinations around capacity to give consent without consultation with appropriately trained and skilled personnel.**

**There is more information about safeguarding adults from Safeguarding Ireland- visit <https://www.safeguardingireland.org/> for more information.**

## **Section 6: RECRUITMENT OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS**

Fighting Words seeks to check thoroughly the background and suitability of all staff and volunteers. The procedure involves a number of checks and safeguards and no provisional offer of employment will be confirmed, nor employment or volunteering will commence, until all checks have been satisfied. No candidate who is deemed to be a risk to children or vulnerable adults will be employed or confirmed as a volunteer following the completion of the recruitment procedures.

It is important therefore to ensure that this recruitment process is thorough and no stage is omitted without agreement of the Operations Director and/or Executive Director.

### **1. Recruitment Processes for Paid Staff and Volunteers**

Applicants will be informed, via the details sent out and/or advertised as part of the recruitment process (e.g. on the application form), that Fighting Words will require personal disclosure that nothing in an applicant's background may preclude her or him from working with children and vulnerable adults so that applicants can make an informed choice as to whether to apply for the post. The details will also cover what checks will take place if they choose to apply. These checks will include:

#### *Application Form*

Applicants for paid positions will be asked to give a full account of their employment history alongside any voluntary experience on their application form, giving details of posts, names, addresses and contact numbers and reasons for leaving.

Applicants for voluntary positions will be asked to give an account of relevant experience. The form must be marked and dated confirming that the information is true, that the candidate gives permission for Fighting Words to approach previous employers, and that there is nothing in the applicant's personal or professional background that would preclude her or him from working with children and vulnerable adults. While electronic applications are accepted by the organisation, candidates must be able to produce signed copies at interview.

#### *Disclosure of Criminal Convictions/Prosecutions*

Applicants will be asked to declare all convictions/prosecutions whether spent or otherwise in the application form. Any disclosures should be treated in strict confidence. The information disclosed will not necessarily disqualify the application.

The Operations Director will decide as to whether the information disclosed is relevant to the post.

Applicants will have the opportunity to speak to the Executive Director, in confidence, about this aspect of the recruitment process should they wish to do so.

### *Interview*

Selected candidates for paid roles will be interviewed by a panel in accordance with the usual recruitment procedures. Candidates for voluntary roles will be interviewed by the Operations Director or relevant location coordinator. Applicants will be asked to account for any gaps on their application forms and to give details of what they were doing if not in employment or volunteering.

### *Garda Vetting<sup>17</sup>*

All staff members and volunteers over the age of 16 years at Fighting Words are legally required to be Garda vetted as the organisation provides assistance including the coaching, mentoring, counselling, teaching or training of children and vulnerable adults, per the National Vetting Bureau Act (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012-2016.

Vetting disclosures obtained by Fighting Words shall be deemed to apply to staff members and volunteers regardless of programme location.

Newly appointed staff are subject to Garda vetting in line with Fighting Words' probation policy. See the Staff Terms and Conditions for full details of the organisation's six-month probation period.

All volunteer mentors at Fighting Words over the age of 16 years are subject to Garda vetting<sup>18</sup>. The volunteer must complete the requisite form for processing by the National Vetting Bureau (Form NVB1) and supply two forms of identification, one confirming proof of address, to be held on file at Fighting Words.

Volunteers between the ages of 16 and 18 years are required to submit the parental consent form for vetting, Form NVB3, as well.

Once the volunteer/staff member's information has been submitted to the National Vetting Bureau, they will receive an email with the online vetting form, which should be completed within 30 days of receipt.

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<sup>17</sup> Fighting Words staff, interns and volunteers are vetted via the National Youth Council of Ireland as part of the consortium of youth-involving organisations in Ireland.

<sup>18</sup>

At time of writing, the processing time for vetting forms once the vetting subject has returned the form is approximately four working weeks.

A processed Garda Vetting Form application will indicate one or more of the following:

- o No previous convictions against the applicant
- o Convictions against the applicant
- o Prosecutions pending involving the applicant

Every applicant will be treated with care, respect and ultimately confidentiality in line with the Fighting Words Data Protection Policy.

Fighting Words may accept and/or employ applicants who return convictions or prosecutions that are not considered to be related to child protection or violence and abuse of adults, vulnerable or otherwise. Each disclosure shall be dealt with on its own merit(s).

#### *Re-vetting*

It is Fighting Words policy to conduct re-vetting of all volunteer mentors and paid staff **every three years**, in line with best practice.

#### *Verification of Identity*

Applicants must be able to produce two documents at interview that can confirm their full name, date of birth, proof of address and signature. These documents are also required for Garda vetting.

Candidates for paid roles also need to be able to produce a document that confirms their right to work in Ireland as part of our normal recruitment checks.

#### *References*

When a provisional offer of employment is made, references will be taken up, at least one of which must be the applicant's present or last employer.

#### **NB: Recruitment of volunteers**

Volunteers will go through all the same background checking procedures as paid staff.

Volunteers will be told when interviewed that the volunteer position being recruited for will involve working with children and the checks in Fighting Words' Child Protection and Vulnerable Policy will be followed.

Referees for volunteers may be colleagues, past employers, family friends – anyone who is not a relative and can confirm the volunteer's good character.

## **2. Responsibility for the Policy: The Designated Liaison Person**

Fighting Words' Designated Liaison Person is Sara Bennett, Operations Director. The primary responsibilities of the Designated Liaison Person are:

- Ensuring that the standard reporting procedure is followed so that suspected cases of child neglect and abuse and vulnerable adult neglect and abuse are referred promptly to the designated person in the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency or, in the event of an emergency and the unavailability of the Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, to An Garda Síochána.
- Ensuring that they are knowledgeable about child protection and undertake any training considered necessary to keep themselves updated on new developments.

## **3. Role of the Designated Liaison Person:**

- To be the first internal point of contact in the case of a report about the Code of Practice being breached. The Designated Liaison Person then has an obligation to report breaches to the Executive Director.
- To make arrangements for the conduct of inquiries when there has been a breach of the Code of Behaviour.
- Record keeping. Records are kept in compliance with the Data Protection Act/GDPR requirements. Fighting Words keeps records relating to:
  - o Attendance at programmes
  - o Accidents (accident records are reviewed regularly and any unusual patterns reported to senior management)
  - o Incidents
  - o Consent forms
  - o Any complaints or grievances
- Report suspicions and allegations of child abuse to the statutory authorities, e.g. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, or An Garda Síochána.
- Liaise between Fighting Words staff, children and the statutory authorities where necessary.
- Create and maintain links with the statutory authorities and other relevant agencies and resources groups.
- Facilitate the provision of support to any victim, volunteer, or employee making a referral and provide support also to the person against whom the allegation has been made.

- Advise the organisation, members, or staff on individual cases as necessary and appropriate.
- Advise on good practice.
- Organise and/or facilitate training and workshops on guidelines in child protection.
- Keep up-to-date on current developments regarding provision, practice, support services, legal obligations/requirements and policy.

## **Section 7 – STAFF AND VOLUNTEER PROTECTION PROCEDURE**

### **The Code of Behaviour**

As part of the policy on child and vulnerable adult protection, Fighting Words has developed a Code of Behaviour, which forms part of this policy document. We believe that by following it, children and vulnerable adults will be protected from abuse. It will also protect staff, volunteers and those involved with Fighting Words from their actions being misinterpreted.

Alleged breaches of the Code of Behaviour regarding a staff member or volunteer should be made under the procedure outlined above. If a breach of Code of Behaviour is found following an investigation, action will be taken under the organisation's disciplinary procedure or volunteer policy, as appropriate.

Members of staff and volunteers are protected in making allegations of breaches of the Code of Behaviour against another staff member provided the allegations are made reasonably and in good faith. If an allegation of a breach of the Code of Behaviour is found to be made unreasonably and not in good faith, the staff member or volunteer whom the allegation was made against may make a complaint under the Fighting Words grievance procedure. If such a complaint is upheld, action may be taken against the complainant under the organisation's disciplinary procedures or volunteer supervision policy, as appropriate.

In the case of staff members, the normal application of the rules of suspension as outlined under Fighting Words' discipline and grievance procedures will apply if required in order to carry out an investigation of a breach of the Code of Behaviour.

### **Provision of Support**

If an alleged incident of abuse takes place in connection with Fighting Words activities, the organisation undertakes to provide support for the alleged victims and the person against whom the allegation has been made while any investigation, either by the statutory authorities or internally, Fighting Words will seek to ensure that any continuing support needed after a situation has been resolved is made available.

## **Training and Support**

- Fighting Words will in the first instance ensure that all staff are aware of the Child Protection Policy and have signed the Code of Behaviour.
- Fighting Words requires all staff and volunteers to follow the Code of Behaviour.
- All managers and location coordinators have the responsibility to ensure that the staff for which they are responsible have access to, are aware of and have signed the Code of Behaviour.
- All staff members have a responsibility to ensure that any events they have planned will include a provision of the need for consideration of child/vulnerable adult protection issues.
- Training will be provided for those in designated jobs on how to maintain exemplary standards in safeguarding children and vulnerable adults as required.
- Staff and volunteer mentors will also be required to review and sign the Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy every three years or in the case of significant material changes, whichever is sooner.

## **Section 7: CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT**

At Fighting Words, we are committed to ensuring everyone's right to confidentiality. The effective protection of a child often depends on the willingness of staff in statutory and voluntary organisations involved with children to share and exchange relevant information.

It is therefore critical that there is a clear understanding of professional and legal responsibilities with regard to confidentiality and the exchange of information.

In relation to child protection and welfare, however, we undertake that:

- Information will only be given on a "need to know" basis in order to safeguard the child or vulnerable adult.
- Giving such information to others for the protection of a child or vulnerable adult is not a breach of confidentiality or data protection.
- We cannot guarantee total confidentiality where the best interests of the child or vulnerable adult are at risk.
- Information gathered for one purpose will not be used for another purpose without consulting the person who provided that information.
- Parents/carers/responsible adults, as well as children and vulnerable adults, have a right to know if personal information is being shared and/or a report to the Tusla (or other statutory authority) is being made, unless doing so could put the child or vulnerable adult at risk.

- Images of children will not be used for any reason without the consent of the parent/carer (we cannot, however, guarantee that cameras/videos will not be used at public sessions).
- Procedures are in place on the use of images of children.
- Procedures are in place for the safe and confidential storage of personal information and records in line with our confidentiality policy and Data Protection Act obligations.
- Personnel records for staff and volunteers are stored in a locked filing cabinet and in an encrypted SSL-protected database. Sara Bennett, Operations Director, has access to staff records. Sara Bennett, Mark Davidson, Louise Melinn and Emmy Lugoye have access to volunteer records.

## **Section 8: COMPLAINTS AND COMMENTS PROCEDURE**

For issues in relation to children, primary carers and staff:

- Written complaints and comments will be acknowledged as soon as possible and responded to in writing within three weeks of receipt.
- Verbal complaints will be logged and responded to in writing within three weeks of receipt.
- The Designated Liaison Person, i.e. the Operations Director, will have responsibility for directing complaints and comments to the appropriate person. The Designated Liaison Person is Sara Bennett – 087 274 6621 or [sara@fightingwords.ie](mailto:sara@fightingwords.ie)
- The Designated Liaison Person will investigate complaints as necessary and respond and respond within the timeframe outlined above.

## **Section 10: ACCIDENTS PROCEDURE**

- In Dublin, the First Aid box is available, clearly labelled and regularly re-stocked in both units at the Fighting Words centre.
- Incident books are clearly labelled and easily available and all incidents recorded.
- Fighting Words staff trained as First Aid Responders:
  - o Sara Bennett, Operations Director
  - o Emmy Lugoye, IT Administrator
  - o Colm Quearney, Outreach Coordinator
  - o Bríd-Treasa Wyndham, Irish Language Programmes Coordinator
  - o Mark Davidson, Programmes Manager
- Availability of first aid will be in accordance with health and safety legislation at the Fighting Words centre. Where volunteers and staff are involved in a Fighting Words programme or event offsite, e.g. at a school/library/other organisation, we endeavour to ensure that availability of first aid will be in accordance with health and safety legislation.

- Fighting Words has public liability insurance in place to cover accidents on the premises.
- Children and young people will be advised of risks of any dangerous materials.
- Details of risky equipment used will be recorded and steps taken to minimise risk.
- Outside organisations hosting Fighting Words events will be required to provide proof that they have public liability insurance.
- **No running in the Fighting Words centre by anyone at any time.**

## Section 11 – INVOLVEMENT OF PRIMARY CARERS

Fighting Words is committed to being open with all primary carers, i.e. parents and guardians.

We undertake to:

- Advise primary carers of our child and vulnerable adult protection policy
- Inform primary carers and schools of all activities or potential activities during Fighting Words programmes
- Issue contact/consent forms where relevant
- Comply with health and safety practices
- Operate child-centred and person-centred policies in accordance with best practice
- Adhere to our recruitment guidelines for volunteers and staff
- Ensure as far as possible that activities are age appropriate
- Facilitate the involvement of parent(s), carer(s) or responsible adult(s), where appropriate

If we have concerns about the welfare of a child or vulnerable adult, we will:

- Respond to the needs of the child or vulnerable adult
- Inform the primary carers on an ongoing basis unless this action puts the child or vulnerable adult at further risk. It is not necessary to inform the family that a report is being made, if by doing so the child will be placed at further risk or in cases where the family's knowledge of the report could impair Tusla's ability to carry out an assessment. Also, it is not necessary to inform the family if the person making the report reasonably believes it may place them at risk of harm from the family.
- Where there are child protection and welfare concerns, we are obliged to pass these on to the Tusla Duty Social Worker and, in an emergency, the Gardaí.
- In the event of a complaint against a staff member or volunteer, we will take such steps as are necessary to ensure the safety of the child or vulnerable adult and inform primary carers as appropriate.

As a child-centred and person-centred organisation, Fighting Words is committed to putting the interest of the child and vulnerable adult first.

To that end, we will:

- Have the Child Safeguarding Statement available at all Fighting Words locations and on our website.
- Contact the Tusla and/or the Gardaí where there is a child protection concern or the relevant statutory authorities in the case of a vulnerable adult protection concern
- Encourage primary carers to work in partnership with us under the guidelines set out by our organisation to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults
- Have a designated contacted person available for consultation with primary carers in the case of any concern about a child or vulnerable adult's welfare. At present, this person is Sara Bennett, Designated Liaison Person.

## **Section 12 - INFORMATION FOR CHILDREN**

In Ireland, no matter what age you are, you have the right to be protected from all forms of abuse, violence and exploitation. It can be hard to recognise some types of abuse. If you are experiencing abuse, it can be difficult to open up but talking to someone about what is going on is a good first step.

### **What legal protection do I have from abuse in Ireland?**

The State has a legal duty to look after your safety and welfare. There are laws and organisations in Ireland that work to protect children and young people from abuse, exploitation and to investigate and punish abusers. The Gardaí and Director of Public Prosecutions may have a role to play in prosecuting people that cause harm to children and young people.

### **What is abuse?**

There are four types of child abuse:

- neglect
- emotional
- physical
- sexual

You may experience one or more forms of abuse at any given time.

### **What is neglect?**

Neglect is when an adult fails to take care of you, and this causes you significant harm or stops you developing properly. Neglect may include:

- not being properly fed, kept warm or clothed
- not being kept safe
- not getting attention and affection from adults
- not bringing you to school
- not getting medical care for you, if you need it
- Neglect is something that happens over time and not just at one specific point.

### **What is emotional abuse?**

Emotional abuse usually happens when an adult:

- is not affectionate or does not support you
- acts in a controlling way to you
- frequently speaks to you in a way that is not respectful
- is critical of you
- frequently makes you feel unsafe
- This form of abuse is more about the kind of relationship you have with an adult rather than particular incidents that take place. It can result in you feeling insecure, unhappy, having low self-esteem and underachieving in school or in other aspects of your life.

### **What is physical abuse?**

Physical abuse happens when an adult causes you harm through physical punishment or by failing to take action to stop you from being physically hurt when it is possible to do so.

This type of abuse includes severe physical punishment or deliberately hurting you. It can include, but is not limited to:

- slapping
- hitting
- pinching
- watching someone else hurt you and not stopping it
- terrorising you with threats
- What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse or exploitation happens when an adult uses you for sexual purposes. This may include:

- touching you in a wrong way
- having sex with you
- forcing you to watch an adult engage in a sexual act

- showing you material of a sexual nature
- wrongful sexual relationships between you and an adult
- trafficking and being exploited for prostitution

**What should I do if I feel that I am being treated badly, do not feel safe or have been abused?**

You have a right to be protected from all forms of abuse. The most important thing, if you experience any kind of abuse at home, school or anywhere else, is that you tell an adult that you trust so they can help and support you.

Then you or an adult you trust should contact your local social worker in Tusla (The Child and Family Agency). To find out their contact details see the Tusla website.

If you need help in an emergency or outside office hours (9am to 5pm Monday to Friday), you, or an adult you trust can contact your nearest Garda station or ring the emergency phone line, either 999 or 112.

If you are worried about yourself, a person you know or a friend, you can talk to Childline. You can also call the Rape Crisis Helpline.

**Will the person I tell be able to keep it confidential?**

Certain professionals like counsellors, teachers and doctors by law have to tell Tusla if you tell them that you have been harmed or are at risk of being harmed. If you would like to talk more about this, you can talk to Childline for free.

**What is Tusla?**

The Child and Family Agency, also known as Tusla, is the national organisation that is responsible for the safety and welfare of children in Ireland. If you cannot live with your family, Tusla is responsible for making sure you have a place to live and adults to look after you.

**What is the role of a social worker?**

Social workers are part of a service that is provided by Tusla. They help and support children who may be at risk of harm or who are not safe. It is the job of social workers to protect and support you if you are feeling unsafe at home or in your life.

**How do I contact a social worker?**

Social workers are available from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. There are social workers across Ireland. To contact a social worker in your area, you will need to contact your local Tusla social work duty service. You can do this by phone, email or by

calling into the office. You can get contact details for social workers by ringing your local social work office, the number is on the Tusla website.

### **What is the role of An Garda Síochána?**

An Garda Síochána is the national police service in Ireland. It is their job to make sure you are safe and do not come to any harm. There are local Garda stations across Ireland. The free, emergency Garda phone numbers are 999 or 112. The Gardaí are available 24 hours a day.

### **What kind of family supports are available to help me and my family?**

Family support services are available to help you and your family deal with difficult situations like:

- conflict in the family
- access to education
- separation
- the death of someone close to you
- addictions

These supports may include counselling, support groups, social worker visits or working with family support workers. The support services will do all they can to make sure that you can stay with your family, if they think that is the best thing for you. You can get more information on these supports through Tusla.

### **Where can I find more information?**

You can read more about your rights in the *Know Your Rights* Guide, which is available from the Children's Rights Alliance website: <https://childrensrights.ie/know-your-rights/>

## **Section 13 - POLICY REVIEW**

The policy will be reviewed bi-annually and/or as necessary. The next review is due in October 2026.

## APPENDIX A – Definitions of Child Abuse<sup>19</sup>

### What is child abuse?

It is generally acknowledged that there are four types of abuse:

**Physical abuse** of a child is that which results in actual or potential physical harm from an interaction, or lack of interaction, which is reasonably within the control of a parent or person in a position of responsibility, power or trust. There may be single or repeated incidents.

Physical abuse can involve:

- Severe physical punishment beating, slapping, hitting or kicking, pushing, shaking or throwing, pinching, biting, choking or hair-pulling.
- Terrorising with threats.
- Observing violence.
- Use of excessive force in handling.
- Deliberate poisoning.
- Suffocation.
- Fabricated/induced illness.

Allowing or creating a substantial risk of significant harm to a child

**Emotional Abuse** is normally to be found in the relationship between a parent/carer and a child rather than in a specific event or pattern of events. It occurs when a child's needs for affection, approval, consistency and security are not met. Unless other forms of abuse are present, it is rarely manifested in terms of physical symptoms.

Examples of emotional abuse can include:

- The imposition of negative attributes on a child, expressed by persistent criticism, sarcasm, hostility or blaming.
- Conditional parenting in which the level of care shown to a child is made contingent on his or her behaviours or actions.
- Emotional unavailability of the child's parent/carer.
- Unresponsiveness of the parent/carer and/or inconsistent or inappropriate expectations of the child.
- Premature imposition of responsibility on the child. Unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of the child's capacity to understand something or to behave and control himself or herself in a certain way.
- Under- or over-protection of the child.
- Failure to show interest in, or provide age-appropriate opportunities for, the child's cognitive and emotional development.
- Use of unreasonable or over-harsh disciplinary measures
- Exposure to domestic violence.
- Exposure to inappropriate or abusive material through new technology.

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<sup>19</sup> For more information, see *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children*.

Emotional abuse can be manifested in terms of the child's behavioural, cognitive, affective or physical functioning. Examples of these include insecure attachment, unhappiness, low self-esteem, educational and developmental under-achievement and oppositional behaviour.

The *threshold of significant harm* is reached when abusive interactions dominate and become *typical* of the relationship between the child and the parent/carer.

**Sexual Abuse** occurs when a child is used by another person for their gratification or sexual arousal, or for that of others, for example:

- Exposure of the sexual organs or any sexual act intentionally performed in the presence of a child
- Intentional touching or molesting of the body of a child whether by a person or object for the purpose of sexual arousal or gratification

Masturbation in the presence of a child or involvement of the child in the act of masturbation

- Sexual intercourse with a child, whether oral, vaginal or anal

Sexual exploitation of a child, which includes inciting, encouraging, propositioning, requiring or permitting a child to solicit for, or to engage in, prostitution or other sexual acts.

Sexual exploitation also occurs when a child is involved in the exhibition, modelling or posing for the purpose of sexual arousal, gratification or sexual act, including its recording (on film, videotape or other media) or the manipulation, for those purposes, of the image by computer or other means. It may also include showing sexually explicit material to children, which is often a feature of the "grooming" process by perpetrators of abuse.

Consensual sexual activity involving an adult and an underage person. In relation to child sexual abuse, it should be noted that, for the purposes of the criminal law, the age of consent to sexual intercourse is 17 years for both boys and girls. An Garda Síochána will deal with the criminal aspects of the case under the relevant legislation.

***It should be noted that the definition of child sexual abuse presented here is not a legal definition and is not intended to be a description of the criminal offence of sexual assault.***

**Neglect** can normally be defined in terms of an omission, where a child suffers significant harm or impairment of development by being deprived of food, clothing, warmth, hygiene, intellectual stimulation, supervision and safety, attachment to and affection from adults, or medical care.

Harm can be defined as the ill treatment or the impairment of the health or development of a child. Whether it is *significant* is determined by their health and development as compared to that which could reasonably be expected of a child of a similar age.

Neglect generally becomes apparent in different ways over a period of time rather than at one specific point. For example, a child who suffers a series of minor injuries may not be having his

or her needs met in terms of necessary supervision and safety. A child whose height and weight is significantly below average may be being deprived of adequate nutrition. A child who consistently misses school may be deprived of intellectual stimulation.

The *threshold of significant harm* is reached when the child's needs are neglected to the extent that his or her well-being and/or development are severely affected.

### **Recognising Child Neglect or Abuse**

Child neglect or abuse can be difficult to identify and may present in many forms. A list of indicators is contained in the *Children First* guidelines. No one indicator should be seen as conclusive in itself of abuse. It may indicate conditions other than child abuse. All signs and symptoms must be examined in the context of the child's situation and family circumstances.

### **Guidelines for Recognition**

The ability to recognise child abuse can depend as much on a person's unwillingness to accept the possibility of its existence as it does on their knowledge and information. There are commonly three stages in the identification of child neglect or abuse:

- Considering the possibility
- Looking out for signs of neglect or abuse
- Recording of information

Further information about each of these stages is available in the *Children First* guidelines.

It is not your responsibility to identify abuse, but it is your responsibility to report your concerns.

## APPENDIX B – Definitions of Abuse of Vulnerable Adults

For the purposes of this policy, vulnerable adult abuse is any mistreatment that violates a person's human and civil rights. The abuse can vary from treating someone with disrespect in a way which significantly affects the person's quality of life, to causing actual physical suffering.

A vulnerable adult may be subjected to more than one form of abuse at any given time.

**Physical abuse** such as hitting, pushing, pinching, shaking, misusing medication, scalding, restraint, hair pulling

**Sexual abuse** such as rape, sexual assault or sexual acts to which the vulnerable adult has not or could not have consented, or two which they were pressurised into consenting.

**Psychological or emotional abuse** such as threats of harm or abandonment, being deprived of social or any other form of contact, humiliation, blaming, controlling, intimidation, coercion, harassment, verbal abuse, being prevented from receiving services or support.

**Financial or material abuse** such as theft, fraud, or exploitation, pressure in connection with wills, property or inheritance, possessions or benefits.

**Neglect** such as ignoring medical or physical care needs and preventing access to health, social care or education services or withholding the necessities of life such as food, drink and heating.

**Discriminatory abuse** such as that based on race, sexuality, a person's ability and other forms of harassment or slurs.

**Domestic abuse** refers to the use of physical or emotional force or threat of physical harm, including sexual violence in close adult relationships. This includes violence perpetrated by a spouse, partner, son or daughter or any other person who has a close or blood relationship with the victim. The term "domestic violence" goes beyond actual physical violence. It can also involve emotional abuse, the destruction of property, isolation from friends, family and other potential sources of support, threats to others including children, stalking, and control over access to money, personal items, food, transportation and the telephone.

**Elder abuse** occurs with persons over the age of 65 years. Concerns in relation to elder abuse should be reported to the relevant Public Health Nurse or to the HSE Senior Case Worker for the Protection of Older People.

## **APPENDIX C – Anti-Bullying: Policy for Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection**

### **1. Introduction**

Fighting Words is committed to creating a safe, inclusive, and creative environment where all children, young people, and vulnerable adults can express themselves freely without fear of bullying, harassment, or discrimination.

This policy is developed in line with:

- Bí Cineálta: Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour (2024)
- Children First Act 2015
- Equal Status Acts 2000–2018
- Fighting Words Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy (2026)

Bullying interferes with the rights of the child (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) and undermines the values of respect, creativity and kindness that Fighting Words upholds.

### **2. Definition of Bullying Behaviour**

Bullying is targeted, repeated behaviour (online or offline) that:

- Causes harm (physical, emotional, or social).
- Involves an imbalance of power (e.g., age, size, social status, disability, race, gender or other factors).
- Is deliberate and unwanted by the person experiencing it.

#### **Examples of bullying include:**

- Physical: Hitting, pushing, damaging property.
- Verbal: Name-calling, insults, threats or offensive jokes.
- Relational: Exclusion, spreading rumours, manipulating friendships.
- Online (Cyberbullying): Harmful messages, sharing private images without consent, impersonation, or exclusion from online groups.
- Identity-Based: Racist, homophobic, transphobic, sexist, disablist or religious bullying.

#### **Not bullying (but still unacceptable):**

- One-off arguments or disagreements.
- Accidental harm (though this should still be addressed).
- Behaviour from students with special educational needs that is not deliberate (e.g., social communication difficulties).

### **Criminal Behaviour:**

Some forms of bullying may be illegal, including:

- Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law): Sharing intimate images without consent.
- Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989: Racist or hate speech.
- Assault or Sexual Harassment: Physical violence or unwanted sexual advances.

### **3. Scope**

This policy applies to:

- All staff, volunteers, interns, visiting writers/artists and contractors working with Fighting Words.
- All children, young people and vulnerable adults participating in Fighting Words programmes (on-site, off-site, or online).
- Online spaces managed by Fighting Words (e.g., social media, virtual workshops).

### **4. Prevention Strategies**

Fighting Words will:

- Promote a culture of kindness and respect through workshops, training, and creative activities.
- Train staff and volunteers on recognising and addressing bullying (including cyberbullying, identity-based bullying, and sexual harassment).
- Supervise activities to ensure safe physical and online spaces (e.g., visible supervision in workshops, monitoring of digital platforms).
- Encourage reporting by:
  - Designating trusted adults (e.g., workshop leaders, Operations Director) for participants to confide in.
  - Providing anonymous reporting options (e.g., suggestion boxes, digital forms).
  - Ensuring no retaliation against those who report bullying.
- Display this policy prominently in centres, on the website, and in participant packs.
- Collaborate with parents/guardians to reinforce anti-bullying messages at home.

### **Specific Measures:**

- Cyberbullying: Clear rules on digital behaviour (e.g., no sharing of private images, respectful online communication).
- Identity-Based Bullying: Workshops on diversity, inclusion, and challenging stereotypes.

- Sexual Harassment: Zero-tolerance approach; training on consent and respectful relationships.

## **5. Reporting and Addressing Bullying**

### **5.1 How to Report**

- Participants: Tell a trusted adult (staff/volunteer), use anonymous reporting tools, or contact the Designated Liaison Person (DLP):
  - Sara Bennett (Operations Director): 087 274 6621 | sara@fightingwords.ie
  - Deputy DLP: Mark Davidson (Programmes Manager): 086 046 1891 | mark@fightingwords.ie
- Staff/Volunteers: Report concerns to the DLP immediately. Use the Fighting Words Incident Report Form (Appendix D of Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy).

### **5.2 Steps to Address Bullying**

1. Listen and Reassure:
  - Take the report seriously. Reassure the person that they are not to blame and that action will be taken.
  - Do not promise confidentiality if the safety of others is at risk.
2. Record the Incident:
  - Document what, where, when, who was involved, and any witnesses.
  - Use the Standard Reporting Form..
3. Investigate:
  - Speak to all parties individually first, then as a group if needed.
  - Avoid leading questions (For example, not "Did X hit you?" Instead: "Can you tell me what happened?").
4. Take Action:
  - Stop the bullying immediately (e.g., separate participants, remove online content).
  - Support the person experiencing bullying (e.g., check-ins, counselling referrals).
  - Address the behaviour of the person bullying (e.g., education on impact, restorative practices if appropriate).
  - Inform parents/guardians (unless doing so would put the child at further risk).
5. Follow Up:
  - Check in with all parties within 20 days to ensure the bullying has stopped.
  - If bullying continues, escalate to disciplinary action (e.g., suspension from programmes) or external authorities (Tusla, An Garda Síochána) if necessary.

### **5.3 Child Protection Concerns**

If bullying involves significant harm (physical, emotional, or sexual abuse), or if measures to stop it are ineffective:

- Report to Tusla (Child and Family Agency) via the DLP.
- Contact An Garda Síochána if there is immediate danger or criminal behaviour.

### **6. Support for Those Involved**

- For those experiencing bullying:
  - Offer emotional support (e.g., counselling, peer mentoring).
  - Provide safety plans (e.g., changing workshop groups, supervised breaks).
- For those displaying bullying behaviour:
  - Educate on the impact of their actions.
  - Identify underlying issues (e.g., lack of empathy, personal struggles).
  - Refer to support services if needed (e.g., NEPS, youth workers).
- For witnesses:
  - Encourage bystander intervention (e.g., reporting, supporting peers).

### **7. Confidentiality and Record-Keeping**

- Confidentiality: Information is shared on a need-to-know basis to protect those involved.
- Records: All incidents are documented and stored securely (in line with GDPR and Data Protection Acts).
- Retention: Records are kept for seven years or as required by law.

### **8. Review and Oversight**

- Annual Review: This policy will be reviewed annually (next review: May 2027) in consultation with staff, volunteers, participants, and parents.
- Monitoring: The Operations Director will track incidents and report trends to the Board of Directors quarterly.
- Feedback: Participants, parents, and staff are encouraged to provide input on the policy's effectiveness.

### **10. Related Policies and Contacts**

- Fighting Words Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy (2026)
- Code of Behaviour for Staff and Volunteers
- Health and Safety Policy

- Tusla: [www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie) | Duty Social Work Team (Dublin North City): 01 856 6856
- An Garda Síochána: 999/112 (emergencies) | Fitzgibbon Street Station: 01 666 8400
- Childline: 1800 66 66 66 | [www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie)
- Webwise (Online Safety): [www.webwise.ie](http://www.webwise.ie)

## APPENDIX D - Fighting Words Standard Notification Form (Sample)

|        |       |
|--------|-------|
| Date:  | Time: |
| Place: |       |

Type of incident, e.g. disturbance, theft, accident:

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|  |

Staff and/or volunteer involved:

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|--|
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|  |

Persons involved in the incident:

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|  |

Description of incident – include the time, those involved, clearly and logically:

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Name and addresses of witnesses:

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Action taken:

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|              |       |
|--------------|-------|
| Prepared by: | Date: |
| Signature:   |       |

## **APPENDIX E – Talking to Parents/Guardians about Child Protection or Welfare Concerns<sup>20</sup>**

Staff and volunteers may feel uncomfortable approaching a parent about a concern. You may have to discuss a concern about the welfare or protection of a child/young person or an issue which relates to the child/young person's developmental needs.

The following best practice tips may be useful:

- Make sure parents/guardians have prior awareness of the Fighting Words guiding principles, procedures and duties to safeguard children.
- Be straightforward and clearly explain the nature of the concern or issue, e.g., by using facts and records of observations made.
- Think about the time and place to have the conversation. Find a time when parents/guardians are not in a hurry.
- Find a place that is quiet and allows privacy.
- Consider arranging to meet parents/guardians.
- Consider with the Designated Liaison Person who is best placed to have the conversation with the parents/guardians.
- Use a calm and gentle tone, consider the language used.
- Start with positive comments and observations about the child/young person. Ensure that the parents/guardians know that you care about the welfare of their child and recognise their strengths.
- Refer to how the situation may be affecting the child/young person.
- Start with positive comments and observations about the parents/guardians. Most parents/guardians are trying to do their best for their children and will appreciate your acknowledgement of how challenging parenting can be at times.
- Give the parents/ guardians an opportunity to talk; ask them for an explanation and acknowledge their feelings.
- Take the approach that you are working together to address any issues in the best interests of the child/young person.
- Don't blame, don't get defensive and don't take things personally.
- Ensure that you are supportive but also address the issue.
- Refer to your guiding principles and child safeguarding procedures for support.
- Offer possible solutions, where appropriate.
- Advise parents/guardians how you plan to follow up and keep them informed and involved, where appropriate. Where it is not possible to contact the

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<sup>20</sup> Based on *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017* and *Child Safeguarding – A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*

parents/guardians to discuss a concern you may need to discuss the concern with the DLP or Tusla duty social worker through the Dedicated Contact Point.

**Remember if a report needs to be made to Tusla, do not delay.**

It is best practice that parents/guardians are informed if a report is to be made to Tusla, unless doing so might further endanger the child, impair Tusla's ability to carry out an assessment or put the reporter at risk of harm.

## APPENDIX F – Useful Contacts and Publications

### Organisations

#### Tusla - Child and Family Agency

Dublin North City  
Ballymun Healthcare Facility, Ballymun Civic Centre, Dublin 9  
Telephone: 01 846 7129  
Email: [linda.creamer@tusla.ie](mailto:linda.creamer@tusla.ie)

The Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, operates an out of hours Crisis Intervention Service in the Dublin area, which can be accessed by emergency services like hospitals and the Garda Síochána outside of office hours.

The Tusla Duty Social Work Team for the North Inner City area can be contacted on **01 856 6856**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

**Out of Hours Social Work Service for Mandated Persons** – Mandated persons can access Tusla's emergency out-of-hours social work service. If you are a mandated person and wish to make a mandated report, contact the out-of-hours social work service on 0818 776 315 between 6pm and 6am every night and between 9am and 5pm on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays.

#### **For non-mandated persons, in an emergency, you should contact the Garda Síochána.**

Outside office hours all child and vulnerable adult protection concerns should be referred to the Gardaí.

#### An Garda Síochána

Fitzgibbon Street Station  
23-28 Fitzgibbon Street, Dublin 1, D01 XT54  
Tel: 01 666 8400  
Website: [www.garda.ie](http://www.garda.ie)

### Publications

The following are available from Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, at <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/publications-and-forms/>

- *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children.*
- *Child Safeguarding – A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*
- *A Guide for the Reporting of Child Protection and Welfare Concerns.*
- *Online Safety, 2019.*
- *Dealing with Adult Retrospective Disclosures of Childhood Abuse, 2019.*

*Our Duty to Care: The Principles of Good Practice for the Protection of Children and Young People.* Published by the Department of Health and Children. Available in the Government Publications Office or online at <http://www.dohc.ie/publications/pdf/ourduty.pdf?direct=1>

*Code of Good Practice: Child Protection for the Youth Work Sector.* Published by the Department of Education and Science. Available in the Government Publications Office or online at [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/youth\\_cpyws.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/youth_cpyws.pdf)

*Identifying Risks, Sharing Responsibilities – The Case for a Comprehensive Approach to Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults*, published by Safeguarding Ireland and available:  
<https://www.safeguardingireland.org/resources/>

*Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons at Risk of Abuse: National Policy and Procedures*. Published by the HSE Social Care Division. <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/corporate/personsatriskofabuse.pdf>

*Guidelines for Taking and Using Images of Children and Young People in the Arts Sector*, published by The Arts Council, 2009 <https://www.artscouncil.ie/uploadedFiles/Guidelines.pdf>

## Fighting Words Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby declare and warrant that there is no reason known to me and there are no convictions, claims or complaints (past or pending) against me relating to children and vulnerable adults that would deem me to be unsuitable to work with children and vulnerable adults and carry out my role within this organisation.

I understand that my making a false declaration would be grounds for dismissal or the termination of my contract on any project on which I was engaged.

I confirm that I have read, understood, and agree to abide by the Fighting Words Child and Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy, with specific reference to **Section 3: Reporting Procedures - What To Do If You Think A Child May Be Being Abused**, regarding my statutory duties under Irish criminal law.

By signing below, I acknowledge that:

1. I understand my personal duty of care under Section 176 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 to prevent the reckless endangerment of children.
2. I understand that under the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information) Act 2012, I have a personal legal obligation to report material information regarding serious offences against children and vulnerable adults to An Garda Síochána.
3. I recognise that reporting an issue internally to the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) fulfills internal organisational policy, but does not remove my personal statutory responsibility to ensure that serious criminal details reach the police.
4. I understand that workplace confidentiality, organisational loyalty, or promises of secrecy do not legally qualify as a "reasonable excuse" for withholding information.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_