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Approved by Tusla Crisis Management Team – COVID-19

Contingency Planning Guidance for Families living in Homeless Emergency Accommodation during the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis

Introduction

In response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, Tusla has introduced specific measures in relation to the provision of essential services for the duration of the period of the public health crisis - www.tusla.ie/about/COVID-19-update.

As a critical service provider of essential frontline services for children and families, Tusla is focused on ensuring that essential services for children and families are maintained. The three main areas of focus during COVID-19 are:

- Child protection and children in care
- Emergency out of hours services
- Domestic, sexual and gender based violence services

Tusla is working closely with our HSE colleagues to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The HSE provides regular updates on its website with up-to-date information on the evolving situation:

- For general guidance - <http://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>
- Advice for children and parents - <https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/child-health/advice-children-parents-COVID-19.html#moves>
- HSE guidance for vulnerable groups - <https://www.hpsc.ie/az/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/vulnerablegroupsguidance>

County and city councils are coordinating a community response framework, known as 'Community Call', with the participation of Tusla along with Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC), Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs), and statutory, community and voluntary partners and volunteers. You can find more information here - <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6dd895-COVID-19-communication-pack-for-communities/>

Legislation and national policy

- Children First Act 2015 and Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017
- Signs of Safety national approach to practice – Safety Planning and Safety Networks

- http://hsenet.hse.ie/childfamilyagency/covid_19_Additional_Guidance_CP_W_contacts_compressed.pdf
- Meitheal Early Intervention Practice Model and Child and Family Support Networks - <https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/parenting-information/how-do-children-and-families-get-extra-help-when-they-need-it/>
- Child Care Act 1991

Purpose of this guidance

The purpose of this guidance is to inform Tusla staff about the Agency's collaboration with local county and city councils, with CYPSC and CFSNs, and partners in the community supporting families. It provides information on various scenarios that may arise in the context of the current COVID-19 crisis for parents living in homeless emergency accommodation.

Contingency plan guidelines for parents or guardians

The parent or guardian of a child is the primary care giver and decision maker for the children in their care. This means that they make the decisions regarding who they want to care for their children in a situation where they are absent or incapacitated through illness or injury. This care can be short term or long term. This is the most natural response when a situation arises where a parent is unable to provide care to their children. It also means that the children are most likely being cared for by someone they are familiar with and have a relationship and be safe with. Services should request parents and guardians to identify and provide details of same to enable contact during the crisis period.

In the overwhelming majority of circumstances, a parent will be able to make a determination as to who is a suitable and responsible adult who they believe should be able to safely care for their children if they are unavailable to do so themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents specific situations where the interests of public health and the right of a child to be with their parent or guardian and/or the right of a parent to make decisions regarding the care of their children, may come into conflict.

All parents living in emergency accommodation should be asked to consider if they can nominate another adult who they would want to take care of their children if they found themselves in a situation where they were either too ill within their own accommodation to care for their children or they required hospitalisation. The parents should be asked to ensure that their nominated person is agreeable to doing so and they should make the manager of the accommodation centre aware in advance who they are nominating. A parent can nominate a number of different individuals. These potential designated carers can either be other residents or members of the community.

There are several key concerns which have been identified as specific issues that need particular attention in congregated residential settings:

Self-quarantine/restricted movement

1. If a parent or guardian is required to self-quarantine based on the public health advice, their child or children should self-quarantine with them, unless they wish and

have nominated another person who can care for their child or children during this 14-day period.

2. If a child has been exposed to COVID-19, or is required to self-quarantine by public health but is not symptomatic, they should be quarantined together with their parent or guardian unless public health direct otherwise. A child cannot be requested to self-quarantine on their own. This should take place within their accommodation.

Self-isolation

1. If a parent or guardian presents with symptoms of COVID-19 and is asked to self-isolate, their children will remain in their care during this time.
2. If a child presents with symptoms of COVID-19 and is asked to self-isolate, their parent or guardian will self-isolate with them.
3. If a parent, guardian or child is diagnosed as positive for COVID-19, the family unit will self-isolate as a unit.
4. If a parent or guardian becomes so unwell that they are no longer able to care for their child or children within the accommodation, or the parent or guardian requires hospitalisation, the parent or guardian can opt for one of their nominees to care for their children at that time.
 - As the children would have been close contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case, their designated carer would have to self-isolate together with the children.
 - The children cannot be requested to self-isolate alone.
 - If the carer has their own children to care for, their family and the children requiring self-isolation would all have to self-isolate as a unit, unless the designated carer was able to designate someone else to care for their own children, in which case, the designated carer would self-isolate with the children required to self-isolate.

It may not always be possible for the self-isolation of the enlarged group to take place within the emergency accommodation and in such cases, alternative venues may be advised by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE)/local authority or public health.

Non-residents of the emergency accommodation may not move into emergency accommodation to care for the children. However, they may be able to be accommodated in emergency accommodation for the duration of the self-isolation or self-quarantine period.

Referrals to Tusla

In some instances, parents may lack the social support system to enable this process. This may require a referral to Tusla Child and Family Agency where there is a concern about the wellbeing or safety of a child during this time. For contact with the local duty social work office where the child lives and other information, please see relevant links here:

- <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/publications-and-forms/>
- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/childrenandfamilyservices/>

Children First legislation and associated Tusla guidance documents (supplemented by any relevant sectoral guidance or organisational policies) have a set of principles that guide work in relation to protecting and supporting children. The overall aim in all dealings with children and their families is to intervene proportionately to support families to keep children safe from harm.

Contact with Tusla is dependent on the individual child and family circumstances:

- Contact their local Tusla Duty Social Work Dedicated Contact Point (DCP) <https://www.tusla.ie/get-in-touch/duty-social-work-teams/>
- For professional referrals and to submit a Child Protection and Welfare Report Form (CPWRF) via the Tusla online portal at www.portal.tusla.ie to seek support in establishing a Safety Plan and a Safety Network with the family
- Contact their local CFSN Coordinator and engage in a Meitheal approach with the family - <https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/prevention-partnership-and-family-support/>

In exceptional circumstances, if all supports have been exhausted, Tusla may have to consider alternative care options, if required and available. If safety planning or Meitheal planning has not resulted in the required supports, Tusla may request the parent to sign the children into voluntary care.

In exceptional cases, Tusla may have to make an application to the courts for orders under the Child Care Act 1991 to affect such care. Tusla may determine that if there is not sufficient safety for the child and there is no suitable adult being nominated by a parent then proceedings may have to be taken to ensure the safety of a child.

If the crisis of a parent being unable to care for their children arises between 9AM and 5PM, the local Tusla duty social worker should be contacted to ensure adequate arrangements are put in place. In a case where the crisis is out of hours, An Garda Síochána and Tusla Out of Hours Social Work should be contacted. The Tusla social worker will assess whether the safety of the child is at risk and whether it is appropriate for a voluntary care agreement. In cases where a parent is unable or unwilling to sign their children into voluntary care, it is only An Garda Síochána that has the legal authority to remove the children under Section 12 of the Child Care Act of 1991. An Garda Síochána is aware of the procedure to follow in those circumstances.

Children First Act 2015 Mandated Person(s) and Designated Liaison Person (DLP) Contingency Plan

The Children First Act 2015 places specific obligations on organisations that provide services to children to develop specific policies and procedures on how to create a safe environment. In order to continue a process for ensuring no issue of child safety goes unreported, it is important to have a list of staff who are mandated persons who are obliged to report under Children First and an identified Designated Liaison Person (DLP) to support other staff in child protection and welfare concerns.

A contingency plan needs to be in place for the role of mandated person and for the DLP should existing mandated person and DLP be unavailable due to illness. This contingency plan information should be made known to all relevant people including the identified replacement(s). These contingency plans will identify how child protection and welfare is managed in the advent of challenges to staffing levels and or changes to staff.