

TRAINING FOR TUSLA STAFF TO SPOT SIGNS OF CHILD TRAFFICKING

Management and frontline staff who work with child and family agency Tusla will be provided with training by MECPATHS on how to identify child trafficking in Ireland, under an interagency partnership which aims to increase agency capacity in responding to this growing human rights and social justice issue.

The new partnership with Tusla will see MECPATHS facilitate online workshops for child protection and welfare social workers from 17 areas across Ireland as well as staff from Tusla's Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP) team and the National Out-of-Hours Service.

MECPATHS, founded in 2013, works to raise awareness around the issue of child trafficking, educating frontline and emerging professionals on human trafficking, with a particular focus on children and how to recognise indicators and report concerns.

Over 500 Tusla management and staff will be trained initially on the types of child trafficking and associated indicators; child trafficking statistics within the global and Irish contexts; Ireland's legal, statutory and non-profit responses and Tusla's emerging role as a 'competent authority' within the new National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The first phase of training was rolled out over the autumn with additional phases due to be rolled out in 2023.

FRONTLINE RESPONDER TRAINING

Government approval was secured by Justice Minister Helen McEntee in July to publish the General Scheme of the Criminal Justice (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Bill 2022. This now puts the NRM on statutory footing to help identify and support victims of trafficking.

Speaking at the announcement of the partnership,

Ann Mara, Education Manager at MECPATHS, said:

"According to statistics published by the Department of Justice in 2020 and 2021, no child victims of trafficking (VoTs) were identified during those years in Ireland. This is due to unsuitable referral mechanisms and a lack of frontline responder training.

"To date, only members of An Garda Síochána are permitted to formally identify and refer victims of trafficking into the national referral mechanism. However, the identification of such victims is best placed in the hands of those frontline professionals who are most likely to encounter them."

The Department of Justice has addressed this issue, and plans are currently underway to restructure the NRM. This restructuring will see responsibility for identification and referral of VoTs expanded to include multiple competent authority partners, including Tusla.

"It is critical that people are aware that child trafficking is happening in Ireland. Our initiative will train Tusla management and staff on what child trafficking is, what indicators to look out for, and how to report any concerns," noted Mara.

PROTECTING CHILDREN ACROSS IRELAND

Welcoming this new partnership with MECPATHS, Bernard Gloster, CEO of Tusla, said it will be a "co-ordinated effort to raise awareness and provide training to our frontline professional staff, including those in the community and



Kate Duggan Tusla's Deputy CEO, pictured with JP O'Sullivan, Networks & Communications Manager, MECPATHS; and Ann Mara, Education Manager, MECPATHS, following the new partnership between both agencies to address child trafficking in Ireland.

voluntary services that we fund, who work to protect children in communities across the country”.

He said that regular training and development are crucial to ensure that their practice methods meet the evolving needs of the children being supported by his agency. “In addition to our training with MECPATHS, we have developed the Child Sexual Exploitation procedure, in partnership with An Garda Síochána to guide this area of work.”

The Child Sexual Exploitation Form and Checklist Tool (CSE1) was developed to assist in the identification and reporting of concerns of suspected child sexual exploitation.

ASSESSMENTS AND INVESTIGATIONS

As the key agencies empowered by law to carry out assessments and investigations, respectively, of suspected child abuse and neglect, this interagency working between Tusla and An Garda Síochána forms an integral part of the responses to child abuse and neglect, as set out under Children First (the National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children and the Children First Act 2015).



Released in January 2021, the Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) procedure applies to all relevant staff involved in child protection, children in care, foster care, the Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP) team, child residential services, and Tusla approved foster carers.

The purpose of the CSE procedure is to assist Tusla staff and carers in recognising the indicators of child sexual exploitation, making appropriate referrals where such concerns exist and responding to cases where children may be at risk of sexual exploitation.

The procedure sets out the pathways for Tusla to report concerns of child sexual exploitation to An Garda Síochána for children who are in the care of Tusla and for children who reside in a community setting. Where child protection concerns are identified, the standard process for the assessment of child protection or welfare concerns is followed.

MECPATHS is now inviting those who work in hospitality, airlines, security, social work, universities, and healthcare to email info@mecpaths.ie to learn more about the in-person or e-learning workshops available. For more information and updates on child trafficking in Ireland visit www.mecpaths.com.



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