



WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE HARM EACH OTHER:

Supporting youth workers to respond effectively

National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for national voluntary youth work organisations in Ireland. It represents and supports the interests of voluntary youth organisations and uses its collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people. www.youth.ie

National Child Protection Programme

The National Child Protection Programme supports and resources the youth work sector to meet its safeguarding responsibilities through the provision of training, events, practice sharing spaces, resources, advice, and advocacy. Supporting organisations to take a whole organisational approach and embedding safeguarding across youth work settings is key to our work.

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agus Óige**
Department of Education
and Youth

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Foreword

The National Child Protection Programme is pleased to introduce this resource to the youth work sector. In recent years, we have seen growing awareness and incidents of peer abuse, or what we call harmful sexual behaviour, among children and young people. These behaviours can have significant and lasting impacts, not only on the young person who was harmed, but also on the young person alleged to have caused the harm. Both are children first, and both need our support.

Harmful sexual behaviour is a deeply sensitive and often distressing issue. It can provoke strong emotional responses in all of us. These reactions are human and understandable. However, they must not get in the way of our responsibility to respond to young people in a way that is calm, considered, and compassionate, keeping the rights, safety and wellbeing of all young people at the centre.

This resource aims to support you to understand what harmful sexual behaviour is, how to respond safely and appropriately, and how to manage the complexities that often arise. It provides guidance grounded in a rights-based, trauma-informed approach that acknowledges the needs of young people and the importance of balancing care, accountability and protection.

The Child Protection Programme recognises the challenges that can come with responding to harmful sexual behaviour, and we hope this resource gives you the confidence, clarity, and practical tools to respond in ways that uphold young people's rights, promote their safety, and ultimately contribute to fostering environments where all young people feel safe, respected, and valued.



Siobhán Laffey

National Child Protection Programme Manager

Glossary

HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Sexual behaviour by under 18s that is developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, and/or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult.

CHILD

Anyone under the age of 18 in Ireland.

YOUNG PERSON

When we refer to young people in this resource, we are talking about adolescents who are under 18.

STATUTORY BODIES

1. TUSLA

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is responsible for promoting the safety and well-being of children and families. They do this by providing various services including child protection and welfare services, family support, and alternative care services like foster care and residential care.

2. AN GARDA SÍOCHÁNA

An Garda Síochána play a crucial role in child protection by responding to immediate risks, investigating potential crimes, and working with other agencies to ensure child safety. They have the power to remove a child to safety in urgent situations. Additionally, they have a responsibility to investigate suspected criminal offences against children and work with organisations like Tusla to ensure children are protected from harm.

NATIONAL INTERAGENCY PREVENTION PROGRAMME (NIAPP)

This programme is funded by Tusla and provides support to children and young people from ages 3 – 18 who have engaged in problematic, harmful, or abusive sexual behaviour.

DESIGNATED LIAISON PERSON (DLP)

A key individual within an organisation who is specifically responsible for overseeing child safeguarding measures and child protection and welfare concerns. They act as a resource for the organisation, staff, and volunteers and facilitate communication with external agencies.

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Introduction

This guide is designed to support youth workers, volunteers, DLPs, managers and/or safeguarding leads in responding effectively to situations where sexual harm is alleged between young people. It may also support you when working with a young person who has been referred to a project or club and has engaged in sexually harmful behaviour. While many are confident addressing issues such as bullying, cyberbullying, or physical violence, there is often less clarity when managing sexual abuse allegations between or against young people, particularly after statutory reporting duties have been fulfilled.

It is vital to recognise that young people can, and do, harm one another. Staff and volunteers in youth work organisations must be equipped to respond sensitively and appropriately to these complex situations, with care and consideration for all young people involved. This resource focuses specifically on supporting responses to sexual abuse between and against young people, addressing the needs of both those who have been harmed and those alleged to have caused harm.

Below are some questions that arise in these situations:

- How should the risk be managed in the youth work service?
 - How can the rights of all the young people involved be upheld?
 - How can we support the young people who are involved?
 - How do we communicate with or support the wider group?
 - How do we support and respond to parents?
- We hope that this guide will help answer some of those questions, guide you on what to do after a report has been made to Tusla/the Gardaí, ensure you uphold your safeguarding responsibilities and centre the rights of all young people involved, and ensure safe, proportionate interventions.
- This resource should also help to inform the procedures already outlined in your organisational Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures.
- What happens while Tusla or the Gardaí carry out their investigation?
 - How do staff or volunteers ensure the safety and wellbeing of all young people involved?
 - Can the young people involved remain connected to the youth work service?

Section 1: Responding

This section offers practical guidance that you may wish to incorporate into your organisational procedures when responding to concerns that a young person has sexually harmed another child or young person.

It provides guidance on how to respond to immediate concerns as well as advice on how to manage the risk and ensure the safety of all young people involved while the statutory authorities carry out their investigation/s.

The content offers suggestions regarding who is responsible for each stage of the process and the associated actions. The decision for who is responsible lies with your organisation as the structures and supports within youth work organisations differ greatly across the sector. You should decide what is most appropriate for your circumstances.

We suggest you consider this proactively and decide who should do what, so that roles and responsibilities are clear if the situation were to arise.

1. Responding to allegations of Harmful Sexual Behaviour and/or engaging with young people who have sexually harmed and been referred to your service

Stage: 1	People Responsible	
Responding to allegations	Youth workers	DLPs

If you receive an allegation that a young person has sexually harmed another child or young person you should refer to your organisations' Child Safeguarding Policy for the reporting procedures. Your organisational policy should broadly reflect the information below but will also contain details specific to your organisation.

Some of the information contained below may also be helpful when engaging with a young person with a history of harmful sexual behaviour who has been referred to your project or club.

When a concern arises or you are informed of an allegation against a young person:

For youth workers/volunteers	For DLPS
Listen carefully and non-judgementally to the information.	Assess whether there are reasonable grounds for concern or if the threshold of harm has been met.
Reassure the person they have done the right thing in speaking up.	Seek advice from Tusla or the Gardaí
Record the information clearly and factually as soon as you can after receiving the disclosure.	You may need to consult relevant organisational policies such as Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures, Critical Incident Policy, Risk Management Policy, and Complaints Policy.
Inform the DLP immediately.	If reasonable grounds for concern are confirmed, reports should be made to Tusla via the Portal.
If you are concerned that a child or young person is at immediate risk of harm, contact the Gardaí.	Where a crime may have occurred, a report will also need to be made to An Garda Síochána.
	Parents/carers of the young people involved should be informed unless one of the following conditions is met (advice should be sought from the statutory authorities before the decision is made): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – There is a risk of harm to the child/young person. – The Tusla assessment may be impacted. – You, the reporter, may be at risk of harm.
	If the alleged incident occurred within the youth work service, you may need to inform senior management or initiate your Critical Incident/Crisis Management Plan.

If a young person with a history of harmful sexual behaviour is referred to your service by Tusla, the Gardaí or NIAPP, the DLP needs to consider the appropriateness of the referral and whether the youth club or project have the relevant and experienced staff or volunteers to support the young person. The DLP should liaise with the statutory services for guidance.

Key Consideration

Confidentiality is a core principle in youth work, fostering trust and openness between young people and youth workers or volunteers. When concerns arise about sexual abuse being carried out by or against young people it is essential that youth workers and volunteers take this seriously and understand the limits of confidentiality.

Information should only be shared, on a need-to-know basis, with those who need it to protect the child/young person or to respond appropriately (eg: DLP, Deputy DLP, manager or statutory agencies).

It is not a breach of confidentiality to share this information with Tusla or the Gardaí.

All records must be factual, accurate, timely, and stored securely with clearly defined access to authorised personnel.

Special care should be taken to ensure information about one young person is not included in the file or records of another young person, if both are involved with your service.

Youth workers and volunteers must respect young people's rights to privacy and dignity while also balancing their right to protection and support from harm.

2. Managing risk within youth work settings

When a young person who is alleged to have caused sexual harm is attending a service, it is vital that the risk is carefully managed to ensure the safety of all the young people. This is particularly important when the young person who has been sexually harmed also attends the same service.

A comprehensive risk assessment should prioritise the safety and wellbeing of young people involved.

Interim measures help maintain safety and stability while investigations are carried out. These must be proportionate and kept under regular review.

The safety and wellbeing of all young people must be prioritised. Decisions should be made in consultation with Tusla, the Garda (where necessary), and with the support of specialist services such as NIAPP.

Key Consideration

A rights-based approach ensures that both young people are treated with dignity and care, regardless of their role in whatever happened.

Recognise that both young people have rights to safety, support, participation, and privacy.

Avoid labelling; focus on behaviour rather than identity.

Ensure both young people have access to support, including mental health services, trusted adults, and advocates.

Facilitate restorative processes only if appropriate, safe, and supported by professionals.

Stage: 2	People Responsible	
Risk Assessment, Safety Planning and Interim Measures	DLPs	Senior Managers

For DLPs	Senior Managers
Conduct an internal risk assessment in consultation with Tusla and the Gardaí (if relevant).	Input as appropriate and support the completion of the risk assessment.
Seek additional advice and guidance from internal safeguarding team (if available) or services like NIAPP.	Consider what supports the DLP may need to enable them to carry out this work.
Identify potential risks to the safety and wellbeing of all involved.	Provide updates through the relevant channels as necessary, keeping in mind that information should only be shared on a need-to-know basis.
Seek input from staff and volunteers who know the young people and run the groups/activities.	
Develop a written safety plan with clear roles and responsibilities, which may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adjusted or separate group times and spaces – Increased supervision – Clear behavioural boundaries and expectations – Involvement of parents/carers where appropriate. 	
Where possible involve the young people involved in both the risk assessing and the safety planning.	
Consider interim measures such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Providing alternative arrangements to one or both young people. – Temporary suspension from certain types of activities for the young person alleged to have caused harm, if proportionate and risk informed. 	
Maintain ongoing communications with Tusla and the Gardaí to ensure actions are aligned.	
Agree interim measures, guided by the principle of “do no further harm”.	
Keep decisions under review, adapting measures as new information emerges.	
Remain fluid as circumstances evolve.	

Below is a practical list of safety measures that could be considered in order to avoid exclusion, if possible and appropriate to the circumstances:

Key Consideration

Exclusion is sometimes necessary but can also carry unintended consequences that affect both the individual and wider group dynamics.

Exclusion can increase vulnerability, shame and disengagement, especially if the young person who is alleged to have caused the harm has experienced trauma.

Isolation may drive harmful behaviours underground, making supervision more difficult.

Where exclusion is considered, it should be time-limited, clearly explained, and supported with a reintegration plan where appropriate.

Inclusive approaches, combined with firm boundaries and accountability, often lead to better long-term outcomes.

✓/X	Action
	Identify an additional volunteer or staff member to monitor the young person alleged to have harmed.
	Agree a plan so they are always accompanied when they leave the room to use the bathroom, get a drink or some fresh air etc.
	Consider additional supports that might be required if leaving the centre on an outing.
	Listen carefully for any comments that might be aimed at the young person who has harmed – they too are a young person.
	Review each session and keep comprehensive notes on how everything went, any issues arising etc.
	Keep the DLP up-to-date and liaise with Tusla if appropriate.

3. Supporting young people

Stage: Ongoing	People Responsible	
Supporting young people	Youth workers, volunteers	DLPs

Young people involved in cases of harmful sexual behaviour need support tailored to their experiences and needs and may benefit from therapeutic interventions.

Youth work services are not mental health providers or specialists in responding to child sexual abuse. However, they play a vital role in advocating for access to support and providing safe, consistent relationships.

Tusla will likely make the necessary referrals to therapeutic services, but this may not happen until after the investigation is complete. The DLP can liaise with the statutory authorities while an investigation is ongoing to advocate for supports for young people or to request approval to make support referrals.

- Referral options include: CAMHS, local counselling services, sexual violence support services. For example: CARI, One in Four, NIAPP, Barnardos, Jigsaw.
- Consider wait times and offer interim emotional support while waiting.
- Engage families in understanding and supporting referrals.

Regardless of the level of support your service is providing, youth work organisations should strive to respond in a trauma-informed way and uphold children and young people’s rights to participation, protection and support.

<p>Trauma-informed and Rights-Based Approaches</p> <p>A trauma-informed, rights-based approach means recognising the impact of trauma while promoting agency, dignity and safety.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Acknowledge that experiences of abuse can cause fear, confusion, guilt, shame and trauma. — Recognise that young people may not disclose everything at once and need time to build trust. — Support the young person’s right to be heard, involved in decisions, and treated with respect. — Avoid re-traumatisation by ensuring safe, calm, and supportive environments. 	<p>Safety, Wellbeing and Participation</p> <p>Support should prioritise both the safety and the active participation of the young people in decisions that affect them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Include the young people involved in safety planning and risk assessments as appropriate. — Ensure ongoing consent and understanding of any arrangements. — Provide regular opportunities for young people to express their views, concerns, or wishes. — Promote wellbeing through routine, peer connection, creative expression, and positive adult relationships.
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It is important to remember that both the young person who is alleged to have caused harm and the young person who has been harmed both need support. In many cases there is emotional and therapeutic support taking place outside of the youth service, and as such the youth service/project/club may be a place for young people to escape and to allow them to participate in a normal, everyday capacity. Providing a safe, youth work environment that allows young people to consciously learn, grow, and develop can be a critical part of the support a young person needs and should be valued as such.

Keeping this in mind, while the investigation is ongoing, your service may need to consider what emotional or practical support can be provided to the following:

- 1. The young person who experienced harm**
- 2. The young person alleged to have caused the harm**
- 3. Other members of the youth service**

Below are some suggestions of what youth workers, volunteers, DLPs, and youth work organisations may be able to offer. Decisions around support should take into account the roles of other professionals who are involved and what's in the best interests of the young person. This should be discussed and agreed between the DLP, volunteers/youth workers, and senior management to see what can be provided and what would be suitable.

For the young person who experienced harm:

- Provide a named, trusted staff member to check-in regularly.
- Offer emotional reassurance and space to process.
- Assist with practical concerns e.g. arrival/leaving times, safe participation, returning to the group.
- Act as their conduit/voice to feedback to the organisation (if required).
- Support their participation in internal processes such as risk assessments and safety planning as necessary.
- Liaise with parents/carers sensitively.

For the young person alleged to have caused harm:

- Ensure support is non-judgmental, focused on accountability, learning and emotional wellbeing.
- Recognise possible underlying trauma or vulnerabilities.
- Support their participation in internal processes such as risk assessments and safety planning as necessary.
- Provide a structured and safe environment with clear behavioural expectations.
- Facilitate access to support services where appropriate.
- Liaise with parents/carers sensitively.

For other members of the youth service:

- Acknowledge the impact on the group and provide opportunities to talk about feelings in a safe way with clearly defined boundaries.
- Address concerns about safety and trust among peers.
- Allow space and time to address other emerging issues such as community gossip, impact on group identity if negative associations are made to the group/service, and wider social and community impact if the information is publicly known or in the news.
- Reaffirm positive norms, respectful behaviour and inclusive values.
- Consider revisiting the group contract and making amendments or additions (if necessary).
- Bring in external experts for awareness raising or information-sharing on issues (if necessary/relevant).



4. Supporting staff and volunteers

Supporting young people affected by harmful sexual behaviour can place significant emotional, practical, and ethical pressure on staff and volunteers, especially when both the young person who experienced harm, and the young person alleged to have caused the harm attend the same service.

Youth work organisations have a duty to ensure their teams feel equipped, confident, and supported in these challenging situations. When staff and volunteers are practically supported and emotionally held, they are better placed to model calm, consistent, and compassionate behaviour, which is exactly what young people need during difficult times.

Stage: Ongoing		People Responsible
Supporting staff volunteers	Youth workers, volunteers	DLPs

For youth workers and volunteers	
<p>Navigating complex emotions and loyalties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – It is normal to feel conflicted, especially if you had relationships with both young people involved. It is important to make space and allow those feelings without judgement. – Avoid taking sides. Focus on facts, safety and your role as a trusted adult for all young people. – Be mindful of unconscious bias and reflect on how your personal values, prior experiences, or relationships may shape your reactions. – Seek support from your DLP or senior management. 	<p>Communicating with the young people involved</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Be consistent, calm, and non-judgmental in your interactions with young people. – Use neutral language, referring to “allegations” or “concern raised” rather than labels such as victim or perpetrator unless and until outcomes are clear. – Respect privacy and avoid asking for details or discussing the incident unless the young person initiates it and it is appropriate to do so. – Remind young people that you are there to support them and that any actions taken are to keep everyone safe.
<p>Managing shared spaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – If both young people remain in the service, seek clarity from the DLP about the agreed safety plan and your role in it. – Stick to supervision protocols. – Know how to respond if an incident occurs or tensions escalate. – Ensure you’re familiar with the risk assessment and your organisation’s Child Safeguarding Policy. 	<p>Maintaining professional boundaries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Be clear about your role and responsibilities. You are not an investigator. – Avoid discussing the incident informally with colleagues or other young people. Remember the principles of confidentiality. – Redirect young people who ask questions or share opinions about the incident to the relevant staff members and remind them of confidentiality.

Self-care and team support

- Speak to your line manager or DLP if you feel unsure, overwhelmed or conflicted.
- Use supervision sessions or meet with your manager to reflect on what's working, what feels difficult, and what further support you need.
- If you're struggling emotionally, request a debrief or a counselling support where available (for example through Employee Assistance Schemes).
- Connect with colleagues in a structured way such as reflective practice sessions to share learning while protecting confidentiality.

Escalation and concerns

- If you believe that a safety plan isn't working, or if a young person's safety or wellbeing is deteriorating, escalate the concern to your DLP or manager immediately.
- Document observations factually and promptly using the agreed document/form.
- Trust your instincts. If something feels unsafe or unclear seek guidance from your DLP or the statutory authorities rather than staying silent.



For DLPS/senior managers

Build confidence through preparation

- Ensure youth workers and volunteers are familiar with your organisation's Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures and Children First Guidance.
- Arrange relevant and supportive trainings on child protection, safeguarding, harmful sexual behaviour, trauma-informed practice, and responding to disclosures.
- Role play scenarios in team meetings to practice responses in a safe and supportive environment.
- Create internal checklists to support staff and volunteers with responding.

5. Supporting parents/carers

Parents/carers play a vital role in safeguarding and supporting young people affected by harmful sexual behaviour. When such incidents occur, they may experience a range of emotions including shock, anger, confusion, hurt, guilt, and distress.

Youth work organisations have a responsibility to engage with parents in a manner that is clear, compassionate, and rooted in children's rights. A strong partnership between youth workers/volunteers and parents/carers can reduce the risk of further harm, help young people feel supported, and contribute to safer environments for all.

While Tusla or the Gardaí should take the lead on all communications regarding the statutory investigation, the DLP and/or youth workers/volunteers may still have contact with parents/carers while the investigation is ongoing if the young person who was harmed continues to attend the service, and if efforts are being made to continue to engage with the young person alleged to have caused the harm.

When concerns arise the DLP (or an appropriate person identified by the organisation) should:

- Provide timely and accurate information about the nature of the concern, safeguarding procedures, and next steps, in line with guidance from Tusla or the Gardaí.
- Be clear about confidentiality, data protection, and the limits of what can be shared, particularly in cases involving multiple young people.
- Acknowledge the emotional impact on parent/carers and provide opportunities for them to express concerns and ask questions in a safe space.

In all other interactions or communications:

- Approach parents/carers with empathy and non-judgement.
- Avoid assumptions or language that assumes guilt or blame while an investigation is ongoing.
- Acknowledge that intense emotions are normal reactions.
- Remain neutral and avoid attributing blame while an investigation is ongoing.
- Use clear, concise messaging when explaining internal organisational processes.
- Seek support and guidance from Tusla or the Gardaí.



Section 2: After the statutory investigation is over, now what?

Once statutory investigations have been concluded and the immediate safeguarding response has stabilised, organisations and groups face the complex task of moving forward.

This section offers guidance on what action may need to be taken after Tusla or the Gardaí have completed their investigation.

The response after the statutory investigation will largely be led by the DLP or senior manager.

They should seek advice from Tusla regarding next steps and provide support and guidance to youth workers and volunteers.

This stage should be approached with the same level of care, transparency, and rights-based approach as the initial response.

1. Outcomes of investigations

The conclusion of Tusla or Garda investigations does not always bring closure for the young people involved or the service. Youth work organisations must reflect on what the outcome means in terms of safeguarding, support and service delivery, and **seek advice from the statutory services before proceeding.**

- Investigations may result in a range of outcomes such as:
 - Substantiated findings
 - No finding of abuse but evidence of concerning behaviour
 - Inconclusive outcomes
 - No grounds for further action by statutory services
- A lack of formal findings does not mean the behaviour did not cause harm or that no support is needed.
- Services should:
 - Review and update risk assessments based on new information and outcomes.
 - Consider who should be involved in supporting this process: e.g. service manager, DLP, safeguarding lead, Tusla, Gardaí, NIAPP, CAMHS.
 - Consider meeting with both young people and their families (individually) to discuss next steps.
 - Decisions should be made based on the best interests and safety of all young people, guided by the principles of precaution and proportionality.
 - Consider whether changes to group dynamics, boundaries, or staffing are needed to maintain safety and rebuild trust.

2. Restoration

Restoration refers to the carefully managed process of reintegrating a young person into the youth service, where it is deemed safe and appropriate. This process requires empathy, structure, communication, and ongoing oversight.

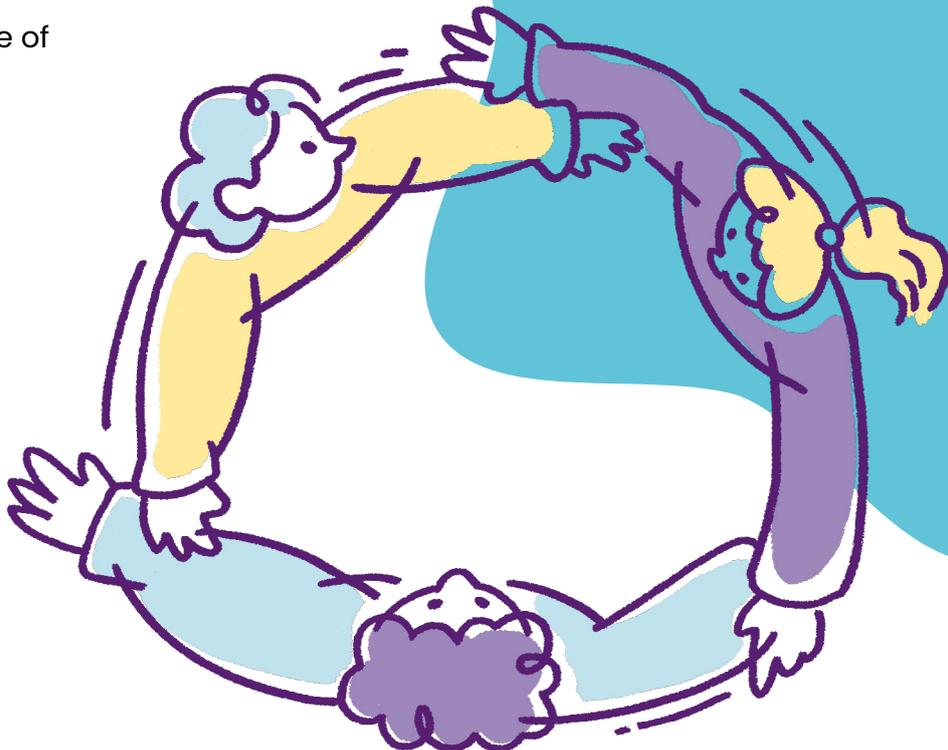
- **Restoration is not automatic** and should only be considered where:
 - The young person no longer poses a risk to others (based on the risk assessment and statutory input).
 - The young person is committed to participating safely and constructively.
 - The return will not cause further harm to others, including the young person who experienced the abuse.
- Key elements of a safe restoration process include:
 - A clear integration plan, developed in consultation with statutory services, families, and the young person.
 - Agreed behavioural expectations and boundaries, written and signed by the young person (where age-appropriate).
 - Ongoing monitoring and support by a trusted staff member.
 - Regular check-ins with all affected young people, to ensure that safety and wellbeing are maintained.
 - Transparent communication with all involved (while maintaining privacy and confidentiality).
- Consider whether restorative practices (e.g. mediation, conflict resolution, restorative conversation) are appropriate. **These should only be facilitated by trained professionals,** with consent and careful preparation of all parties.

- If restoration is not appropriate:
 - Help the young person to transition to alternative supports or services.
 - Provide referrals and ensure a respectful, dignified closure of their involvement with the service.

3. Rebuilding trust and group dynamics

Incidents of harmful sexual behaviour and abuse can have a lasting impact on the wider group of young people and on the culture of a youth work setting. It's important to consider some of the below:

- Offer structured opportunities to revisit group norms around respect, safety, and relationships.
- Reaffirm your organisation's commitment to creating a safe and inclusive space.
- Use creative or group-based approaches (e.g. youth-led discussions, workshops, art, or drama) to help rebuild trust.
- Monitor for signs of ongoing distress, exclusion or conflict within the group.
- Be alert to any re-emergence of harmful behaviour patterns.



4. Ongoing support and monitoring

Even after formal procedures conclude, young people may need long-term emotional or practical support.

- Maintain regular contact with the young person who experienced harm (if this is something they want or need), ensuring they continue to feel safe and heard.
- Support the ongoing involvement of parents/carers and refer to therapeutic or community services as needed.
- Review safety plans periodically and update based on changes in risk, relationships, or group dynamics.
- Provide clear points of contact for any new concerns or disclosures.

5. Reflection and learning

Youth services should take time to reflect on their response, the impact of the harm on staff, volunteers, and young people, and identify learning to improve future safeguarding practice.

- Conduct a debrief with staff to:
 - Reflect on what worked well and what could be improved.
 - Identify training, policy, or procedural gaps.
 - Update safeguarding protocols as needed.
- Where appropriate, involve young people in reviewing and improving service practices.
- Document changes and share learning within your organisation or with sector partners to strengthen collective safeguarding.



Section 3: Additional information to inform policy and procedures

This section has additional information that may be helpful to refer to when drafting the section on Allegations of Peer Abuse in your Child Safeguarding Policy. This section of your safeguarding policy should outline the procedures for responding when you receive information that a young person in your service has sexually harmed another child or young person.

This information might be useful to managers and DLPs who are involved in developing policy and procedures, reviewing and updating Child Safeguarding Statements and risk assessments, and youth workers who are also involved in these processes.

This information might also be of interest to staff and volunteers who want to learn more about harmful sexual behaviour for their own CPD, for training development, or for practice sharing.

1. Understanding Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) describes a continuum of sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people that range from developmentally inappropriate to harmful and abusive and may be directed towards self or others.¹

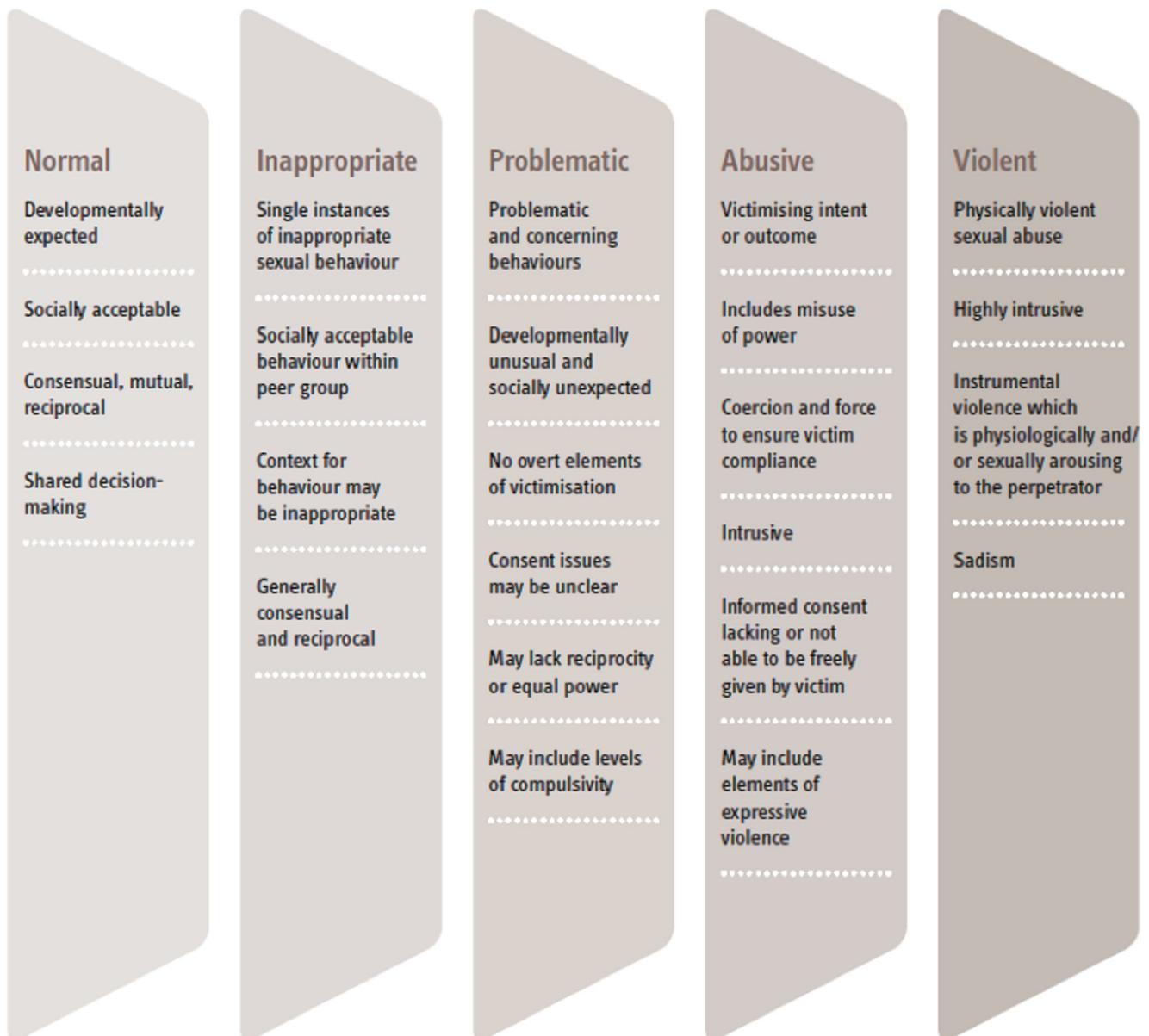
Sexual abuse carried out by under 18s can include sexual harassment, sexual assault, coercive sexual behaviour, grooming, non-consensual image sharing, and exploitation.

Peer-on-peer abuse is a form of harmful sexual behaviour where sexual abuse takes place between children or young people of a similar age or stage of development.

Child-on-child sexual abuse is a form of harmful sexual behaviour that can take place between children or young people of any age or stage of development.²



Figure One³ below from Hackett demonstrates the continuum of children and young people’s sexual behaviours:



While we do not know the true extent of sexual abuse carried out by children and young people, there have been attempts to estimate the prevalence using data from children’s self-reported experiences and services who work with children/ young people who display harmful sexual behaviour. Research shows that in the UK, under 18s are responsible for around a third of sexual offences committed against other children/young people⁴. In Ireland, 2022 data from the Central Statistics Office indicates that 13% of suspected offenders of sexual offences where the victim was under 18 years of age, were themselves aged under 18 years⁵.

The NSPCC⁶ highlights some key considerations to keep in mind:

- We do not know the true number of children and young people impacted by HSB because it covers a wide range of behaviours which do not all come to the attention of the authorities.
- Available data suggests around a third of child sexual abuse is carried out by other children or young people.
- There is cross over between online and offline HSB.
- It is most identified in adolescent boys, but girls and younger children can exhibit HSB.
- Many children/young people who display HSB have experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect.
- Most children/young people displaying HSB do not become sexual offenders as adults.
- Young people who display HSB often experience other emotional, behavioural and peer-related difficulties.

It is also worth noting that emerging research into technology-assisted HSB suggests that boys who engage “only” in watching images of child sexual abuse online are less likely to have experienced adverse childhood experiences and are more likely to come from stable, economically advantaged backgrounds than those who commit other sexual offences.

Important reminders

Abuse is harmful even when both parties are under 18.

- ! Power imbalances related to age, ability, gender, or social status are often present.
- ! Consent cannot be assumed simple due to closeness in age.
- ! Both the young person who experiences harm and the one who causes harm need support.
- ! Abuse may occur in person or via digital platforms.

2. Legal and Policy Framework

In Ireland, there is robust legislation in place that underpins safeguarding practices. It is essential that youth workers, volunteers and their organisations have a clear understanding of their statutory obligations under the law, including when concerns involve children/young people harming other children/young people. The full extent of youth work organisations' safeguarding responsibilities under the legislation and guidance is covered in NYCI's Child Protection Awareness Programme (CPAP), a four-hour training programme that all youth workers and volunteers engaging directly with children/young people should complete.

In this guide we will briefly recap the key pieces of legislation and guidance that support youth workers to respond to sexual abuse carried out by children/young people.

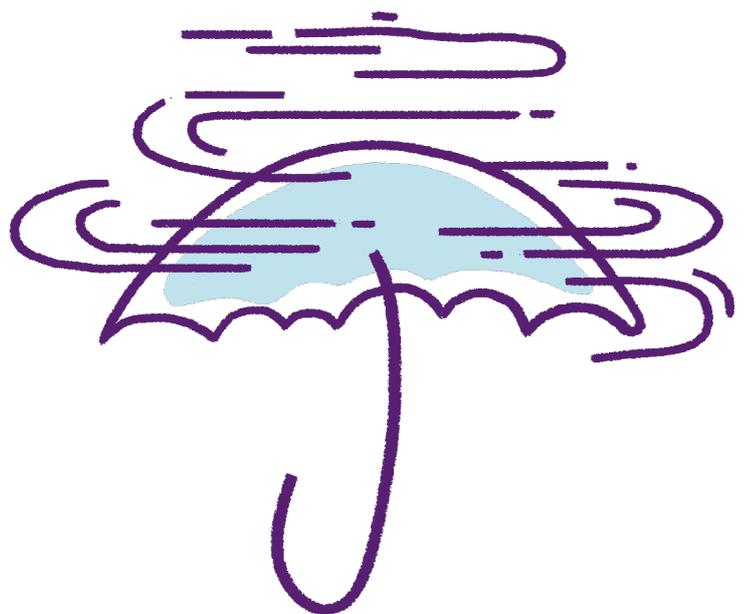


<p>Children First Act 2015</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Establishes statutory obligations for mandated persons, including youth workers, youth justice workers, and other professionals working with children, to report concerns of abuse or neglect to Tusla. – Requires all organisations providing services to children to have a Child Safeguarding Statement informed by a safeguarding risk assessment and to appoint a Relevant Person. 	<p>Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Aims to promote the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people in Ireland and strengthens the legal and practical framework for child protection. – Provides a comprehensive outline on how to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect and how to promote their overall wellbeing. – Supports organisations and individuals in recognising and responding to child abuse, including sexual abuse carried out by under 18s, and online safety risks. – Details reporting procedures and sets out organisational responsibilities to create safeguarding cultures and ensure appropriate policies and procedures are in place.
<p>Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Defines criminal offences involving sexual acts with or between minors, including sexual exploitation, grooming and sexual assault. – Recognises a “proximity of age” exemption for consensual sexual activity between young people aged 15 or over, but this does not negate a youth workers duty to report where there are indicators of coercion, power balance, or lack of consent. 	<p>Organisational child safeguarding policies and procedures should include guidance for staff and volunteers on reporting and responding to allegations of abuse against children and young people.</p>

3. Organisational Responsibilities and Creating a Safeguarding Culture

Creating a safe, responsive, and young person-centred environment requires more than policies on paper. Youth work organisations must actively embed safeguarding into their culture, leadership, relationships, and daily practice. This means ensuring all staff and volunteers understand their roles, feel confident to act, and are supported by clear procedures and a shared ethos of safety and inclusion.

A robust safeguarding culture is proactive rather than reactive. It fosters a setting where young people feel heard, respected, and where harm is identified early and appropriately. By taking a whole organisational approach, youth services can move beyond crisis response and towards a proactive, relational, and rights-based model of safeguarding. This empowers both young people involved, and the adults who work with them to co-create environments of safety, dignity and mutual respect.



Staff training and awareness

Staff and volunteers are on the front lines of safeguarding. Their ability to prevent, identify and respond to peer sexual abuse depends on access to high-quality training and reflective practice.

- Provide mandatory safeguarding training for all staff and volunteers including:
 - Children First and organisational child protection procedures.
 - Understanding peer-on-peer harm, including sexual abuse.
 - Responding to disclosures and managing confidentiality.
 - Boundaries, power dynamics, and ethical dilemmas in youth work.
- Offer specialist training for those in designated safeguarding roles and those working in higher-risk groups.
- Build continuous learning into team practice through supervision, debriefs, scenario discussions, and reflective spaces.
- Include safeguarding as a standing item in team meetings and planning sessions.
- Ensure all new staff and volunteers receive a comprehensive safeguarding induction.

Learning from cases and incidents

Organisations grow stronger when they learn from difficult situations and commit to continuous improvement.

- After any serious incident or concern:
 - Conduct a case review to examine what happened and how your team responded.
 - Identify strengths and gaps in policy, procedure, culture, or communication.
 - Involve young people in co-producing improvements, where appropriate.
- Share learning internally and, where possible (or if relevant) with other organisations to strengthen sector-wide practice (for example anonymise case reviews or practice sharing).
- Use findings to inform staff training, organisational development, and safeguarding leadership.

Leadership and Accountability

A safeguarding culture starts from the top. Leaders must be visible, informed, and accountable for promoting child protection.

- Ensure senior leadership and boards are actively engaged in safeguarding procedures.
- Appoint and support a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) with the time, training and authority to fulfil their role.
- Consider whether a Deputy DLP needs to be appointed to support with safeguarding.
- Allocate resources to safeguarding including training, staff time, and supervision.



Partnering with Young People

Young people are rights holders and key partners in building safer services.

- Involve young people in:
 - Shaping policies and procedures in age-appropriate ways.
 - Reviewing service culture and group norm.
 - Co-designing safeguarding messaging and campaigns.
- Create multiple pathways for young people to raise concerns safely.
- Show young people how their voices lead to real change.

Promoting a safe, inclusive culture

A strong safeguarding culture is based on respect, inclusion, and trust. All young people must feel safe to be themselves and to speak out if something feels wrong.

- Develop group agreements with young people that centre respect, consent, and boundaries.
- Address harmful behaviour early: name it, explore it, and challenge it constructively.
- Encourage positive peer relationships through group work, creative programmes, and youth leadership.
- Ensure inclusive practice that respects diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, cultural backgrounds, and experiences.
- Foster a non-punitive environment where young people feel supported, not judged, when issues arise.

Developing policy and procedures

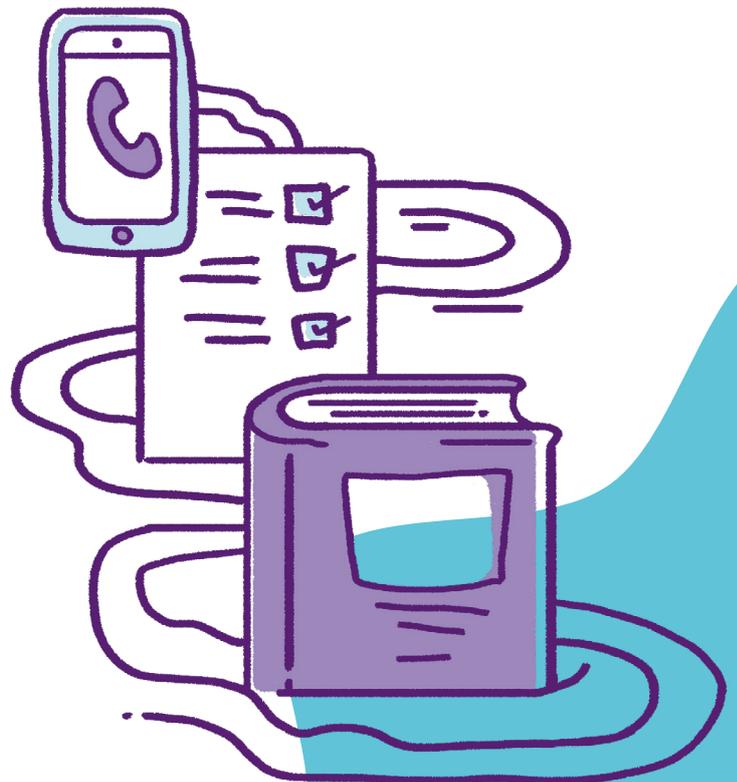
- Within the organisation's child safeguarding policy, there should be specific procedures for responding to allegations of abuse against young people by young people.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities across the team and senior management.
- Include guidance on managing situations where both young people remain in the service.
- Ensure procedures are youth-friendly, rights-based, and trauma-informed.
- Ensure your wider policy framework supports a culture of prevention and protection.
- Review and align:
 - Anti-bullying policy: address sexual harassment.
 - Digital safety and social media policies: address online grooming, image sharing, and peer exploitation.
 - Behaviour and code of conduct: embed expectations for respectful interactions and outline consequences for breaching these.
 - Confidentiality policy: reflect best practice in safeguarding and data protection.
- Seek advice or guidance from specialist organisations such as NIAPP.
- Review and update procedures regularly to reflect learning and best practice.



Section 4: Resources

This section contains some contacts, tools and templates that you may find helpful in your work. Please adapt these templates for use in your own services and with your own groups.

The templates included below are examples and should be viewed as such.



1. Useful Contacts

- Tusla Social Work Teams: <https://www.tusla.ie/get-in-touch/duty-social-work-teams/>
- Tusla Children First Information and Advice Service: <https://www.tusla.ie/get-in-touch/children-first-information-and-advice-officers/>
- An Garda Síochána Protective Services Bureau: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/organised-serious-crime/garda-national-protective-services-bureau-gnpsb-/>
- An Garda Síochána Child Sexual Abuse Reporting Confidential Freephone Number: 1800 555 222
- Barnardos: www.barnardos.ie 01 453 0355 – an Irish charity that works to ensure all vulnerable children in Ireland get the support they need to overcome childhood adversity.
- NIAPP: 01 878 2790 National Interagency Prevention Programme – provide support to children and young people from age 3 – 18 who have engaged in problematic, harmful, or abusive sexual behaviour.
- CARI: www.cari.ie 0818 924567 – an Irish charity that provides professional, child-centred therapy and support services to children, families, and groups who have been affected by child sexual abuse or to children under 12 who display sexually harmful behaviours.
- Brook: www.brook.org.uk – a UK charity that believes in a society where everyone is supported to live healthy lives, free from inequality and strengthened by fulfilling relationships.

2. Tools

- Brook Traffic Light Tool + Online Training Guide: A tool to identify, understand and respond to sexual behaviours in children and young people, accompanied by an e-learning training on how to use the tool. <https://www.brook.org.uk/education/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/>
- Video Consent is Like a Bike Ride: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgU2_UwScNw
- Video Consent is Like Making a Cup of Tea: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQbei5JGiT8>

3. Example Checklist for youth workers/volunteers

Below are some suggested actions you may want to include in a checklist for youth workers/volunteers. Please add, subtract, or amend these to be specific to your own service.

Immediate Response	
	Stay calm.
	Listen non-judgementally.
	Reassure the young person they have done the right thing telling you.
	Only ask questions for clarification.
	Reflect back to the young person what they've told you, using their own words and phrases.
	Explain that you will need to share this information with the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) – use the DLP's name.
	Check if the young person would like a glass of water/cup of tea (something reassuring).
	Ask the young person if they would like another youth worker/volunteer to keep them company while you talk to the DLP.
	Record the information using your organisations child protection report form <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Use the young person's exact words – Note the date, time and context of the disclosure – Include your name, signature and role – Include the date/time it was shared with the DLP
Reporting Internally	
	Inform the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) immediately or Deputy DLP if unavailable.
	Submit your written record to the DLP securely and promptly.
	Do not inform the young person who is alleged to have caused the harm or anyone else unless advised to do so by the DLP or Tusla/Gardaí.
	If you are able to speak with your DLP or Deputy DLP contact your local duty social work team for advice.

Support and Safety of Young People	
	Ensure the immediate safety of all young people. Seek advice from the DLP regarding whether temporary separation or increased supervision is needed if the young person alleged to have caused the harm is attending the service.
	Support the young person who made the disclosure with sensitivity and avoid victim-blaming.
	Avoid making assumptions about the young person alleged to have cause the harm, they also have a right to fairness and support.
Follow Organisation Protocols	
	Participate in any safety planning or risk assessing as requested by the DLP.
	Participate in any review or debrief with the DLP/management as needed.
	Maintain confidentiality and do not discuss the allegation with others unless required to do so for safeguarding purposes.
Individual Support	
	Seek support for yourself from the DLP, your manager or through services such as the employers EAP Scheme (if available).

4. Example Checklist for DLPs, Managers, Safeguarding leads

Below are some suggested actions you may want to include in a checklist for DLPs/ Management. Please add, subtract, or amend these to be specific to your own service.

Initial Steps Upon Receiving a Report	
	Review the information you receive carefully and ensure the youth worker/volunteer has accurately documented it.
	Clarify facts with the reporting staff member/volunteer if needed (without re-questioning the young person).
	Consult your organisation's Child Safeguarding Policy and Procedures for guidance.
	Seek advice from Tusla and/or the Gardaí if required.
	Follow child safeguarding procedures for both young people involved.
	Ensure the immediate safety of all young people involved and consider interim safeguarding measures (e.g. increased supervision, separation).
Report to Statutory Authorities	
	Report the concerns to Tusla using the Tusla Portal.
	Inform An Garda Síochána if a criminal offence may have occurred or if there is immediate risk.
	Confirm receipt of the report by Tusla and/or the Gardaí and record all communications.
Inform Relevant People Internally	
	Inform the organisations senior management in line with governance protocols, sharing information only on a need-to-know basis.
	Seek advice from Tusla/the Gardaí whether to inform the parents/carers of the young person who is the subject of the abuse allegation and agree the process of informing them with senior management, including what information can and cannot be shared (if Tusla give the go ahead).
	Seek advice from Tusla/the Gardaí whether to inform the parents/carers of the young person who made the allegation and agree the process of informing them with senior management, including what information can and cannot be shared (if Tusla give the go ahead).
	Document all decisions, rationales, actions, and attempted actions taken.

Risk Management Measures	
	Conduct a safeguarding risk assessment, with advice from Tusla.
	Agree on proportionate measures to reduce further risk, balancing the rights of all involved.
	Ensure actions are trauma-informed and not punitive unless required for safety.
Support for Both Young People	
	Arrange support for the young person who made the disclosure (if appropriate) or liaise with Tusla regarding supports.
	Ensure support for the young person alleged to have caused the harm following discussion with Tusla regarding what might be appropriate.
	Keep both parties informed about what will happen next (within what is possible when an investigation by the statutory authorities is ongoing)
Follow-up Actions	
	Liaise with Tusla and the Gardaí throughout their investigation.
	Coordinate internally with senior management and staff as needed while investigation is ongoing.
	Get advice from Tusla or the Gardaí if risks remain or are escalating.
	Convene a meeting of the relevant internal people (youth worker/volunteer, management) if risks remain or are escalating.
	Record all actions taken, discussions held, and advice received in a secure and confidential record.
	Consider a case review in the future to examine lessons learned, identify where things went well, and what could be improved in the future.

5. Example Risk Assessment Template

This risk assessment template is based on guidance from the NSPCC. The terms Young Person 1 and 2 are used to record and assess the risks and decisions for both young people, remembering that they are both children and neither should be labelled or presumed guilty. The DLP or a senior manager with safeguarding experience may complete the risk assessment. Tusla and the Gardaí should be consulted for advice and guidance. The risk assessment should be completed factually and professionally and reviewed regularly.

Young Person 1:	Young Person 2:	Additional person/s:
Person completing the risk assessment:		
Date of completion:		Planned review date:

Risk No.	What to consider	Reasons for decision-making	How does this apply to/affect person 1?	How does this apply to/affect person 2?	Actions needed to address risk
1	Brief description of the incident/allegation. Include date, who reported and responded to it.				
2	<i>Example: both young people being in the building at the same time.</i>	<i>Example: potential for harm to occur in shared spaces within the centre when groups go to the kitchen for snacks, bathrooms etc.</i>	<i>Example: may increase the risk of further harmful sexual behaviour or inappropriate contact whether intentional or unintentional. It may also place person 1 under stress if they think they are being watched, excluded or stigmatised, which could affect their engagement with the service.</i>	<i>Example: being in shared spaces could be distressing and may impact their sense of safety and wellbeing in the service, reduce their participation, or lead to withdrawal. The possibility of contact may heighten fear, anxiety, or risk of further harm.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
3					
4					
5					
6					

Signed (by person completing the risk assessment): _____

Print Name: _____

Role: _____

Date: _____

Action Plan based on completed risk assessment.

Person/s completing this action plan: _____

Outcome from risk assessment: _____

Risk No.	Action Required from Risk Assessment Outcome	When and by whom?	How could this reduce risk?	Decision made by whom and when?	Further review date?
2	<i>Example: Agreed that a staff member will accompany person 1 while they're in the service.</i>	<i>John Smith – senior youth worker from 28/07/2025</i>	<i>Example: reduces the risk of unsupervised contact, supports safe movement through shared spaces and provides support for person 1.</i>	<i>Jane Smith – DLP 28/07/2025</i>	<i>28/08/2025</i>
2	<i>Example: Schedule groups so that person 1 and person 2 won't be in the youth service at the same time.</i>	<i>Janet Doe – Service Manager 28/07/2025</i>	<i>Example: Reduces the likelihood of contact between person 1 and person 2.</i>	<i>Jane Smith – DLP and Janet Doe – Service Manager 28/07/2025</i>	<i>28/08/2025</i>

Further Review Date: _____

Persons to be involved in review: _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

6. Guidance for Safety Planning

Safety plans are intended to support youth workers to meet their goals of continuous engagement with young people when there are allegations of harmful sexual behaviour against them. Depending on the nature of your service, you may also receive referrals from agencies to work with young people who have a history of harmful sexual behaviour and safety plans will ensure the safety and wellbeing of young people, and staff/volunteers who are connected with or part of the work.

With the safety plan, youth workers and parents/carers work to take action to eliminate or mitigate threats to the safety of the young person and the youth worker.

On encountering the young person for the first time youth workers are:

- Engaging with the referrer (if a referral is made) or requesting advice from Tusla (if an allegation of harmful sexual behaviour is received) to gather information about their concerns for the child: the who/what/where/when.
- Critically reviewing all previous histories/records relating to the young person.
- Engaging with the parent/carer for all relevant information.

Step 1: Undertake a collaborative risk assessment that will assist everyone to identify and understand what the safety plan needs to focus on.

Undertaking the assessment should take into consideration the location of the work taking place, the engagement in the project, whether individual or group work, access to and the commute to and from the project.

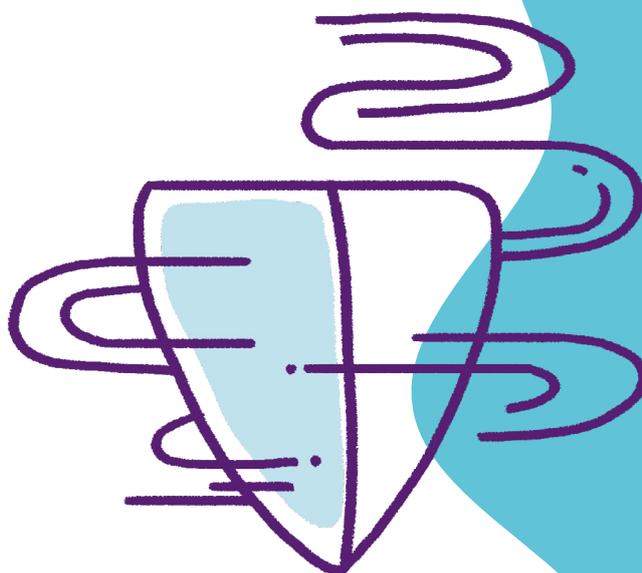
Step 2: Development of a safety plan with the inclusion of the risk assessment.

The safety plan should be regularly reviewed with a review date included in it. The review should be carried out with the support of an experienced staff member and/or manager. The manager should be alerted to any further emerging risks.

What should I include in a Safety Plan?

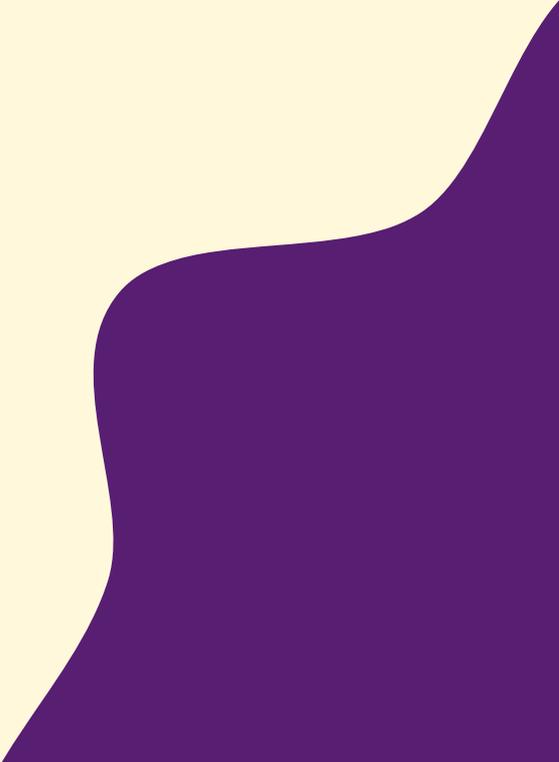
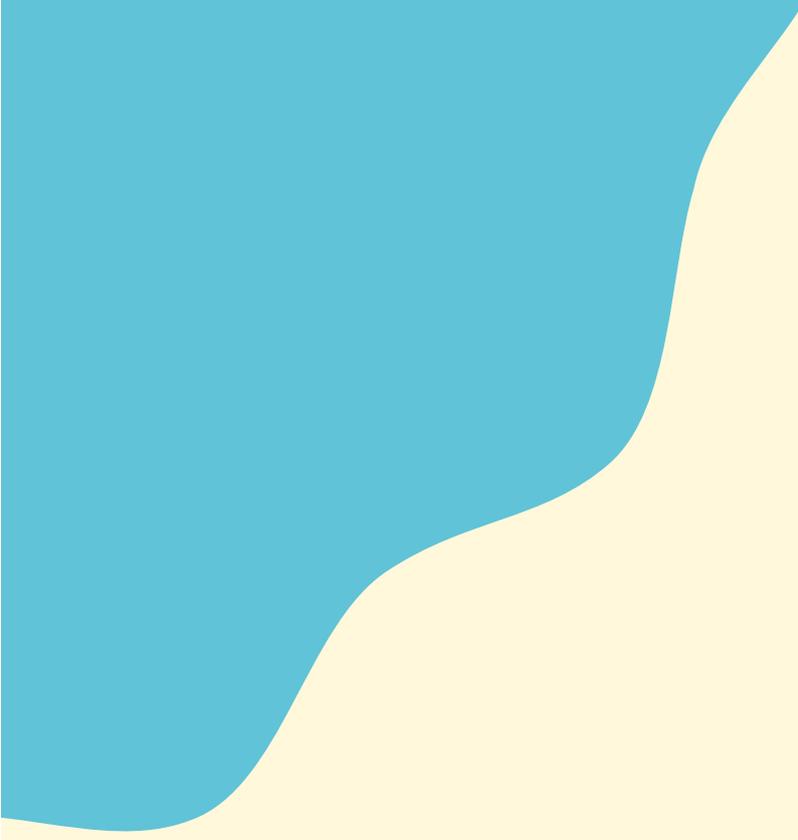
Below are some suggestions of what might be included in a safety plan depending on the nature of the concern and the service.

- Up to date guidance from the parent/carer, including any emerging risks that need to be considered.
- Transport to and from the youth service.
- Consider whether an additional youth worker or volunteer should be present if one-to-one work is being planned.
- If an additional youth worker/volunteer is required, decide what their role should be.
- Through the risk assessment, determine the level of risk to other young people in the building.
- Decide whether the young person alleged to have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour should be accompanied to the toilets, kitchen, outdoor spaces if other young people are present in the building.
- For group work, consider whether one staff member/volunteer should be assigned specifically to work with the young person alleged to have caused harm.
- Consider whether the young person should have use of their phone during engagement with the youth service.
- Consider the types of activities that will be undertaken and whether additional risks are associated with certain activities such as swimming or water-based sports.
- Ensure youth workers/volunteers are clear that their role is to eliminate or reduce risk when working with the young person alleged to have caused harm.
- Ensure safety rules and child safeguarding policy and procedures are adhered to in all circumstances.
- Keep accurate records of all engagements with the young person.
- Only share information on a need-to-know basis with the relevant people.



Footnotes

1. Hackett (2014) Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. Dartington: Research in Practice and Hackett, S., Branigan, P. and Holmes, D. (2019) Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework: An Evidence-informed Operational Framework for Children and Young People Displaying Harmful Sexual Behaviours (2nd edition). London: NSPCC.
2. NSPCC (2025) Problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour>.
3. Hackett (2014) Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. Dartington: Research in Practice.
4. NSPCC (2024) Statistics Briefing: harmful sexual behaviour. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/harmful-sexual-behaviour-hsb>.
5. Central Statistics Office (2023) Recorded Crime Victims 2023 and Suspected Offenders 2022. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rcvo/>
6. NSPCC (2024) Statistics Briefing: harmful sexual behaviour. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/harmful-sexual-behaviour-hsb>
7. McNeish, D. and Scott, S. (2023) Key Messages from Research on Children and Young People Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour (second edition). Barkingside: Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse. <https://doi.org/10.47117/NNXP7141>.



YOUTH WORK CHANGES LIVES

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info@nyci.ie

NYCI National
Youth
Council
of Ireland



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Óige
Department of Education
and Youth