



Staff Guidance

June 2026

Our Pact is a shared agreement that sets out how children's services in Northern Ireland should support and work with children, young people and families. It brings together the core expectations that children and families say matter most: being respected, being listened to, getting clear information and being involved in decisions. By writing this agreement down and making it easy to access, Our Pact offers a common reference for families, staff and organisations across the system.

Our Pact is for everyone involved in supporting children, young people and families. This may include social workers, family support workers, youth workers, teachers, health professionals, managers from both statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations. It is equally for the children, young people and families who receive support. This shared approach helps everyone understand what to expect from services, how we work together and gives staff practical guidance on how to deliver these expectations in everyday work.

Our Pact is grounded in children's rights, particularly the right to be listened to, treated fairly and shown respect. It aligns with the [Children and Young People's Strategy 2020–2030](#), [Being Human: A Framework for Safety Culture within Health and Social Care](#) and [The Health and Social Care Model Complaints Handling Procedure \(MCHP\)](#) to reinforce a rights-based, child-centred approach across all services involved in children's lives.

Children, young people, parents and carers have explained clearly why this matters to them. They want to feel heard and taken seriously. They want to understand their choices and know who can help. They want services to be clear, respectful and consistent so they can feel safe throughout their involvement with social care.

For staff, Our Pact strengthens consistency, supports reflective practice and encourages cross-agency collaboration. When we follow the principles together, services become clearer, fairer and more responsive.

A Shared Commitment: Our Pact is a commitment to working together. It embeds a culture where no one works in isolation and no family is left to navigate services alone.

Our Pact – Everyone Together | No One Alone

Background: How did we get here?

The [Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services](#) by Professor Ray Jones identified the urgent need for transformational change in Children's Social Care services in Northern Ireland. In response, the Department of Health, working with other departments and organisations through the Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme, developed plans to address the Review's recommendations.

A key commitment in the Reform Programme Strategic Plan is the importance of consulting, engaging and involving children, young people and families in decision-making. This will require a renewed focus on participation which reflects a broader shift across the system towards co-production and genuine partnership with children, young people and families. The Lundy Model of participation offers a helpful framework for children's services to support children and families meaningfully express their views and that these views are heard and acted upon. In practice, this means:

- creating the **space** for children and families to share their views;
- supporting them to express their **voice**;
- ensuring there is an **audience** willing to listen; and
- acting so that their views have genuine **influence**.

Our Pact was developed to translate these principles into practice. The Our Pact Model sets out how organisations providing children's services in Northern Ireland should work with children, young people and families. The Our Pact Model is built on the principle that children have the right to be listened to and taken seriously ([The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12](#)). This means that children's voices must be heard in decisions about their lives, families should be fully involved, and services must act with fairness, respect and transparency.

This guidance, co-developed with staff, supports practitioners to understand and apply the Our Pact Model and provides the tools and organisational backing needed to respond effectively to the feedback they receive.

Our Pact Model

The Our Pact Model was created in partnership with children, young people, parents, carers, community and voluntary organisations and Health and Social Care Trust staff. Through an iterative process, over 150 participants took part in workshops and surveys to refine the content, shaping the initial 14 ideas into the four key principles that form Our Pact today.

Young people were also directly involved in five digital workshops to create the name, design the logo, and develop awareness content, ensuring Our Pact reflects the voices and ideas of those it is designed to support.

Key Principles of the Our Pact Model

The Model is structured around four core principles:

1. Standards: Respect, Fairness and Honesty

- Guides values and behaviour in every interaction.
- Ensures children and families are treated with dignity and consistency.

2. Support: Accessing the Right Help at the Right Time

- Ensures children and families can access the right people, services and information when needed.
- Helps children and families understand services and participate meaningfully.

3. Share: Working Together to Make Shared Decisions

- Children and families are involved in decisions and kept informed about plans and progress.
- Promotes collaboration across services, teams and families.

4. Speak Up: Respecting Rights and Supporting a Fair Way to Raise Concerns

- Children and families are aware of their rights and can safely raise concerns.
- Supports fair and consistent handling of complaints and receiving feedback.

Our Pact Model



Respect, fairness
and honesty in
every interaction

STANDARDS



Helping families
access the right
help, from the
right people, at
the right time

SUPPORT



Working together,
sharing
information and
making decisions
as a team

SHARE



Respecting rights
and ensuring
there is a fair way
to raise concern

SPEAK UP

**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE LISTENED
TO AND TAKEN SERIOUSLY**

How to Use This Guidance

This guidance sets out the minimum standards required to implement Our Pact consistently across services which support children, young people and families. It describes what children, young people and families should expect as a baseline, and what organisations and staff must do to meet those expectations in everyday practice. It has a dual structure that reflects both organisational and individual staff responsibilities:

- **Organisational Responsibilities to Support Staff:** This section describes what all organisations who provide children's services need to do to enable staff to effectively apply the principles in Our Pact. It includes leadership, policies, training, systems and resources that help and support staff uphold the principles in practice.
- **Practical Staff Actions:** This section outlines the day-to-day actions staff can take to apply the principles directly with children, young people and families. It includes examples of behaviours, communication approaches and processes that demonstrate respect, fairness, honesty, support and participation. A staff checklist has also been developed as a reflective prompt to support practitioners in considering how the Our Pact principles are being applied in their work. The checklist can be found at the end of this document.

How the Guidance is Organised

Each of the four Our Pact principles (Standards, Support, Share, Speak Up) is presented in the same structure:

- A brief explanation of the principle and why it is important;
- Organisational responsibilities to enable staff to deliver the principle;
- Practical actions and examples for staff to apply in daily practice.

This approach ensures that staff understand both what the organisation must do to support them, and what they should do in practice. It also links all activity to children's rights, participation and high-quality care.

1. Standards

Children, young people and families should be treated with respect, fairness and honesty. These values guide how we work with children and families.

Respect, fairness and honesty underpin all positive relationships between children, young people, parents, carers and staff. When people feel valued and treated with integrity, they are more likely to engage openly, share their views and participate in decisions about their lives. This principle helps create a safe and trusting environment where everyone's voice is heard and staff feel supported to act ethically. Organisations, teams and individual staff members all have a role in modelling these values so that respect becomes embedded across services. Upholding high standards ensures families experience fairness and reliability in every interaction.

Key Areas of Action

Organisational Responsibilities to Support Staff

- Publicly commit to the principles of Our Pact.
- Embed respect, fairness and honesty in policies, procedures and everyday practice so staff know what is expected.
- Promote awareness of children's rights and ensure these are visible, understood and reflected in decision-making.
- Provide training and support staff to model the principles in Our Pact.

Practical Staff Actions

- Treat children, young people and families with courtesy and respect in every interaction, including when there is disagreement.
- Clearly explain decisions, processes and outcomes appropriate to age and understanding.
- Check understanding, answer questions, respond openly to concerns and offer time for processing information.
- Be open with families about limitations or delays rather than avoiding difficult conversations.
- Record key decisions clearly and explain reasons and next steps in ways children, young people and families can understand.

2. Support

Helping families access the right people, services and information at the right time.

Children and families should have access to clear and simple information about services, timely access to the support they need and trained staff who can provide the appropriate level of help. Delivering this principle relies on both organisations and staff working together: organisations create the systems and structures that enable staff to provide coordinated and accessible support, while staff use these resources to engage with families, respond to families' needs and ensure they can navigate the system confidently.

Key Areas of Action

Organisational Responsibilities to Support Staff

- Provide a clear 'step by step' guide to navigating services, ensuring information is clear, accessible and available in multiple formats.
- Set up clear points of contact and communication channels so families know who to contact for support.
- Establish effective processes and allocate resources to minimise waiting times, while regularly monitoring and reporting average waiting times for assessment.
- Promote multi-agency collaboration arrangements to provide coordinated care.
- Deliver training to equip staff with the skills and confidence to provide effective support.

Practical Staff Actions

- Introduce yourself and make your role and responsibilities clear to the family.
- Provide information to children, young people and families in ways they can understand using simple language, age-appropriate explanations, visual aids or guides.
- Explain available services, options and processes clearly.
- Ensure families know who to contact and how to get help between appointments.
- Respond to contact from families in a timely manner.

- Use guides and tools consistently such as checklists, UNOCINI principles or flowcharts to ensure accurate information is delivered.
- Monitor progress and escalate delays or unmet need through agreed routes.

3. Share

Working together with children, families and services to make shared decisions

Children, young people, parents and carers should be listened to, actively involved in decisions that affect their own lives and kept updated about plans and progress. Applying this principle begins with supporting children, young people and families to participate meaningfully in decisions about their own care, making sure they understand their options, the process and what will happen next.

Both organisations and staff have essential roles in enabling participation. Organisations create the culture that make meaningful engagement possible. Staff put this into practice by communicating in accessible ways, creating space for children and families to share their views, working collaboratively with other services and ensuring that families' voices are heard, respected and acted upon.

Key Areas of Action

Organisational Responsibilities to Support Staff

- Embed a culture of shared decision-making in policies and training so participation is a core organisational principle and service users are recognised as 'experts by experience.'
- Provide formal structures and regular opportunities that allow children, young people, parents and carers to participate meaningfully in shaping services and policies.
- Develop tools and materials to help staff facilitate meaningful participation.
- Ensure consistent information-sharing across services and multi-agency teams in line with [Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland \(2024\)](#).

- Create opportunities for children, young people, parents and carers to share their lived experiences and use this feedback to improve practice and decision making.
- Track and monitor participation, including whether children and families understand decisions that affect them and feel their views are valued.

Practical Staff Actions

- Prepare children and families for meetings and explain the purpose, who will be present and possible outcomes.
- Actively seek and record the views of children, young people and families before decisions are made affecting their lives.
- Check understanding, confirm consent and allow time for questions before, during and after meetings.
- Provide feedback on how views were considered in decision making, even where they could not be followed.
- Share relevant information with partner agencies in line with safeguarding guidance.
- Support children and families to participate in broader opportunities to share experiences and influence service improvement.

4. Speak Up

Respecting rights and supporting a fair way to raise concerns

Children, young people, parents and carers should know their rights as service users, including the right to speak up about their care, have their views listened to and have them considered in decisions that affect them. This includes knowing how to raise concerns and that their concerns should be approached seriously and fairly. Effective implementation of the other Our Pact principles should help resolve issues early and reduce the need for complaints.

All HSC organisations in Northern Ireland are now required to adopt [the Health and Social Care Model Complaints Handling Procedure \(MCHP\)](#) and implement it fully in practice. The new standards will apply to all government departments and their ALBs from 1 January 2027 [Model Complaints Handling Procedures | NIPSO](#). This

Procedure will apply to most, children's services. It also applied to organisations that are funded to deliver services on behalf of a government body. Organisations and staff each have a role in effectively implementing the MCHP, organisations provide clear processes, guidance and support, while staff ensure families understand their rights, know how to raise concerns and feel safe and supported in doing so.¹

Key Areas of Action

Organisational Responsibilities

- Provide clear information on rights, raising concerns and giving feedback, in formats that suit different needs.
- Adopt and fully implement the Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) as appropriate including providing staff training on listening and responding using the MCHP.
- For HSC organisations, have arrangements in place for considering representations made under the Children Order and associated regulations.
- Set up and communicate clear reporting routes so children, young people and families know how and where to raise concerns and understand which policy is being used to address the issues they have raised.
- Promote access to advocacy services and support staff in referring children and families appropriately.
- Monitor compliance and ensure learning from complaints is used to improve services.

Practical Staff Actions

- Foster a "Speak Up" culture which encourages issues to be raised early and ensure children and families are never treated differently or disadvantaged for speaking up.
- Respond to concerns respectfully and take them seriously at first point of contact.

¹ In some situations concerns should be addressed through processes other than the MCHP such as a safeguarding policy or, for particular elements of children's social care, processes in place to consider representations made under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and associated regulations. Further information is available in [FCPD Communication 01/2026](#). Organisations and staff should be clear about what policy to follow and ensure that families fully understand the process.

- Take timely action to address concerns as soon as they are raised, including supporting advocacy and collaborating with colleagues and relevant agencies to resolve issues before they escalate.
- Follow the Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) and meet required timescales:
 - Stage One (Early Resolution): aim to resolve within 5 working days;
 - Stage Two (Formal Investigation): final response within 20 working days; and
 - If concerns are not resolved after Stage Two, signpost families to NIPSO and offer advocacy or independent support where appropriate.
 - Where appropriate, follow other relevant procedures such as those for safeguarding issues or Children Order representations.
- Record concerns, actions taken and outcomes accurately including how children's views influenced decisions or changes made.

Useful Resources

[Being Human: A Framework for Safety Culture within Health and Social Care](#)
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) (2023)

[Children's Social Care Reform Programme](#) Department of Health Northern Ireland

[Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland](#)
Jones, R. (2023)

[Learning Zone](#) Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC)

[Model Complaints Handling Procedure for Health and Social Care](#)
Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) (2025)

[Safe Hands Thinking Minds](#) Safe Hands Thinking Minds

[Signs of Safety Knowledge Bank](#) Signs of Safety

[Social Workers Toolbox](#) Social Workers Toolbox

[The Lundy Model of Child Participation](#) Lundy, L. (2007)

[Our Pact](#) resources on Department of Health website



Our Pact was co-designed with children, young people and families. It sets out how we work together so that people feel respected, heard and involved in decisions about their lives.

Please use this checklist as a reflective prompt to consider how the Our Pact principles are being applied in your work with children, young people and families.

Standards	Support
☐ I introduced myself and explained my role clearly ☐ I used language the child or family could understand ☐ I listened carefully to their views and experiences ☐ I treated them with respect and without judgement	☐ I asked what support they feel they need ☐ I explained what services or help are available ☐ I made sure they know who to contact if they need help again ☐ I considered whether advocacy or additional support would help them access services.
Share	Speak Up
☐ I explained what decisions need to be made ☐ I asked the child or family what they think should happen ☐ I shared information about what will happen next ☐ I recorded their views and how they informed the decision	☐ I explained their rights and how their views will be considered ☐ I made sure they know how to raise concerns or complaints ☐ I explained how to access advocacy if they need support to speak up
Reflections	
Would the child or family say they felt listened to, respected and involved in decisions? If not, what could I do differently next time?	