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Department of Health
An Roinn Sláinte
Männystrie O Poustie
www.health-ni.gov.uk

STANDARDS CIRCULAR

Subject: **Amendment to the Department of Health's Minimum Standards for Children's Homes**	**Circular Reference: FCPD Communication 02/2023** **Date of Issue: 28 April 2023**
For action by: Chief Executives, HSC Trusts Directors of Children's Services, HSC Trusts HR Directors, HSC Trusts Chief Executive, RQIA Director of Mental Health, Learning and Disability, Children's Services and Prison Healthcare, RQIA Chief Executive, NISCC Shared Services, Recruitment and Selection, BSO Registered Individuals, Independent Children's Homes **For information to:** Deputy Secretary, SPPG Director of Hospital and Community Care, SPPG ADs Social Work Governance, HSC Trusts Chief Executive, NICCY Chief Executive, VOYPIC	**Related documents:** Relevant legislation, guidance and circulars can be accessed here: https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/children-residential-care **Superseded documents:** The Department of Health's Minimum Standards for Children's Homes – Version 2 (January 2019) **Status of contents:** The Department's Minimum Standards for Children's Homes must be complied with. **Implementation:** Immediate **Enquiries:** Any enquiries about the content of this Circular should be addressed to: Looked After Children Unit Family and Children's Policy Directorate Department of Health Room A3.7 Castle Buildings Stormont BELFAST BT4 3SQ ☎ 028 90522909 ✉ lookedafterchildren@health-ni.gov.uk **Summary of contents:** This Circular advises of amendments to Standard 17 of the Department of Health's Minimum Standards for Children's Homes which: reflect the need for all registered managers and care staff to be registered with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council in line with regulatory requirements; and remove the minimum age requirement of 21 for care staff working in residential children's homes.

Introduction

1. The Department of Health's Minimum Standards for Children's Homes aim to improve the quality and consistency of care for children and young people in children's homes and provide further detail on the criteria for registration and inspection set out in the Children's Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

2. The original version of the Standards was published in 2014 following consultation with key stakeholders and Version 2, which updated the section on the Requirements for Registration (Fitness of the Premises – New Homes and Extensions) was published in January 2019.

3. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) uses the Standards to register and inspect residential childcare services under the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

Purpose of changes to the Minimum Standards for Children's Homes

4. **Amendments to Standard 17 - Staffing**

The purpose of the changes to Standard 17 (Staffing) are to:

- Reflect the requirements for all registered managers and care staff to be registered with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) in line with the regulatory requirements contained within The Children's Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 and The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (Social Care Workers Prohibition) and Fitness of Workers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 (**see new Criterion 2**); and

- Remove the previous minimum age requirement set out in Versions 1 and 2 of the Minimum Standards which specified that all care staff working in residential children's homes are at least 21 years of age. This amendment has been made following legal advice obtained by the Department that the inclusion of this age requirement could potentially be construed as direct discrimination on the grounds of age.

  The previous Criterion 9 has therefore been replaced with a new Criterion 10 which is focused on ensuring that all care staff have the appropriate experience, qualifications, skills, values, and competence to meet the assessed needs of children in the relevant home and to ensure the health and welfare of children in their care are safeguarded and promoted.

5. The Standards on the Departmental website have been updated to reflect the changes to Standard 17 and can be accessed at:

https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/care-standards-childrens-homes-full-version.pdf

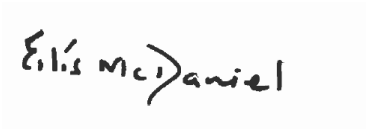
Action

6. You are asked to note and implement the contents of this Circular and to cascade to staff within your organisation as appropriate.

7. I would also draw your attention to the Department's intention to undertake a wider review of the Minimum Standards for Children's Homes which will incorporate a further examination of the content of Standard 17. This review will be informed by the outcome of ongoing work being led by the Department's Strategic Planning and Performance Group in relation to the skills mix of staff in residential children's homes, as well as the findings of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services. Subject to the necessary approvals, it is intended to conduct a wider consultation exercise at that stage.

8. Finally, it remains incumbent upon us all to ensure that recruitment and governance processes are sufficiently robust to facilitate the recruitment and ongoing support of a well-led, safe, effective, and compassionate workforce across children's residential services. Connected to this, I have confirmed with the Chair of the Regional Recruitment Group for Social Work that a review of the regional recruitment processes in summer 2023 will include a focus on how the regional processes have worked to date for recruitment of residential social work staff. The review will also evaluate the alternative process in place whereby HSC Trusts undertake local recruitment of social workers. The outcome of this review will then inform considerations around any necessary amendments to the current processes for recruitment to residential children's services.

Yours faithfully



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