



An Roinn Leanai, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group

Annual Report 2021

June 2022

Prepared by the Department of
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Annual Report [2021] to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth of the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group

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1. Introduction

The Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group was established under Part 4 of the Children First Act 2015. The relevant provision, section 20, was commenced in May 2016 and the first meeting of the Group took place in November of that year.

The Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group is required, under section 26(1) of the Children First Act 2015, to prepare and submit to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth an annual report on the performance of its functions and activities in the preceding calendar year. This report must be submitted to the Minister no later than 30 June of the year following the calendar year to which it relates. On receipt of the annual report, the Minister is required to lay a copy of the report before each House of the Oireachtas.

2. Content and Structure of the Report

The Annual Report is required to address the functions and activities of the Implementation Group for the period in question. In addition, this Report will outline the main provisions of the Children First Act 2015, and implementation of same.

The contents of the report are as follows:

❖ Children First Act 2015

- Enactment
- Key provisions
- Commencement

❖ Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group (CFIDIG)

- Membership of the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group
- Functions of the Implementation Group

❖ Activities of the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group in 2021

- Meetings of the Implementation Group
- Work programme of the Implementation Group

❖ Actions taken by Departments and Agencies in 2021 in support of Children First and child protection including relevant initiatives in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

❖ CFIDIG Priorities for 2022

3. Children First Act 2015

3.1 Enactment

The Children First Act 2015, which was signed into law on 19 November 2015, placed key elements of *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* on a statutory footing. The enactment of the legislation reflected the commitment of a number of successive Governments to strengthen protection for children. The Act is part of a suite of child protection legislation, which includes the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012-2016 and the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences Against Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012.

3.2 Key provisions

The Children First Act 2015 provides for:

- Mandatory reporting of child abuse by key professionals;
- Mandated assisting;
- Comprehensive risk assessment and preparation of Child Safeguarding Statements by providers of relevant services to children;
- The establishment of the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group on a statutory basis; and
- The removal of the common law defence of reasonable chastisement in relation to corporal punishment of children by parents or those acting in loco parentis.

3.3 Commencement

- (i) Sections 1 to 5 (Part I) and section 28 (Part 5) of the Act were commenced on 11 December 2015. Sections 1 to 5 are standard provisions in relation to the title of the Act, its citation, regulations, definitions etc. Section 28 removes the common law defence of reasonable chastisement in relation to corporal punishment by parents or those acting in loco parentis.
- (ii) Section 18 (Part 3) and sections 20-26 (Part 4) were commenced on 1 May 2016. Section 18 of the Act is a technical amendment to ensure that the Child and Family Agency is a specified body for the purposes of the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012-2016. Sections 20-26 deal with establishing the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group on a statutory basis and expanding the Group to include all Government Departments.
- (iii) All remaining provisions of the Children First Act 2015 were commenced on Monday 11 December 2017. These included the provisions in relation to:
 - Section 14 - mandated reporting of child abuse by defined categories of persons; and
 - Section 11 - obligations on organisations providing relevant services to children to keep children safe from harm, to carry out risk assessments and to prepare and publish Child Safeguarding Statements.

4. Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group

4.1 Membership of the Implementation Group

As indicated above, Part 4, sections 20-26 inclusive, of the Children First Act 2015 were commenced on 1 May 2016. These sections of the Act provide for the establishment of the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group on a statutory footing.

Membership of the Group includes representatives from every Government Department, the Health Service Executive (HSE), An Garda Síochána and the Child and Family Agency, Tusla.

The members of the Implementation Group are appointed by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, on the nomination of their respective Minister, CEO or Commissioner, as appropriate. The membership of the Implementation Group in the period covered by this Annual Report, i.e. 1 January to 31 December 2021, is set out in *Appendix 1*.

The Act (section 21 (2)) also requires the appointment by the Minister of an officer of the Minister to be the Chairperson of the Implementation Group. Mr Conor Rowley was appointed Chair of the Implementation Group by the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on 24 February 2020. He continued as Chair of the Group throughout 2021.

4.2 Functions of the Implementation Group

The Children First Act 2015 (section 22) sets out the functions of the Group which are to –

- a) Promote compliance by Departments of State with their obligations under the Act;
- b) Monitor the implementation by Departments of State of the guidelines issued by the Minister under section 6;
- c) Provide support to Departments of State in respect of the preparation and publication of sectoral implementation plans;
- d) Promote a consistent approach by Departments of State in respect of the preparation and publication of sectoral implementation plans;
- e) Report to the Minister, when requested, on the implementation of the Act and of the guidelines issued by the Minister under section 6; and
- f) Provide information or advice, or make proposals, to the Minister on matters relating to the functions of the Implementation Group referred to in paragraphs (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e).

The Act also makes provision for the following:

- Minister issuing directions to the Implementation Group (section 23);
- Conditions and cessation of membership (section 24);
- Meetings and procedures for the Group (section 25);
- The preparation and submission to the Minister of reports, including an annual report on the functions and activities of the Implementation Group (section 26); and
- The preparation by each Department of State of a Sectoral Implementation Plan (section 27).

5. Activities of the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group in 2021

5.1 Meetings of the Implementation Group

The Implementation Group met twice in the period 1 January to 31 December 2021. The meetings took place on 4 March and 21 October. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 situation, both meetings took place online. The agendas for these meetings can be found in *Appendix 2*.

5.2 2021 Work Programme of the Implementation Group

The statutory functions of the Implementation Group under section 22 of the Act are set out in paragraph 4.2 above. The activities of the CFIDIG in 2021 concentrated on subsections (a) to (d) inclusive of paragraph 4.2, with a particular focus on monitoring implementation of the Act and any issues arising.

5.2.1 Compliance with Children First Obligations

The Implementation Group continued to promote compliance, monitor implementation and provide support in the preparation of Sectoral Implementation Plans (SIPs), in line with its core functions.

The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth addressed the March meeting of the Group and acknowledged the work of the CFIDIG in supporting implementation and compliance with Children First across sectors. He noted that the introduction of the Children First Act 2015 represented an important step forward in enhancing children's rights and safety by setting out the roles that individuals, professionals and organisations must play in supporting a culture in which all children are to be protected.

He emphasised how each Government Department has a responsibility to ensure that children and young people are kept safe while accessing their direct and funded services and to ensure that staff and services under their remit comply with Children First obligations. He added that the Sectoral Implementation Plan (SIP) that each Government Department is obliged to prepare and publish is the key tool for supporting compliance with the Act across sectors.

The Minister also noted that many Departments had either recently reviewed or were in the course of reviewing their SIPs, in line with the timelines in the Act or as a result of the reassignment of some Departmental responsibilities. He requested that Departments use this opportunity to examine their SIPs to ensure that they were as robust and meaningful as possible.

5.2.2 Children First Awareness Week

Children First Awareness Week took place from 1st to 7th November 2021. It was delivered by Tusla Communications on behalf of the CFIDIG. The information campaign raised awareness about Children First and reminded everyone, including organisations working with children and young people, of our collective responsibility to keep children safe.

The communications plan for awareness week was drafted by Tusla Communications and agreed in advance by the CFIDIG Information Campaign Subgroup. The information campaign focussed on three main groups (i) organisations working with children and young people (ii) mandated persons under the Children First Act 2015 and (iii) general public. Key campaign messages included:

- Everyone has a responsibility to keep children as safe as possible.
- You should always inform Tusla if you are concerned that a child or young person may have been, is being or is at risk of being abused or neglected.
- Organisations classed as providers of relevant services under the Children First Act 2015 are required to have Child Safeguarding Statements and have a responsibility to keep children safe from harm.

There was a photocall to launch awareness week on 1st November with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Tusla CEO and representatives from An Garda Síochána and the HSE in attendance. As part of the campaign, a new website launched at gov.ie/childrenfirst where users could find key information about Children First. The website, which includes campaign videos featuring a Garda, a public health nurse and a social worker, and other social media content was supported by an advertising campaign across digital and mainstream media platforms.

The CFIDIG supported awareness week by promoting the new website and campaign videos within their department/ agency and to relevant sectors and funded services.

5.2.3 Other issues

The ongoing Covid-19 situation formed part of the agenda for the March meeting and members were invited to update the Group on impacts in their sectors. The Group was informed that the ‘Supporting Children’ information and media campaign, which was originally launched by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in June 2020, was relaunched in February 2021 in light of the intensified Covid-19 restrictions. The purpose of the campaign was to raise awareness of services and supports for vulnerable children, young people and their families.

At the March meeting, the Group was given a brief update about Operation Encompass, a programme that is operational in England and Wales and which is being piloted in Northern Ireland. It is an initiative where police contact a child’s school in cases where a child has witnessed a domestic violence incident the previous evening. The purpose of the notification is to ensure that when the child arrives at the school the appropriate school personnel will already be aware that the child may need sensitive treatment.

At the October meeting, the Department of Justice (DoJ) gave CFIDIG members an update about the Garda Vetting Review Group, which is undertaking a review of vetting legislation and arrangements. The Vetting Review Group is chaired by DoJ and several Government Departments and Agencies are represented on it, including the Department of Health (DoH), the Department of Education (DoE), DCEDIY, Tusla, HSE and An Garda Síochána (AGS).

In addition to the updates noted above, the following informative presentations were given to the Group during 2021:

- Supporting families of children who have experienced sexual abuse (Tusla and HSE, March 2021)

The Group received a presentation on the resource document 'A Stone Unturned', a guide for families of children who have experienced sexual abuse. This document is available at the following link

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/children/astoneuntuned.pdf>

As the social work system can be daunting and difficult to navigate, Tusla and the HSE recognised that there was a need for an information resource to help parents and guardians cope with the discovery that their child had been sexually abused. The guide was produced in 2015, prior to the enactment of the Children First Act. It was noted that while it may benefit from some updating, the information contained within it was still useful.

- 'What is the Data Telling Us?' Report – Five year Review of trends in Child Protection and Welfare data (DCEDIY March 2021)

This report, prepared by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), examines child protection and welfare data published by Tusla during its first five years of operation (2014 to 2018).

It was noted that referrals to Tusla's child protection and welfare services continue to increase year on year, while the number of children in care continues to decrease. The commencement of mandatory reporting in December 2017 has not resulted in a surge of referrals to date.

Tusla child protection and welfare data is available on their website at the following link
<https://www.tusla.ie/data-figures/>

6. Actions taken by Departments and Agencies in 2021 in support of Children First and child protection including relevant initiatives in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

The following examples provide an insight into some of the initiatives or actions undertaken by individual Departments and Agencies throughout the year to promote Children First and child protection and welfare in their sectors.

- **Department of Social Protection**

The School Meals Programme provides funding towards the provision of food to some 1,500 schools and organisations benefitting 230,000 children. The objective of the programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children who are unable, due to lack of good quality food, to take full advantage of the education provided to them.

As part of Budget 2019, funding was provided for a pilot scheme from September 2019, providing hot school meals in primary schools at a cost of €1m for 2019 and €2.5m in 2020. The pilot involved 37 schools benefitting over 6,700 students for the 2019/2020 academic year and was aimed primarily at schools without onsite cooking facilities. An evaluation of the Hot School Meals Pilot was completed in July 2020. All stakeholders indicated that the pilot project had a positive impact on children's diet, behaviour, attentiveness and psychological wellbeing.

In Budget 2021, an additional €5.5m was provided to extend the provision of hot school meals to an additional 35,000 primary school children, who were in receipt of the cold lunch option. Invitations for expressions of interest were issued to 705 primary schools in November 2020, and a total of 281 expressions of interest were received, of which 256 related to DEIS and 25 related to non-DEIS schools. The 35,000 available places were allocated to each local authority based on the number of children applied for by local authority area as a percentage of the total.

- **Department of Education**

As part of the Department of Education's oversight of the implementation of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools 2017, the Department's Inspectorate checks on compliance with the key aspects of the 2017 Procedures during all school inspections. There were a total of 2,632 Inspections carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department during 2021, of which 50 were Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspections (CPSI). This model is a focused inspection of the implementation of the 2017 Procedures. The CPSI inspection process consists of an Initial Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspection and a Final Child Protection and Safeguarding Inspection. The two inspections are typically carried out in a school within a relatively short timeframe and result in published reports.

The Inspectorate reports on compliance with aspects of child protection procedures in all published inspection reports and continues to engage with schools that are not compliant with aspects of the 2017 Procedures until the school becomes compliant.

During 2021 the Department of Education commissioned a high-level independent review of the Department's current child protection policies and processes.

- **Department of Rural and Community Development**

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) 2018-23 provides funding to tackle poverty and social exclusion at local level and works with both individuals and communities. SICAP target groups include disadvantaged children and families. Compliance with Children First is part of the contract conditions in the Funding Agreement with SICAP delivery bodies, which are primarily Local Development Companies (LDCs).

In 2021, 4,550 parents and guardians and almost 31,400 children and young people were supported through SICAP. One SICAP-supported example is the Dublin Northwest Partnership (DNP) response to food poverty in families.

Early in 2021, when schools were closed due to Covid-19, food poverty presented as a pressing need for school-going children in the DNP area. Many of these children would have usually availed of food provision in after-school facilities. DNP therefore continued to deliver food hampers and educational resource packs in Finglas South and Cabra, until schools re-opened in March. In addition to the provision of food, the deliveries also provided a point of contact and feedback for children and families who may have been vulnerable to isolation. Educational packs were also provided to help keep children and families engaged in learning activity, even when unable to attend school.

- **Health Service Executive (HSE)**

HSE services continued to be significantly disrupted due the impact of Covid-19 and also due to the serious cyber-attack on the HSE ICT network in May 2021. However the importance of staff awareness of their roles and responsibilities to support the protection and welfare of children under Children First remained a key priority.

Following the cyber-attack, an alternative online training platform was quickly developed for new staff to access the HSE's mandatory training, including the 'Introduction to Children First' training module. HSE staff complete the mandatory online training module, as a refresher course, every three years. Online live interactive training workshops for Mandated Persons were also delivered to over 1,200 HSE staff members in 2021 and all training resources were provided to HSE funded organisations. Further workshops were provided to line managers in relation to their roles and responsibilities under the HSE Child Protection and Welfare Policy, and workshops to support guidance on the completion of child safeguarding Risk Assessments and Child Safeguarding Statements were also made available. The HSE Children First National Office also finalised and published the HSE

Children First Training and Resource Strategy. This sets out the training and resource initiatives that will be delivered over the period 2021-2023, to support child safeguarding in the HSE.

A consistent national governance and reporting structure to monitor the progress of ongoing Children First implementation is in place, with Children First Operational Steering Committees established across all Community Healthcare Organisations and Hospital Groups.

The HSE also supported the Children First Awareness Week campaign in November 2021, with communications issued to all staff and through HSE social media forums throughout the week.

- **An Garda Síochána (AGS)**

Divisional Protective Services Units operate in each Garda Division, promoting a consistent and professional approach to the investigation of crimes against children, amongst other crime types. A review commenced in 2021 which included an analysis of resource allocation to Divisional Protective Service Units (DPSUs) and their capacity to meet the investigative needs in each Division. This review also considered the redevelopment of DPSU training to ensure a fit-for-purpose and victim-centric training course is delivered to all DPSU personnel. This review is scheduled to conclude in Quarter 2 2022.

An Garda Síochána and Tusla continued to implement An Garda Síochána/Tusla Joint Work Programme as approved by the National Child Safeguarding Strategic Liaison Committee (NCSSLC), with a view to enhancing child protection processes and procedures, as set out within the Children First Joint Working Protocol for An Garda Síochána/Tusla Child and Family Agency Liaison 2017.

- **Tusla**

Throughout 2021, Tusla continued to work to ensure the continuity of supports and services, balancing the needs and best interests of children with public health advice. Tusla was also severely impacted by the cyber-attack on the HSE ICT network in May 2021. The main activities of Tusla during 2021 include:

The Children First Information and Advice Service (CFIAS) supports implementation and leadership in safeguarding and Children First within Tusla and the wider external environment. The CFIAS continued to develop information and training resources for delivery in a virtual learning environment, including the development of the Mandated Person eLearning Programme, due to be launched in early 2022.

The Children First eLearning Programme continued to have considerable participation, with over 63,700 participants completing the programme during 2021. This introductory training programme is available on the Tusla website at <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/children->

[first-e-learning-programme/](#).

The CFIAS also recommenced face-to-face engagement and delivery, wherever possible. The service was a key stakeholder in the development of the Children First Awareness Week campaign.

Tusla's Commissioning Office and the Children First Information and Advice Service (CFIAS) worked collaboratively throughout 2020 and 2021 to integrate Children First governance into the commissioning process. The CFIAS provided a list of questions to better inform compliance with Children First requirements. This allowed the Commissioning Office to implement a new Children First component to its Service Level Agreement process, capturing all funded partners nationally.

Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare Service was also impacted by the serious cyber-attack on the HSE. Despite this, Tusla received an increasing number of referrals for its services, with some 73,000 child protection and welfare referrals received in 2021, an increase of over 3,000 referrals on the 2020 figure. Some 980 children were listed as 'active' on the Child Protection Notification System (CPNS) at year end 2021. The CPNS is a record of every child who, following child protection conference procedures, is deemed to be at ongoing risk of significant harm due to inappropriate or inadequate care from parent(s).

The Tusla Portal was significantly impacted by the cyber-attack on the HSE in May 2021. While the Portal was down, Tusla dedicated contact points remained available for reporting child protection concerns by telephone and in writing. The Portal was brought back online by Tusla ICT in July 2021 and remains a safe and secure method for reporting concerns to Tusla. The Portal is available at the following link <https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/web-portal/>.

The Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit (CSSCU) continued to support relevant organisations to attain Child Safeguarding Statement compliance through targeted engagement, information sharing and effective partnership building. Their supportive compliance approach is guided by a five-year Child Safeguarding Statement Implementation Support Strategy (2018-2023).

Tusla Family Support and its partners worked together in 2021 to ensure families experienced services that were easily accessible and integrated at the front line in their own communities. During the pandemic, the need for integrated, cohesive child and family services at a local level has been particularly important, as families faced new challenges. Services applied hybrid models and provided practical supports such as education and food packs. Children First requirements are a key focus for all Family Support staff and the guidance is implemented throughout the work. Particular attention is given to those who are vulnerable or at risk.

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), which includes the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, School Completion Programme and Educational Welfare Service continued to promote Children First throughout 2021 via induction and training for staff.

Poor access to the internet and IT equipment impacted particularly on children and young people living in emergency accommodation, direct provision and also on the Traveller and Roma community. TESS staff sought to address this digital divide by sourcing equipment for these young people and liaising between families and schools where there were issues around connectivity.

There was a focus on supporting the return to school in March 2021 and again in September 2021. This necessitated close working with families to provide information on Covid-19 requirements in schools and to build confidence in parents returning their children to school after periods of school closures.

7. CFIDIG Priorities for 2022

The priorities for 2022 will be as follows:

- Continue to review and monitor impact of implementation of Children First Act 2015;
- Address any cross Departmental/cross sectoral issues arising, including in relation to effective interagency working;
- Inform consideration of proposals for updates to the Children First National Guidance;
- Roll out of a second Children First Awareness Week to reinforce the importance of supporting the protection and welfare of children;
- Continue to support awareness of and access to Children First online training through all relevant sectors;
- Continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 on child protection and welfare across the different sectors;
- Provide information or advice, or make proposals to the Minister on matters relating to the functions of the Implementation Group under section 22 (f) of the Children First Act 2015; and
- Comply with any requests from the Minister for reports under the Children First Act 2015.

APPENDIX 1

MEMBERSHIP OF CHILDREN FIRST INTER-DEPARTMENTAL IMPLEMENTATION GROUP FOR THE PERIOD 1 JANUARY TO 31 DECEMBER 2021

Department	Member	Membership Dates 01/01/2021-31/12/2021 unless otherwise stated
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	Conor Rowley {Chair} Gráinne Morrissey	
Education	Teresa McNeill Judith Lyons	01/01/21 – 11/01/21 11/01/21 – 31/12/21
Housing, Local Government and Heritage	Sean McLaughlin	
Justice	Gráinne Whelan*	
Social Protection	Marie O’Flynn	
Transport	Siobhán Nic Thighearnáin Patricia O’Brien	01/01/21 – 07/10/21 07/10/21 – 31/12/21
Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	Karen Brophy	
Health	Rachel Kenna**	
Finance	Feargal Ó Brolcháin Scline Scott	01/01/21 – 11/01/21 11/01/21 – 31/12/21
Agriculture, Food and the Marine	Padraig McMahon	
Environment, Climate and Communications	Brendan O’Reilly	
Defence	Anne Behan	
Foreign Affairs	Fiona Flood Caitriona Doyle	01/01/21 – 11/01/21 11/01/21 – 31/12/21

Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Gerald Harty	
Public Expenditure and Reform	Kieran Sheedy	
Taoiseach	Stephanie Harris	
Rural and Community Development	Clodagh McDonnell	
Agencies		
Tusla, Child and Family Agency	Jim Gibson	01/01/21 – 09/02/21
	Kate Duggan	09/02/21 – 31/12/21
An Garda Síochána	Detective Chief Superintendent Declan Daly	
Health Service Executive	Marion Martin	

* The Department of Justice was represented by Amy Sheils at the March 2021 meeting of the CFIDIG.

** The Department of Health was represented by Clare Lewis at the March 2021 meeting and by Georgina Bassett at the October 2021 meeting.

APPENDIX 2

AGENDAS OF THE 2021 MEETINGS OF THE CHILDREN FIRST INTER-DEPARTMENTAL IMPLEMENTATION GROUP

Meeting of Thursday 4 March 2021

Venue: Online using Webex

Time: 11am

AGENDA

1. Introduction/Welcome by Chair
 - Tour de Table
2. Opening Remarks by Minister Roderic O’Gorman TD
3. Minutes of meeting of 22 October 2020
 - Matters arising
4. Presentation by Tusla and HSE – Supporting families of children who have experienced sexual abuse
5. Presentation by DCEDIY – on report ‘What is the Data Telling Us?’ – Five year Review of Trends in Child Protection and Welfare data
6. Compliance with Children First obligations/ SIP Reviews
7. Updates:
 - Impact of Covid-19
 - Information Campaigns
8. AOB
 - Operation Encompass
 - CFIDIG Annual Report 2020
 - Outstanding paperwork for nominees to CFIDIG
 - Date of next meeting

Meeting of Thursday 21 October 2021

Venue: Online using Webex

Time: 11am

AGENDA

1. Introduction/Welcome
2. Minutes of meeting of 4 March 2021
3. Children First Awareness Week
4. Garda Vetting Review Group (DoJ)
5. Tusla Review of Adequacy Report
6. Compliance with Children First obligations
7. Updates:
 - DoE review of child protection
 - Special Rapporteur 2020/21 report
8. AOB:
 - CFIDIG 2020 Annual Report
 - Outstanding paperwork for nominees to CFIDIG
 - Proposed 2022 meeting dates



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