



Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Work Package Final Report

Key Findings

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SEPTEMBER 2018



Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS)

This is a programme of action being undertaken by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, as part of its National Service Delivery Framework. The programme seeks to embed prevention and early intervention into the culture and operation of Tusla. The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway has undertaken an evaluation study focusing on the implementation of and the outcomes from the PPFS Programme. The study's overall research question is:

Is the organisational culture and practice of Tusla and its partners changing such that services are more integrated, preventative, evidence informed and inclusive of children and parents? If so, is this contributing to improved outcomes for children and their families?

We have adopted a Work Package approach reflecting the key components of the PPFS Programme. The five work packages are: Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks, Children's Participation, Parenting Support and Parental Participation, Public Awareness and Commissioning. While stand-alone studies in their own right, each Work Package contributes to the overall assessment of the programme.

What is the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Work Package?

Meitheal refers to an Irish early intervention and prevention practice model that is used when children and young people need support around, for example, behavioural issues or emotional needs; but do not meet the threshold for an intervention by Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare (CPW) service. Meitheal is coordinated by a Lead Practitioner. The family's voluntary involvement in identifying their strengths and needs and developing associated action plans is a key part of the process. In some cases, a single organisation can provide support but usually a team of people from a number of agencies with relevant expertise is brought together to work with the parents or guardians, the child or young person. A coordinated action plan is developed to meet the needs of the child or young person and if necessary other family members. Regular meetings are held to review the progress made and to discuss possible new actions. Child and Family Support Networks are multi-agency networks developed to improve access to support services for children and their families.

What is the focus of this report?

This report details the findings of the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Process and Outcomes Study which is a nationwide study that evaluated the experiences of parents or guardians and their children who were participating in Meitheal. The aim of this report is to give a full picture of families and Lead Practitioners' experiences of Meitheal, the nature of families' participation in it and the impact it has had on the difficulties they need support for. This report presents findings on a number of themes including the experience of taking part in Meitheal, the impact it has on families' outcomes and changes to the system of providing help and challenges it faces.

How was the research conducted?

The information was collected from children and young people, their parents or guardians and corresponding practitioners who are currently involved in a Meitheal, and the Lead Practitioners who support them. Information was gathered through interviews and tools that measure changes in families' outcomes and their strengths and difficulties. Information from a total of 85 families is presented in the study. Tusla performance data on its activities was also analysed for this report and focus groups were carried out with professionals involved in the Child and Family Support Networks around the country to understand their views.

WHAT ARE THE KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS?

1. The impact of the Meitheal and CFSN model on outcomes for children, young people, and families.

- Meitheal is improving family outcomes over time, particularly from the perspective of mothers, showing the potential of Meitheal to improve and sustain improvement in outcomes over time.
- Maternal well-being was the most significant predictor of family outcomes suggesting that supporting mothers is key to support families.
- Meitheal was described as empowering by parents and families. They valued being listened to. Challenges remain around the successful participation of children and young people in the Meitheal process.
- Meitheal can have a positive impact on parental attitudes towards help-seeking behaviours and accessing services.
- Lead Practitioners feel Meitheal is a structured process that can facilitate change in family outcomes and the overall service provision system.
- Even though it is early stages of implementation, evidence suggests CFSNs can also improve families engagement with and access to services through integrated support and local coordination of services to effectively respond to complex needs.

2. Implementation of the Meitheal and CFSN model.

- Fidelity to the Meitheal model increased over time suggesting that the model is applied following the guidelines and stages intended in the model design.
- The majority of Meitheals were initiated through Direct Access and Lead Practitioners engaged come from a variety of sectors including community and voluntary suggesting that families have adequate access to the model.
- Key Stakeholders identified differences in how the model is being implemented nationwide. Some of the reasons given were the lack of structure and personnel needed to establish and deliver the model as stated in the original design.
- Features of Meitheal were perceived to play a very important role in the process of implementation and its outputs. These include the Lead Practitioner, the Meitheal Review Meetings, its voluntary nature, and the promptness of its initiation.
- Challenges to implementation were identified; where a referral is made to the Child Protection and Welfare System about child protection concerns and the Meitheal is closed, there are serious issues about what supports are made available to the family during this period. The second issue is the principle that a separate Meitheal needs to be opened for each child in the family. This may prevent families from taking part due to the perceived burden of a second set of Meitheal Review Meetings and the associated paperwork. Thirdly, issues with identifying thresholds were also mentioned.
- Practitioners are willing to engage in the CFSNs however issues around attendance and the lack of uniformity in availability of services remain as challenges.
- Meitheal and CFSNs are working separately in practice; however, both are improving families engagement with and access to services.

3. Impact of the Meitheal and CFSN model on the Irish Child Protection and Welfare System.

- This study identified that the level of Meitheal activity, compared to overall activity in the child protection and welfare system, is at an early stage, with low numbers nationwide
- Meitheal activity increased between Q4 2015 and Q4 2016; however, numbers decreased slightly over 2017. In this period, 2288 Meitheals were initiated and 99 CFSNs were in operation.
- Meitheal has the capacity to work at a prevention and early intervention level. Meitheal is supporting families with a level of need that may not previously have been a priority in the child protection and welfare system. However, its ability to provide help is hindered in individual Meitheals by the lack of key services, lengthy waiting lists and the level, complexity, and entrenched nature of some of the presenting issues.
- Participants in Key Stakeholder Interviews had mixed views. Almost the same number of participants described the system as connected, as those who thought it was not connected.
- Meitheal is influencing practice as there appears to be some shift towards a sense of shared responsibility for supporting children, young people, and their families, as shown by the fact that Meitheal was suggested to families from professionals outside of the child protection and welfare system.
- Participants who are members of the CFSNs felt that these have a potentially important role to play in the development of early intervention and prevention strategies in local areas.

4. Embeddedness of the Meitheal and CFSN model in the Irish Child Protection and Welfare System.

- Meitheal's perceived embeddedness in the system of service provision is working – albeit to varying degrees. There are challenges in the Meitheal framework about a child protection referral being made during a Meitheal, but Meitheal is being suggested to families at a divert and step-down stage. However, some practitioners described experiences where they had lost complete contact with their families when they were referred to CPW system.
- Meitheal was perceived as a sustainable model of practice, at least in some areas, however additional resources, structured supports such as administrative staff, and voluntary engagement of Lead Practitioners is needed to facilitate sustainability.
- Issues remain around the need for public and internal awareness of Meitheal, issues also remain around the engagement of Meitheal with other statutory bodies, such as the HSE, Department of Education, and several local authorities.

The extent to which the CFSNs are embedded in the Child Protection and Welfare System is not fully clear. At a structural level there appear to be issues with how connected the networks are to other bodies such as CYPSC and the Meitheal process.



Conclusions and Recommendations

- Overall, the experience of Meitheal was positive for most families as they felt their needs were met and they were listened to and empowered. The holistic nature and inter-agency collaboration facilitated the response to complex needs.
- CRSNs can support families in an indirect way by building capacity through organising training events and improving practitioners' relationships.
- The role of the Lead Practitioners is crucial, however challenges to engagement need to be addressed.
- Meitheal can work effectively at a prevention and early intervention level of support, providing support for families at lower levels of need.
- The connection between Meitheal and the CPW system is not fluent in all areas which can have a negative impact in the timely provision of services for families.
- There is some evidence to support the sustainability of the model over time with the appropriate funding and resources.

Recommendations

- Address the challenges to implementation and engagement of Lead Practitioner to improve the sustainability of the model.
- Prioritise the meaningful inclusion of children and young people in the Meitheal process.
- Improve the connection between Meitheal and the CPW system to ensure that families' needs are met and services are provided on a continuous basis.
- Tusla needs to give careful consideration to the needs and difficulties that specific areas may be experiencing in implementing the Meitheal and CFSN model.
- Increase internal awareness and external public awareness towards the model to facilitate access and also to encourage the engagement of government and statutory bodies to provide timely and integrated services for families.
- Facilitate availability and access to specialised services for children and young people.

About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the National University of Ireland, Galway. It was founded in 2007, through support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Ireland and the Health Service Executive, with a base in the School of Political Science and Sociology, the mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services and practices that improve the lives of children, youth and families through research education and service development. The UCFRC has an extensive network of relationships and research collaborations internationally and is widely recognised for its core expertise in the areas of Family Support and Youth Development.



List of Publications for the Meitheal and CFSN Work Package:

Cassidy A., Devaney C., McGregor, C. and Landy F. (2016), *Interfacing informal and formal help systems: Historical pathways to the Meitheal model*, Administration. Volume 64, (2) 137-155, doi: 10.1515/admin-2016-0019

Cassidy A., Devaney C. and McGregor C. (2016) *Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks. Early Implementation of Meitheal and the Child and Family Support Networks: Lessons from the field*. The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, The National University of Ireland, Galway.

Devaney C., Mc Gregor C. and Cassidy A. (2017) *Early implementation of a family-centred practice model in child welfare: Findings from an Irish Study*. Practice: Social Work in Action 29(5), 331-345. doi:10.1080/09503153.2017.1339786

Rodriguez, L., Cassidy, A. and Devaney, C. (2017) *Interim Report on the Meitheal Process and Outcomes Study*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Rodriguez, L., Cassidy, A. and Devaney, C. (2018) *The Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks*

Process and Outcomes Study. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Rodriguez, L., Cassidy, A. and Devaney, C. (2018) *The Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Process and Outcomes Study Final Report*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Cassidy A., Rodriguez L and Devaney C. (2018) *The Child and Family Support Networks Research Study* Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Cassidy A., Rodriguez L and Devaney C. (2018) *A Retrospective Study of the Meitheal Model*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Rodriguez L., Cassidy A. and Devaney C. (2018) *The Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Process and Outcomes Pilot Study*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Further Information

If you would like to read the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Work Package Final Report, or any of the publications listed above please visit our website

www.nuigalway.ie/childandfamilyresearch

if you have any questions on our research, please email cfrc@nuigalway.ie

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