

Meitheal

TÚSLA *-led Early Intervention Practice Model*



Meitheal Toolkit

TÚSLA

An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

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This third edition (V3.0) of the Meitheal Toolkit replaces previous editions and should be the only one in use.

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Version 1 of the Meitheal Toolkit was drawn together by Fergal Landy of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway, on behalf of Tusla – Child and Family Agency. The second edition was revised by Avril Dooley, Michelle Sheehan, Fergal Landy, Marie Crawley, Ann Butler and Berni Smyth of Tusla – Child and Family Agency.

The overall Tusla – Child and Family Agency Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) service has been supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies and was initially led by Dr Aisling Gillen Programme Lead for the Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support.

This third edition of the Meitheal Toolkit was developed by a range of stakeholders and their contribution to this revised toolkit is gratefully acknowledged by Amy Mulvihill, National General Manager for Prevention Partnership and Family Support.

Dedication

Paula Gorman was a passionate advocate for the people of the Cranmore community in Sligo. In her role as Project Manager of the local Family Support Project, she worked alongside families to help them achieve their potential. She was a champion for community development, collaboration and getting support services to gather around children, young people, and families as a team. In doing this work, she proposed the term Meitheal as most accurately reflecting the spirit of working together. For this and for all of her contribution, those who worked with her and indeed all the child and family practice community owe her a debt of gratitude and remember her fondly.

Acronyms used

CAF	Common Assessment Framework
CFSN	Child and Family Support Network
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
ION	Identification of Need
LANS	Limerick Assessment of Needs System
PPFS	Prevention, Partnership and Family Support

Introduction

How to use this toolkit

The Tusla Meitheal Toolkit is intended for use by practitioners using the **Meitheal Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model for all agencies working with children, young people, and their families** in conjunction with the Tusla Standardised Meitheal training. It provides direction, guidance, and advice on all stages of the Meitheal process and can be used as a route planner for undertaking a Meitheal effectively.

The toolkit is a practical resource that will:

- inform and guide practitioners through the Meitheal process.
- provide direction, advice, and guidance on how best to undertake the Meitheal process.
- provide support and guidance to Lead Practitioners to undertake their role effectively in the Meitheal process.
- identify how to store and share information safely as part of the Meitheal process.
- provide Meitheal documentation and guidance on how to complete Meitheal forms.
- provide guidance on facilitating meetings as part of the Meitheal process.

The Meitheal Toolkit has been developed as a resource that practitioners can use either in its entirety to get an overall understanding of the Meitheal process and how it works in practice, or that practitioners can dip in and out of in accordance with the stage of the Meitheal process they are currently working on.

The toolkit has been designed to be read both in book format and online on the Tusla website <https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/guidance-documents/>. You will find the list of contents useful for finding your way through the toolkit.

We recommend that practitioners ensure that they are using the most up-to-date version of Meitheal resources by regularly consulting the Tusla website.

Structure of toolkit

The toolkit contains 7 sections:

- **Section 1** provides the background to Prevention, Partnership and Family Support and to the theoretical and policy documents underpinning the development of Meitheal.
- **Section 2** provides an overview of the Meitheal process and outlines the individual steps that should be followed in preparing, discussing, and delivering a Meitheal to a child/young person and their family.
- **Section 3** describes the Meitheal process and deals with issues such as when a Meitheal should or should not be undertaken, the benefits of a Meitheal and the supports available to practitioners when planning for and undertaking a Meitheal.
- **Section 4** focuses on Meitheal groups and multi-agency working and provides guidance on how to work effectively within the Meitheal process.
- **Section 5** focuses on the role of the Lead Practitioner in the Meitheal process.
- **Section 6** considers how information is gathered and shared in the Meitheal process, with a particular focus on **clearly explaining the Data Privacy Notice** to parents and carers from the very beginning.
- **Section 7** contains appendices that cover frequently asked questions and checklists.

Section 1: Background to Prevention, Partnership and Family Support

This section provides background information on the National Service Delivery Framework of Tusla – Child and Family Agency; the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support service within Tusla, and the role of Meitheal a Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model for all agencies working with children, young people, and their families.

It focuses specifically on the following areas:

- Overview of the Tusla National Service Delivery Framework
- Prevention, Partnership and Family Support within the National Service Delivery Framework
- Commissioning and ensuring a Continuum of Support for children and families
- The Meitheal Model
- Design of the Meitheal Model
- Accessing the Meitheal process
- *My World Triangle*

1.1 Tusla National Service Delivery Framework

The development and implementation of a single, transparent, consistent, and accountable National Service Delivery Framework, focused on improving outcomes for children, is a key element of the work of Tusla.

Providing support to a child or young person and their family is not the exclusive responsibility of Tusla. Other statutory services – such as health, education, An Garda Síochána, local authorities – and the community and voluntary sector, all have a responsibility and a contribution to make in the protection, welfare and wellbeing of all children.

Tusla's National Service Delivery Framework offers pathways of support for children/young people and families as part of an integrated Tusla service. For example, Meitheal is Tusla's Early Intervention Practice Model, Signs of Safety is the National Approach to Practice for Child Protection and Welfare staff. These pathways are connected with the wider support system for children and families offered by all agencies working with children, families, and communities.

The interface between the Meitheal process and a variety of services is important, both internally within Tusla and with our external partners. A key principle to be applied is that of minimum intervention. Tusla's integrated approach to service provision is guided by a common concern for the well-being and rights of children and by the principle of the best interests of the child.

Meitheal was developed as part of a wider programme of work involving Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS). Therefore, this Toolkit needs to be understood as part of the PPFS service and in conjunction with the accompanying suite of documents:

- Guidance for the Implementation of an Area-based Approach to Prevention, Partnership, and Family Support
- Investing in Families: Supporting parents to improve outcomes for children – the Parenting Support Strategy
- 50 Key Messages to accompany Investing in Families: Supporting parents to improve outcomes for children

- What Works in Family Support?
- Tusla's Commissioning Strategy and Toolkit
- Child & Youth Participation Toolkit
- Parental Participation Toolkit
- Parent Support Strategy 2022
- Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) Guidance Document

Please visit the Tusla website to access relevant and most up-to-date versions of Meitheal related documents:

<http://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/guidance-documents/>

1.2 Prevention, Partnership and Family Support within the National Service Delivery Framework

The ***Guidance for the Implementation of an Area-based Approach to Prevention, Partnership and Family Support*** is a particularly important document because it sets the context within which Meitheal operates. It specifies the overarching principles for the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support service, and the specific principles for the Meitheal Model (see *Section 1.4*). The overarching principles are:

- Children, young people, and families are at the heart of everything that we do. There will be a clear focus on the wishes, feelings, safety, and well-being of children.
- The *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DCYA, 2017) and relevant legislation must always be adhered to.
- Appropriate supports will be provided at the earliest point of engagement, using a strengths-based perspective that takes account of resilience.
- Service providers will focus on improving outcomes for children and families and will track progress and results.
- There will be a focus on a progressive universalist approach to providing a continuum of support to all children and families. A balanced approach will be struck between developing primary prevention and early intervention services, whilst also maintaining secondary and tertiary services, with a redistribution of resources to areas of high need.
- Practice and service delivery will be informed by a consideration of evidence on effectiveness in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of services to meet needs.
- Tusla will work in partnership with children, parents, communities, child and family practitioners, and other agencies – statutory, community and voluntary.
- Services will be cost-effective and will demonstrate value for money.
- Practitioners and services will promote human rights and social inclusion, addressing issues around ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and rural/urban communities.

Another key document is the Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) Guidance Document, 2016. This document aims to guide and support the development of CFSNs. The Guidance outlines the role of members of the CFSN to:

- Participate in a collaborative Child and Family Support Network of community, voluntary and statutory providers so as to improve access for children/young people and families to support services at all levels of need.
- Facilitate more engagement and outreach to vulnerable families in the community.
- Bring relevant information on initiatives, gaps and needs in the locality to discussions and share information, as appropriate.
- Participate fully in the operation of Meitheal, a Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model, designed to ensure that the needs and strengths of children are effectively identified, understood, and responded to in a timely way so that children and parents get the help and support needed to improve children's outcomes and realise their rights.
- Help ensure that a continuum of support is available to all families, including those experiencing multiple challenges, that includes a range of supports and interventions, from universal services to more focused and intensive provision.
- Advise collectively on community development initiatives to support children and families.
- Adhere to *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)*, and the enhanced requirements of the Children First Act 2015, including Child Safeguarding Statements.¹

¹ Tusla (2017), *Guidance on Developing a Safeguarding Statement*. Dublin. Available at www.tusla.ie.

1.3 The continuum of need and support

As part of the PPFS service, Tusla has developed an approach to commissioning in order to ensure there is a clear continuum of support to meet need across the country. Tusla defines commissioning as *the ... use of ... the total resources available for children and families in the most efficient, equitable, proportionate, and sustainable way in order to improve outcomes for children*. To achieve this, each of Tusla's 17 Areas and each National Service Directorate must apply the commissioning cycle outlined below.

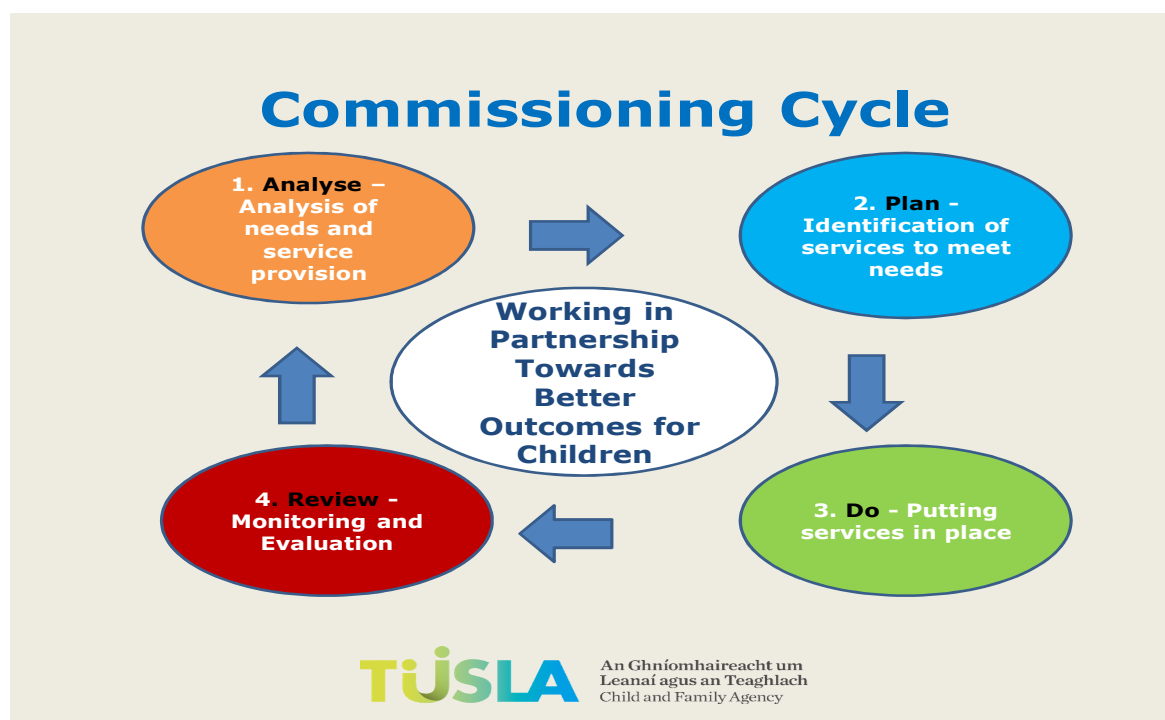


Figure 1. Tusla's Commissioning Cycle

Tusla has agreed five key principles to underpin the commissioning cycle:

1. Early intervention/prevention will be prioritised at all levels of service delivery – low, medium, and high.
2. Priority will be given to programmes and services that are evidence-based and evidence-informed.
3. The Tusla commissioning approach is based on partnership and participation principles.
4. Commissioning will take account of, and actively address, the specifics of the local context, e.g., rural and urban.
5. Commissioning will support both small, highly targeted services and large-scale local, regional, and national services.
6. Commissioning should incorporate capacity-building measures for the local community and voluntary sector to enable it to respond effectively to the needs of children and parents and the local context, and the service requirements of Tusla.

The first principle outlined above emphasises how Tusla will prioritise early intervention / prevention at all levels of service delivery (low, medium, and high), thereby ensuring that preventative support is available to families across the continuum of need. Meitheal is the appropriate method for identifying need and coordinating support to ensure prevention at the low level.

1.4 The Meitheal Model

Meitheal is an old Irish term that describes how neighbours would come together to assist each other in the saving or harvesting of crops or other tasks. In this context, Meitheal is a Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model designed to ensure that the strengths and needs of children and their families are effectively identified, understood, and responded to in a timely way so that children and families get the help and support needed to improve children's outcomes and realise their rights. It is an early intervention, multi-agency (when necessary) response, tailored to the needs of the individual child or young person.

Meitheal is voluntary and can only be undertaken when the parent/carer agrees to cooperate, engage with, and actively participate in the process. The parent signs the Meitheal forms to indicate this agreement and willingness to engage at each stage. Meitheal is used in partnership with parents to help them share their own knowledge, expertise, and concerns about their child and to hear the views of practitioners working with them. The ultimate goal is to enable parents and practitioners to work together to achieve a better life for the child.

- The word **Meitheal** is the name of the overall model and is used when describing specific components within it.
- The name given to the team around the child inclusive of the parent (and the child or young person, where appropriate) is the **Meitheal Group**.
- The name used when this group meets is the **Meitheal meeting**.
- The first Meitheal meeting should result in the development of a **Meitheal Action Plan**, which is documented and subsequently reviewed using the **Meitheal Planning and Review Form**.
- You will also find references in this toolkit to the **Meitheal Process**, which refers to the formal, centrally coordinated process for ensuring that strengths, needs, and desired outcomes are identified and, where necessary, support is planned, delivered, and reviewed in order to meet the identified need, capitalise on the identified strengths and achieve the desired outcomes.

The identified needs of the child will indicate who is best placed to be a member of the Meitheal Group. Based on the principle of minimum intervention, there may be some instances where the identification of strengths and needs indicates that the outcomes for a child can be achieved by a Meitheal Group that involves only the family and one agency. It could, for example, consist of the parent, child, and Lead Practitioner and, if necessary, another practitioner from his or her service. Because Meitheal is an outcomes-focused process, it is preferable to allow the process to continue in this instance so that robust planning and review continues and the progress towards outcomes for such a child is documented.

The underpinning principles of Meitheal are:

- Parents are made aware at the outset that child protection concerns in relation to their child or children will be referred to Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Services in line with the **Children First Act** (2015).
- Meitheal is a **voluntary process**. All aspects – from the decision to enter the process to the nature of information to be shared, the outcomes desired, the support delivered, and the agencies to be involved, to the end point of the process – are led by the parent/carer and child/young person.
- A Meitheal meeting **cannot** take place without the involvement of at least one parent.²

² Throughout the text of this toolkit, for ease of reference we refer to the involvement and participation of 'the parent'; this, of course, can refer to the parents or primary carers of a particular child.

- The Meitheal Model looks at the **whole child**, in the context of his or her family and environment. It takes into account strengths and resilience, as well as challenges and needs.
- The Meitheal Process privileges the voices of the parent/carer **and child**, recognising them as experts in their own situations and assisting them to identify their own needs and ways of meeting them.
- The Meitheal Model is aligned with the wider Tusla **National Service Delivery Framework** (see *Section 1.1*).
- The Meitheal Model should be **outcomes-focused** and should be implemented through a Lead Practitioner.

Research undertaken to date by Tusla's research partner for PPFS, the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, Ollscoil na Gaillimhe – University of Galway has indicated that families appreciate the unique principles of the Meitheal Model and, in particular, feel that they jointly own the process with the practitioners involved. Every effort needs to be made to ensure that this characteristic of the model is preserved and enhanced. The research also indicates that extra effort needs to be made to ensure that the co-productive and participatory aspect of the model is experienced equally by children and young people as well as by parents. For example, the professional role of the Lead Practitioner should not lessen the participation of the child.

1.5 Design of the Meitheal Model

The Meitheal Model has been designed in order to create a balance between national standardisation and local responsiveness to need. It is envisaged that families and practitioners can expect a consistent approach to service delivery in accordance with the overall National Service Delivery Framework, but also that practitioners will be able to work together locally with families to deliver innovative and creative responses to locally identified need.

Meitheal is primarily designed to create a common method for identifying unmet needs which require a coordinated response across all agencies that work with children, young people, and families. Therefore, all agencies are encouraged to use Meitheal, rather than any other approach, to identify and coordinate responses to child and family need. If a child's needs require clarification, and a practitioner does not have reasonable ground for concern in relation to the protection and welfare of that child, then a Meitheal should be initiated.

The Meitheal Model is influenced by the Limerick Assessment of Needs System (LANS) and the Identification of Need (ION) Project operated in Sligo, Leitrim, West Cavan and previously in Donegal. These initiatives, in turn, were influenced by the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in England and Wales, and the My World Triangle and Practice Model as part of *Getting it Right for Every Child* in Scotland.

1.6 Accessing the Meitheal Process

A family can access support through Meitheal in a number of ways:

1. **Directly**, as a result of a discussion between a parent and a practitioner.
2. **Diversion**, when a referral has been made under Children First and it is deemed that no harm or future harm has been identified. The family may be offered Meitheal as an early intervention response as an option.
3. **Step down**, when a case is being closed to Tusla Child Protection and Welfare and there is a recognition that the child may have some unmet needs. The family may be offered Meitheal as an early intervention as an option.

The offer of Meitheal as an early intervention option should be recorded by the person making the suggestion.

Parents decide if they want to engage in Meitheal as it is a **voluntary process**.

In circumstances where families choose alternative ways to meet their child's unmet needs, agencies should continue to engage with families outside of the Meitheal process.

At all times the safety and welfare of the child is paramount. Regardless of where and how a Meitheal is initiated, should a child protection concern emerge at **any** stage, all practitioners have a duty to follow Children First guidance.

The Meitheal process and the process of assessment of child protection and welfare concerns by Tusla are two distinct processes within the overall National Service Delivery Framework. Therefore, a family must not be subject to both processes at the same time. If a referral under Childrens First is made and accepted for assessment, then an open Meitheal process will have to be closed. This is to avoid any role confusion or duplication from the perspective of both the practitioner and the family.

Once commenced, the key elements of the Meitheal process are summarised in the following step-by-step guide (*see Section 2 for full descriptions of each step*):

Stage 1: Preparation

- Step 1: Consider whether a Meitheal would be helpful.
- Step 2: Introduce the Meitheal Model to the family, using **Meitheal Information Leaflets**, the **Meitheal Data Privacy Notice**, and other appropriate resources.
- Step 3: Document the conversation where the parent, and where appropriate, the child, express that they understand the Meitheal process and agree to proceed with a Meitheal Request. This is achieved through the completion of the **Meitheal Request Form**.
- Step 4: Submit the Meitheal Request Form.
- Step 5: Tusla will check if a Meitheal is in place for this child or if the child is receiving a Child Protection and Welfare Response and will advise you whether or not to proceed with a Meitheal.

Stage 2: Discussion

- Step 6: Document the needs, strengths, and desired outcomes by completing the **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form**.
- Step 7: Consider an appropriate response in partnership with the parents and child/young person.

Stage 3: Delivery

- Step 8: Plan and deliver support, using the **Meitheal Planning and Review Form**.
- Step 9: Monitor and review progress, using the **Meitheal Planning and Review Form**.
- Step 10: Document closure and feedback, using the **Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form**.

1.7 My World Triangle

The Meitheal Model has adopted the *My World Triangle* tool used by the Scottish government in its National Practice Model and developed as part of the *Getting it Right for Every Child* (2012) approach.

The *My World Triangle* (see Figure 2) is used to guide discussions with parents and children/young people (in accordance with their age and understanding) when identifying the child/young person's strengths and needs. This is done by examining key areas of the child's circumstances in three domains:

- How I grow and develop
- What I need from the people who look after me
- My wider world

By focusing on the child's development within their family and their wider community, the *My World Triangle* introduces a mental map which helps practitioners explore a child/young person's experience and identify the strengths, needs and challenges to a child's well-being in partnership with the child/young person and their parents/carers. These are recorded as strengths and needs. This should help to plan a more 'whole child, whole system' approach to achieving improved outcomes for the child/young person. While different practitioners may have a role in meeting particular needs, all practitioners in a Meitheal can participate in a holistic response to the child's needs. The feedback from the evaluation research to date is that parents, children/young people, and practitioners find the *My World Triangle* very helpful and user-friendly.

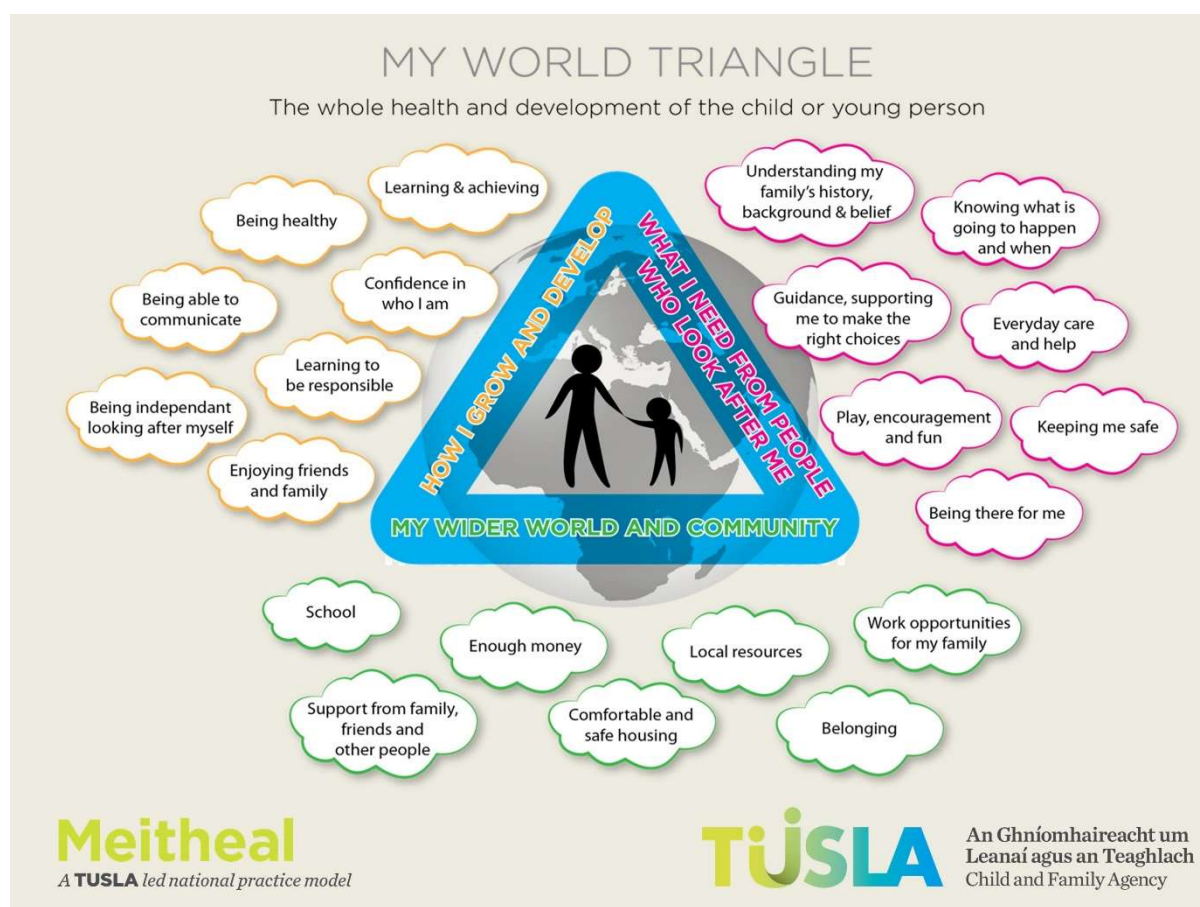


Figure 2. My World Triangle (Acknowledgement to the Scottish Government)

The areas of a child's life that are explored in each of the three domains are:

How I grow and develop

- **Health** – Physical and mental; diet; exercise; immunisations; medical and dental care; developmental milestones; major illnesses or accidents; hospital admissions; impairments/disabilities/conditions affecting the child's health/development; with teenagers – sexual health and alcohol/substance misuse
- **Education** – Cognitive development (understanding, reasoning and problem-solving); learning achievements; skills and interests; opportunities for creativity, exploration, experimentation, imagination, play/social interaction; identification of any special education needs; personal learning plans
- **Emotional and behavioural development** – Being able to communicate (speech and language, conversation, expression); confident in who they are (social presentation, resilience, self-esteem, quality of attachments; enjoying family and friends)
- **Behavioural development** – Becoming independent and looking after themselves; learning to be responsible

What I need from the people who look after me

- **Everyday care and help** – Providing for the child's physical needs (food, clothing, personal hygiene, access to medical/dental care)
- **Keeping the child safe** – Ensuring the child is kept safe from harm/danger; recognition of hazards both inside and outside the home, and also from unsafe adults/children and self-harm
- **Emotional warmth and supporting the child** – Ensuring the child's emotional needs are met and that the child has secure, stable and affectionate relationships with significant adults
- **Stimulation** – Promoting the child's learning and intellectual development through encouragement and cognitive development, and promoting social opportunities
- **Guidance/boundaries** – Supporting the child to make the right choices; social problem-solving; anger management; consideration for others; effective discipline and shaping of behaviour
- **Stability** – Providing a sufficiently stable family environment to enable a child to develop and maintain a secure attachment to the primary caregiver(s) in order to ensure optimal development; ensuring the child has contact with important family members and significant others

My wider world and community

- **Wider family and friends** – positive contact with people who are considered members of the wider family by the child/parents; related/non-related and absent members; a support network of friends, including exploring what support do they provide
- **Housing** – Comfortable and safe housing; amenities; a sense of belonging
- **Income and employment** – Family has a regular income and is accessing all their entitlements; financial difficulties that may affect the child; impact of parent/carer's work pattern on the child
- **Community resources** – Facilities and services in the community; access and availability to the child/family; impact of services on the family
- **Sense of belonging and inclusion** – Degree of child/family's integration or isolation in the community/with peer groups and other social networks

Section 2: Meitheal Step-by-Step Guide

This section provides details on the Meitheal step-by-step process and the approach underpinning it.

References to the Meitheal forms that need to be completed at each stage of the process are highlighted in **bold** throughout this section. This allows the practitioner to link the step-by-step process with the documentation and to be aware at what point of the process they are used.

The process should be *supported*, rather than driven, by the documentation. The practitioner should focus primarily on building and developing a relationship of trust with the parent and child/young person and ensuring their maximum understanding of, and participation in the process.

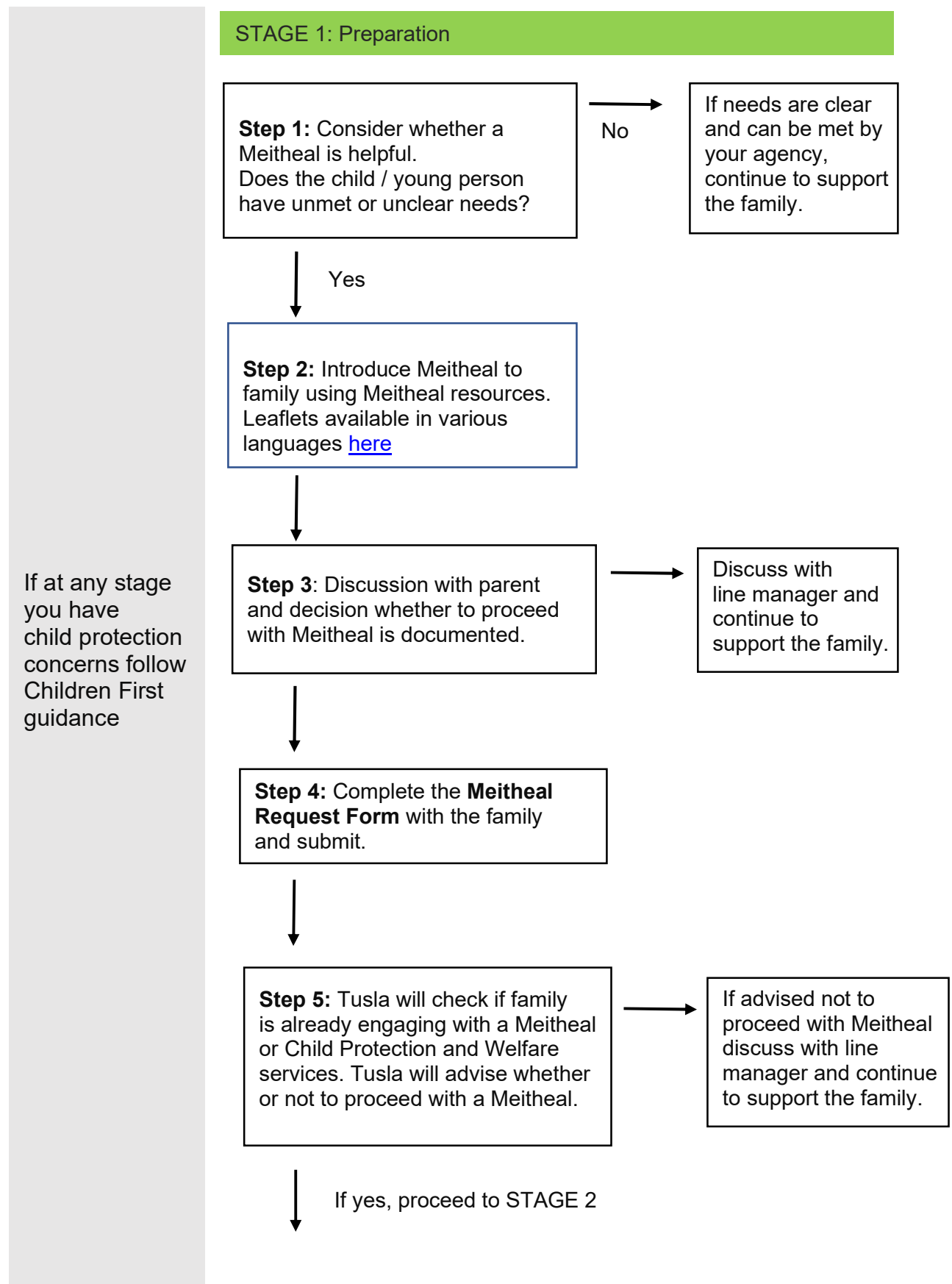
2.1 Introduction

A family can access Meitheal in a number of ways.

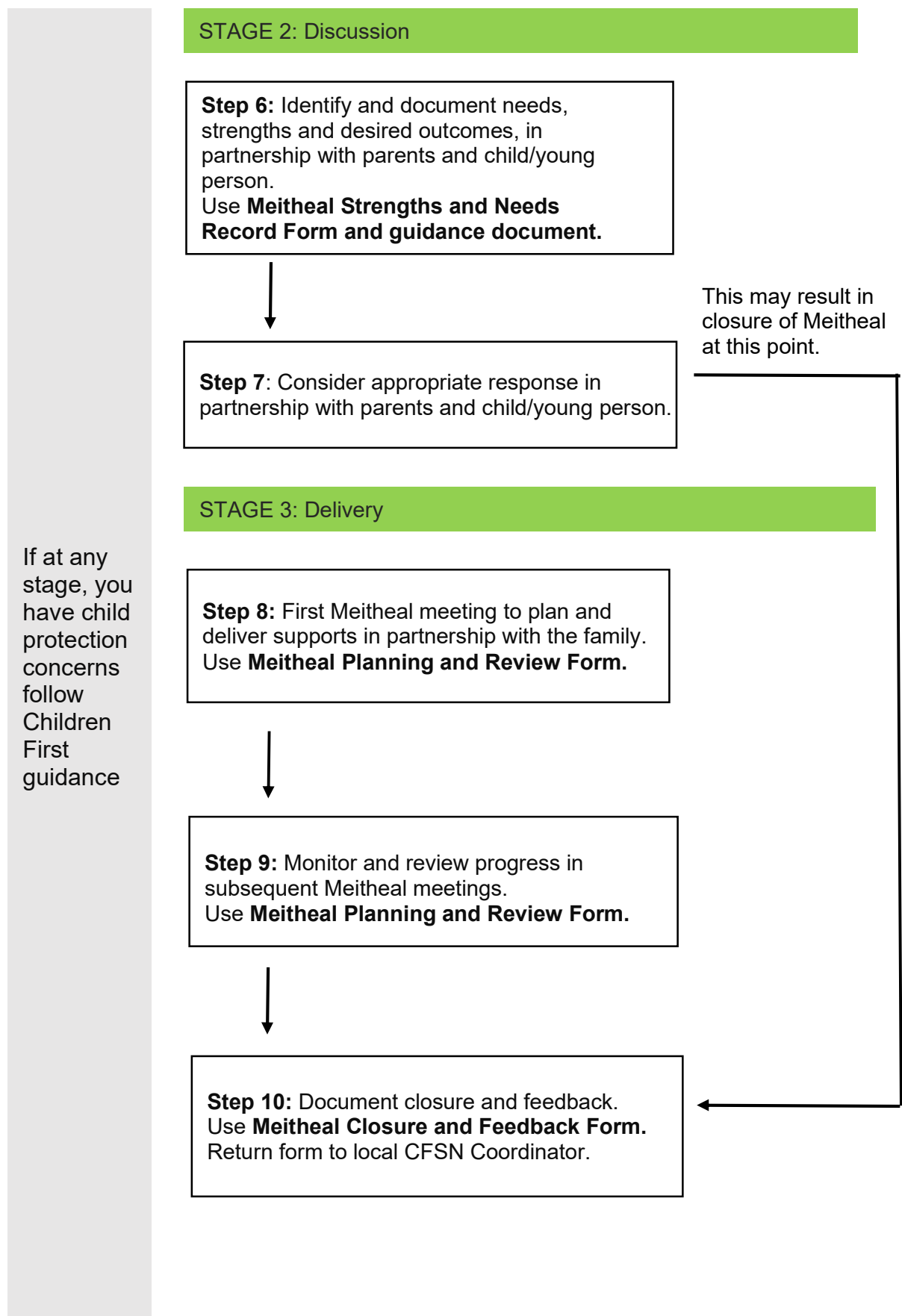
Directly	Through a discussion between a parent and a practitioner	The Meitheal Process commences at Step 1 as outlined below.
Diversion	A referral has been made under Children First and no harm has been identified.	The family may be offered Meitheal as an early intervention response.
Step down	A case is being closed to Tusla Child Protection and Welfare and there is recognition that the child may have some unmet needs.	They may also be offered other alternatives.

The next two pages provide an overview of the Meitheal Step-by-Step process from a practitioner's perspective.

2.2 OVERVIEW OF MEITHEAL STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS



OVERVIEW OF MEITHEAL STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS continued



2.3 Detailed description of Meitheal step-by-step process

Keeping children safe is everyone's business. ***Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)*** stipulates that society has a duty of care towards children and requires everyone working with children to be alert to the possibility of abuse.

If at any stage throughout the Meitheal process you have child protection concerns, then *Children First* Guidance should be followed.

Practitioners are encouraged, under Section 3.4.2 of *Children First*, to consult with Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare Services for further guidance around any concerns.

In this section each step in the Meitheal process is considered in much more detail. This is explained from the perspective of a Lead Practitioner.

STAGE 1: Preparation

**Step 1 Consider whether a Meitheal is helpful.
Practitioner identifies a child/young person as having unmet additional needs.**

Meitheal is about early help where children have unmet additional and/or complex needs that need to be responded to, but who do not require a Child Protection or Welfare Response.

You might decide to consider a Meitheal:

- when you have concerns about how well the child is progressing.
- when the child/young person's needs are unclear and/or broader than the remit of a single agency provider.
- when a number of agencies are already involved and a Meitheal would help to agree desired outcomes, coordinate, and review the supportive interventions.
- when the child/family raises concerns with you in relation to the child's progress.

A Meitheal can be carried out at any time – on unborn babies, new-born babies, children, and young people up to 18 years of age (once initiated before their 18th birthday). Ultimately the family are best placed to decide what form of support they would prefer.

A Meitheal should *not* be undertaken:

Without a parent's consent.

When there are child protection concerns in relation to the child/young person. You should follow *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)* and your own organisation's Child Protection policies and procedures.

If a child or young person is not in agreement with the need for a Meitheal to take place, then their view should be given due consideration in accordance with their age and understanding. The individual circumstances of each child will determine

whether a Meitheal should proceed or not in this instance. If the Meitheal does proceed, the child or young person may choose not to engage.

Step 2 Introduce Meitheal to family using Meitheal Resources

Use the Meitheal Information Leaflet **A Guide for Parents and Carers** to introduce Meitheal to parents. You can use other resources to explain Meitheal if you think these would be helpful. Explain that Meitheal is a Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model used to identify a child's strengths and needs. Meitheal privileges the voice of parents and children and recognises them as experts on their own lives.

In accordance with age and understanding, you should also explain Meitheal to the child / young person, using the Meitheal Information Leaflet **A Guide for Young People** or other appropriate resources.

If you have been asked to consider initiating a Meitheal by a Tusla Child and Family Support Network Coordinator as a result of a diversion or step-down from a Child Protection and Welfare response, you still need to explain the Meitheal process to the parent and child/young person in the same way.

It is **essential** to inform parents of two key legislative requirements for engagement in Meitheal.

The first relates to Child Protection.

The Lead Practitioner must inform parents that if child protection concerns are raised at any stage throughout the Meitheal process, then **Children First Guidance** will be followed.

The second obligation relates to information sharing within the Meitheal process.

You must highlight to parents the **Meitheal Data Privacy Notice**. This notice helps support the parent's understanding of how their information will be stored and processed when they are participating in Meitheal.

Step 3 Discussion with parent and decision whether to proceed with Meitheal is documented.

If the parent is interested in Meitheal, explain about the checks that need to be undertaken and secure their agreement for the checks to take place.

If the parent does not agree to participate in the Meitheal process, you can still continue to engage with and support the family.

You should document their decision and have a discussion with your line manager to decide on any further appropriate course of action to take. There may be scope to discuss any parental fears/concerns about Meitheal and to overcome these, if appropriate.

Agreement for the Meitheal can be given by any person holding guardianship rights in respect of the child. This includes anyone who is deemed a guardian in accordance with the law. The agreement of one legal guardian is sufficient to proceed, although it is preferable to secure and record the agreement of both.

Step 4 Complete Meitheal Request Form and submit.

Complete the **Meitheal Request Form** with the parents and if appropriate, the child, and submit.

Step 5 Tusla will advise whether or not to proceed with a Meitheal.

Tusla will check if family is already engaging with a Meitheal or Child Protection and Welfare services. If the family is not already engaging with a Meitheal or Child Protection and Welfare services, you will be advised to proceed with Meitheal.

If you have been asked to consider initiating a Meitheal by Tusla as a result of a diversion or step-down from a Child Protection and Welfare services, then ordinarily you will be advised to proceed at this point.

If you are directed not to proceed with a Meitheal, continue to engage with the family through your agency's response mechanisms. You can link with your local CFSN for additional support if necessary.

Step 6 Identify and document needs, strengths, and desired outcomes in partnership with parents and child/young person.

You should provide the **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form** to the family.

Youth Participation resources can be found [here](#).

You should have a discussion (or a number of shorter conversations) with the family in order to complete and finalise the information gathered in the form. Ensure the following:

- You include the views of the child/young person.
- You accurately record their strengths and needs.
- Parents see and agree the final version of the form.

In the Strengths and Needs Record Form parents identify agencies, and in some cases, individuals within agencies, that they would like to invite to engage in the Meitheal process with them. You need to be clear that the information on the form will be shared with these identified parties.

Step 7 Consider appropriate response in partnership with parents and child/young person.

Following the discussion(s) around the Strengths and Needs, the appropriate response may be:

- ♦ Single service response – move to Step 8.
 - ♦ Multi service response –move to Step 8.
 - ♦ Referral to Child Protection and Welfare Services – move to Step 10.
 - ♦ Closure of Meitheal – move to Step 10.
- ♦ Single service response
- It may be possible to meet the identified need and achieve agreed outcomes without having multiple agencies involved. This is allowed for within the Meitheal process in order to adhere to the principle of minimum intervention.

Although there may be no need to invite other agencies to the Meitheal meeting, if proceeding to STAGE 3: Delivery, a copy of the completed **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form** must be forwarded to the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator within 10 working days of the form being signed. The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator will work with you to identify a date for the first meeting.

♦ Multi service response

Multiple agencies may be involved in order to address the identified need(s) and achieve the agreed outcomes. If you are proceeding to STAGE 3: Delivery, then you must forward a copy of the completed **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form** to the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator within 10 working days of the form being signed. Jointly agree who will contact the relevant services to invite them to participate in the Meitheal process and establish a meeting date.

♦ Referral to Child Protection and Welfare Services

If child protection concerns are raised at any stage throughout the Meitheal process, then **Children First Guidance** will be followed.

♦ Closure of Meitheal

If not proceeding to STAGE 3: Delivery, you are required to forward a completed **Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form** to the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator and not the completed **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form**.

This serves to document this work as part of a formal Meitheal process.

Step 8 First Meitheal meeting to plan the delivery of supports in partnership with the family

The purpose of the Meitheal meeting is to agree an action plan, which will show everyone what needs to happen for the child/young person so that they are kept safe and grow up well, and that everyone involved has fewer worries about them.

An outcomes-focused Action Plan will be devised based on the Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form and the discussion that takes place at the meeting. The Action Plan will identify who is doing what and by when.

The meeting is recorded through the **Meitheal Planning and Review Form**.

Step 9 Monitor and review progress in subsequent Meitheal meetings

All actions contained within the action plan should be reviewed at each Meitheal meeting using the **Meitheal Planning and Review Form**.

Implement and review the action plan for the child/young person to check if their needs are being met.

Meetings should be held based on the agreed action plan, with the date set for when there is something significant to review.

Step 10: Document closure and feedback.

Each Meitheal should have a closure and feedback stage, which is recorded on the **Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form**. This should document the reason for closure, where progress towards an outcome has occurred and/or explain if the initial desired outcomes changed or have not been achieved. This form provides valuable feedback from practitioners, parents, and children/young people.

A review of the Meitheal process should be undertaken when a Meitheal action plan has been in place for a year and the Meitheal has not been closed. Should the Meitheal continue, the review will help to refocus the work of the Meitheal for a further time-limited period.

When the Meitheal process ends, it is the Lead Practitioner's responsibility to inform the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator. The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator should have a copy of all completed record forms, action plans and review meeting forms.

Key points to note from Section 2

- If you have child protection concerns about the child/ young person, you should follow *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2017) and your own organisation's Child Protection policies and procedures.
- Consult your line manager or designated person for support with decision-making as required.
- Consult with the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator for support with the Meitheal Model and with information-sharing.
- If a fundamental change occurs, the strengths and needs identified should be reviewed to ensure the support offered remains appropriate.
- Completed Meitheal documentation should be circulated to relevant partners, including parents, within 10 working days.

Section 3: Description of Meitheal

This section describes the Meitheal process, focusing on the following areas:

- What is Meitheal?
- Benefits of Meitheal
- Who should initiate a Meitheal?
- Who else should be involved in the Meitheal process?
- What are the stages involved in undertaking a Meitheal?
- How do I initiate and support a number of Meitheals within one family unit?
- What supports are available in carrying out the Meitheal process?

3.1 What is Meitheal?

Meitheal is a Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model designed to ensure that the needs and strengths of children and their families are effectively identified, understood, and responded to in a timely way so that children and families get the help and support needed to improve children's outcomes and realise their rights. It is an early intervention, multi-agency (when necessary) response, tailored to the needs of an individual child or young person.

Meitheal is voluntary and can only be undertaken when the parent/carer agrees to actively participate in the process. The Meitheal process is a partnership with parents to help them share their own knowledge, expertise, and concerns about their child/young person and to hear the views of practitioners working with them. The ultimate goal is to enable parents and practitioners to work together to achieve a better life for the child/young person.

The Meitheal Model is designed to look at all aspects of a child's development. It uses the *My World Triangle* to explore three interconnected areas, or domains, of a child's world in a structured way, as follows:

- **How the child grows and develops:**
This area focuses on a child's health, their progress in learning new skills, their attendance and attainment in school, their emotional well-being and their development of social skills and friendships.
- **What the child needs from the people who care for them:**
This area focuses on the critical influences of others – parents, carers, siblings, and teachers – on the child's life. It focuses on everyday care and help, keeping the child safe, and providing boundaries, guidance, and support.
- **What the child needs from the wider world and community:**
This area focuses on the environment where the family lives, community resources, family income and the extent to which the child feels included in their community. It explores how the community can either support or put additional pressures on the child/family.

3.2 Benefits of Meitheal

The potential benefits of Meitheal are:

- Families are centrally involved in the Meitheal process. They identify actions that they can take and co-produce a Meitheal support plan to improve their own lives.
- It provides a formal mechanism for individual practitioners and families to work collaboratively and transparently in developing a collective solution to issues or difficulties.
- It is about early intervention and supporting children and families to prevent or minimize the need for a higher level of specialist support.
- Meitheal can be used to support children with established complex needs.
- It focuses on the outcomes to be achieved for children/young people.
- It encourages practitioners to see the child/young person's needs holistically. It focuses on strengths as well as needs. The *My World Triangle* provides for the child's individual, family and community needs and strengths to be identified and responded to in a timely manner.
- It facilitates a shared understanding across service providers and supports the development of a common language on strengths, needs and outcomes, and the support necessary to achieve such outcomes.
- It reduces the number of times a family is required to repeat its story. A family only has to tell its story once.
- It enables transparent and appropriate information-sharing across agencies, with the agreement and active participation of the families involved.
- Parents are provided with the Meitheal Data Privacy Notice which provides information about why Tusla is collecting and processing their data and that of their child.
- It provides for a robust approach to documenting and reviewing supportive interventions put in place to support the child/young person.
- It supports better outcomes, through services working together more effectively to meet the needs of children, young people, and their families.

Research completed through a comprehensive evaluation of Meitheal by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in Ollscoil na Gaillimhe – University of Galway concluded the following:

- Meitheal is improving family outcomes 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 supporting families.

- Meitheal was described as empowering by parents and families. They valued being listened to.
- Challenges remain around the participation of children and young people in Meitheal.
- 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.

The full account of the research is available at the following link:

https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Meitheal_Process_Outcomes_Report_12_FAW_WEB_PDF.pdf

3.3 Who should initiate a Meitheal?

Practitioners that work with children/young people and families are best placed to initiate a Meitheal. In most instances, the person who initiates the Meitheal will have a trusting working relationship with the child/young person and their parent, which enables them to discuss the Meitheal process and secure their support for its commencement.

Where a Meitheal is being proposed as result of a diversion or step-down from a Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Service, then Tusla will work with the family, the referrer and other agencies working with the family to identify a potential Lead Practitioner.

3.4 Who else should be involved in the Meitheal process?

The parent identifies which agencies/services they would like to involve in the Meitheal with their child/young person. These will be identified through the early discussions between the parent and the practitioner. The completion of the Strengths and Needs Form identifies further partners.

The identified needs and strengths of the child/young person inform the necessary responses required and the agencies/services that could be involved to provide them. Agencies already working with the family are likely to be invited to the Meitheal meeting.

It is also useful to identify and include any other family members who play a key role in the child's life. This must happen with the agreement of the parent and the child or young person in accordance with their age and understanding.

3.5 What supports are available in carrying out the Meitheal process?

- **Within your own agency** – Support, supervision and line management remain the responsibility of the practitioner's own organisation.
- **Within the Meitheal Group** – Other agencies involved in the Meitheal group should identify how best they can support the process in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for the child and family.

- **From the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator** – Support and guidance can be provided to carry out the Meitheal process effectively and to problem-solve issues that may arise along the way.
- **From Tusla Workforce, Learning and Development (WLD)** – WLD provides a suite of Tusla Standardised Meitheal training programmes which are reviewed regularly. Training is open to all professionals working directly with children and families and is not restricted to Tusla staff. For details about Meitheal training in your area, contact your local WLD Training and Development Officer or your CFSN Coordinator. Further information is available on the Tusla website.

3.6 How to undertake a number of Meitheals within one family unit?

The Meitheal Model operates on a per child basis, so it may be necessary to have multiple Meitheals for one family. It is important that an individual Meitheal and an action plan is put in place for each child. The needs of individual children within a family unit will vary and the responses they require may be quite different. An individual plan is necessary in order to be specific to the needs, strengths, and desired outcomes of each individual child.

Equally, there may be some common needs and responses to undertake.

It is important to be aware of Meitheals being undertaken with other siblings and to organise Meitheal meetings to facilitate the parents to engage and to reduce duplication for them. For example, if three siblings are participating in the Meitheal process, the Meitheal meetings could be held in quick succession in the same location, with child-specific services relevant to the child (e.g., schools) attending the meetings.

Section 4: Meitheal and Meitheal Groups

This section details the work of Meitheal Groups.

This section focuses on the following areas:

- What are Meitheal groups?
- What is the membership of Meitheal groups?
- What is the duration of a Meitheal group?
- How to work effectively as a Meitheal group
- What are the responsibilities of members of Meitheal groups?
- What are the lines of responsibility and accountability in Meitheal groups?

4.1 What are Meitheal groups?

Meitheal groups are a means of delivering integrated multi-agency working. They bring together the parent, the child/young person (if the child does not wish to attend, consider how to ensure their voice is heard) and a range of practitioners to provide specific support and interventions to a child/young person and their family.

A Meitheal group is comprised of a specifically selected group of practitioners who convene, and work together *as needed*, to respond to the identified needs of a particular child/young person at a particular moment in time. The Meitheal group is a flexible multi-agency team. Its composition can change depending on the needs of the child/young person.

Each practitioner involved in a Meitheal group is responsible and accountable to their own agency for the services they deliver to children, young people, and families throughout the process.

As a member of a Meitheal group, you are also accountable to the Meitheal group for delivery of agreed actions assigned to you as part of the Meitheal action plan for the child/young person.

4.2 What is the membership of Meitheal groups?

The parent identifies which agencies/services they would like to involve in the Meitheal with their child/young person. These will be identified through the early discussions between the parent and the practitioner. The completion of the Strengths and Needs Form identifies further partners.

The child/young person and family are at the centre of the Meitheal process. Parental engagement and active participation are a prerequisite of the Meitheal process. A meeting of the Meitheal group cannot proceed unless at least one parent is present. Every possible effort should be made to facilitate the participation of the child/young person.

The membership of Meitheal groups varies depending on the needs of the specific child/young person and can also change over the timeframe of the Meitheal process as the needs of the child/young person change.

4.3 What is the duration of a Meitheal group?

There should be at least two Meitheal meetings: one to agree an action plan and the other (or others) to review it. The decision on the number and frequency of meetings will depend on the needs of the child/young person and family. However, 4-6 weekly intervals are suggested.

Meetings should be held based on the agreed action plan, with the date set for when there is something significant to review.

The Meitheal process itself should be reviewed when a Meitheal action plan has been in place for a 12-month period. The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator can provide you with support to undertake the review after 12 months, if required.

4.4 How to work effectively as a Meitheal Group

Parental engagement in the Meitheal group is essential. If the parent cannot attend, the Meitheal meeting cannot take place. Therefore, it is important that the Lead Practitioner supports the parent to engage fully in the process.

The focus of work of the Meitheal group is to keep the strengths and the needs of the child/young person to the forefront of its agenda and to identify ways in which all participants (partner agencies, children, and parents) can contribute to improved outcomes for the child/family through working together.

It is important that the actions people sign up to, including parents and children/young people, are realistic and achievable. All actions must be agreed with the parent and also with the child/young person in accordance with their age and understanding.

Additional supports to enable the child and family to be included and participate fully may need to be put in place. For further information on this please consult with your local Child and Family Support Network Coordinator.

4.5 What are the responsibilities of members of Meitheal groups?

As a member of a Meitheal group your responsibilities include;

- Following the principles of the Meitheal Model (*see Section 1.4*),
- Engaging in Meitheal meetings to provide coordinated support,
- Committing to providing specific supports,
- Implementing specific actions allocated to their agency,
- Updating on progress to the meeting,
- Identifying other supports that may be provided,
- Supporting the meetings by chairing or minute taking (if necessary),
- Adhering to safe and effective information sharing.

4.6 Accountability in the Meitheal process

Members of a Meitheal group are accountable to their own agencies in relation to the delivery of actions and supports as part of the Meitheal process. They commit to providing the Meitheal group with updates on progress and to engaging in discussion to develop and implement high-quality plans to meet the needs of the child/young person.

If an agency/service cannot deliver on an agreed action, then they should inform the Lead Practitioner and Meitheal group of this as early as possible so that alternatives can be explored.

The Lead Practitioner is not responsible for carrying out all the work or delivering all of the services needed by the child/young person or being accountable for the actions of other practitioners or service providers.

Section 5: Role of Lead Practitioner

This section focuses on the role of the Lead Practitioner in the Meitheal process.

It focuses on the following:

- Meitheal and the Lead Practitioner
- Who can be the Lead Practitioner?
- Who is best placed to be Lead Practitioner?
- What knowledge and skills does a Lead Practitioner require?
- What are the responsibilities of the Lead Practitioner?
- What the Lead Practitioner role *does not* entail
- What contact does the Lead Practitioner have with the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator?
- Lead Practitioner line management
- Tips for Lead Practitioners

5.1 Meitheal and the Lead Practitioner

The role of the Lead Practitioner in a Meitheal group is crucial. It is needed to build capacity for the implementation of the Meitheal Model. The role as outlined here is a description of the fullest range of responsibilities. It is ultimately the members of the Meitheal group through the Meitheal meetings who share responsibility and are accountable for providing an integrated response.

5.2 Who can be the Lead Practitioner?

The Lead Practitioner can be any practitioner who is working with the specific child/young person and can be drawn from the statutory or community/voluntary sectors. The Lead Practitioner needs to be someone who has or can develop trusting working relationships with the child/young person and their family, and also the other practitioners involved in the Meitheal Group. Lead Practitioners are required to have completed *Children First* training within the last three years and ideally should complete the Tusla Standardised Meitheal training **before** taking on the role.

5.3 Who is best placed to take on the role of Lead Practitioner?

When taking on the role of a Lead Practitioner, the primary considerations are:

- the person preferred by the family/child/young person
- the person with the most contact or envisaged contact with the family
- the person with the capacity to take on the role

Other criteria include:

- the agency/service with primary responsibility for addressing the needs of the child/young person (e.g., Tusla's Educational Support Services responding to school attendance)
- the agency/service best placed to respond to the predominant needs of the child/young person

5.4 What knowledge and skills does a Lead Practitioner require?

There are no specific knowledge, skills or qualifications required by a Lead Practitioner. The most important factor is having a trusting relationship with the family. Broadly speaking, a practitioner should be able to practise in line with the principles of the Meitheal Model (*see Section 1.4*). Lead Practitioners should demonstrate a commitment to child and family-centeredness, integrated working, prevention and early intervention, evidence-informed practice, and a human rights-based approach.

5.5 What are the responsibilities of the Lead Practitioner?

The Lead Practitioner has some core responsibilities. These are to:

- Introduce the option of Meitheal to the family and invite them to consider initiating the process
- Outline the Children First obligations that apply to those participating in Meitheal
- Clearly explain the Meitheal Data Privacy Notice to parents
- Facilitate the parent and the child or young person to identify the child/young person's strengths and needs
- Act as a consistent point of contact for the child/young person and their family throughout the Meitheal and support their engagement with the process
- Ensure, with the assistance of the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator, that Meitheal meetings are convened, facilitated, and recorded to enable the coordinated action plan for the child/young person to be developed and reviewed on an ongoing basis
- Attend all Meitheal meetings and focus on achieving the desired outcomes for the child/young person
- Coordinate the delivery of agreed actions from their agency
- Support the family to carry out their agreed actions in response to issues they have identified to be addressed in the Meitheal Strengths and Needs Form and any further actions from Meitheal meetings

5.6 What the Lead Practitioner's role *does not* entail

The Lead Practitioner does *not* have to be an 'expert' in everything – although it is helpful that he or she possesses good general knowledge of a range of services and supports available for children and young people.

In addition, the Lead Practitioner is *not* responsible or accountable for the actions of the other practitioners or services within the Meitheal group. The Lead Practitioner is responsible and accountable for services provided by their own agency as part of the Meitheal action plan.

5.7 What contact does the Lead Practitioner have with the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator?

The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator is responsible for coordinating work on Meitheal across all the Child and Family Support Networks assigned to them. The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator provides support to practitioners engaged in undertaking Meitheals and the Lead Practitioner should liaise with the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator to access this support. The Lead Practitioner is likely to contact the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator regularly in relation to any of the following:

- **An informal Meitheal enquiry** – when a Lead Practitioner thinks a Meitheal might be a helpful process for a child/young person and would like an opportunity to discuss this and identify any next steps that may need to be taken. The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator can talk you through the process; provide you with support and guidance on introducing the Meitheal to the parent and give pointers on how to overcome possible fears/concerns they may have about engaging in the process. The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator will highlight the need to inform parents of Children First and GDPR requirements before a Meitheal commences. Not all Meitheals will go through this informal enquiry stage since many will begin the process directly by submitting a Meitheal Request Form.
- **Submitting a Meitheal Request** – this is when the Lead Practitioner formalises the enquiry, having documented the agreement of the parent using the Meitheal Request Form. When the Lead Practitioner submits the Meitheal Request Form, Tusla will check if a Meitheal is in place for the child/young person or if the family is engaging with Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Service. It is usually the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator who will advise you whether or not to proceed at this stage. See Section 2 for more information on the steps.
- **Meitheal Identification of Strengths and Needs** – the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator can provide support in relation to completing the **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form** with the parent. It is the responsibility of the Lead Practitioner to forward a copy of the Strengths and Needs Record Form to the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator within 10 days of its completion.
- **Meitheal meetings** – support can be provided in relation to planning and facilitating these meetings. The **Meitheal Planning and Review Form** must be forwarded to the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator within 10 days of the meeting.
- **Meitheal Closure Meeting** – support can be provided by the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator to plan and facilitate the Meitheal Closure Meeting. It is the responsibility of the Lead Practitioner to forward a copy of the **Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form** to the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator within 10 days of its completion.
- **Diversions/Step Down Meitheal** – when a child/young person or family is being either diverted or stepped down from Tusla’s Child Protection and Welfare Services, a Lead Practitioner will need to be identified. As part of this early intervention response, you may be contacted and asked to undertake this role as part of your work with a child/young person or family.

5.8 Lead Practitioner line management

The Lead Practitioner is line-managed through their own agency. They are accountable for the delivery of services and supports from their agency to the child/young person/family. They are also responsible for carrying out the functions of the Lead Practitioner. It is the responsibility of their own agency to provide support, advice, and guidance to them in relation to their role as Lead Practitioner. This management role is comprised of three main elements:

- **Managerial:** to ensure that the practitioner is accountable for delivering the agency’s services and the Lead Practitioner’s functions. Remember the Meitheal process adds value to the existing interventions and supports to the family in providing a coordinated response to the child and young person’s needs.

- **Support and Supervision:** to provide support, advice, and guidance to the Lead Practitioner and to provide opportunities for them to engage in reflective practice
- **Training and Development:** to assess their strengths and identify their training and development needs, and to link them into appropriate training opportunities

5.9 Tips for Lead Practitioners

- Ensure that the family and other practitioners involved in the **Meitheal Group** have your contact details. These will be recorded on the **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form**.
- Ensure you have the contact details of the family and the other practitioners in the **Meitheal Group**. These will be recorded on the **Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form**.
- Plan your contacts with the child/young person/family so that they know and understand you will be actively involved with them. A key part of your role will be to ensure that their views are driving the process.
- You are essential to the process and should attend each **Meitheal** meeting.
- Prepare the child /young person for the meetings. Check in with the child/young person/family regularly between meetings to support progression towards desired outcomes. Check in with the child/young person after the meetings if appropriate.
- You are part of the **Meitheal group** working with the family – you are not expected to do everything, only those actions assigned to you.

Section 6: Meitheal and Information

This section focuses on recording and sharing information through the Meitheal process.

This section focuses on the following areas:

- How is information recorded during Meitheal
- Meitheal Data Privacy Notice
- How to share information appropriately during the Meitheal process

Tusla has three main roles in relation to Meitheals being undertaken:

- a quality assurance role
- a managerial oversight role
- a coordination role to avoid duplication

For each Meitheal, copies of the documentation used during the process must be submitted to Tusla. A full set of Meitheal forms would include the following:

- Meitheal Request Form
- Meitheal Strengths and Needs Record Form
- Meitheal Planning and Review Form, and
- Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form.

In some instances, you may not use the full set of forms, for example, a family may choose to submit a Request Form and subsequently do not proceed, or a family may complete the Strengths and Needs Form and conclude their engagement at that stage. In these situations, Lead Practitioners should submit whichever forms were used.

6.1 Recording information in Meitheal

Note: All partner agencies involved in a Meitheal are **data controllers** in their own right and are therefore responsible for complying with all relevant legislation in relation to data protection and information-sharing.

The Meitheal Information Leaflets and the Data Privacy Notice should inform your discussion with parents when you are introducing the Meitheal process to them. Parents must receive a clear and comprehensive explanation of the Data Privacy Notice. It would be a breach of data protection legislation if data was collected and processed in a way that was unexpected by any individual. It is important that all data subjects involved in the Meitheal process understand what their personal data is being used for and how they can exercise their rights in relation to their personal data.

6.2 Data Privacy Notice in Meitheal

The aim of the Meitheal Data Privacy Notice is to make clear to parents the basis on which information is shared and who information is shared with as part of the Meitheal process. The Data Protection Office in Tusla strongly recommends that all practitioners familiarise themselves thoroughly with the Data Privacy Notice and in particular that they highlight the following in their discussions with parents who are considering engaging in Meitheal:

“You are providing your information and that of your child to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and [list all proposed participating agencies identified by parents] for the purposes of your child participating in the Meitheal so that each of the participating agencies can provide their respective services to your child. Your privacy is important to us, and it is important to us that you understand exactly why we need to collect information about you and your child and what we will use this information for. We have provided you with the Meitheal Data Privacy Notice which sets out this information in detail and which has been explained to you.”

The full Meitheal Data Privacy Notice is provided in the Appendices and is also available on the Tusla Hub.

6.3 Sharing information in Meitheal

Tusla is currently developing Data Sharing Agreements with our funded providers. Where this does not exist, partners will be encouraged to develop a local data sharing agreement for those with no Service Level Agreement, such as GPs or school staff.

Tusla will only share personal data processed under Meitheal with third parties who are participating agencies in the Meitheal process where:

- the participating agency needs that personal data in order to provide a service under the Meitheal process and the provision of that service is part of the participating agency’s statutory duties and functions.
- the personal data shared is limited to what is strictly necessary for the participating agency to provide services under the Meitheal process;
- the personal data will be securely transmitted by Tusla and always secured by the participating agency once received and only accessed by staff of the participating agency on a strict ‘need-to-know’ basis;
- the personal data shared will only be retained by the participating agency for as long as is needed to provide the services and will be securely destroyed once no longer needed;
- the personal data shared will be accurate and complete.

All personal data processed during Meitheal must be accurate and kept up to date. Every reasonable step should be taken to ensure that personal data that are inaccurate are erased or rectified without delay. **A four-eye review or second review of all correspondence and documentation generated as part of the Meitheal process is a requirement of the process.** This procedure will help to ensure the accuracy of personal data within the Meitheal process.

6.4 Relevant, clear, and accessible language in Meitheal

It is important to record information on the relevant Meitheal forms. The language used on Meitheal forms should be kept simple and jargon-free, so that the information is accessible. Any information collected and shared should only be done so if it is necessary, relevant, accurate, timely and secure. Practitioners must always be clear about the purpose for which they have received the information and that this matches the purpose it is used for. At each stage of Meitheal, practitioners should revisit the purpose and discuss this with parents.

The Lead Practitioner will need to explain clearly what the parent(s) signature signifies on each of the forms.

When the parent signs the Meitheal Request Form the Lead Practitioner will have explained the Data Privacy Notice and highlights that the parents signature indicates that the parent(s) understand the process and are requesting a Meitheal to be initiated.

When the parent signs the Meitheal Strengths and Needs Form the Lead Practitioner clarifies that this signature indicates that the parent is agreeing to engage and participate in the Meitheal process.

When the parent signs the Meitheal Planning and Review Form the parent is indicating that they agree with the actions identified in the Meitheal meeting.

When the parent signs the Meitheal Closure Form the parent is giving their feedback of their experience of the Meitheal process and they are willing for this to be shared.

An important consideration for the process is the compliance with the principle of data minimisation. While Meitheal looks at the whole child in their environment, data minimisation will be a guiding principle when collecting and sharing information.

The retention period for any data collected should be explained to parents i.e., this has been agreed with Tusla's Data Protection Unit, up to the child/young person's 19th birthday (where the young person is engaged with Meitheal prior to 18th birthday). The data will be deleted safely at the end of the retention period.

Section 7: Appendices

Appendix 1: Frequently Asked Questions

How do I decide which child in the family requires a Meitheal?

A Meitheal should be completed for each individual child in a family that you have concerns about, as it is based on the principle of each child benefiting from individualised support. If more than one child in the family requires a Meitheal, but you only have capacity to undertake one Meitheal at the moment or it would place undue stress on the family to embark on a number of Meitheal processes concurrently, then a few options are open to you:

- If the parent is open to commencing more than one Meitheal at the same time, you could identify another practitioner who has involvement with the children and ask them to act as Lead Practitioner and undertake the process for the other child or children.
- You could identify which child in the family is in greatest need of supportive intervention and focus on him/her initially. This decision should be guided by the parent. As the Meitheal action plan puts in place actions around parent and family support, it can bring benefits for other children in the family who are not the core focus of the Meitheal process.

See Section 3.6 for guidance on undertaking sibling Meitheals.

Should a Meitheal be completed if it is believed that a child is at risk of abuse or neglect?

No. If you have concerns about the child's safety, you should follow the *Children First National Guidance on the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2017) and your own organisation's child protection procedures. And you should report your concern immediately to the Tusla.

Similarly, if **at any stage during the Meitheal process** you have concerns about the child's safety, you should follow the *Children First National Guidance on the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2017) and report your concern immediately to the Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Team. **You do not need consensus** from the other partners in the Meitheal process to make a child protection and welfare referral.

What if the parent doesn't agree to engage with the Meitheal and I am still concerned about the child, but have no evidence of abuse or neglect?

Meitheal cannot be progressed without the engagement and active participation of the parent. If parents choose not to participate in Meitheal, you can continue working with the parent/child.

You could discuss the case with your line manager, and you may also seek advice and consultation with Tusla under Children First Guidance.

Another option is to discuss the situation with the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator to seek advice on ways of introducing Meitheal.

There are a range of resources that may be of use in introducing Meitheal. Many of these are indicated in this Toolkit and are highlighted in Meitheal training.

I am not yet trained in Meitheal but think that a child I am working with could benefit from a Meitheal. What should I do?

It is recommended that all voluntary and statutory agency staff involved in a Meitheal process with children and families have undergone the Tusla Standardised Meitheal training. This training is coordinated by Tusla Workforce Learning and Development (WLD).

The CFSN Coordinator links locally with Workforce Learning & Development and will be able to advise you of future dates for the Tusla Standardised Meitheal training. This will provide you with the knowledge and skills required to undertake a Meitheal as a Lead Practitioner.

However, if you have not yet completed the training, this should not prevent you from supporting a family through the Meitheal process. Contact the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator (CFSN) to discuss the reasons why you feel a Meitheal may benefit the child.

If I lead out on the Meitheal, will I remain the Lead Practitioner for its duration?

In many instances, you will remain the Lead Practitioner for the duration of the Meitheal as you will be the person who has an on-going working relationship with the child/family and may also be the person who has most contact with the child/family.

In other instances, the Lead Practitioner may change, e.g., where the child/family disengages from your service but is still linked in with other services or where the priority needs of the child change, and it is more relevant for another agency to take on the lead role. It is important that parental agreement be secured for the new Lead Practitioner to take on the role. The process of changing Lead Practitioner will generally take place following discussion at a Meitheal meeting.

How long should a Meitheal take?

The duration of a Meitheal will vary depending on the level and complexity of need identified for the child/young person and the relevance of the Meitheal process in responding to the child's needs. Achieving outcomes for the child should be the determining factor in deciding how long a Meitheal will take.

There should be at least two Meitheal Meetings. The decision on the number and frequency of meetings will depend on the needs of the child/young person and their family. However, 4-6 weekly intervals are suggested. Meetings should be held based on the agreed action plan, with the date set on the basis of there being something significant to review.

The Meitheal process itself should be reviewed when it has been in place for a 12-month period or earlier if required. The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator can provide you with support to undertake the review after 12 months.

Will I still need to fill out referral forms to other services when a Meitheal is in place?

Yes. If you have been assigned this action at a Meitheal meeting. Meitheal is a coordinating mechanism rather than a service and as such does not replace the need that a child and family may have for specific services or interventions. Nor does it guarantee that a service will be in a position to provide a response to a child.

What do I do when the Meitheal has identified a need for the child, and we are unable to identify a service in the child's area that can respond to that need?

It is important that this be discussed, and a way forward agreed at the Meitheal meeting. If, for example, the service is available in an adjoining area, an action for the Meitheal could be to arrange transport for that child to access the necessary service. Also, some services can provide an outreach service or extend beyond their stated area if requested. Again, this should be explored at a Meitheal meeting. Your local Child and Family Support Network Coordinator (CFSN) can support with this action.

If none of these options is possible, discussion should take place on other ways of responding to the presenting need. It is important that the absence of a service be documented on the Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form. Systemic gaps in capacity to meet need should be clearly identified so that the Senior Manager for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support can use this information to inform the commissioning process. If the gap in service does not relate to Tusla service provision, then systemic gaps can also be raised at the Children and Young People Services Committee in order to identify whether another agency can address the gap.

As the Meitheal process develops for the child, additional needs may be identified. How are these needs incorporated into the Meitheal action plan for the child?

The Meitheal meetings provide an opportunity to focus on the progress being made to achieve outcomes identified for the child/family at the outset of the process. It is highly likely that additional needs or more detailed information on presenting needs will be identified as the process evolves. The plan should be adapted to reflect this.

If additional service providers are required to respond to these additional needs, they should be invited to become part of the Meitheal process. Remember that parental cooperation for their inclusion is required. This will generally be secured at a Meitheal meeting and be recorded on the Meitheal Planning and Review Form.

Can we hold Meitheal Support Meetings without the parent being present?

No. The Meitheal process is based around parental engagement and active participation of the parent in the process. If the parent is not present for a scheduled meeting, the meeting should not proceed. The Lead Practitioner should contact the parent to find out the reason for non-attendance and reschedule the meeting. Remember the mantra of “nothing about us, without us!”

What do I do if, as part of the Meitheal process, I make a referral to Tusla Child Protection and Welfare and the referral is not considered to reach the threshold necessary for an assessment and the parent will not re-engage with the Meitheal?

If you have any child protection concerns, it is important that you report them to the Tusla Social Work Department as per *Children First: National Guidance on the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2017) and your own organisation’s child protection procedures.

It is also good practice to inform the parent that you are making the referral and the reasons for doing this (unless to do so would put the child at risk). This communication will be key to maintaining a relationship with the parent. Should Tusla decide not to undertake an assessment and the parent does not want to continue their engagement in the Meitheal process, you should have a discussion with your line manager for guidance on your next steps. It is important to remember that Meitheal is a voluntary process premised on parental engagement - a parent can withdraw from the process at any stage.

If you do not agree with the decision of Tusla not to undertake an assessment, you can complain as per the *Children First National Guidance on the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2017)

What happens if a parent withdraws cooperation during the Meitheal process?

A parent can withdraw their cooperation for the Meitheal at any stage and the Meitheal process cannot continue without their active participation. The Lead Practitioner should meet with the parent to discuss their reasons for withdrawal and to find out if changes can be made that would support their continued involvement in the process.

The Lead Practitioner should also discuss the matter with their line manager for advice on how best to proceed. A key issue to address is whether the withdrawal of cooperation may contribute to increased risk for the child.

The Child and Family Support Network Coordinator can provide support and guidance in relation to the Meitheal process itself and how best to involve and include the parent in the process. Ultimately, if the parent does not want to continue with the Meitheal, then the Meitheal is closed. The Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form should be completed, with the reason for closure stated as ‘Parent/carer(s) did not engage with the process’.

Individual services supporting the family should continue to do so on the basis of their respective involvement with the child and/or parent.

If I require support and guidance in relation to the Meitheal process itself, who should I contact?

Queries about the Meitheal process should be directed to your local Child and Family Support Network Coordinator. If s/he is not available, contact the Senior Manager for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support.

Appendix 2: Data Privacy Notice for Meitheal

Who we are?

The Child and Family Agency (Tusla) is the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. Tusla operates under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 (see more about the agency at <https://www.tusla.ie/about/>). Tusla is a data controller under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. We are required to fulfil the obligations of a data controller under data protection legislation.

Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Services (PPFS) works with children and families and communities to provide prevention and early intervention family support. We try to do this as early as possible to help prevent the problem becoming more difficult and to ensure that all children are safe and achieving their full potential.

We work with communities and many other services to ensure that early support and practical, accessible help is available to children and families when and where they need it. The Meitheal process is part of the PPFS services provided by Tusla.

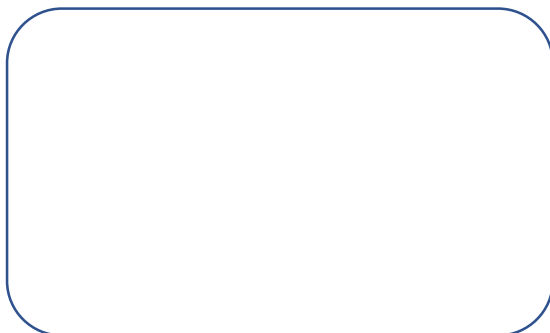
What do we do?

Meitheal is an old Irish term that describes how neighbours would come together to assist each other in the saving or harvesting of crops or other tasks. In this context, Meitheal is a Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model designed to ensure that the strengths and needs of children and their families are effectively identified, understood and responded to in a timely way so that children and families get the help and support needed to improve children's outcomes and realise their rights. It is an early intervention, multi-agency (when necessary) response, tailored to the needs of the individual child or young person.

How PPFS can be contacted?

If you have any queries about how Meitheal operates, you can contact your Lead Practitioner or you can contact Tusla by email on ppfs.admin@tusla.ie or by writing to the PPFS team, 5th Floor, Tusla, Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8.

Or contact your local PPFS Service at:



What is the legal basis for processing personal information through the Meitheal Model?

- Section 8.1, 8.6, 8.8 and 9.4 of the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013 provide the legal basis for the processing of personal information through the Meitheal process.
- The Meitheal Model is one of ways that Tusla can carry out its functions under Section 8.1 (b) and (c) to support and promote the development, welfare, and protection of children and to support and encourage the effective functioning of families.
- The Model is a key way for Tusla to ensure it can collaborate with the people it needs to in line with Section 8.6 and promote enhanced inter-agency cooperation to ensure that services for children are co-ordinated and provide an integrated response to the needs of children and their families in line with Section 8.8.
- The Model is also one way that Tusla can ensure that the views of the individual child, where the child is capable of forming and expressing his or her own views, be ascertained and given due weight having regard to the age and maturity of the child in line with Section 9.4.

What type of personal information does Tusla process for the Meitheal?

- Basic personal details – name of child, date of birth, gender, address, nationality, ethnic group, child's first language.
- Details of family – name of parents/carers, address, contact number.
- Information relating to the reason for the request.
- Sensitive personal information relating to the strengths and needs of the child and family involved in the Meitheal, including name, address, and date of birth of siblings, services already providing services to the child and their family, lifestyle, and social circumstances.

Some of the personal information collected may be considered sensitive personal information. Tusla will only collect and use this information where necessary to provide appropriate supports to your child and your family.

How does Tusla receive this personal information?

- If you as a parent discuss Meitheal with a supportive professional and feel that your child could benefit from having their strengths and needs identified, then that person or another professional trained as a Lead Practitioner in Meitheal will, with your consent, complete the Meitheal Request Form with basic information about your child. This is called the **Preparation Stage** of Meitheal.
- Tusla will receive this request and check to make sure Meitheal is the most appropriate pathway for your child. If the Meitheal process is proceeding, the Lead Practitioner will meet with you to complete a Strengths and Needs form. This is called the **Discussion Stage** of Meitheal.
- If you agree that your child would benefit from some planned support, then the Meitheal can proceed to the Delivery Stage. If you feel that there are other people or services who can help with this Stage then, with your consent, they can be invited to participate in the **Delivery Stage**.

What does Tusla do with this personal information?

We will use the information we get from you, your child and from others involved in the Meitheal process to help the Lead Practitioner develop a plan with you and your child to ensure further development of your child's and family's strengths as well as identifying supports to address the unmet needs and achieve

positive outcomes identified by you and your child. If a child protection or welfare concern were to arise during the Meitheal process, then relevant information from the Meitheal process may be used to inform a referral to the Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Service.

How we store your information securely.

PPFS Services as part of Tusla must comply with all Tusla data collection and data sharing policies. We have a number of security precautions in place in Tusla that we continue to review and improve to prevent the loss, misuse, or alteration of your personal information. All staff working for Tusla have a legal duty to keep your personal information confidential and safe whether it is held in paper or electronic format. As part of the Meitheal process, you and your child's basic information, collected at the Preparation Stage, will be collected and stored by your Lead Practitioner. The more detailed information collected during the Discussion and Delivery Stages will be stored securely in the Meitheal Sharepoint Database.

Where there may be restrictions to data subject rights and our obligations as data controllers.

We make sure to keep your data safe and to process your data in a way that is necessary and proportionate to the purpose, even where there are restrictions to the scope of your data subject rights and our obligations as data controllers. Any restriction to your rights and our obligations shall be exclusively for 'the protection of the data subject or the rights and freedoms of others'. This may apply where your rights are limited for legal reasons. We shall always take measures to support your data subject rights and data protection principles and put in place safeguards for your data where restrictions may apply.

How long will you keep my personal information for?

Tusla must keep personal information in a form that permits the identification of individuals. We keep the records according to our Retention Schedule and Policy in Tusla Records Management Policy. Some records are kept in perpetuity under the Child Care Act 1991 (as amended). Other records are kept for as long as we require them to promote the development, welfare and protection of the child and to promote the effective functioning of families in line with the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013. We keep records safely with the appropriate safeguards for current and retained records. Records relating solely to Meitheal will be retained until a child reaches their 19th Birthday.

What are my rights regarding my personal information?

We shall support your rights as a data subject and respond to any requests you have based on these rights.

- **You have the Right to be Informed.** This means that you can contact Tusla to ask for clear information about how your personal information is collected and used.
- **You have the Right of Access.** This means that you can contact Tusla and request a copy of all of your personal information that is held. Tusla will respond to your request within one month.
- **You have the Right to Rectification.** This means that you can contact Tusla and request that they change any of your personal information held which you believe is incorrect. Tusla will respond to your request within one month.
- **You have the Right to Erasure.** This means that you can contact Tusla and ask them to delete your personal information. Tusla will respond to your request within one month.

- **You have the Right to Restrict Processing.** This means that you can contact Tusla and ask them to stop using your personal information and instead, store it. Tusla will respond to your request within one month.
- **You have the right to Data Portability.** This means you can contact Tusla and seek a copy of your personal information to use elsewhere. Tusla will respond to your request within one month.
- **You have the right to Object to Processing.** This means you can contact Tusla and ask them to stop using your personal information. Tusla will respond to your request within one month.

You can use any of these rights without charge by contacting Tusla.

Can I complain about Tusla using my personal information?

If you have any questions about the use of your personal information, you may contact Tusla by writing to Tusla Data Protection Unit, 6th Floor, Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8. Alternatively, you may phone (01) 7718500 or email datacontroller@tusla.ie.

If you are unhappy with how Tusla used your personal information you can make a complaint to the Data Protection Commission by webform at www.dataprotection.ie or by post to Data Protection Commission, 21 Fitzwilliam Square South, Dublin 2, D02RD28, Ireland.

Appendix 3: Links to Meitheal Forms

Link to forms on website:

<https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/prevention-partnership-and-family-support/meitheal-forms-and-guidance-documents/>

Link to CFSN contacts:

<https://www.tusla.ie/familysupport/>

Appendix 4: Meitheal Checklists for Lead Practitioners

Stage 1: Preparing for Meitheal	
Details	Tick
Have you considered whether a Meitheal is necessary and appropriate for this child/young person/family?	
Have you accessed the Meitheal Toolkit and the relevant documentation to support your discussion with the family?	
Have you introduced Meitheal to the parent using the Meitheal Information Leaflets?	
Have you introduced Meitheal to the child/young person using the Meitheal Leaflets?	
Have you considered the Data Privacy Notice and discussed this with the child/young person/family?	
If family do not wish to proceed, have you documented this?	
If proceeding, have you submitted the Meitheal Request Form?	
Have you had contact from the Child and Family Support Network Coordinator regarding proceeding?	
If unable to proceed at this time, have you documented same and planned an alternative service provision for the family?	
Stage 2: Discussion	
Have you considered attending Child and Youth Participation training?	
Have you accessed the Child and Youth Participation Toolkit?	
Have you considered and planned how you will hear the voice of the child, in the context of Lundy's Model of Participation?	

Have you introduced the My World Triangle to the family and discussed all three sides of the Triangle with the family to examine their strengths and needs. You may need to revisit this conversation a number of times with the family.	
Have you populated the Meitheal Strengths and Needs Form?	
Based on discussions around Strengths and Needs, have you agreed with the family whether they require: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Single service response 2. Multi service response 3. Referral to Child Protection and Welfare Services 4. Closure to Meitheal 	
If single service response -use the Meitheal Planning and Review Form to plan your intervention.	
Have you linked with the CFSN?	
If multi service, agree with child/young person/family where/when a Meitheal meeting should occur and whom should be invited to be part of the Meitheal group.	
Have you linked with CFSN?	
If having completed the Meitheal Strengths and Needs Form, do you have concerns that are now at a level that you wish to make a referral to Child Protection and Welfare Services? If so, complete a Meitheal Closure Form.	
If having completed the Meitheal Strengths and Needs, are you and the family clear on their needs and is there no longer a need to proceed any further? If so, complete a Meitheal Closure Form.	
Stage 3: Delivery	
Planning and Reviewing	
As the Lead Practitioner, are you actively engaging with the parents and the child/young person between meetings to support them?	
Are you encouraging participation between meetings by using tools from the Child and Youth Participation Toolkit or alternative tools?	

Are you ensuring the child is given multiple opportunities to have their voice heard even if they do not wish to attend meetings?	
Are you ensuring that your allocated tasks are completed?	
Closure and Feedback	
Have you ensured that the Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form is completed by the parent and the child/young person?	
Have you ensured that the Meitheal Closure and Feedback Form is returned to the local Child and Family Support Network Coordinator?	