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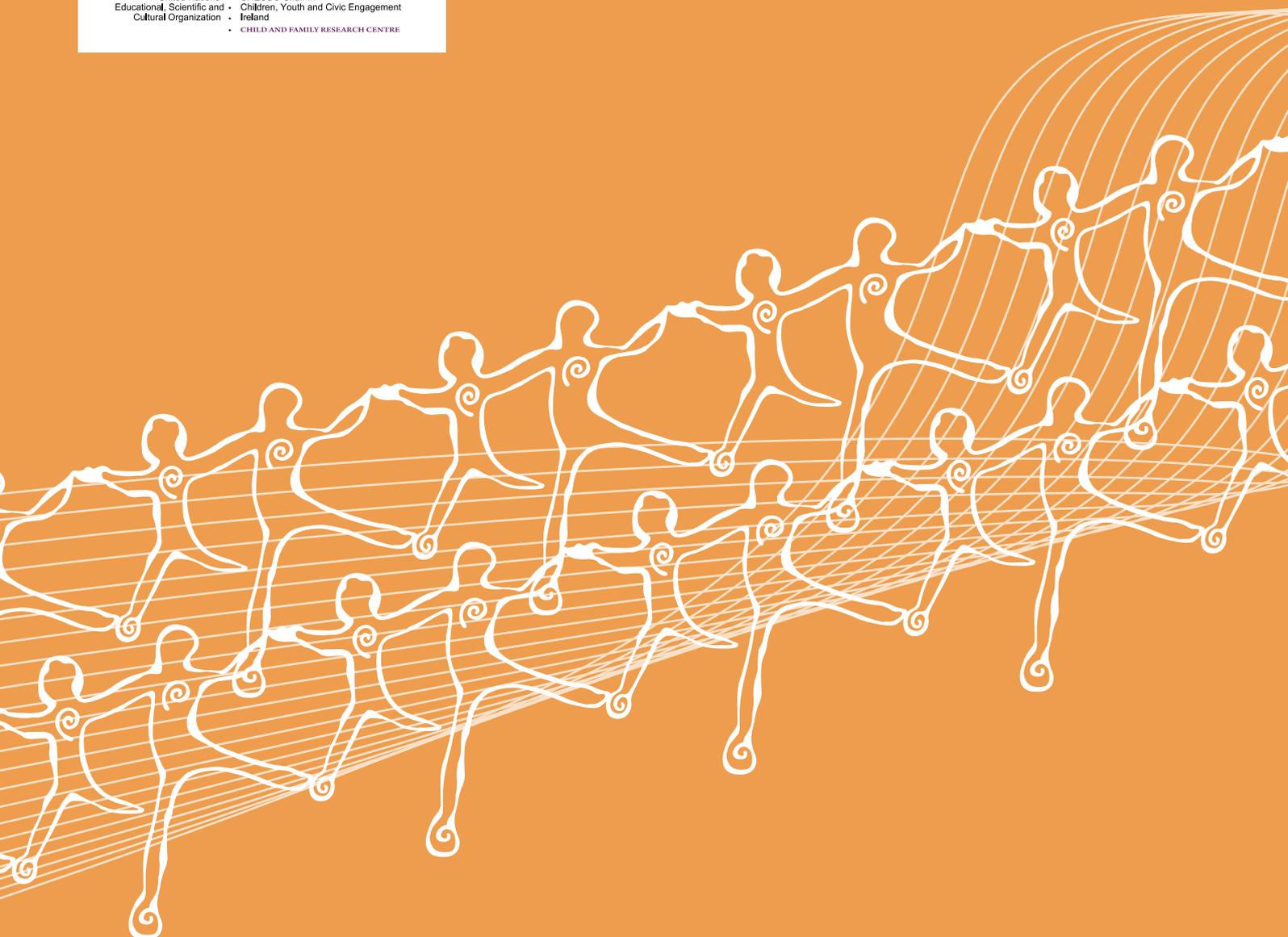
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CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE



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Tusla's Programme for Prevention, Partnership and  
Family Support:

## Children's Participation Work Package Final Report

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# Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support



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

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

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

**This is the Final Report of the Children's Participation Work Package**

## About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

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

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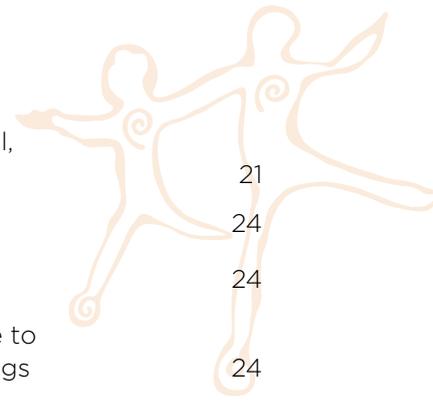
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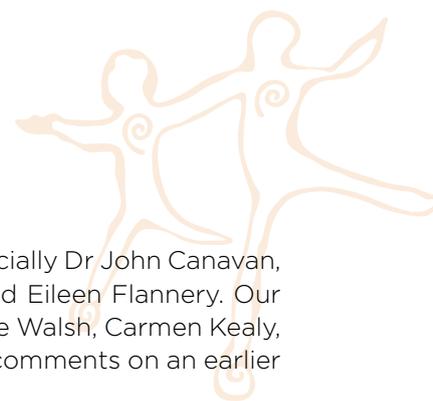
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# List of Initialisations

CYPSC	Children and Young People's Service Committee
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
EPIC	Empowering People in Care
HIQA	Health and Information Quality Authority
IIC	Investing in Children
PPFS	Tusla programme of work for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support
PPOs	Participation and Partnership Officers
Tusla	The Child and Family Agency
UCFRC	UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WLD	Workforce Learning and Development
YAG	Youth Advisory Group

## Note on terminology in this report:

Throughout this report we use the phrase **children and young people** to cover children and young people of all ages supported by Tusla. Different terms are in use in different settings, for example **children, child and youth, and young people**. The phrase **children and young people** is used to encompass all of these terms.

We use the term **Children's Participation Work Package** to describe the three-year research programme.

We use the term **children's participation** to describe the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly, as this is the definition employed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in its National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015–2020.

**PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work** is the term used by Tusla to describe its programme of work currently being implemented to promote children and young people's participation in decision-making in Tusla. It forms part of a wider body of work being implemented under Parenting Partnership and Family Support within Tusla.

The Tusla National Child and Youth Participation Working Group is the steering group that was established by Tusla to oversee the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work.

# 1



## Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the Overall Study

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

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### 1.2 Background to the Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support: The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work

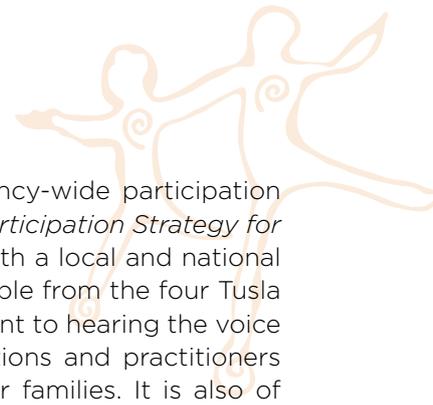
Tusla understands the term 'participation' to mean the involvement of children and young people in decision-making on issues that affect their lives. Decisions made by Tusla may relate to issues of a personal nature, concerning the welfare, protection, or care of a child (individual participation), or of a public nature, affecting children collectively (collective participation). Decisions affecting children as a collective commonly relate to service planning and review. Participation is fundamental to a child-centred, rights-based approach and is a requirement of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). Aligned to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs' (DCYA) National Strategy, Tusla's approach to participation is underpinned by the Lundy model (Lundy, 2007).

To support the implementation of national policy and children and young people's rights, as part of the Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS programme), Tusla developed a programme of work to embed children and young people's participation within the agency. The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work is directed towards achieving a series of medium-term and long-term outcomes. The medium-term outcome guiding the Programme of Work was that 'the participation of children is embedded in Tusla's culture and operations'. It was intended that this outcome would be achieved through an integrated programme of

work designed to promote children and young people's participation. This programme of work includes the following: the development and dissemination of a Tusla National Child and Youth Participation Strategy and National Children's Charter; child and youth participation training and a participation toolkit for practitioners; the development of a quality assurance framework for participation using the Investing in Children Membership Award™ and Agenda Days™; a seed fund initiative; three national conferences on child and youth participation; the establishment of foster care fora in conjunction with Empowering People in Care (EPIC) to support children and young people in foster care to feed into policy development and service provision; and the development of a child-friendly complaints service (see Figure 1). Through this programme of action, Tusla is committed to developing its participatory practice at all levels in the organisation. Further detail on each of these components of the programme of work are outlined below.



**Figure 1: The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work**



## **Tusla National Child and Youth Participation Strategy**

In 2015, Tusla published a background document to pave the way for an agency-wide participation strategy (Kennan et al., 2015). Tusla is currently developing its strategy: *Tusla's Participation Strategy for Children and Young People 2018–2022*. It has been widely consulted upon at both a local and national level and is currently in the process of consultation with children and young people from the four Tusla regions (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018c). This strategy and the commitment to hearing the voice of children and young people is relevant to all Tusla staff as well as organisations and practitioners funded by the agency to provide services to children, young people, and their families. It is also of relevance to other partners, both statutory and non-statutory, who are not directly funded by the Child and Family Agency but who have a central role in assisting the agency to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people, and their families (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018c).

## **National Children's Charter**

The purpose of developing the Charter was twofold: to provide greater clarity on the quality of services that children and young people may expect from Tusla, how these will be delivered, and the principles underpinning them; and to provide a benefit to staff by clearly stating the principles to be adhered to in the delivery of services to children and their families (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018b).

## **Child and Youth Participation Training**

December 2016 saw the launch of Tulsa's Child and Youth Participation Training.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the training was to support an organisation-wide culture change, within Tusla and the agencies that it funds. Staff from Tusla, including Regional Implementation Managers (RIMs), Participation and Partnership Officers (PPOs), Work Force Learning and Development (WLD),<sup>2</sup> Education and Welfare Service (EWS), and funded partners gave regular scheduled training in Child and Youth Participation nationally. Dates for the 1½-day training were advertised through a variety of means, including email and Tusla Newscasts. Although not mandated, senior managers encouraged and supported staff to attend this training. After completing Day 1 of the training, participants returned for a follow-up half-day to discuss the experience of implementing learning and actions agreed on Day 1.

On completion of the training, it is expected that participants will be able to: define what Participatory Practice is, apply the 'Lundy Model of Participation' in their work, utilise the 'Child and Youth Participation Toolkit', develop their own participatory practice and plan, and demonstrate and share their learning. This training is intended for all staff within Tusla, including staff and managers from Human Resources; Finance; Administration; Legal Services; Social Work; Family Support and Social Care; Educational Welfare Services; Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence Services; Early Years Services; and Residential Services (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018e).

## **Tusla Child and Youth Participation Toolkit**

The purpose of the 'Tusla Child and Youth Participation Toolkit' is to support Tusla staff in facilitating participatory practice at every level of Tusla and in every engagement with a child or young person. This toolkit is intended as a guide to practice for staff in support of their own professional skills and judgement. The toolkit is aligned to the Lundy model of participation. It includes resources and child-friendly tools and activities to support staff to implement each of the elements of the Lundy model – space, voice, audience, and influence (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> Keenaghan Collaborative and Dr Sue Redmond were commissioned to develop this training programme and the accompanying toolkit.

<sup>2</sup> Tusla's Workforce Learning and Development has responsibility for the learning and development of staff within Tusla.

## **Investing in Children Membership Award**

Investing in Children (IIC) provides research and participation services to organisations that work with children and young people. IIC has been working with the PPFs programme to develop a Quality Assurance process across Tusla in relation to participation. The Investing in Children Membership Award recognises and celebrates examples of imaginative and inclusive practice. IIC members are those services that can demonstrate a commitment to dialogue with young people that leads to change (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018a). Organisations can achieve membership if they demonstrate that they have dialogue with children and young people, if they show that changes have happened as a result, and if children and young people who use the service agree that this is the case. By including change as a criterion as well as dialogue, it focuses on outcomes as well as processes. The awards serve as national recognition that the awardee, as a service or team, listens to and acts upon what young people tell them. Evaluation reports acknowledge and celebrate the work and give recommendations for further work (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018a).

## **Agenda Days**

An Agenda Day is an opportunity for a group of children and young people to come together to begin to discuss a particular area or issue. Agenda Days provide the chance for children and young people to debate important issues among themselves. They are intended to be the start of a process of engaging in dialogue with decision-makers and campaigning for change (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2017a). Though supported by adults, Agenda Days are an adult-free environment and are run with a variety of age groups. Working methods may vary to take into account the characteristics of the children or young people (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2017a).

## **Seed Funding Initiative**

Under the PPFs Programme, Tusla agreed to assist areas in exploring and developing initiatives in participatory practice. Tusla made seed funding available to support new and developing initiatives that required initial or additional funding in order to progress. There was €170,000 for year 1 funding (July 2016 to June 2017), and €187,000 (€11,000 per area) for year 2 funding, available from July 2017 to June 2018. Services and areas had the opportunity to submit one or a number of proposals. Each application required endorsement by the relevant Area Manager. A number of areas could come together and make an application for a larger amount of funding. A funding committee decided on the final projects to receive funding. This was to ensure that there was a spread of projects across all Tusla services, age groups of young people, and areas (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018d). Successful projects were marked on preparedness, dialogue with young people in the preparation of the application, sustainability, demonstrable adherence to the Lundy model, and ability to replicate or initiate similar projects around the country. Applications were accepted for initiatives from: Tusla services either individually or in coalition, Tusla services in conjunction with funded agencies, and Tusla services in conjunction with partner agencies. There was a requirement that all initiatives submit a short progress report and financial report on a quarterly basis until the initiative was completed, when a final report was required (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2018d).

## **Three National Conferences on Child and Youth Participation**

Three conferences were held which showcased children and young people's participation projects around the country. These were organised and run by a conference-organising committee whose core members were children and young people. Annual conferences were held over three years:

- Conference 1, entitled 'Towards Participation', January 2016
- Conference 2, entitled 'On Our Way', April 2017
- Conference 3, entitled 'Where to From Here', April 2018.



## **Tusla and EPIC Foster Care Fora**

In 2015, Tusla initiated a collective model of participation for children in care. These collective fora, operating in conjunction with Empowering People in Care (EPIC) and hereafter called Tusla and EPIC Fora, are intended to ensure that the voices of children and young people in foster care are heard with the support of advocates and social workers, to enhance service delivery, and to promote the social and emotional well-being of children and young people in foster care. The key aim of these fora is to consult with young people in foster care and to seek their views on care-related issues that are important to them. They are intended to constitute a formal mechanism by which young people can be facilitated and supported to engage directly on the reform and monitoring of care – locally with the management of Tusla, and nationally with senior policymakers.

## **Child-Friendly Complaints Service**

The 'Tell Us' complaints and feedback mechanism for young people is a national, child-friendly feedback and complaints service. The overarching policy and procedure is supported by a number of guidance documents. 'Tell Us' began operating as the Feedback and Complaints service for Tusla on 5 September 2016, replacing 'Your Service Your Say'. There were 20,000 'Tell Us' leaflets distributed throughout the agency, informing children and young people about the service and providing them with information about how to make a complaint or offer feedback. After the launch of the new service, it was decided that the leaflet would be revised following consultations with youth groups nationally. Three consultations with young people were held in 2016, leading to a revised version of the 'Tell Us' leaflet. A new 'Tell Us' leaflet and Tusla poster were designed by a Tusla Youth Advisory Committee in Mayo, advertising the child-friendly service for communicating feedback, comments, or complaints in person or by letter, call, text, WhatsApp, or email and was launched in January 2018.

## **1.3 Overview of the Literature**

Children's participation is defined as 'the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015: 20). It is argued that children's participation is of particular importance in the context of child protection and welfare, as decisions are made for children and young people about matters of a deeply personal nature, such as where they should live and who should care for them (Thomas and O'Kane, 1999). Involving the child in the decision-making process respects their right to have a say in decisions that can profoundly affect their lives. It offers a range of benefits for children and young people, such as ensuring that decisions taken are responsive to their needs (Heimer et al., 2018; Mason, 2008; Kiely, 2005), positive psycho-social development and increased self-esteem (Thomas and Percy-Smith, 2012), and a greater sense of agency in their lives (Pölkki et al., 2012; Cashmore, 2002). Conversely, research has shown that when children in care are not heard or given a chance to participate in decisions that affect them prior to and during the provision of care, it can impact negatively on emotional well-being and future outcomes (Nybell, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2010; Leeson, 2007).

Research in Ireland and internationally has shown that children and young people often feel that their voices are not heard in the context of very formalised and bureaucratic child welfare and protection systems (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018; Lucas, 2017; Daly, 2014). McEvoy and Smith (McEvoy & Smith, 2011) consulted with 211 children and young people in the care of the state in Ireland on the issues that matter to them. One of the key themes that emerged was a need to allow young people to express themselves in a less intimidating environment in care plan reviews and to have a greater input into decisions impacting their lives in care. The report recommended that a culture of participation be developed in which young people are consulted on the key decisions that affect their lives on an ongoing basis.

The research literature identifies the following actions required in the areas of organisational culture, structures, and practice. It is considered important to develop a shared understanding of the importance of participation among all staff (Wright et al., 2006); to build support at management level; to identify

'champions' at national, regional, and local levels who will promote the participation of children and young people within the organisation; and to develop a strategy and action plan (Kirby et al., 2003; Bell, 2002). Having appropriate structures through which children and young people can participate is seen as important in ensuring that there is a mechanism for their voices to be heard and valued (Kirby et al., 2003). Adequate time and resources are required for staff to be able to build relationships with children and young people, to set up the structures for participation, and to put their ideas into action (Ewles & Simnett, 2005; UNICEF, 2005). Furthermore, there is a broad consensus in the literature that training and capacity-building for staff are needed to cultivate the necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities (Bell, 2011; UNICEF, 2010; Kirby et al., 2003).

Kotter (2007) highlights that for change to be anchored in an organisation's culture, it needs to be integrated into its core policies and procedures. Reflective practice, evaluation, and monitoring are also important. Children must be made aware of what their rights are in relation to participation, using accessible, diversity-sensitive, and age-appropriate information (UNICEF, 2010). Child- and youth-friendly complaints procedures are seen as important for encouraging young people to give feedback, which will ultimately enhance the service and providers' awareness of how they engage with children and young people (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Providing feedback to children and young people is recommended in most child-participation practice guidance (Lansdown, 2011), but there is often little detail on what the feedback should contain and when it should happen. It often takes the form of a child-friendly version summarising children's views or a thank-you letter. However, these strategies are seen as a wasted opportunity to actively encourage adults to engage meaningfully with the substance of children's views (Lundy, 2018). Lundy (2018) recommended that feedback to children should be provided in full, appropriately child friendly, fast, and followed up on in order to create the optimal conditions for adults to engage seriously and sufficiently with the views they have sought or been given. Finally, it is considered necessary to find ways of engaging the most marginalised children and youth to ensure that their views are taken into consideration (Kelleher et al., 2014).

In 2016, the Council of Europe published a Child Participation Assessment Tool (Council of Europe, 2016). The aim of this tool is to support governments to implement a child's right to participate. The tool encompasses ten structural and procedural indicators representing 'the building blocks that member states need to have in place to progress implementation' (Council of Europe, 2016: 6). These indicators broadly reflect the range of structural and procedural actions identified in the literature as necessary to embed a culture of participation and are designed to allow progress to be measured over time. The indicators are described further in section 2 of this report.

The systematic literature review carried out as part of this work package established that facilitating children's participation in practice requires having a range of options available to children that accommodate their individual preferences and abilities at each stage of responding to a child welfare or protection concern (Kennan et al., 2018). It found there is a body of evidence indicating that the use of advocates is an effective means of supporting children's participation. Children have consistently testified to the value of having an advocate (Jelicic et al., 2013; Bell, 2011; Boylan and Braye, 2007; Chase et al., 2006; Oliver et al., 2006; Dalrymple, 2002). This corroborates an earlier review of the literature by Cashmore (2002), who found that while adults tend to focus on structures or formal procedures to support a child's participation, such as attendance at meetings, children have expressed their preference for informal procedures and for a personal relationship with a trusted advocate or mentor. It is reported that advocates give young people the confidence to infiltrate an adult-dominated decision-making process (Chase et al., 2006) and can help to redress the power imbalances at play (Bell, 2011; Boylan and Braye, 2007; Dalrymple, 2002).

The systematic review also found there are a range of factors that can influence the realisation of a child's right to participate in practice. A fundamental factor is the child's relationship with their case worker. It is consistently reported that a positive, trusting, and stable relationship is instrumental to creating a safe space for children's participation (Bijleveld et al., 2015; Buckley et al., 2011; Tregeagle and Mason, 2008). Other influencing factors include the degree to which the child is adequately prepared in

advance (Gallagher et al., 2012), the formality of the decision-making meeting and whether the child had an input into its planning (Bell, 2011), the professional's communication skills (O'Reilly and Dolan, 2016), and support for and a shared understanding of the participation principle by professionals and parents (Daly, 2014; Vis et al., 2012).

## 1.4 Research and Evaluation: Children's Participation Work Package

In 2016 the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway commenced a three-year programme of research. **Its aim was to assess to what extent the participation of children and young people became embedded in Tusla's culture and operations, following the implementation of the PPFS participation programme.** As outlined in section 2, the design of this study involved a mixed-methods baseline and follow-up approach, using various research strands to measure progress. All data for the baseline was collected prior to 31 January 2016, with the report being published in 2017 (Kennan et al., 2017). This final report details the methodological approach to the study and the findings across baseline and follow-up, to report progress on embedding participation across Tusla's culture and operations.

## 1.5 Layout of Report

This report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 outlines the methodology of the research programme 2015–2018. It outlines the research work streams and describes the research methods within each research stream.
- Section 3 presents the integrated findings across the research streams pertaining to children's participation, mapped onto the Council of Europe Indicators and the Lundy model. It presents findings pertaining to the challenges and barriers which Tusla staff and management face when implementing children's participation rights and the levers supporting implementation.
- Section 4 discusses the findings, drawing conclusions on the progress made with embedding participation in Tusla and the levers and barriers to embedding participation.
- Section 5 distils the key messages and offers recommendations for future policy and practice.

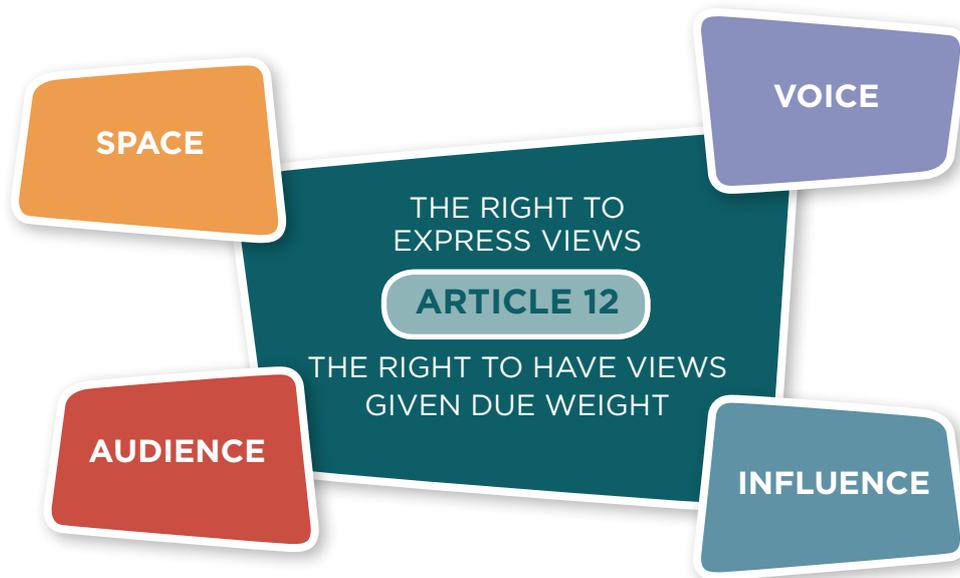


# 2

## Method

### 2.1 Introduction: Overarching Aim of the Research

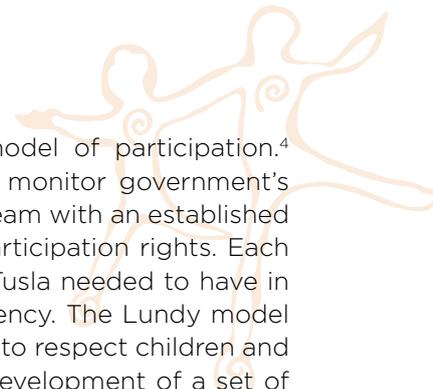
In 2016 the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway undertook a three-year programme of research. *Its aim was to assess to what extent the participation of children and young people became embedded in Tulsa's culture and operations, following the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work.* The study defined participation as conceptualised by the Lundy model (Lundy, 2007). This model outlines four chronological steps to be followed in the realisation of children and young people's participation. First, 'space': children must be provided with the opportunity to express a view in a space that is safe and inclusive. Second, 'voice': children must be facilitated to express their view. Third, 'audience': the view must be listened to. Fourth, 'influence': the view must be acted upon as appropriate and the reasons for the decision taken must be communicated to the child.



**Figure 2: The Lundy Model of Participation as included in Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015).**

### 2.2 Methodological Approach

The overarching research design was a comparison of data gathered from the baseline study 2014-2015 and the follow-up study 2016-2018. Tracking progress on embedding a culture of participation was via seven structural and procedural indicators adapted from the Council of Europe Child Participation



Assessment Tool<sup>3</sup> and five practice indicators underpinned by the Lundy model of participation.<sup>4</sup> The Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool was designed to monitor government's implementation of a child's right to participate, thereby providing the research team with an established framework to assess Tusla's implementation of children and young people's participation rights. Each of the indicators was viewed as a structural or procedural building block that Tusla needed to have in place to embed children and young people's participation rights within the agency. The Lundy model was adopted by Tusla to support staff to translate into practice their obligations to respect children and young people's right to participate. By using the Lundy model to inform the development of a set of practice indicators, the research team was thereby assessing Tusla against its own predefined criteria as to what was necessary to implement participation in practice. The relevant indicators in the context of this study are set out below and have been grouped as structural, procedural, and practice indicators.

### **Structural Indicators**

1. Legal protection for children and young people's right to participate in decision-making is reflected in the national Constitution and legislation.
2. There is explicit inclusion of children and young people's right to participate in decision-making in a national strategy.
3. Children and young people's right to participate in decision-making is embedded in training programmes for professionals.
4. Children and young people are represented in forums at local, regional, and national governance levels.

### **Procedural Indicators**

5. There are procedures in place to enable children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in administrative proceedings.<sup>5</sup>
6. Child-friendly complaints procedures and child-targeted feedback mechanisms on local services are in place.
7. Children and young people's right to participate is promoted, and children and young people are provided with information about their right to participate.

### **Practice Indicators**

8. Children and young people's views are actively sought.
9. Children and young people are provided with information.
10. Children and young people are supported to express their views.
11. Children and young people are listened to and taken seriously.
12. Children and young people are provided with feedback.

The research design incorporated a mixed-methods approach across eight research work streams and across the various stakeholders; see Table 1 below. Mixed methods in baseline and follow-up design included qualitative interviews with children and young people, internal Tusla stakeholders, external

<sup>3</sup> The Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool includes two additional indicators which were not included as part of this study as they were not relevant to Tusla's remit.

<sup>4</sup> These indicators were also influenced by a module in the 2013 Kids Life and Times survey, commissioned by the Centre for Children's Rights, Queens University Belfast.

<sup>5</sup> The first procedural indicator in the Council of Europe tool includes procedures to participate safely in judicial proceedings. While fundamental decisions concerning a child's care are made in court, the study did not examine if there are procedures in place to enable children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in judicial proceedings. This is an issue being examined by the Child Care Proceedings in the District Court Research Group in University College Cork: [www.ucc.ie/en/appsoc/resconf/res/childcareproceedingsinthedistrictcourt/](http://www.ucc.ie/en/appsoc/resconf/res/childcareproceedingsinthedistrictcourt/). University Belfast.

stakeholders, and staff involved in the roll-out of Tusla and EPIC fora. Focus groups were conducted with children and young people involved in the Tusla and EPIC fora. A quantitative survey was used to assess Tusla’s staff participation practices and perceptions before and after the roll-out of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work. A survey was also used to compare staff perceptions of their participation practices before and after attendance at child and youth participation training. Secondary analysis was used to explore compliance with participation standards for children and young people in care and assessed by Health and Information Quality Authority (HIQA) Inspectors and reported in HIQA reports. Documentary analysis was employed to explore implementation of various aspects of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work. The eight research streams are further described in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Research streams and data sources in this study**

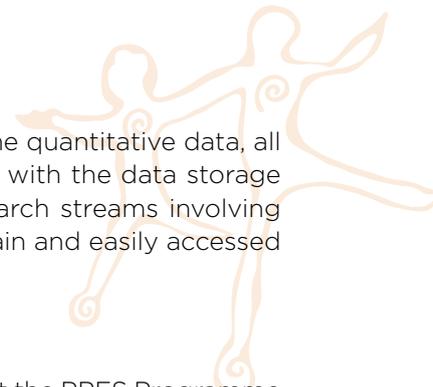
Eight research streams and data sources across multiple stakeholder perspectives
1. A systematic literature review exploring the effectiveness of structures and procedures intended to support children’s participation in child welfare, child protection, and alternative care services
2. Secondary analysis of Tusla’s compliance with participation standards published in HIQA Inspection Reports 2013–2015 and 2016–2017
3. National baseline and follow-up participation survey of all Tusla staff
4. Interviews with children and young people about their experience of individual participation in Tusla services
5. Evaluation of fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care
6. Evaluation of child and youth participation training – pre-, post-, and follow-up survey with all participants in the child and youth participation training during the period January–June 2017
7. Documentary analysis of core elements of Tusla PPFs Children’s Participation Programme of action
8. Interviews with key internal and external stakeholders.

## 2.3 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for various research streams was sought and granted from NUIG Ethics Committee and Tusla Ethics Review group. Ethical approval processes for the research streams involving children and young people were complex and involved discussions with various stakeholders to understand the issues involved. For example, for children in care, informed consent processes are different, dependent on the care order.

These issues were carefully discussed with the ethics committees and teased out. Staged ethical approval processes allowed the research team to commence the work but with various check-ins and feedback mechanisms in place at various points along the way. For example, interim approval was granted to seek advice from a youth advisory group on the design of information leaflets for the qualitative research with children and young people. Follow-up approval was then granted when these processes and materials were submitted to the ethics committee for final approval.

Confidentiality and anonymity of all participants was paramount throughout the study and was preserved by anonymising all transcripts from qualitative interviews and by assigning codes to participants. In line with best practice for qualitative interviews, all participants received a copy of their transcribed interview



and were offered the opportunity to review and offer additional comment. For the quantitative data, all data management practices were in line with data-protection best practice and with the data storage and retention policies of NUI Galway. Ethical approval was not sought for research streams involving secondary or documentary analysis, as this material is already in the public domain and easily accessed by the public or interested parties.

## 2.4 Research Limitations

This three-year programme of research was limited in scope. We acknowledge that the PPFS Programme of work was only in its infancy, and a two-year follow-up of the impact that this may have in practice is limited. Data covers a variety of perspectives using a range of research methods and designs. Integrating this data is complex and may mean that the findings focus on stronger data emerging across the seven work packages rather than data emerging from only one or two research streams.

We acknowledge the low numbers of children and young people in the qualitative study on their experience of individual participation in Tusla services. However, it was not our intention to seek the views of a representative group of children and young people; rather, we sought to include the views of a purposive sample who are not involved in activities which were part of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work to supplement the data in the study and include the voice of children and young people. Interviews with 96 internal and external stakeholders were long. The average interview lasted approximately one and a half hours and incorporated their views about the wider Development and Mainstreaming Programme. This meant that data pertaining to the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work may have been limited in its scope and depth.

Limitations are acknowledged in respect of the method of secondary analysis of the qualitative findings in the HIQA inspection reports. Because the secondary analysis entailed analysing data collected by HIQA, the research team had no control over the methodology used for data collection or the issues interrogated. A second limitation relates to the services inspected by HIQA. HIQA is mandated to inspect child welfare and protection services, as well as foster care, residential care, and special care. This excludes other Tusla services, including Educational and Welfare Services (EWS), Early Years Inspectorate Services, and Family Resource Centres. Therefore, data from participation standards and practice within these services are not included in the HIQA reports.

The low response rate of 10 per cent from Tusla staff to the national survey at baseline<sup>6</sup> and 7 per cent at follow-up<sup>7</sup> could be seen as a limitation. But the numbers are still quite large (n = 343 at baseline, n = 255 at follow-up), represent a good geographical spread, and are largely proportionate to the breakdown of Tusla staff in terms of their job role. Despite these limitations, integrating the data across the seven research streams of the study did allow for triangulation and validation of the data.

<sup>6</sup> Based on figures from Tusla (2016) *Quarterly Integrated Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 4 2015*. Dublin: Quality Assurance Directorate Tusla: Child and Family Agency.

<sup>7</sup> Based on figures from Tusla (2018) *Quarterly Integrated Performance and Activity Report Quarter 1*. Dublin: Quality Assurance Directorate Tusla: Child and Family Agency.

## 2.5 Overview of Methodology for Each Research Stream

### **1. Research Stream One: A systematic literature review exploring the effectiveness of structures and procedures intended to support children's participation in child welfare, child protection, and alternative care services<sup>8</sup>**

Procedures designed to support the individual child to be involved in decisions taken regarding their care, protection, and welfare include: one-to-one consultation with their case manager; submission of their views in writing to assessment, planning, and review meetings; attending and being actively involved in meetings; using an advocate to bring their views to the attention of the decision-makers; engaging in a process of family-led decision-making, as happens in Family Welfare Conferences; and making a complaint through a designated complaints procedure. Structures and procedures designed to support a representative group of children to participate in service planning and review include: national, regional, or local advisory forums; including children's views in inspection reports; and consultations or research conducted with children in receipt of services.

#### **Research Aim**

The aim of the systematic literature review was to provide a narrative synthesis of the evidence on how effective the above-mentioned structures and procedures commonly used in child welfare and protection practice are in realising children and young people's participation rights.

#### **Design and Methods**

To systematically review the literature means 'to identify, evaluate and summarise the findings of all relevant individual studies, thereby making the available evidence more accessible to decision-makers (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2009). In this systematic literature review, national and international studies were included if they provided evidence of the effectiveness of the mechanisms listed above in supporting children's participation. Studies were included if they provided theoretical, indicative, or causal evidence of effectiveness as defined by Veerman and van Yperen (2007). Studies that focused on mechanisms to support a child's participation specifically in the court process were excluded, as were non-English-language publications.

#### **Analysis**

In total, 26 studies that satisfied the criteria were identified for inclusion in the literature review. These studies were primarily small-scale empirical studies, and the level of evidence documented was mostly indicative, drawing on service user and service provider testimonies. A narrative synthesis approach (Popay et al., 2006) was used to describe and compare the findings of the quantitative and qualitative studies included.

### **2. Research Stream Two: Secondary analysis of Tusla's compliance with participation standards published in HIQA inspection reports 2013–2015 and 2016–2017**

Ireland's social care inspectorate, the Health and Information Quality Authority (HIQA), has a statutory function to set standards on safety and quality. HIQA monitors Tusla's compliance with national standards for child protection and welfare, foster care, residential care, and special care. While these standards vary, they all include standards on children and young people's participation rights (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Kennan, D., Brady, B., and Forkan, C. (2016) 'Exploring the Effectiveness of Structures and Procedures Intended to Support Children's Participation in Child Welfare, Child Protection and Alternative Care Services: A Systematic Literature Review'. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway.  
Kennan, D., Brady, B., and Forkan, C. (2018) 'Supporting Children's Participation in Decision-Making: A Systematic Literature Review Exploring the Effectiveness of Participatory Processes'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 0–18. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcx142



## **Research Aim**

The aim of this research stream was to understand Tusla's service implementation and compliance with national participation standards as assessed by HIQA inspectors.

## **Design and Methods**

This study used a qualitative approach based on the secondary analysis of HIQA inspection reports of Foster Care Services, Child Protection and Welfare, Special Care Units, and Children's Residential Centres on compliance with national participation standards. This research stream incorporated analysis of 53 published inspection reports from 2013 to 2015 at baseline and 65 published reports from 2016 to 2017 at follow-up, publicly available on the HIQA website. All reports were downloaded and then uploaded to NVivo 10 software for coding and thematic analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2012) guided the analytical process underpinned by the conceptual framework of the Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007). Deductive analysis in NVivo informed analysis for both collective and individual participation. Analysis was guided by the following themes: children and young people's views are actively sought, children and young people are provided with information, children and young people are supported to express their views, children and young people are listened to and taken seriously, children and young people are provided with feedback, and challenges involving children and young people in decision-making.

### **3. Research Stream Three: National survey**

#### **Research Aim**

A national survey was employed at baseline and follow-up to explore how participatory Tusla staff consider both the agency and their individual practice to be in terms of supporting children and young people's participation.

#### **Design and Methods**

The baseline survey was conducted in January 2016. The follow-up survey was conducted in January–March 2018. Data collection was primarily via SurveyMonkey. The survey contained the following sections: 1. Background Information/Demographic detail: geographical area and job role/description of Tusla staff members. 2. Questions on individual participation: Children and young people's participation in decision-making about their personal welfare, protection, or care. 3. Questions on collective participation: Children and young people's participation in service planning and review. 4. Questions on skills development needs. 5. Questions on level of awareness about Tusla's PPFS Children's Participation Programme of Work to support participation. Survey questions were underpinned by the Lundy model of participation.

At baseline and follow-up, the survey was issued via Tusla's communications department Newscast and was live for six weeks. Three reminders were issued to Tusla staff during this time. The email included an information sheet about the study and a link to the survey. Hard copies of the survey were made available to staff who did not have access to email. The survey took about 5–7 minutes to complete.

#### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive and comparative analysis of baseline (n = 370) and follow-up (n = 255) surveys was conducted using SPSS. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the open-ended survey questions.

#### **4. Research Stream Four: Qualitative interviews with children and young people about their experiences of individual participation in Tusla services**

##### **Research Aim**

The aim of this research stream was to explore young Tusla services users' (children's and young people's) experiences of participation in decision-making about their personal welfare, protection, and care within Tusla services. Research objectives were to: explore the perspectives of young Tusla service users regarding their experiences of participation in decision-making about Tusla services in their lives; explore young Tusla service users' experiences of participation in decision-making as conceptualised by the Lundy model of participation; assess if young Tusla service users feel their views were taken into account when decisions were being made about their personal welfare, protection; and care; and reflect on the learning in relation to the participation of young Tusla service users and make recommendations for future work in this area.

##### **Design and Methods**

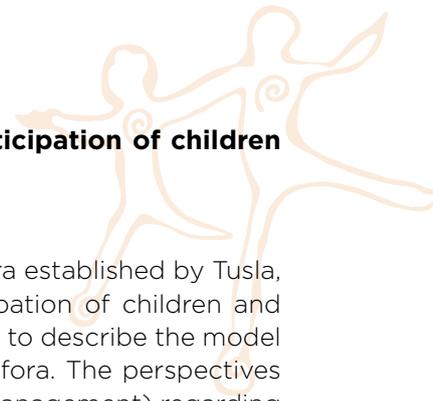
This study employed a qualitative design. Data collection involved one-to-one interviews with 19 children and young people aged 9–21 years drawn from across the following Tusla services: child welfare system, child protection system, foster care, residential care, and domestic violence services. The research was guided by two advisory groups. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants across the range of Tusla services. Tusla's four regional Participation and Partnership Officers (PPOs) supported the recruitment of the 19 children and young people who participated in interviews. These were children and young people who were not involved in Tusla's activities as part of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, but rather represented the wider population of children and young people in Tusla services. The PPOs liaised with appropriate Tusla staff during the recruitment to identify and support voluntary recruitment of the children and young people and to ensure that all correct consent procedures were followed.

**Project Advisory Group:** This group comprised members of Tusla's National Child and Youth Participation Working Group. It advised the research team about sampling and recruitment strategies and supported recruitment of young Tusla service users. It also advised on any consent issues arising, as some children and young people were drawn from foster care and residential services.

**A Youth Advisory Group** comprised two young men who provided feedback on the study design and implementation. They gave feedback on the research questions, materials, project information leaflets, and consent forms. These two men were members of a youth café in Dublin funded by Tusla.

One-to-one interviews took place in a variety of locations depending on where the children and young people were based and at locations convenient for them: Tusla offices, Family Resources Centres, residential care locations, participants' family homes, foster homes, or by phone.

**Data Analysis:** Data from the interviews were transcribed in full. The approach to analysis was inductive thematic analysis. Data was analysed using the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clark (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis was then mapped onto Lundy's model of participation and informed by the core concepts of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.



## **5. Research Stream Five: Evaluation of fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care**

### **Research Aim**

The overall aim of this research stream was to explore the extent to which the fora established by Tusla, in partnership with EPIC (Tusla and EPIC fora), facilitate the collective participation of children and young people in care and influence Tusla policy and practice. The objectives were to describe the model of collective participation and provide an operational profile of the established fora. The perspectives of stakeholders (including children and young people, EPIC and Tusla staff and management) regarding their experiences of involvement with the fora were explored to assess whether the fora have facilitated a safe and inclusive space for children and young people in care to communicate their views to Tusla management, and whether their views were taken seriously.

### **Design and Methods**

A purposive sample of eight fora was selected, cognisant of factors such as age range of participants, geographical location, and length of time the forum is in operation. Participatory research methods (Chambers, 1994) were utilised to develop focus group formats to explore young people's views about the fora. This approach enabled children and young people to express views according to their individual capacities using a variety of techniques, and to take part to the extent that they wished.

A Youth Advisory Group (YAG) was established to provide oversight and feedback on various aspects of the study design and implementation. The group comprised two young people aged 12-13 years who had been involved in Tusla and EPIC fora. The YAG provided feedback on the design and wording of information sheets and consent forms and on the methodology used in focus groups.

There were three data sources. Focus groups were conducted with young people in each of the eight fora areas under study to explore the young people's experiences of involvement and perceived outcomes of the fora. Semi-structured one-to-one qualitative interviews were conducted with the staff of EPIC and with other relevant adult stakeholders, such as social work practitioners and Area Managers, to explore their perspectives on their experiences of involvement in the fora and the degree to which the fora have influenced policy and practice in Tusla. Plans, records of fora activities, and outputs such as recommendations that arise from the fora were analysed using documentary analysis (Flick, 2014).

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the focus groups and interviews were transcribed and digitised in full. Framework analysis was then performed to evaluate the achievement of participative rights within the fora and reflect on future practice (Ritchie et al., 2003).

## **6. Research Stream Six: Evaluation of child and youth participation training**

### **Research Aim**

The aim of the child and youth participation training was to support an organisation-wide culture change, within Tusla and the agencies that it funds, by facilitating greater child and youth participatory practice and embedding such participation in the organisation's culture, practices, and processes. The evaluation of the training focused on assessing the extent to which participants were able to define participatory practice, evidence of the Lundy model of participation being applied in their work, and the development of skills and knowledge needed to develop their own participatory practices with children and young people.

## Design and Methods

A collaborative approach was taken to this project, with extensive involvement by Tusla staff and Workforce Learning and Development (WLD) trainers in the development and delivery of the evaluation. A steering group was composed of Tusla WLD training officers with particular responsibility for the PPF Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the Regional WLD Manager with responsibility for this area, and researchers from the UCFRC. Subsequently, the questionnaires were designed by the UCFRC team with extensive feedback provided by Child and Youth Participation trainers. The questionnaire was framed by the Kirkpatrick model of evaluation, which can be used to assess both the quality of training and its impact on participants (Kirkpatrick, 1994).

Evaluation of the training involved participants completing a pre- and post-training self-administered questionnaire on the day of the training, in addition to a third questionnaire on the follow-up day. To facilitate this process, trainers were sent research packs by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) containing information sheets, consent forms, and the questionnaires. The trainers then returned the consent forms and questionnaires by pre-paid post to the UCFRC.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive and comparative analysis of baseline and follow-up surveys was conducted using SPSS on 411 pre-, 416 post-, and 225 follow-up questionnaires.

## 7. Research Stream Seven: Documentary analysis of core elements of Tusla PPF programme

### Research Aim

The aim of this research stream was to supplement data gathered via the other research streams.

### Design and Methods

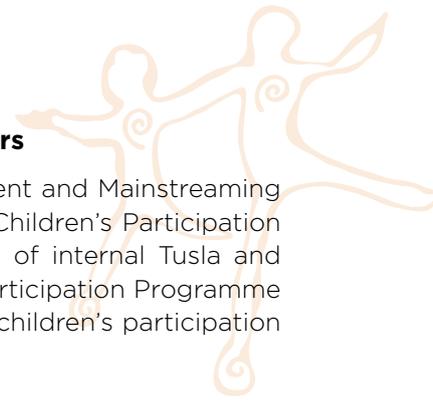
The data collection and analysis drew on documentation publicly available on Tusla's website and in reports as well as information provided by relevant personnel in Tusla. Documentary analysis was conducted on the following core activities of the Tusla participation programme of action:

- Developing and disseminating Tusla's Child and Youth Participation Strategy
- Developing and disseminating Tusla's National Children's Charter
- Developing and disseminating the Child-Friendly 'Tell Us' Complaints and Feedback Policy
- Seed-funding initiatives
- The Investing in Children Membership Award and Agenda Days
- The three National Participation Conferences
- Tusla's standard operating procedures, accompanying forms, and guidance for completing the forms, which were published in the *2009 Report of the NCCIS Business Process Standardisation Project*.

Additional interviews were conducted with key stakeholders recruited via purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), which included Tusla staff, and Investing in Children personnel, to supplement the documentary analysis and provide more detailed information on Investing in Children Membership Award and Agenda Days. Data collection to source all relevant material was supported by key Tulsa personnel.

### Data Analysis

In some cases data was imported into NVivo and deductively coded onto themes developed with reference to the Lundy model of participation and informed by the core concepts of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.



## **8. Research Stream Eight: Interviews with internal and external stakeholders**

This research stream was supported by data collection for the wider Development and Mainstreaming Programme.<sup>9</sup> This wider overall evaluation offered an ideal opportunity for the Children's Participation Work Package research team to supplement their data with the perspectives of internal Tusla and external stakeholders about the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work. A section in the interview schedule was dedicated to questions about children's participation and the implementation of the PPFS participation programme of work.

### **Research Aim**

The aim of this research stream was to explore key stakeholders' perspectives on the extent to which participation has become embedded in Tusla's culture and operations through the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work. Key questions were: What worked well? What were the challenges? Is the model pursued in embedding children's participation in Tusla thus far sustainable for the future?

### **Design and Methods**

Both purposive sampling (based on participants' knowledge of Tusla and the PPFS Programme of Work) and random sampling (for certain groups to avoid selection biases) were used to select participants. They were then invited to participate in a face-to-face or telephone interview at a time and place convenient to them. Interviews were conducted with internal and external stakeholders between October and February 2018. Interviews were either face-to-face or telephone interviews with the following personnel: officials/management in Tusla at national office and operational level; senior policy actors in the Government departments and other statutory organisations; in Community and Voluntary sector organisations and other external stakeholder organisations.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was based on interviews with 96 stakeholders. All interviews were transcribed, and data pertaining to children and young people's participation was extracted and imported into NVivo. Data analysis followed a three-step process and was underpinned by the Lundy model of participation. In Phase one, transcripts were imported into NVivo. In Phase two, interview themes were categorised, including open coding of interview transcripts and development of core themes. In Phase three, content analysis of generated themes was followed by data reduction. This illuminated relevant levers and barriers to programme implementation and allowed synthesis of the primary data findings. This process continued until data saturation was reached (Creswell, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> A full account of this part of the methodology is provided in *Systems Change: Final Report on Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme*.

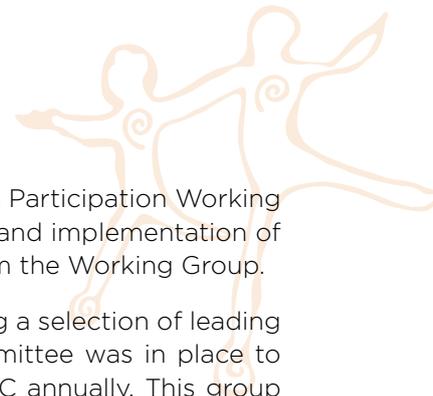
## 2.6 Bringing it all Together: Integrated Data Analysis

Following completion of fieldwork and separate data analysis on all research streams, the data from across the eight research streams was integrated to answer the overall research question. A summary of data collection methods and sample sizes is set out in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Data collection approaches and methods across eight research streams**

Research Stream	Methodological approach	Sample
Systematic literature review	A narrative synthesis approach was used to describe and compare the findings of the quantitative and qualitative studies included	26 studies
Secondary analysis of participation standards published in HIQA Inspection Reports 2013–2015 and 2016–2017	Secondary analysis of qualitative HIQA findings as set out in the HIQA inspection reports	118 reports
National survey	Quantitative and qualitative online survey at baseline and follow-up	Baseline n = 343 Follow-up n = 255
Interviews with children and young people about their experience of individual participation in Tusla services	Qualitative face-to-face interviews	n = 19
Evaluation of Tusla and EPIC fora	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	Staff n = 20 Young focus group participants n = 28
Evaluation of child and youth participation training	Self-completion pre-, post-, and follow-up survey with all participants in the child and youth participation training (Jan.–June 2017)	Pre = 411 Post = 416 Follow-up = 225
Documentary analysis of core elements of Tusla PPFs programme	Secondary analysis and information checks with Tusla staff	N/A
Interviews with internal and external stakeholders	Qualitative face-to-face and telephone interviews	n = 96

Data analysis for the entire study was complex, as it combined several data sources across eight research streams and two time frames (baseline and follow-up), as outlined above. It employed a conceptual framework (the Lundy model of participation) and used indicators adapted from the Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool (Council of Europe, 2016) and the Lundy model to structure the analysis and track progress on the extent to which the participation of children and young people became embedded in Tusla’s culture and operations, following the implementation of the PPFs participation programme. Data was collected and analysed separately for each research stream to produce separate sets of findings. This final report draws together where the findings from each research stream agreed (convergence), offered complementary information on the same issue (complementarity), or appeared to contradict each other (discrepancy or dissonance) (O’Cathain et al., 2010).



## 2.7 Research Governance

The study was conducted with the support of the Tulsa National Child and Youth Participation Working Group, which had a core governance role in advising and monitoring the design and implementation of the study across the research work streams. Table 3 below outlines the input from the Working Group.

The study was also overseen by an Expert Advisory Committee (EAC) comprising a selection of leading international experts in the field of child welfare and family support. This committee was in place to support the research and evaluation work. The research team met with the EAC annually. This group advised the team on design and implementation challenges, as well as on the content of key outputs.

**Table 3: Research partnership and collaboration with Tulsa**

Research Working Group	Details of Research Working Group (i.e. terms of reference)	Outline of engagement and partnership approach
Tulsa National Child and Youth Participation Working Group	<p>Advise on best approaches to delivering on grant expenditure through the seed funding grants and ensure the participation of children and young people in service design, development and evaluation.</p> <p>Support the implementation of the Tulsa Child and Youth Participation Strategy.</p> <p>Advise on the development of and participate in 3 National Conferences in 2016, 2017 and 2018.</p> <p>Develop the Agency approach to participation.</p> <p>Advise on seed funding criteria and support implementation of seed funding grants in the areas.</p> <p>Support the development of project procurement documentation and sign-off on tender documents.</p> <p>Advise on the tender of contracts and milestones.</p> <p>Support voluntary/community partners in actively engaging in implementation of the Tulsa Child and Youth Participation Strategy.</p> <p>Advise the work of the Participation and Partnership regional posts to ensure compliance with the AP grant objectives and the development and the training needs of posts.</p>	<p>Support across baseline and follow-up data collection points. Assistance across the various research streams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of data and feedback on baseline report</li> <li>• Support with recruitment of children and young people for qualitative study</li> <li>• Dissemination of national survey to all Tulsa staff</li> <li>• Support with and participation in interviews with key internal and external stakeholders</li> <li>• Support with sourcing relevant material for documentary analysis</li> <li>• Members of a steering group to design the evaluation of the Child and Youth Participation Training</li> <li>• Advice re research stream evaluating Tulsa and EPIC fora to explore the collective participation of children in care</li> <li>• Data checks, feedback and comments on final report.</li> </ul> <p>Communication with the working group was via email and phone calls.</p> <p>Attendance at six National Tulsa Child and Youth Participation Working Group meetings to update them on progress with the study and seek input on various aspects of the research streams.</p>

# 3

## Children's Participation in Tusla Services – Key Findings

### 3.1 Introduction

Data was analysed separately across the seven research streams and then integrated and mapped onto the structural, procedural, and practice indicators to assess to what extent the participation of children and young people became embedded in Tusla's culture and operations, following the implementation of the PPFS participation programme. This section sets out the findings regarding the barriers impeding and the levers supporting children and young people's participation becoming embedded within the agency.

### 3.2 Findings: Structural Indicators

#### 3.2.1 Legal protection for children and young people's right to participate in decision-making is reflected in the national Constitution and legislation

Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was a strong legal framework supporting a child's right to participate. A child's right to participate was provided in national legislation (including Tusla's founding legislation: the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013) and the Irish Constitution. There was no change in the legal protection granted during the period of this study.

#### 3.2.2 There is explicit inclusion of children and young people's right to participate in decision-making in a national strategy

In 2015, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) published a *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015-2020*. However, there was no Tusla strategy solely focused on children and young people's participation rights. As part of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, Tusla is developing a National Child and Youth Participation Strategy. A draft strategy was initially prepared by the National Programme Manager for PPFS. Staff feedback on this draft strategy was sought at two consultation sessions in 2016 and a further four consultations in Dublin North East in 2017. Tusla Participation and Partnership Officers held a further eight feedback sessions with children and young people across four regions and all services in 2017. Children from residential services, foster care, youth cafés, Traveller groups, mental health groups, and family support groups gave input on the draft strategy content. In these sessions a presentation was made on the draft strategy, and children and young people were asked about the aims and objectives, format, concept of the strategy, and how it should be communicated to children and young people. Feedback from these sessions was incorporated into the final draft. The National Strategy is currently in the final stages of development (June 2018) and is with Tusla management for approval. An infographic will be developed as part of the dissemination strategy.



In addition, a National Children's Charter and a National Young People's Charter were launched in June 2017, developed in consultation with over 50 children and young people aged 9-17 from the four regions. These Charters clearly set out and promote children and young people's right to participate in decisions about their lives and about services delivered by Tusla to children and young people and their families (see Vignette on page 26).

### 3.2.3 Children and young people's right to participate in decision-making is embedded in training programmes for professionals

Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was no competency-based training programme delivered to Tusla staff nationally. Central to the implementation of Tusla's PPFS programme of work was the roll-out of nationwide training for staff, facilitated by staff from Tusla and funded partner organisations. Training was co-facilitated by two WLD trainers, or by a WLD trainer in conjunction with other trained Tusla practitioners or practitioners from funded agencies. The primary focus of the training was to enable staff to further develop their existing understanding of child and youth participation and to learn new and innovative methods for supporting participation in their day-to-day work. A participation toolkit was developed to support the training and practice. Training has been delivered to over 800 to date.<sup>10</sup> These have been mainly Tusla staff with some funded partners involved with seed-funding projects. The aim is to train all 4000+ Tusla staff.

### 3.2.4 Children and young people are represented in fora at local, regional, and national governance level

Prior to the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline study found that there were few designated structures in Tusla to bring children and young people together to participate at a local, regional, or national governance level in service planning and review. The local structures that existed were primarily for children and young people in care. However, Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs)<sup>11</sup> were mandated to engage with the local Comhairle na nÓg<sup>12</sup> to involve children and young people in the planning and delivery of children's services, including in the development of their local Children and Young People Plans.

Following the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, Tusla's commitment to bring children and young people together to participate in service planning and review is further evidenced in the implementation of a collective model of participation for children and young people in care. Tusla and EPIC fora were established to support children and young people in care to feed into policy development and service provision. Following a pilot phase of six fora, there are now 12 fora in operation nationwide. Within each forum area, all children and young people who matched the age criteria were contacted by letter or through practitioner recruitment strategies to invite them to attend. Universal access to the structures could not be guaranteed due to child protection concerns. See the vignette below for an example of how these fora operate.

<sup>10</sup> Based on figures from Tusla (2018) *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report quarter 1*. Dublin: Quality Assurance Directorate Tusla: Child and Family Agency.

<sup>11</sup> The Children and Young People Services Committees work to improve the lives of children, young people, and families at local and community level through integrated planning and improved service delivery.

<sup>12</sup> Comhairle na nÓg (youth council) is the official government structure at local level for the participation of children and young people in the development of policies and services.

**Vignette: Donegal Tusla and EPIC Foster Care Group: Athrú<sup>13</sup>**

This forum was in operation for one year from 2017–2018. Recruitment strategies involved sending invitations to the children and young people, sending information to the foster parents, and direct recruitment by social workers and EPIC staff. The group convened five times over its lifetime. It is intended that the forum will be cyclical, and currently reflection is under way on how best to plan for its continuity.

**Youth Participants:** 12–17-year-olds. Out of a catchment area where 91 children are in the care of Tusla, 14 members were recruited, but this reduced to eight over time.

**Staff Involved:** Participation and Partnership Officer, EPIC Co-ordinator, Social Care staff, Aftercare staff. Reporting to the Principal Social Worker who acted as social worker on call.

**Facilitation:** This group worked on developing their products and plan of action through round-table discussion, assisted by the stakeholders.

**Outputs:**

Passport for Children and Young People in Care – entering into or moving between foster placements.

Consultations with Foróige regarding the potential set-up of a youth group particularly for children and young people in care.

**Communication of Outputs**

Presentation at National Participation Conference, Athlone 2018.

Presentation to the senior management team.

Progress in bringing children and young people together to participate in decisions taken at a governance level is also evidenced in Tusla's commitment to Agenda Days. Agenda Days are an adult-free environment where children and young people are free to discuss issues without adult influence. This is achieved by having young people as facilitators. Agenda Days have been run with a variety of age groups across Tusla services. Working methods vary to account for different characteristics of the children or young people. Agenda Days are sometimes used as consultation events. However, they are encouraged to be seen as the start of a process in which young people develop their ideas and their capacity to engage in dialogue. Eleven Agenda Days have been held across Tusla services in the past two years. See the vignette below for an example.

<sup>13</sup> This vignette was developed from data gathered in the evaluation of the fora described in section 2 of this report.



### **Vignette: Agenda Days<sup>14</sup>**

In 2016 the first Agenda Day in Ireland was held in Dun Laoghaire. A multi-agency group from Wicklow and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown applied for seed funding of €10,000. The youth service provided them with a venue, and a variety of agencies identified 20 young people aged 9–18 to attend. Following this, the management team identified six young adults who would facilitate the session. These were supported by EPIC and Extern. Rob Johnson, from Investing in Children, met with the young adults to discuss their role in facilitating the Agenda Days. They identified a question: What help would you like from adults in your life?

At the first Agenda Day, the group were divided into a teenage group and a younger group. They identified the need for more child-friendly information about Tusla to be available, and specifically the need for a child-friendly website about Tusla. Following this, two further Agenda Days were held with approximately 30 young people. They also developed a research group of about six to eight young people from that larger group. The first Agenda Day identified this website idea. The second one was held to discuss the content, and the third was to get feedback on work done to date on the website. At this point Tusla management heard about the project and wanted to develop it into a national project, so extra funding of €30,000 has been made available to date to develop the project.

The research group then approached a local art college, IADT in Dun Laoghaire, for help in developing the child-friendly website. The college put this on its curriculum for its web design class, which put forward 14 designs. From these the research group shortlisted four designs, then chose one they felt was the best design. Following this, and in consultation with Tusla's communications department and the Tusla Participation and Partnership Officers (PPOs), they consulted with children and young people around the country about the website content. The website content was previewed at the Tulsa National Participation conference in April 2018.

The view of this Agenda Day was that its value lay in its inspiration and transformative powers. It handed over power to young people. It communicated to the young people that they are the decision makers. Feedback from carers and staff indicated that these young people felt listened to, and that sense of being listened to was new. The young adults who facilitated the groups felt that this experience was transformative. The challenges in running the Agenda Day included letting go of control, trusting the process, and finding champions to support the idea.

Facilitators to running the Agenda Day included having the right network of people to support the idea and drawing on the support from management to champion this as a national project of importance. The future of Agenda Days was felt to be dependent on letting go and trusting the process, as well as sharing information across organisations. Understanding that it takes time is important in the process.

The follow-up study also found that a number of the CYPSCs nationally availed of the funding through the seed-funding initiative to enhance their engagement with the local Comhairle na nÓg, schools, and youth groups in their area (see vignettes on seed funding, pages 28–31) for the purpose of supporting children and young people to participate in service planning. While there is an opportunity for CYPSCs to feed into area commissioning plans at local level, with the potential to influence national plans, this study found that there were limited structures or mechanisms for children and young people's views to feed into governance decisions at the national policy and national service provision level.

<sup>14</sup> This vignette was developed from an interview conducted with key personnel involved in this Agenda Day.

### 3.2.5 Summary of Findings Structural Indicators

Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was a strong legal and policy framework in place supporting children and young people's participation. While there was no change in the legal protection of a child's right to participate during the period of the study, progress was made across each of the remaining structural indicators. As part of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, Tusla developed a National Child and Youth Participation Strategy and a National Children's Charter and a National Young People's Charter. Children and young people's right to participate was for the first time embedded in a competency-based training programme for Tusla professionals, which is being implemented nationally. The training programme is accompanied by a participation toolkit, with practical tools and resources to support staff to further apply the Lundy model of participation in practice. There were also 12 Tusla and EPIC fora established nationally and 11 Agenda Days bringing children and young people together to express their views for the purpose of influencing governance decisions related to policy, service planning and review.

## 3.3 Findings: Procedural Indicators

### 3.3.1 There are procedures in place to enable children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in administrative proceedings

While fundamental decisions concerning a child or young person's care are made in court, this study did not examine if there are procedures in place to enable children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in judicial proceedings. This is an issue being examined elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> The focus in this study was on administrative proceedings. Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Programme of Work, documentary analysis of Tusla's national practice approaches found that there were procedures in place to support children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in administrative proceedings. The proceedings examined are: Meitheal, the assessment process, child protection conferences, family welfare conferences, admission to care, and care planning and review. Procedures supporting their participation included openings for one-to-one consultation with the child, submission of their views in writing, and attending and being actively involved in meetings. However, the baseline study found that their participation was often encouraged rather than required. For the most part, Tusla's standard operating procedures and accompanying forms did not require staff to account for information provided, the support they provided to children and young people to express a view, whether the child or young person's view was taken into account, and whether feedback was provided on the outcome and the reasons for the decision taken. Participatory practice was caseworker-led and was not embedded in organisational practice approaches to Child Protection and Welfare. A notable exception was Meitheal, the national practice model that came into being in 2013 to ensure that the needs and strengths of children and their families are effectively identified, understood, and responded to in a timely way. Guidance on the operation of Meitheal and the Meitheal forms place the child at the centre of decision-making and seek to ensure compliance with all elements of the Lundy model of participation. The baseline study also established that there were regional and local variations to child care proceedings and the accompanying forms. For example, it was found that in some areas the practice was to use child-friendly Child in Care review forms to support children and young people to express their views, but these were not mainstreamed.

With the exception of Meitheal, the PPFS Children's Participation Programme of Work did not include an action focused on reviewing Tusla's practice approaches to enable children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in administrative proceedings. This was already somewhat under way as part of the whole system change happening in Tusla. As part of this change, Tusla selected the Signs of Safety as its national approach to child protection proceedings grounded in partnership

<sup>15</sup> See: the Child Care Proceedings in the District Court Research Group in University College Cork: [www.ucc.ie/en/appsoc/resconf/res/childcareproceedingsinthedistrictcourt/](http://www.ucc.ie/en/appsoc/resconf/res/childcareproceedingsinthedistrictcourt/).

and collaboration with children, families, and their wider networks of support (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2017b). This approach requires children and families to be placed at the centre of assessment and decision-making and uses child-friendly tools to support children and young people to express a view. Signs of Safety is seeking to mainstream greater participation in all child protection and welfare cases open to social work services and above the threshold where Meitheal operates. The Signs of Safety approach is currently being implemented nationally.



### 3.3.2 Child-friendly complaints and feedback mechanisms are in place

Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline study found that Tusla received feedback and complaints through the HSE's 'Your Service, Your Say' complaint and feedback mechanism. There was no child-friendly version of this mechanism, although a complaints mechanism 'Speak up, Speak out' was operational for children in foster care. In the baseline study, it was also evident from analysis of the HIQA reports that 'Your Service, Your Say' appeared to regularly operate in parallel with other, ad hoc, and less formal complaints processes, such as letters being written directly to the area manager or being communicated directly to social workers.

Following the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, 'Tell Us' began operating as the feedback and complaints policy for Tusla, replacing 'Your Service, Your Say'. The 'Tell Us' leaflet is a child-friendly leaflet published in January 2016. There were 20,000 copies distributed throughout the agency. Following initial dissemination of the new policy, it was decided that the leaflet would be revised by a number of consultation groups nationally. Three consultations with young people were held in 2016 to get feedback on the revised leaflet. The new leaflet was published and circulated in 2017. The poster was designed by young people (from the Tusla Mayo Youth Advisory Group) and launched in January 2018.

### 3.3.3 There are mechanisms/procedures in place to promote a child's right to participate and provide them with information about their right to participate.

Prior to implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there were limited activities to promote a child's right to participate and provide them with information about their right. In 2015, a child-friendly information leaflet on Tusla's approach to the participation of children and young people and what this right means in practice was published and disseminated nationally. The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work focused on specific measures to ensure that a child's right to participate was promoted. This was aided by the development of the National Children's Charter, the National Young People's Charter, the Development of the National Child and Youth Participation Strategy in consultation with children and young people, and the three national participation conferences. The introduction of quality assurance measures such as Investing in Children Membership Award and Agenda Days also promoted children's right to participate.

### **Vignette: Development of Tusla's National Children's Charter<sup>16</sup>**

The purpose of the Tusla Children's Charter was twofold: to provide greater clarity on the quality of services that children and young people may expect from Tusla, how these will be delivered, and the principles underpinning this; and to provide benefit to staff by clearly stating the principles to be adhered to in the delivery of services to children and their families.

Tusla worked with Dr Carmel Corrigan and groups of children and young people from across the four regions to develop charters that reflect the views and preferences of children and young people.

The consultation with children and young people was central to the development of the Charter: Tusla identified four groups, one in each geographical region, to participate in the consultations. Over 50 children and young people aged 9-17 years across all services participated. Consultations included a number of children and young people from traditionally seldom-heard groups. In these sessions a presentation was made to the groups on: Who Tusla are, What a Charter is, Purpose of the Children's Charter, Children's Rights, and Examples of Other Children's Charters. The presentation used video and storyboard, Chick and Dan, to facilitate the sessions. Questions to guide facilitated sessions with the children and young people in small groups included: *If you were Chick or Dan, how would you like the Tusla worker to treat you? What could the Tusla worker do to make you feel better? What could the Tusla worker do to make you feel safe or looked after? What could the Tusla worker do that would make you feel sad or angry? What kinds of things would you want to ask the Tusla worker?*

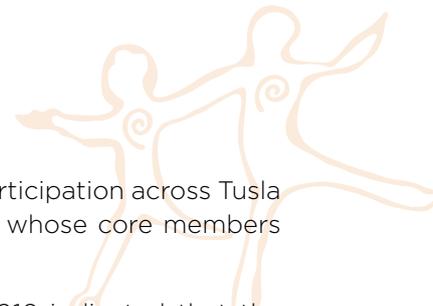
Themes were identified from children and young people's responses, including **Give us information, Listen to us, Respect our privacy, Keep us safe, Help us get other supports, Be suitable for the job, Be realistic/honest, Think about alternative solutions, Build a relationship with us, Treat us with respect, Have a positive attitude, Have a child-focused approach, Think about our family, and Get us practical help.**

Feedback sessions on a draft Charter were undertaken in January 2017 with each of the groups. In these sessions children and young people were broadly happy with the draft Charter but considered it too 'wordy' and too long; they reported that two versions were needed: one for younger children and one for older children. They also provided ideas about the design of the Charter and how it should be made available: online, posters, audio version, Braille version, in different languages, etc.

#### **Two charters were developed: A National Children's Charter and A National Young People's Charter**

Dissemination of the Charter has included a presentation of the Charter to Tusla at the National Child and Youth Participation Conference in April 2017, and a poster version circulated to all Tusla offices and services. Tusla staff also received a brief document setting out the process used in the development of the Charter and its purpose. Information for staff was also developed. A checklist for staff for implementing the children and young people's Charters was developed, based on comments made by children and young people during consultations. The National Children's Charter and the National Young People's Charter were officially launched on 28 June 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Vignette developed with information supplied by Tusla Partnership and Participation Officers (PPOs) and presentation about development of the National Charter by Dr Carmel Corrigan at Tusla Participation Conference 2017.



## National Child and Youth Participation Conferences

Three national conferences were held showcasing children and young people's participation across Tusla services. These were organised and run by a conference-organising committee whose core members were children and young people.

Feedback from children and young people following the first conference in 2016 indicated that the conference was too 'adult-focused' and 'too boring'. The subsequent conferences had more input from children and young people, and the children and young people were invited to join the conference planning group. The entire third conference in 2018 was organised, supported, and run in conjunction with children and young people. Feedback from attendees at the latter two conferences was much more positive. Children and young people reported that hearing about what was happening on the ground from young people was much more interesting and a much better experience for all conference attendees. There were three conferences over three years:

- Conference 1: 'Towards Participation', January 2016
- Conference 2: 'On Our Way', April 2017
- Conference 3: 'Where to From Here', April 2018.

## Investing in Children Membership Award

Investing in Children (IIC) has been working with PPFs Children's Participation Programme of Work to develop a Quality Assurance process across Tusla in relation to participation. The Investing in Children Membership Award recognises and celebrates examples of imaginative and inclusive practice. Investing in Children members are those services that can demonstrate a commitment to dialogue with young people that leads to change. Forty-five IIC awards have been made to a variety of services since this quality assurance mark was rolled out across Tusla services. Four of these have completed their annual review. An example of a group in receipt of an IIC Award is outlined below.

### **Vignette: Investing in Children Membership Award<sup>17</sup>**

#### **Evaluation Tusla – Fostering Team (Dublin South West/Kildare/West Wicklow) I Believe – Creative Birth Children of Foster Carers Group**

A senior project worker from IIC met with seven young people to evaluate this project. All these young people live at home with their parents who foster other children and young people in the Kildare and West Wicklow regions of Ireland. They are supported by the fostering team for Tusla in this area to come together as group. Through feedback from children, young people, and families, the team felt there was a need to support birth children in foster care placements. What emerged was a development of a group called 'I Believe', which allows young people to come together to explore their ideas about support offered by the team in safe spaces. It also gives them opportunities to meet with other children and young people who are in similar situations regarding being a birth child of the family and having in-foster-care placement. Since the group was created in autumn 2016, it has expanded to include up to 12 young people who meet regularly to discuss the growth of the group, involving them in the development of a creative art project, socialisation activities, and trips. The staff support the young people to develop friendships and progress the project further, based on the input of the young people who attend. Currently, the group meets approximately every six to eight weeks in a local community centre, where they participate in a wide range of activities, including games and group artwork projects.

<sup>17</sup> This vignette was developed based on a report received from Senior Project Worker, Investing In Children, CIC, December 2017

## Seed-Funding Initiative

Under the PPF Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, Tusla agreed to assist areas in exploring and developing participatory practice initiatives. Tusla made seed funding available to support new and developing initiatives that required initial or additional funding in order to progress. Funding was made available: €170,000 for year 1 funding (July 2016 to June 2017) and €187,000 for year 2 funding (July 2017 to June 2018). All seed-funding projects engaged children and young people and listened to their ideas and opinions on what they want from a project or group to further improve Tusla's participation culture. Many of the workshops presented by the young people at the Participation Conferences in 2017 and 2018 not only promoted the value of participatory practice but also let their audience know the difference these projects made to their daily lives. There was a broad range of projects supporting children and young people of all ages and including after care. Projects included: youth leadership programmes, domestic violence peer education programmes, children-in-care focus groups, support groups for birth children of foster parents, and the creation of a child-friendly website. A total of 41 projects were funded between 2016 and 2018: 21 in Dublin North East, eight in Dublin Mid-Leinster, six in the South, and six in the West. Projects were undertaken in partnership with agencies such as Youth Work Ireland, Family Resource Centres, Garda Youth Diversion, Comhairle na nÓg, and CYPSCs. A full list of projects funded between 2016 and 2018 can be viewed at: [www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/prevention-partnership-and-family-support-programme/participation/seed-funding-projects-for-children-and-young-peoples-participation-2016-201/](http://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/prevention-partnership-and-family-support-programme/participation/seed-funding-projects-for-children-and-young-peoples-participation-2016-201/). The vignettes below are illustrative examples of how seed funding was used to support participation practice on the ground.

### **Vignette: Seed-funding projects<sup>18</sup>**

#### **Roscommon Social Peer Research (2016–2018)**

The aim of the Social Peer Research Project is to carry out social action research to inform plans of Tusla, CYPSC, and voluntary agencies in Roscommon. 23 focus groups were established with children and young people aged between 3 ½ and 24 years. Groups included children in early years settings, schools (national and secondary), disability services, children in care, and those involved in child protection, family support, and youth services. The young people will be trained in research skills, starting in year two, September 2017. Focus groups will continue and the needs and suggestions will form part of the social research which the young people will carry out themselves. Outcomes are fed into and influence the action plans of the various partners: CYPSC, Roscommon County Council. The money was spent on training youth researchers and organising 23 focus groups or consultation sessions (venues, transport, food, etc).

<sup>18</sup> See: [www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/prevention-partnership-and-family-support-programme/participation/seed-funding-projects-for-children-and-young-peoples-participation-2016-201/](http://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/prevention-partnership-and-family-support-programme/participation/seed-funding-projects-for-children-and-young-peoples-participation-2016-201/).



**Vignette: Roscrea Agenda Day<sup>19</sup> (one of Midwest seed-funding projects): This project was supported by Roscrea Youth Service – NTL**

**‘Agenda Day about you and your positive well-being’**

This Project was initiated in early 2017, as part of the National Child and Youth Participation strategy. Roscrea Youth Service has always worked as a place of young-person participation at the centre of service delivery; therefore this was an immediate fit for the service. The plan was to provide a space for a group of young people who have been part of the service for a number of years, and encourage the opportunity to develop a project that would get the feedback of the larger youth population in Roscrea on an issue or issues that were pertinent to them. The group was made up of six young women from different friendship circles, some with personal experience of services in Tusla and others with family knowledge of services and interventions available.

The group were invited to an information session in Limerick hosted by Tusla, in which they worked with a senior Project Officer with Investing in Children for an evening along with many other groups. During this space the group decided to carry out an ‘Agenda Day’, inviting young people from the wider community and targeting all clubs and groups from Roscrea with invitations. The theme of the day was Mental Health and Wellness in Roscrea – Your Opinion. The group had decided on this theme due to the experience that they have had in the community and school over the past number of years and what they perceived to be huge gaps in service and schools in the area of mental health and wellness.

The groups were provided with seed funding from Tusla and a weekly space in the Youth Café to meet and plan the day. As a very enthusiastic group, there was huge learning for them individually in relation to the group dynamic. There were a number of natural leaders, who learned to take turns in leading different elements of both the discussions and work load; there were also very introverted people, who found the courage to find their voice and challenge opinions during discussions. The group had to adjust their timeline as the project developed, and this was their choice, as they discovered that the level of work that needs to go into an Agenda Day is vast. After long months and a lot of prep work on behalf of the group, Roscrea’s first Youth Agenda Day took place in October 2017. Transport was provided from town to the venue, and the day proved very successful in what it set out to achieve.

The findings on the day have led to a number of new initiatives in the town. Some have been achieved, while a number of bigger initiatives are still being pursued. The personal benefits were very visible within the group of facilitators, with a new sense of confidence and approach to future developments. They also had a great sense of worth in relation to developments that are under way in the community. One of the main benefits for the group was the fact they felt heard by ‘department officials’. This project was developed by a group of young people, who in turn provided a space for a larger group of young people to be heard.

<sup>19</sup> This vignette was developed by the Partnership and Participation Officer (PPO) working with the group.

### **Vignette: 'Cork Matters' Project<sup>20</sup>**

#### **Cork ISPCC – Children's Advisory Committee – Tusla Seed-Funding Project**

The 'Cork Matters' project was commenced by the ISPCC in 2017, with the aim of identifying issues facing particular communities and of coming together both to address these and to celebrate all the great things about living in these areas. Youghal and Ballincollig, two Cork towns where the views of residents appear not to be regularly highlighted, were chosen to be the focus of the 'Cork Matters' project.

As part of the project, ISPCC staff spent several months listening to children, young people, parents, and community members from both areas to find out more about the key strengths and challenges facing children and young people living there. The staff conducted face-to-face group sessions and interviews, as well as using the SurveyMonkey tool online to increase reach. Once they had gathered their data around the key challenges, they set about organising two 'World Cafés'. The purpose of these World Cafés was to give children and young people – as well as adults associated with the communities – the opportunity to share their views on the changes they felt would assist their areas.

The ISPCC wanted to ensure they had a child-centred approach to the project and were delighted to have their Children's Advisory Committee in Cork play a key role in the design and implementation of the project. They said the following about their involvement in 'Cork Matters' so far: 'We helped plan the World Café events and made sure that they were fun, welcoming events for people attending. At the events themselves we co-presented to the audience, took on roles of "table hosts", and encouraged people to interact and take part. We feel that the project was very important because it gave the locals the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding issues within Youghal and Ballincollig.'

An ISPCC Childhood Support Worker said, 'While we are satisfied with our efforts to reach out and hear the views of children and young people, our next step is to present our findings to influential stakeholders. Success in this project would mean delivering the real tangible, positive, changes identified by those living in the areas, most especially children and young people.'

<sup>20</sup> This vignette was developed by the Partnership and Participation Officer (PPO) working with the group.



### **Vignette: The Mighty Midlanders: Seed-Funding Project Midlands Area<sup>21</sup>**

In July 2016 'The Mighty Midlanders' were formed. The project is a collaboration between the Tusla Midlands Area and Youth Advocate Programmes (YAP). The Social Work Department wanted to hear from young service users about what they are doing well and what they could change to make the service better. Through art they sought the views of 10 young people from Laois, Offaly, Longford, and Westmeath. The group was facilitated by a Community Artist, a Team Leader from YAP, and a Social Care Leader from Tusla PPFs. As part of that process the young people created art pieces which are a visual representation of the 'voice of young people'. The finished artwork is displayed in the new Tusla building in Mullingar as a permanent reminder of the importance of Child and Youth Participation. The group also made a presentation at the official launch.

The young people then agreed that they would like to move to the next step and evoke change within services. They met area management and told them what they would like to happen or change in the future. Management listened and openly discussed the views of the young people with them and acknowledged what they may be able to enhance or provide going forward. Some of the changes requested by the young people were for staff to meet with the young people for fun, not only when something is wrong; and to dress more informally and not wear lanyards when visiting the young people. Equally important to the young people is that they were given reasons if some of their wishes could not be fulfilled. The group said they would like all young people equally to receive a quality service from Tusla, and therefore tasked social workers with a project of doing an activity with a young person in their community and recording evidence of this to forward to the group. This project is now complete, and a celebration day is planned for Lough Key Forest Park in summer 2018. Future plans include running an Agenda Day, as four of the young participants have availed of Agenda Day facilitator training.

All the young people involved in this project hosted an exhibition stand and facilitated a workshop at the National Child and Youth Participation Conferences in 2017 and 2018. They were also invited to Tusla headquarters in Brunel to meet with the Tusla CEO Fred McBride and COO Jim Gibson. To date, the notable benefits of this project have been the progression of the groups' work ethic, their commitment to the project, and the young people gaining confidence from their communication with services. Another benefit is the young people actively participating in the changes they wanted to make in services. It is important to note that when the social workers returned the evidence of working with young people in their own communities, the benefits of this project served not only the young people who devised the project but also the social workers involved and the young people receiving the service.

<sup>21</sup> This vignette was developed by the Partnership and Participation Officer (PPO) working with the group.

### 3.3.4 Summary of findings procedural indicators

Following the implementation of the PFFS Programme of work, progress was made across all four procedural indicators. Progress on having procedures in place to enable children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in child welfare and protection proceedings was significant. However, this is not solely attributable to the implementation of the PFFS Child and Youth Participation programme of work. The implementation of Signs of Safety, Tusla's national approach to child protection proceedings, which requires children and families to be placed at the centre of assessment and decision-making, is occurring as part of the wider systems change in Tusla. Significant progress was also made across all other procedural indicators. The PFFS Child and Youth Participation programme of work implemented for the first time a national child-friendly complaints and feedback mechanism, 'Tell Us', developed in consultation with children and young people. The PFFS Child and Youth Participation programme of work also extensively promoted a child's right to participate. This was done via the development and dissemination of a National Children's Charter and a National Young People's Charter, and the development of a National Child and Youth Participation Strategy in consultation with children and young people (due for dissemination in 2018). The introduction of quality assurance measures such as Investing in Children Membership Award™ and Agenda Days™ also promoted children and young people's right to participate, as did the implementation of seed-funding initiatives to promote and encourage participation practice on the ground.

### 3.4 Findings: Practice Indicators

Practice indicators to measure progress with embedding a culture of participation across Tusla culture and operations were assessed using a number of indicators and across seven research streams. They were as follows: children and young people's views are actively sought, children and young people are supported to express their views, children and young people are provided with information, children and young people are listened to and taken seriously, and children and young people are provided with feedback. While it is useful to examine the data collected under each of these indicators, 'participation' was understood as the sum of all these elements of participation. Therefore, before examining progress under the individual indicators, findings are presented from the national baseline and follow-up survey on staff's perceptions as to whether they were supporting children and young people to participate in compliance with all elements of the Lundy model. The data is divided into staff's perceptions as to whether they were supporting individual children and young people to participate in decisions related to their personal welfare, protection, and care, and their perceptions as to whether Tusla at the organisational level was supporting children and young people collectively to participate in service planning and review. In the baseline and follow-up survey, respondents (n = 370 and n = 255 respectively) were asked to rate their compliance with each of these elements of participation using a five-point Likert-type scale (definitely true, mostly true, unsure, mostly not true, and definitely not true).

Prior to implementation of the PFFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline survey found that 83% (n = 186) perceived that they support (definitely true, mostly true) individual children and young people to 'participate' in decisions taken regarding their personal welfare, protection, or care. In the follow-up survey this increased to 85% (n = 107). The baseline survey found that 22% (n = 58) perceived that Tusla at the organisational level provides opportunities for children and young people to 'participate' in service planning and service review (definitely true, mostly true). In the follow-up survey this had increased to 29% (n = 43). See Table 4.



**Table 4: Overall levels of individual and collective participation as rated by staff in the baseline and follow-up national survey**

Compliance with each of the elements of participation	Pre-PPFS implementation	Post-PPFS implementation	Rate of Change (Pre- to post-)
Individual Participation	83% (n = 186)	85% (n = 107)	+2%
Collective Participation	22% (n = 58)	29% (n = 43)	+7%

The quantitative and qualitative data collected under each of the individual indicators will now be considered in turn.

### 3.4.1 Children and young people's views are actively sought

Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline study found that actively seeking the views of children and young people on decisions relating to their personal, welfare, protection, and care was routine practice for the most part.

Following the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was further evidence across the seven research streams of children and young people's views being actively sought. **The national survey of all Tusla staff** at baseline revealed that 97.4% (n = 217) of Tusla staff agreed that it was true (definitely true / mostly true) that they actively seek the views of children and young people in their day-to-day work. This figure, while decreasing slightly at follow-up (95.4%, n = 124) still evidences a strong adherence by staff to this principle. Across the research streams staff provided specific examples of how they actively seek the views of children and young people across the spectrum of Tusla's services – from child welfare (including educational and welfare services), psychiatric, child protection and alternative care services. Views are primarily sought by means of one-to-one consultations with the child or young person; inviting them to attend planning and review meetings; and/or child/youth-friendly form completion.

Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline study found that, in relation to the collective participation of children and young people to inform service planning and review, there was limited evidence of the views of children and young people being sought. This was especially the case for those in receipt of child protection and welfare services. There were some positive examples, but these activities were localised and largely reliant on the initiative of Tusla professionals. The HIQA reports regularly commented on the potential for complaints made by children and young people to be analysed to identify emerging patterns and trends and inform service planning and review, but there was limited evidence of this happening in practice. The national participation survey found that at baseline, 64% (n = 171) of Tusla staff agreed (definitely true / mostly true) that Tusla at the organisational level actively seeks the views of children and young people. The figure increased slightly at follow-up to 65.3% (n = 102). Staff provided examples of how Tusla actively seeks the collective views of children and young people. At follow-up, this ranged from the implementation of the Children's Charter to a group of children and young people involved in a Tusla School Project being brought to head office and asked what they would like Tusla to do for them.

**In interviews with children and young people about their individual participation in decision-making in Tusla, some children and young people** talked about formal spaces like Tusla camps or residential settings where their views are sought, but most participants talked about how informal settings such as a chat, cup of coffee, or drive in the car led to more meaningful and relaxed conversations which felt safer and more 'normal' than formal meetings. Where formal spaces were discussed, they included meetings with CAMHS teams and care review meetings.

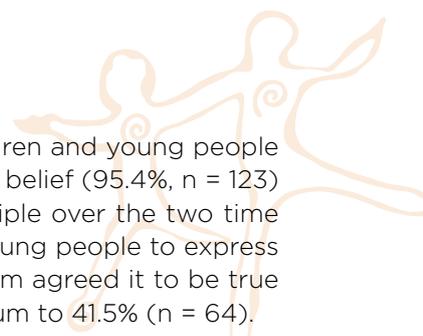
**In qualitative interviews with internal and external stakeholders**, many commented that following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, it is now a requirement to seek individual children and young people's views when discussing care planning and so on. Some participants talked about difficulties consulting with harder-to-reach children and young people, including Travellers, LGBT, children with disability, and refugees. For children and young people's input on collective participation on service planning and review, structures such as Thog na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg were cited as fora where the opinions of children and young people are sought collectively. Agenda Days and seed-funding initiatives were also cited as useful and successful ways to consult with children and young people on a collective and individual level. **In documentary analysis of the IIC awards** there were distinct examples which demonstrated dynamic practices seeking children and young people's views at both collective and individual level. For example, in one project the children had requested to have a treehouse in the outdoor area of the facility. The adults supported this but also supported the children to design and help construct the treehouse. In the same project, weekly meetings were held to discuss the meal plans and activities for the following week. Further positive examples were demonstrated where adults encouraged children and young people to express their views and opinions with their peers, via individual and group meetings, picture selection, and planning sheets.

Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, in the follow-up study, **secondary analysis of HIQA reports of residential settings** revealed evidence of children and young people's views being routinely sought in the context of their everyday lives. For example, in relation to service provision, it was reported that house meetings were widely used to bring together children and young people and staff to discuss issues such as weekly menus, social and recreational activities, house rules, and behaviour management. Inspection reports of foster care services also highlighted that children were encouraged to exercise choice at an individual level in their foster care placements regarding clothes, food, pocket money, bedroom decoration, activities, and hobbies. Some children told inspectors that they could express their views in relation to access arrangements if these did not fit in with their daily routines. The residential care and foster care reports analysed indicated that, in most cases, children and young people were encouraged to attend their care review meetings and were supported to express their views at the meetings. The reports indicated that the majority of children and young people attended care review meetings and that those who declined to attend had their views represented by a member of staff on their behalf. The involvement of children and young people in decisions about their lives was also noted in inspection reports of Special Care Units. In the Child Protection and Welfare Services, emphasis was placed on incorporating the voice of the child through meeting the child on their own where possible, to ensure the child or young person had an opportunity to express their views. These views were then reflected in the documentation in relation to each child.

### 3.4.2 Children and Young People Are Supported to Express Their Views

Prior to implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, evidence emerged in the baseline study of children and young people being supported in a variety of ways, both individually and collectively, to express their views in a safe and inclusive space, and of Tusla staff being responsive to the diverse needs of children and young people. However, whether measures are taken to support a child or young person to express a view and what these measures are is largely at the discretion of the individual professional. While there was some evidence prior to implementation of the Programme of Work of individual social workers supporting children and young people with communication difficulties to express their views, overall services and support for staff appeared weak in this regard. Indeed, the survey respondents in the baseline study rated skills to engage seldom-heard children and young people and skills to communicate creatively as their top two skills development needs.

Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, however, there was qualitative evidence across the seven work streams of improved practice in how children and young people are supported to express their views. There was little change in the quantitative evidence. In the **national participation survey of all Tusla staff**, data analysis revealed that at baseline, 97.7% (n



= 218) of Tusla staff agreed (definitely true / mostly true) that they support children and young people to express their views. The situation at follow-up showed a slight decrease in this belief (95.4%, n = 123) but nevertheless provided evidence of a strong adherence by staff to this principle over the two time points. When staff were asked to rate Tusla's attempt to support children and young people to express their views collectively, the results at baseline showed that 42.3% (n = 113) of them agreed it to be true (definitely true / mostly true). By follow-up the figure had decreased by a minimum to 41.5% (n = 64).

**In interviews with children and young people** about their individual participation in decision-making in Tusla, all children and young people talked about the importance of speaking up to have their voice heard in decisions being made about their lives. They encouraged children and young people to speak to a responsible adult who can help or make things happen. **In qualitative interviews with internal and external stakeholders**, participants talked about creative ways in which staff were engaging with children and young people to seek their individual views and using appropriate means according to age and maturity level. Following the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, different tools such as the participation toolkit were cited as mechanisms that staff use to support children and young people to express their views. EPIC was cited as an example of how services are supporting children and young people in care collectively to express their views. **In documentary analysis of IIC awards**, data highlighted the various platforms and methods which are used to support children and young people to express their views both individually and collectively. For example, in one project, children and young people could put forward their suggestions at the weekly meetings held or they could also submit their suggestions via writing. Age-friendly practices, encouraging children to express their views and participate meaningfully, were demonstrated at a project where pictures were printed for children who could not yet read and write. In this project, community sessions were held which encouraged the children to discuss their hopes, dreams, and aspirations through art and conversation.

**In the secondary analysis of HIQA reports** at follow-up, inspections of Child Protection and Welfare services note that the majority of children were spoken with, by the social worker, prior to Child Protection Conferences. Where it was not felt to be in the best interests of the child to attend these meetings, the social worker represented the views of the children and young people at these meetings. Examples were given of children being consulted in a child-friendly manner and of cases where staff 'went the extra mile' to support and assist children with additional needs to express their views. The reports included evidence of children and young people being encouraged by their social workers to express their views and opinions by writing letters to judges, when a case concerning them was before the courts. Similar to the findings in the baseline, some reports found that there was room for improvement in some service areas to ensure effective communication for children with additional needs, for example through the provision of a loop system. The reports indicated that children and young people in Special Care Units, Children's Residential Centres, and Foster Care Services were encouraged to attend meetings. There is evidence contained in the reports of children and young people being supported to express their views through external advocates, while some children and young people had support from a guardian *ad litem*. As noted earlier, input into service planning and review was via house meetings, and these were also widely used to provide a space for children and young people to express their voice and opinions on matters relating to their everyday lives.

**The evaluation of the Tusla and EPIC fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care** revealed that there were supports for children and young people to express their views in safe spaces, where a lack of stigma, and trust in the adult supporters, were key to ensuring they could talk about their challenges and work on developing solutions. The support of their peers and the opportunity to share experiences in a safe space helped them express their views on the care process. The efforts of the facilitators to create an informal, child-friendly space and to develop relationships with the young people were also key to the expression of their collective views. In interviews with fora stakeholders there was evidence of work done to support collective participation via the development of this safe space and created through relationships built via team-building activities and social events.

**In the evaluation of child and youth participation training**, staff engaging in the training were asked two specific questions on their skill set to support children and young people to express their views. In response to the first question at time 1 (pre-training), 78% of staff agreed or strongly agreed that they had the skills to creatively support children to express their views (see Table 5). This had increased to 90.8% at time 2 (post-training) and to 94% at time 3 (follow-up): an 18% increase between time 1 and time 3. Those unsure if they had the adequate skills to engage in this work decreased in parallel from 19.5% at time 1 to 5% at time 3. The second question asked staff if they had the skills to provide a safe physical and emotional space for children to express their views. Results show that at time 1, 82% suggested they had these skills, with this rising to 89% at time 2 and to 93.4% at time 3: an 11.3% positive change between time 1 and time 3. Those describing themselves as unsure declined from time 1 to time 3 by 7.3% (13.9% to 6.6%).

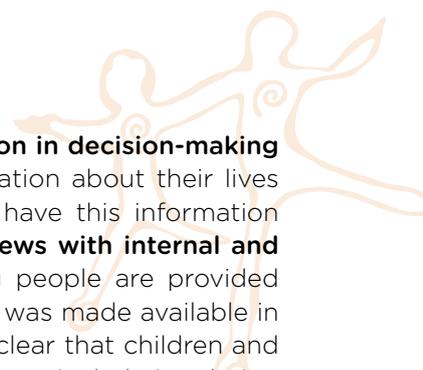
**Table 5: Staff confidence to support children and young people to express their views pre-, post-, and follow-up to training**

Statements about supporting children to express their views	Pre-training - time 1	Post-training - time 2	Follow-up - time 3
Strongly Agree/Agree I have the skills to creatively support children to express their views	78 (n = 416)	90.8 (n = 390)	94 (n = 225)
Strongly Agree/Agree I have the skills to provide a safe physical and emotional space for children to express their views	82.1 (n = 418)	89 (n = 392)	93.4 (n = 225)

### 3.4.3 Children and young people are provided with information

Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline study found that children and young people in foster care and in receipt of child protection and welfare services were not systematically receiving the required information to support their participation. There was no organisational approach to the provision of information and no requirement for staff to record whether information had been provided to children and young people in receipt of these services. In contrast, for children and young people in residential care, the HIQA reports revealed that it was standard practice to receive information on their rights and on Tusla services. Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the qualitative data revealed a significant improvement in the practice of children and young people being provided with information or seeking information, although there were areas that still required improvement. This improvement was not reflected in the quantitative data.

**In the national participation survey of all Tusla staff**, data revealed that at baseline, 91% (n = 203) of Tusla staff agreed (definitely true / mostly true) that they provide children and young people with the appropriate information needed to help them form a personal view on decisions being taken about them. Following the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, follow-up survey data showed a slight decrease in this belief (89.3%, n = 116) but still provided evidence of a strong adherence by staff to this principle over the two time points. When staff were asked to rate Tusla's attempt to provide children and young people with the appropriate information needed to help them form a view on decisions related to service planning and review, the results at baseline show that 59.9% (n = 152) of them agreed it was true (definitely true / mostly true). By follow-up, the figure had decreased to 55.8% (n = 87).



**In interviews with children and young people about their individual participation in decision-making in Tusla**, children and young people felt it was important that they get information about their lives and decisions being made about them. They were clear that if they do not have this information then they should ask for it from the relevant professional. **In qualitative interviews with internal and external stakeholders**, few participants talked about how children and young people are provided with information. There was some evidence of good practice, where information was made available in accessible language, but it was not disseminated widely. Participants were very clear that children and young people need to be provided with appropriate and accessible information, particularly in relation to a child's individual participation in child review meetings, where the focus is kept on the child and their needs. **In documentary analysis of IIC awards**, there was good evidence of children and young people's views and opinions being sought in regard to the quality of information they received, and recommendations in the evaluation reports provided guidance to improve the delivery of information. One young person in a project noted that the provision of information required improvement. In the same project, it was noted that some of the children and young people did not fully understand why the service was working with children and young people and their families. The children and young people said that the flyer which provided this information was 'boring' and that it should also be made available in different languages. The adults listened to the children and young people and were currently updating the leaflet to include more colours and different languages.

Following the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the **secondary analysis of HIQA reports** revealed that services across all settings demonstrated good practice with regard to providing information to children and young people regarding their rights. The reports noted many innovative and proactive examples of young people being provided with information about their rights. Although the majority of services provided information to children and young people regarding their rights, some reports indicated that some children did not know how to make a complaint or were not aware that they had a right to access their records. Similar to the baseline, this finding was mainly with the Child Protection and Welfare Services and Foster Care Services. Improved practice in the provision of rights information to children was noted with regard to recent inspections of Special Care Units.

Similarly, **evaluation of the Tusla and EPIC fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care** provided evidence of children and young people having the opportunity to ask questions in relation to the care process. There was a feeling in two out of five fora sampled that this model of collective participation provided an opportunity to gain information in a timelier fashion compared to other participative opportunities they may have experienced. In one of the fora it was felt that this process may be particularly beneficial for younger cohorts who struggle to understand the care process. Interviews with fora stakeholders revealed that the fora provided an opportunity to inform young people of their rights in response to hearing of challenges in the care system. A key example of this was the opportunity to provide a young person with information on what to do if they do not have a social worker.

#### 3.4.4 Children and young people are listened to and taken seriously

Prior to the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline study data from the HIQA reports and the national survey revealed that while there was an eagerness to take children and young people's views seriously when decisions were being taken relating to their individual welfare, protection, or care, practice in relation to listening to these views and taking them seriously was mixed. Many of the respondents to the national survey at baseline referred to the challenge of weighing up children's views against other factors, including the safety and welfare of the child, the level of risk involved, what is considered to be in the child or young person's best interests overall, the views of other family members, and the willingness of parents to engage. Other respondents indicated that it was dependent on the age and capacity of the child and the available resources. In relation to children

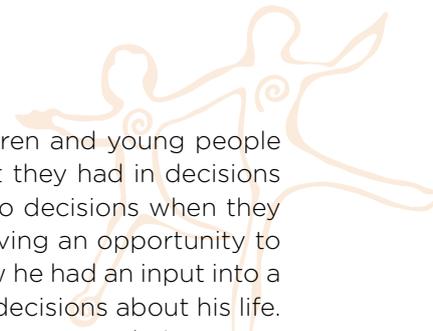
and young people's collective participation in service planning and review, there were limited examples in the baseline study of consultations with children and young people resulting in tangible change. The involvement of children and young people in the production of child-friendly materials was the most commonly reported tangible outcome of seeking the views of children and young people.

Following implementation of the PPF Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was qualitative evidence across the seven research streams of children and young people being listened to and taken seriously. The follow-up study found improved practice particularly at a collective level where children and young people's views were being taken into consideration via conferences, Agenda Days, and other mechanisms. The study participants were very positive about how listening to the children and young people improved practice, and the input of children and young people led to tangible outcomes.

**The national participation survey of all Tusla staff** revealed that at baseline, 93.2% (n = 208) of Tusla staff agreed (definitely true / mostly true) that they listen to children and young people. There was a slight decrease in this belief (92.3%, n = 119) at follow-up. Nevertheless, the data provided evidence of a strong adherence by staff to this principle over the two time points. When asked if they take children's and young people's views seriously, data from baseline showed that 98.2% (n = 218) agreed (definitely true / mostly true). The situation at follow-up showed a slight decrease (97.7%, n = 126). A subsequent question asked staff whether or not the children's or young people's views influenced the decisions taken regarding their personal welfare, protection, or care. Both at baseline and follow-up, 76% (n = 167 at T1; n = 96 at T2) of staff believed this to be the case. When staff were asked to rate Tusla's attempt to listen to children and young people at a collective level, the results at baseline show that 48.6% (n = 129) suggested that Tusla did listen (definitely true / mostly true). By follow-up, the figure had increased to 54.9% (n = 84). When asked if they thought children's and young people's views are taken seriously by Tusla, data from baseline showed that 57% (n = 150) agreed (definitely true / mostly true). The situation at follow-up showed a slight increase (62%, n = 96). A follow-on question asked staff whether or not the children's or young people's views resulted in tangible change. Data revealed an increase in those supporting this claim, increasing from 37.4% (n = 88) of staff at baseline to 42.3% (n = 58) at follow-up.

**In interviews with children and young people about their individual participation in decision-making in Tusla**, champions in the young person's life were adults whom they felt they could trust. These were key workers whom the young people met with on a regular basis (also called care workers or link workers) but also included friends, family members, and social workers. This audience was key for the participants in this study. The key worker role was to listen to the young person and advocate on their behalf to social workers or other professionals. The role of the social worker was to inform the child about what was happening with issues in their family and keep them up to date on key decisions being made. They were also responsible for communicating the children's wishes to other professionals who could implement change. Children and young people talked about the mode of communication that adults used when communicating with them about their personal welfare, protection, or care, which they viewed as vital for building trusting relationships. Communication strategies such as nonverbal behaviour and eye contact were important mechanisms which showed they were listening to the voice of the young person. The mode of communication was perceived as empathetic and supportive. One key finding regarding audience was that young people felt that communication from Tusla staff should be 'real' and not tokenistic for them to feel engaged and respected. This was achieved by having normal conversations which are reciprocal rather than interrogative, interview-style conversations. One girl in particular talked about the need for professionals to pay attention when in conversation with children and young people and not to be so absorbed with note taking. She felt this results in the children and young people withholding information, as the conversation is not natural.

**In these interviews with children and young people** about their individual participation in decision-making in Tusla, children and young people also talked about the types of decisions they were involved in about their personal welfare, protection, or care and whether they felt their voice was heard in these decisions. The decisions varied from personal decisions about daily life, attending care review meetings,



foster care court orders, decisions about school, where to live, and so on. Children and young people who were in foster care talked about how their voice was heard and what input they had in decisions about their care. They described how they had an opportunity to have input into decisions when they were in the care system through review meetings, attending counselling, and having an opportunity to provide feedback about how things were going. One young man spoke about how he had an input into a foster care court order, which was a huge opportunity for him to have input into decisions about his life. Other children and young people talked about having input into how often they got to see their parents or whether they were happy in their placements. There was some agreement that as they got older they had more autonomy, and could speak up more for themselves and let their voice be heard. Where participants talked about influence, they described situations where input into decisions was via a key worker speaking on their behalf in meetings where this could effect change. Two participants felt they had no influence in these decisions, and this was extremely upsetting.

**In qualitative interviews with internal and external stakeholders**, all participants gave examples of how children were being listened to by staff who are now putting children's voice at the centre of their work. They talked about specific examples of where participation practice was happening and the difference it was making for young people and their families. There were also examples of children and young people having the opportunity to collectively influence service planning and review, such as having young people involved in organising the participation conferences and offering them the opportunity to meet with the CEO of Tusla. Agenda Days rolled out across Tusla were also cited as examples of collective participation work which led to positive outcomes, for example to developing a national, child-friendly website and involving children and young people in the development of the Children's Charter. Participants were very positive about how listening to the children and young people improved their own practice and how the collective input of children and young people's input into policy and practice led to tangible outcomes such as design of buildings and information leaflets about services. **In documentary analysis of IIC awards** there were consistent examples throughout the projects where children and young people's views and opinions resulted in tangible change for them. Children's participation, throughout all the projects, was not a one-off occurrence but rather a concise and consistent approach. This approach encapsulated genuine and meaningful dialogue between adults and children and young people. Regarding decisions about personal welfare, protection, or care, in one project it was noted that 'many young people are able to direct the family support they need from staff'. Children and young people were also supported to liaise with government bodies, providing them with additional life skills. Some young people interested in horses said there were instances where the Council had removed their horses. However, a committee was established and was seeking planning permission from the Council to build some stables.

Similarly, following the implementation of the PPF Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, **secondary analysis of HIQA reports** at follow-up revealed that the majority of children in Foster Care Services, Children's Residential Centres, and Special Care Units expressed their views and were listened to and taken seriously. The majority of children spoken to by inspectors said they felt listened to by staff; their requests and suggestions resulted in change for them and their peers. There were reports that complaints made by children and young people in residential care had been dealt with appropriately and to the satisfaction of the child.

**Evaluation of the Tusla and EPIC fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care** recorded that young people feel heard at a collective level as part of general fora operations, with feedback from the facilitators being key to their experience. This was meaningful for the young participants, as many felt that being heard in relation to their experience throughout the care process outside of the fora was difficult, due to challenges accessing social workers as a result of staffing constraints. Interviews with fora stakeholders, particularly social work practitioners, reported a concerted effort to create a space where all children and young people can express their views freely without censure. This is followed up by providing support to the young people on any matters that arose. There was evidence of social work and social care practitioners reporting back to children in care teams and regional meetings, in some cases prompting reflective practice and small-scale change at a local level.

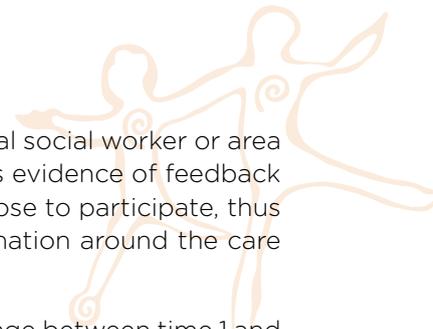
### 3.4.5 Children and young people are provided with feedback

Prior to the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, in the baseline study there were limited accounts in both the HIQA findings and in the national survey of children and young people being provided with feedback. HIQA on a number of occasions reported good follow-up with children and young people when they made a complaint, but there was little evidence of children and young people being provided with feedback outside of the complaints system. Following the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was qualitative evidence that practice remained weak across the research streams.

**The national participation survey of all Tusla staff** revealed that at baseline, 90.6% (n = 202) of Tusla staff agreed (definitely true / mostly true) that children and young people are provided with feedback on whether any changes occurred given their individual participation. The situation at follow-up showed a slight decrease in this belief (86.9%, n = 112) but nevertheless showed a strong adherence by staff to this principle over the two time points. When staff were asked to rate Tusla's efforts at providing feedback to children and young people at a collective level, the results at baseline showed that 38% (n = 100) of them said Tusla did engage in this action. By follow-up, the figure had increased slightly to 42.6% (n = 66). **In the interviews with children and young people about their individual participation in decision-making in Tusla**, this practice was less evident. For one young man, the lack of clarity about how decisions are made was felt to be 'dishonest' and made it difficult for him to understand how decisions are made. This meant that having an input into his personal welfare, protection, or care was confusing for him. Noteworthy in this study was the lack of data about formal feedback mechanisms to children and young people on how decisions were taken. Children and young people did talk about how they had feedback from social workers in particular, but most focused on the informal and unstructured nature of this feedback. **In qualitative interviews with internal and external stakeholders**, again the general feeling was that staff are not good at feeding back to children and young people about decisions being made about their personal welfare, protection, or care or what happens when they get their input. However, there was agreement that the participation training made staff more aware of the need to do this. **In documentary analysis of IIC awards** there was little data in the reports which explicitly demonstrated instances where children and young people have been provided with feedback. However, it may be argued that feedback has been provided where there is tangible change as a direct result of children and young people's views and opinions.

Following the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, **in the secondary analysis of HIQA reports at follow-up** there was evidence that a structured course of action was followed when children made complaints in Children's Residential Centres. As part of this course of action, children and young people are informed of the outcome of their complaint and asked if they are satisfied with the outcome. Although not always documented, staff reported that feedback was verbally relayed to children and young people. Data here is mixed, with some centres performing better than others. Special Care Units were also seen to require improvements with regard to documenting feedback.

Similarly, **in the evaluation of the Tusla and EPIC fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care**, there was evidence of young people having an opportunity to meet with key decision-makers about service planning and review. This ranged from visits by principal social workers and area managers to attendance at participation conferences. Feedback received at these events or meetings was perceived as meaningful by the young people who received it. However, there was evidence of one forum that did not have consistent social work presence, which left participants feeling disconnected from decision-makers in general, highlighting the importance of social work engagement with the process. This forum, along with all others, received feedback and updates from their facilitators at a local level. In interviews with fora stakeholders, all fora sampled had an opportunity to meet with social work practitioners both as part of the fora and at participation conferences. Feedback was offered to



the young participants from management level, ranging from visits by the principal social worker or area management to opportunities to visit social work offices. Furthermore, there was evidence of feedback from the fora being disseminated to children and young people who did not choose to participate, thus offering continued access to information regarding the fora activities and information around the care process.

The **evaluation of child and youth participation training** revealed substantial change between time 1 and time 2 in the skill level of staff being able to provide feedback to children and young people (see Table 6). At time 1, 83.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they had the adequate skills to provide feedback. This increased to 91.3% after the training (time 2) and to 95% by time 3: a total positive change of 11.7% between time 1 and time 3. The other notable change was those describing themselves as 'unsure', as this fell from 14.1% of staff at time 1 to 4% at time 3 (an 11% decrease).

**Table 6: Staff perceptions of their skills to provide feedback to children and young people**

Level of Agreement	Pre-training time 1 (%)	Post-training time 2 (%)	Follow-up training time 3 (%)	Summary of change (T1-T3)	Largest single change
Strongly Agree/Agree	83.3	91.3	95	+	11.7% (Pos)
Strongly Disagree/Disagree	2.6	1.3	1	-	
Unsure	14.1	7.4	4	-	

### 3.4.6 Summary of findings practice indicators

Following the implementation of the PPFs Programme of Work, the qualitative data as well as the quantitative data from the evaluation of the training, provided evidence of improvements in practice across all five indicators. The most notable change concerned the practice of supporting children and young people collectively to participate in service planning and review. This was also evidenced in the national survey. The baseline survey found that 22% of staff perceived that Tusla at the organisational level provides opportunities for children and young people to 'participate' in service planning and service review and this had increased to 29% in the follow-up survey.

In terms of children and young people participating in decisions concerning their personal welfare, protection or care, the quantitative data gathered as part of the national survey recorded very little if any change in practice. The perception of staff as to whether they support individual children and young people to participate in decisions increased from 83% believing this to be mostly true or definitely true at baseline to 85% at follow-up. Prior to the implementation of the PPFs programme of work, actively seeking the views of children and young people was found from across the data sources to be routine practice, thereby leaving limited scope for improvement. However, in relation to the following elements of the Lundy model, supporting children and young people to express their views, providing them with information, listening to children and young people and taking their views seriously, notable improvements were evidenced in the qualitative data. Providing children and young people with feedback continued to be less evident in practice. However, the evaluation of child and youth participation training revealed substantial change between baseline and follow-up in the skill level of staff being able to provide feedback to children and young people. The data also revealed that participation practices are not mainstreamed for all children and young people, and there is a lack of resources to support children with additional needs to participate.

### 3.5 Findings: Challenges or Barriers to Participation

There was evidence from across the research streams of the challenges and barriers which Tusla staff and management face when trying to involve children and young people in participation practice. Though improvements in practice had been reported, these challenges still exist and remained largely unchanged over the research time frame.

Prior to implementation of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline survey reported that 76% of the respondents (n = 162) working directly with children and young people suggested that they face difficulties when involving a child or young person in decisions concerning their personal welfare, protection, or care. Analysis of data from the follow-up survey showed an increase, with 83.6% (n = 107) saying they faced difficulties. The top three difficulties these respondents faced at baseline and follow-up were unchanged and are outlined in Table 7.

**Table 7: Top three challenges to individual participation as reported by Tusla staff in national survey baseline vs follow-up**

Baseline	Follow-up
Children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making (n = 60, 35%)	Children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously (n = 15, 13.4%); Children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making (n = 15, 13.4%)
Children and young people have difficulty communicating their views (n = 31, 19%)	There is insufficient time to establish a trusting relationship with the child or young person (n = 11, 9.8%)
Parents do not agree to a child or young person's participation in the decisions being taken (n = 20, 14%)	Parents do not agree to a child or young person participating in the decisions being taken (n = 10, 8.9%)

When the survey respondents were asked if they felt Tusla faces challenges with collective participation involving children and young people in service planning and review, at baseline 87% (n = 221) said yes. This increased slightly at follow-up to 89% (n = 135). When those surveyed were asked to identify what they perceived to be the top three challenges, the following list emerged at baseline and follow-up: adults (practitioners, managers, parents/carers) believe they know best; children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously; the lack of openings to channel children and young people's views to senior management; insufficient time to engage in dialogue with children and young people; and children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making (see Table 8).



**Table 8: Top three challenges to collective participation as reported by Tusla staff in national survey baseline vs follow-up**

Baseline	Follow-up
Adults (practitioners, managers, parents/carers) believe they know best (n = 60, 25.8%)	Adults (practitioners, managers, parents/carers) believe they know best (n = 61, 14.8%).
Children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously (n = 45, 20%)	Children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously (n = 49, 11.9%)
The lack of openings to channel children and young people's views to senior management, and insufficient time to engage in dialogue with children and young people (n = 31 each, 14.8%)	Children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making (n = 47, 11.4%)

When these top three challenges reported by staff were analysed further by job role, no significant differences emerged. The challenges to participation were identified across the various perspectives.

**In interviews with children and young people about their participation in decision making in Tusla**, children and young people felt that not having access to social work outside of normal working hours was a missed opportunity to connect with children and young people and have their voice heard about personal welfare, protection, or care. As one girl explained, a lot happens in a young person's life outside of 9-5 office hours. **In qualitative interviews with internal and external stakeholders**, participants across the board spoke about the challenges which arose involving children and young people in decisions about their personal welfare, protection, or care, including the need for different strategies or approaches for different children to match communication ability, and the need to tailor the approach to individual children. A wide skill set is required. Participants also talked about the difficulty of including hard-to-reach children and young people. The volume of work for social workers and its adversarial nature meant participation can often be viewed suspiciously by parents and children, making it challenging for staff to involve children in decision-making. This was expressed particularly by social workers and those working in child protection services. Concerns were expressed across participants and roles about the tokenistic nature of the work. Many felt that more training is needed to remedy this. There was reference to buy-in and lack of organisational culture, and to the need to change the mindset and let go of power. There was a lack of coherence about what participation really means, and this was discussed widely. All stakeholders cited lack of resources to do this work as the biggest challenge impeding the work. In particular, the lack of time for staff to engage meaningfully with children and young people was cited as a challenge, and this was affected by the busy work schedule, which is seen as the crisis of social work. Despite the roll-out of participation training across Tusla, participants still talked about the need for training and capacity-building for staff in underpinning the work of the agency, and the need for management to complete the training. The perceived bureaucracy of the work was also mentioned as a challenge for staff trying to get participation initiatives off the ground. This was an additional burden on already busy staff which was felt to be unnecessary.

Adequate space was identified as a challenge for staff in **secondary analysis of HIQA reports** at follow-up. There was one Child Protection and Welfare Service where adequate space presented a challenge and consequently impeded on the individual participation of children and young people in their personal welfare, protection, or care. The report notes that the accommodation and facilities provided to staff was not adequate. Some offices did not have private rooms, and staff noted that this created issues for them in ensuring confidentiality, dignity, and the right to privacy. Reports from Children's Residential Centres

noted that although there were opportunities for children to participate in daily decisions at meetings, not all children attended these meetings. Staff had been devising ways to encourage attendance. Reports from the Special Care Units highlighted the conflictual parameters often inherent in children's participation, namely the balancing of children's rights vis-à-vis balancing risks. Some children who were on a single occupancy programme were not given sufficient supports to exercise their rights of peer-to-peer interaction. Disability was a prominent feature presenting challenges to involving children and young people in decision-making. Although the majority of services provided to children and young people with additional needs showed examples of good practice (had staff trained in sign language), some services still lacked resources for children with communication and sensory difficulties. The report highlighted the need for a loop system for some services and for information to be provided in Braille. Additional suggestions were made in relation to children and young people with sensory issues.

Similar to findings with Tusla management and external stakeholders, **evaluation of Tusla and EPIC fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care** revealed that time to participate in the collective model of participation is an issue for both staff and young people. The fora must operate at child- and youth-friendly times, which means that staff must be available in evenings and at weekends to facilitate the group. For children and young people, their participation in schooling and extracurricular activities means that their participation in the fora may be challenging at times. A time burden may also fall on foster parents to support the participation of their foster child in the group, with travel over a large geographical area, particularly in rural areas, and the resulting waiting times potentially difficult to maintain. Social work resources were a key issue in one area in particular, where it was not possible to maintain social work presence at meetings. This may have resulted in a group not being able to initiate a project important to the young people that was deemed actionable in other areas, due to lack of information available to the group.

Following implementation of the PPF's Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, **in the evaluation of child and youth participation training** participants were asked if they expected to encounter barriers or difficulties in supporting children and young people's individual participation in decision-making. Post-training (time 2), 80% said they were expecting barriers or difficulties, with 9% stating they were not, and 11% unsure. At time 3 (follow-up), participants were asked if they had encountered barriers or difficulties since completing the training some six weeks earlier. This time, 61% had experienced difficulties - 19% less than the number who had expected this when interviewed at time 2. From the 9% who said No at time 2, this had risen to 32% at time 3. It is clear, therefore, that staff's overly negative perceptions at time 2 about difficulties they would face in facilitating individual child and youth participation were alleviated considerably by time 3, supporting a claim that the training was successful in supporting staff to this end.

In addition, participants were asked at post-training and follow-up to identify what they regarded as the main difficulties they could encounter when supporting children and young people's individual participation. See Table 9.



**Table 9: Difficulties encountered by staff supporting children and young people's participation as noted at post-training and follow-up time points**

Post-training	Follow-up
Children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making (n = 235, 16.1%)	Children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making (n = 69, 15.1%)
Children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously (n = 208, 14.2%)	There is a lack of child- or youth-friendly spaces/office (n = 68, 14.9% )
There is a lack of child- or youth-friendly spaces/office (n = 176, 12.1%)	Children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously (n = 58, 12.7%)
Children and young people have difficulty communicating their views (n = 171, 11.7%)	Children and young people have difficulty communicating their views (n = 55, 12.1%)

### 3.5.1 Summary of Findings: Challenges or Barriers to Participation

Following implementation of PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the quantitative data revealed an increase in the number of respondents who suggested that they face difficulties when involving children or young people in decision-making. However, the evaluation of the training revealed that the negative perceptions of staff, 80% believing they would encounter difficulties supporting children's participation post training, were somewhat alleviated in practice with a total of 61% reporting they encountered actual difficulties six weeks following the training.

At baseline and follow-up there were two challenges consistently reported across the data sources. These were: children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making and children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously. Other challenges that featured as among the top three reported at baseline and follow-up were: children and young people have difficulty communicating their views; parents do not agree to a child or young person's participation in the decisions being taken; there is insufficient time to establish a trusting relationship with the child or young person and the lack of child or youth friendly spaces. Adults believing that they know best emerged as the number one challenge reported by staff at baseline and follow-up when they were asked specifically about the challenges they face in supporting the collective participation of children and young people. The qualitative data revealed that the biggest challenge reported by children and young people regarding their participation in decision making in Tusla, was not having access to their social worker outside of normal working hours. For internal and external stakeholders, challenges included the need for different strategies to match communication ability, the need to tailor the approach to individual children, including hard-to-reach children and young people in decision making. There were also concerns about the burden of work, time to do participatory work and the tokenistic nature adopted by some staff. Adequate space, balancing of children's rights vis-a-vis risks and lack of resources for children with communication and sensory difficulties were identified as the main challenges in the HIQA reports at follow up.

### 3.6 Findings: Facilitators or Levers to Participation

There was qualitative evidence across the seven research streams of levers which support participatory practice, and these were key to sustaining participation practice. **In interviews with children and young people about their individual participation in decision-making in Tusla**, children and young people talked about the importance of speaking up to have their voice heard. This was the most powerful tool for them in having a voice in how decisions are made and how this information will be used in the future to affect decisions. One young woman described children and young people as experts in their own lives. They are an important information source, and she felt that this resource should be tapped into by Tusla to help Tusla make more information available about their services to children and young people, foster parents, parents, and Tusla staff. All children and young people in the study agreed that it was important to speak up in order to have their voice heard in decisions being made about their lives. They also recognised that this is not easy or comfortable for some young people. They recommended that children and young people speak to a responsible adult or a key worker who could speak up on their behalf or make things happen.

Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, **internal and external stakeholders** talked about good relationships and champions who support the work and lead on the Programme of Work. There was also discussion about buy-in from enthusiastic staff. They believed that participation is in vogue, and there is an environmental readiness as well as national policy supports in place, so participation is like 'pushing an open door'. This readiness was supported by investment by Tusla. The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work was deemed to be an investment and a lever, and certain structures or programmes in Tusla such as Signs of Safety promote and support the PPFS Programme. The elements of the PPFS Programme which were seen to support participatory practice included the seed funding and the Investing in Children Membership awards. The PPFS Programme has helped promote children and young people's participation and kept it on the agenda. The training and skills development as rolled out by Tusla across the country was also seen as a key pillar to the programme.

Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, **in secondary analysis of HIQA reports in the follow up study**, well-structured house meetings supported participative practice across settings. **Evaluation of Tusla and EPIC fora facilitating the collective participation of children in care** reported that *interagency cooperation* was a notable benefit in the operation of the fora, enabling a child-centred approach to collective participation. The specific professional skill set of the advocates involved supporting children and young people to initiate lines of inquiry that challenged practice narratives, and building channels of communication that allow children and young people to seek support outside of the fora's issues of focus was cited as important. Similar to findings from the children and young people and management, the visible cooperation of advocates and social workers helped to break down unhelpful perceptions that young people may have had around social workers, and helped build relationships and trust. It was felt there were excellent channels for communication at a local level; however, if the products of the fora, such as the passports, dictionary, or information leaflets were to effect meaningful change in Tusla policy and practice, communication and feedback channels need to be strengthened at a national level to ensure full implementation.

Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, **evaluation of Tusla's child and youth participation training** found that participating staff were asked a number of questions, which when tracked across the three data collection time points can be understood as examples of facilitators to participation for staff. See Table 10.



**Table 10: Statements about staff perceptions of participation pre-, post-training and follow-up**

Questions pertaining to participation	Pre-training	Post-training	Follow-up
Staff strongly agreed/agreed that they believed in a child's right to participate	98.6%	97.2%	98.6%
Staff strongly agreed/agreed that they understand what child participation meant	77%	98.5%	99.2%
Staff strongly agreed/agreed that they are familiar with policy and legislation relating to children's and young people's participation	44.7%	88.4%	89%
Staff strongly agreed/agreed that they understood the principles of participatory practice	55.8%	97.3%	99%
Staff strongly agreed/agreed that they had the skills to engage in participatory practice	67.6%	92%	97.7%

These five statements, taken as a whole, reveal a considerable shift in the staff's understanding and skills relating to child and youth participation between time 1 and time 3 following training. Therefore, it can be argued that this growing level of understanding and skills can be attributed to the training, which can in turn be seen as a lever to support child and youth participation.

Staff were asked to identify factors that could support them to apply the training to their knowledge post-training and again at follow-up. See Table 11.

**Table 11: Key factors which support participation in practice identified by staff post-training and follow-up**

Factors which support participation	Post-training	Follow-up
The participation toolkit	16%	16.2%
Support from line manager	12%	-
Personal commitment	15%	16.4%
Support from co-workers	14.8%	14.6%

### **Awareness of PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work**

PPFS Participation programme activities rated quite low as factors to support staff to apply training in their practice, but it could be argued that these programme resources were very new and not yet rolled out fully across Tusla services. See Table 12.

**Table 12: Use of PPFS programme activities to support practice post-training and follow-up**

Factors which support participation	Post-training	Follow-up
Tell us complaints policy	4.4%	2.6%
Towards development of children’s participation strategy	4.3%	4.2%
Quality Assurance Framework	3.1%	2.7%
Seed fund initiative	2.3%	3.1%

Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the **follow-up survey** asked about staff level of awareness of the programme to support participation among children and young people. Nearly one fifth (18.2%, n = 143) identified Tusla’s ‘Tell us’ complaints policy as the main element of the programme with which they were most aware; participation training (15.8%, n = 124) and the National Child and Youth Participation Strategy (15.6%, n = 123) were second and third. Participants had the least awareness of the seed-funding initiative, accounting for 11.3% (n = 89) of those surveyed. See Table 13.

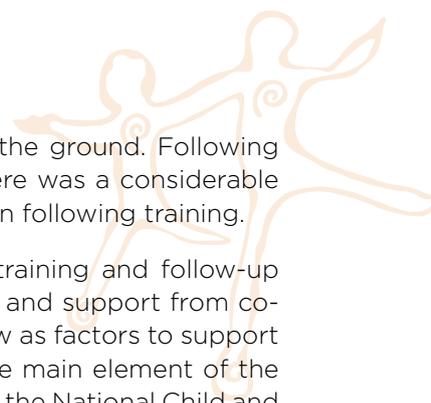
**Table 13: Participants’ level of awareness of PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work**

	Responses	
	N	Percent
National participation strategy	123	15.6%
Participation toolkit for practitioners	106	13.5%
Participation training	124	15.8%
Investing in Children Membership Award	92	11.7%
Seed funding available to support participatory practice	89	11.3%
Children’s Charter	109	13.9%
Tusla ‘Tell Us’ complaints policy	143	18.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>786</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

### 3.6.1 Summary of Findings: Levers to Participation

Interviews with children and young people about their individual participation in decision making in Tusla, revealed that children and young people saw themselves as the most powerful tool in having a voice in how decisions are made and how this information will be used in the future to affect decisions in their lives. Key internal and external stakeholders talked about good relationships and champions who support the work, an environmental readiness, as well as national policy supports which are in place and support the work.

The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work was deemed to be an investment and a lever as well as certain national approaches within Tusla such as Signs of Safety which promote and support the PPFS Programme. The elements of the PPFS Programme which were seen to support participatory practice included the seed funding and the Investing in Children Membership awards™ and the training and skills development as rolled out by Tusla across the country. Interagency co-operation was a notable benefit in the operation of the Tusla and EPIC fora, enabling a child centred approach to collective participation. There were excellent channels for communication at a local level, but communication and feedback channels need to be strengthened at a national level to ensure full implementation.



Child and youth participation training was a lever to participation practice on the ground. Following implementation of PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was a considerable shift in the staff's understanding and skills relating to child and youth participation following training.

Other factors which support participation in practice identified by staff post training and follow-up were the participation toolkit, support from line manager, personal commitment and support from co-workers. However, awareness of participation programme activities rated quite low as factors to support staff to apply training in their practice. Tusla's 'Tell us' Complaints Policy was the main element of the programme of which they were most aware; followed by participation training and the National Child and Youth Participation Strategy. Participants had the least level of awareness of the seed funding initiative.

# 4

## Discussion

### 4.1 Introduction

This study set out to assess to what extent the participation of children and young people became embedded in Tusla culture and operations following the implementation of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work. To do this, we employed a baseline and follow-up methodological approach, tracking progress using a set of structural, procedural, and practice indicators. The aim of this section is to discuss the key findings as presented in section 3, in light of the pertinent literature, and to discuss what progress has been made with embedding participation in Tusla, and what are the levers and barriers to embedding participation in Tusla. In section 5 we make recommendations for future policy and practice.

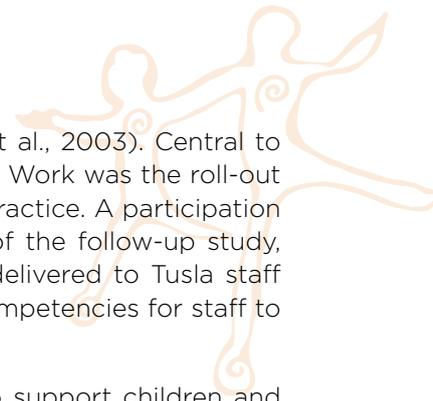
### 4.2 What Progress Has Been Made with Embedding Participation in Tusla?

Children and young people often feel that their voices are not heard in the context of a formalised and bureaucratic child welfare and protection systems (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018; Lucas, 2017; Daly, 2014), and when children in care are not heard or given a chance to participate in decisions that affect them, it can impact negatively on emotional well-being and future outcomes (Nybell, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2010; Leeson, 2007). Prior to the implementation of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, Tusla had a strong legislative and policy framework mandating staff to take into account the views of children and young people. Other structures and procedures viewed as essential to progress the implementation of children and young people's participation rights were not in place. At the practice level, there was much good practice happening to support children and young people's participation in decisions concerning their personal welfare, protection, and care, and there were pockets of good practice supporting children's participation in service planning and review. Nevertheless, the baseline assessment found that participatory practice was not mainstreamed or embedded in Tusla's culture and operations. Investment in the PPFs Programme, specifically the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, was intended to embed participatory practices within the agency.

The research found strong evidence of children's participation being embedded across Tusla's structures, procedures, and practices over the period of the research. This has been supported by, but cannot be attributed solely to, the implementation of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work. Other wider environmental and cultural systems supported this trend.

#### 4.2.1 Participation Structures

Having appropriate structures through which children and young people can participate is seen as important in ensuring that there are mechanisms for their voices to be heard and valued (Council of Europe, 2016; Kirby et al., 2003). Following implementation of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was no change in the legal protection granted during the period of this study. There was, however, the development of a National Child and Youth Participation Strategy due to be published and disseminated in 2018, and a National Children's Charter and National Young People's Charter developed in consultation with children and young people and launched in June 2017. Training and capacity-building for staff can cultivate the necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities to



embed participation (Council of Europe, 2016; Bell, 2011; UNICEF, 2010; Kirby et al., 2003). Central to the implementation of Tusla's PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work was the roll-out of nationwide training for staff, to enable staff to further develop their existing practice. A participation toolkit was also developed to support the training and practice. At the time of the follow-up study, almost a quarter of Tusla staff had completed the training. This training was delivered to Tusla staff and management and has demonstrated perceived improvement in skills and competencies for staff to support children and young people's participation.

A collective model of participation, the Tusla and EPIC fora, was developed to support children and young people in care to feed into policy development and service provision. It was established and implemented across the country. The study found evidence of these fora supporting children and young people to feed into policy and service provision at the local level. However, one gap identified in the study was that there were minimal national structures or opportunities for children and young people to feed into national policy and service provision decisions. While CYPSCs were actively seeking the views of children and young people prior to the implementation of the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the study also found that CYPSCs nationally availed of the funding through the seed-funding initiative to enhance their engagement with the local Comhairle na nÓg, schools, and youth groups in their area.

#### 4.2.2 Procedures

At the procedural level, the implementation of Meitheal nationally supports children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in child welfare proceedings. Likewise, though it is outside of the PPFs programme, Signs of Safety has been adopted as Tusla's national approach to child protection practice and is an approach to child protection proceedings grounded in partnership and collaboration with children, families, and their wider networks of support. As advocated by Kotter (2007), procedural changes at the organisational level will serve to anchor participation in an organisation's culture and into its core policies and procedures.

Child- and youth-friendly complaints procedures are key to encouraging young people to give feedback, which will ultimately enhance services' and providers' awareness of how they engage with children and young people (Council of Europe, 2016; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The 'Tell Us' complaints and feedback policy for young people is a child-friendly mechanism developed in consultation with children and young people and circulated for use in services in 2017. It holds the potential to be an important mechanism for children and young people's voices to be heard.

This study found that the PPFs Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work implemented specific measures to ensure that a child's right to participate was promoted. These included the development of a National Children's Charter and a National Child and Youth Strategy in consultation with children and young people. The introduction of quality assurance measures such as Investing in Children Membership Award and Agenda Days also promoted children's right to participate. The roll-out of national annual conferences supported and organised by children and young people, and of seed-funding initiatives to support participatory practices on the ground, were successful mechanisms to support participation and promote a child's right to participate. In addition to this, Tusla and EPIC fora were developed as a collective mechanism for seeking the views of children and young people in care and are now in operation around the country. However, the feedback loop and connections to national management structures could be improved. Feedback is a distinct point in the participatory process that provides opportunity for demonstrating transparency and further participation, which are crucial for social accountability (Lundy, 2018).

#### 4.2.3 Participation in Practice

This study found strong evidence of children and young people's participation becoming embedded in practice. There was evidence of improvements in practice on the ground over the period of the

research study. Progress cannot be attributed solely to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, though elements of the programme have contributed significantly to improved practice and will inevitably sustain practice over time. Other factors which supported the process of embedding participation include environmental readiness, staff's personal commitment, and a national legal and policy framework supportive of participatory practice.

### **Children and Young People's Views Are Actively Sought**

Facilitating children's participation in practice requires having a range of options available to children to accommodate their individual preferences and abilities (Kennan et al., 2018). Prior to the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, actively seeking the views of children and young people on decisions relating to their personal, welfare, protection, and care was routine practice but limited for the purpose of informing service planning and especially for children and young people in receipt of child protection and welfare services. Following the PPFS Programme, there was further evidence of children and young people's views being sought across the range of Tusla services. There was evidence of children and young people's views being actively sought in planning and review meetings, in decisions concerning their everyday lives and in exercising choice at the individual level in residential settings. There was also evidence of improved practice at the collective level. The development of Tusla and EPIC fora, Agenda Days, and IIC Awards created the opportunities for actively seeking the views of children and young people on issues related to service planning and review.

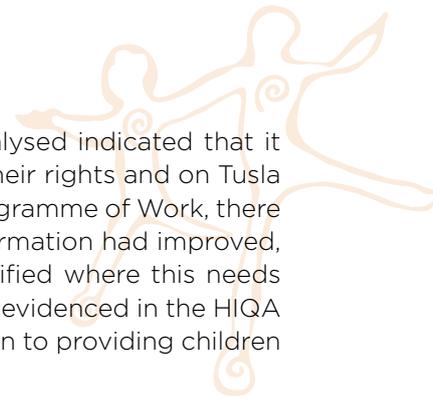
### **Children and Young People Are Supported To Express Their Views**

Prior to implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, the baseline study found that children and young people were being supported in a variety of ways to express their views in a safe and inclusive space, and that Tusla staff for the most part were responsive to the needs of children and young people. However, there was limited evidence of children and young people with additional needs being supported to communicate their views. In the follow-up study, there was evidence across the various research streams to suggest that efforts were being made to support children and young people to express their views in a variety of creative and flexible ways. However, while good practice was happening, this was largely at the discretion of the individual caseworker. The literature also reminds us that it is necessary to find ways of engaging the most marginalised children and youth to ensure that their views are taken into consideration (Kelleher et al., 2014). It was evident from the follow-up study that there are still children and young people with additional needs for whom participation practices are not mainstreamed.

Similar to a previous finding by McEvoy and Smith (McEvoy & Smith, 2011), one of the key themes emerging from this study was a need to support young people to express themselves in a less intimidating environment. Children and young people talked about the need for informal meetings and spaces to support decision-making. The value of having an advocate (Jelicic et al., 2013; Bell, 2011; Boylan and Braye, 2007; Chase et al., 2006; Oliver et al., 2006; Dalrymple, 2002) is a consistent theme in the literature, and this study provides evidence across the research streams of the importance of champions to support children and young people.

### **Children and Young People Are Provided with Information**

Children must be made aware of what their rights are in relation to participation, using accessible, diversity-sensitive, and age-appropriate information (Council of Europe, 2016; UNICEF, 2010). Prior to implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, children and young people in foster care and in receipt of child protection and welfare services were not systematically receiving the required information to support their participation, and there was no organisational approach to providing information to children and young people in receipt of these services. The exception was in



relation to children and young people in residential care. The HIQA reports analysed indicated that it was standard practice for children and young people to receive information on their rights and on Tusla services. Following implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there was evidence that the practice of providing children and young people with information had improved, though it was still not mainstreamed across the organisation. Areas were identified where this needs improvement. For example, similar to the baseline study, there was good practice evidenced in the HIQA reports and compliance with this standard, but there were shortcomings in relation to providing children and young people with access to their personal records.

### **Children and Young People Are Listened to and Taken Seriously**

Prior to implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, in the baseline study the qualitative data in the HIQA reports and the national survey revealed that there was an eagerness to take children and young people's views seriously when decisions were being taken in relation to their welfare, protection, or care. Evidence of children and young people being involved in service planning and review was limited. There were also limited examples of consultations with children and young people resulting in tangible change. After implementation of the PPFS Programme of Work, children and young people's participation in service planning and review was much improved, resulting from specific PPFS programme activities. In particular, the Agenda Days, Participation Conferences, and Tusla and EPIC fora were cited. These have resulted in changes to Tusla services and buildings, and changes at local service levels.

Cashmore (2002) found that adults tend to focus on structures or formal procedures to support a child's participation, such as attendance at meetings, but children prefer informal procedures and personal relationships with a trusted advocate or mentor to support participation. This was borne out in the follow-up study, where many children and young people reported that they felt listened to and expressed a preference for more informal settings as decision-making arenas. Significant people to support them were key workers and link workers who helped them to have their voice heard, particularly in personal decision-making and in informal settings. The role of advocates and the communication style used with children and young people was deemed to be very important. This corroborates findings in the literature: that advocates give young people the confidence to infiltrate an adult-dominated decision-making process (Chase et al., 2006). It also concurs with the literature that a positive, trusting, and stable relationship is instrumental to creating a safe space for children's participation (Bijleveld et al., 2015; Buckley et al., 2011; Tregeagle and Mason, 2008).

### **Children and Young People Are Provided with Feedback**

Providing feedback to children and young people is a strategy of choice when it comes to encouraging meaningful child participation, and is recommended in most child participation practice guidance (Lansdown, 2011; Lundy, 2018). Prior to implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, in the baseline study there were limited accounts of children and young people being provided with feedback. In the follow-up study, it was found that this was still a limited practice at individual and collective levels. There are few formal mechanisms in place outside of the formal complaints systems for providing feedback to children and young people about how decisions are made or about how their input has affected the decisions being made. This was acknowledged as an area for improvement by Tusla management. The training was expected to have a positive impact by drawing attention to this element of participation, and this was borne out in evaluation of the training, which demonstrated improvement in the skills of staff to provide feedback to children and young people.

There was a noted improvement in practice in relation to feedback mechanisms in children's residential centres, as evidenced in the HIQA reports, but special care units needed improvement in this regard. Improvement was also noted in the evaluation of the Tulsa and EPIC foster fora, where the opportunity to meet with key decision makers about service planning and review and feedback at meetings was perceived as meaningful.

### 4.3 What Are the Levers to Embedding Participation in Tulsa?

Across the research streams, there were examples of levers which support participation to become embedded in culture and practices across the organisation. The study revealed that children and young people themselves can act as catalysts of change in the participation journey. They are powerful advocates who can speak up and educate Tulsa staff and families about the real-life experiences of children and young people, and they should continue to be treated as valuable resources in this regard. This aligns with the literature, which shows that involving the child in the decision-making process respects their right to have a say in decisions that can profoundly affect their lives and has been found to have numerous benefits for children and young people (Heimer et al., 2018; Pölkki et al., 2012; Thomas and Percy-Smith, 2012; Mason, 2008; Kiely, 2005; Cashmore, 2002).

Good relationships and advocates or champions who support the work are key levers to the participation of children and young people in Tulsa, supporting the literature that positive, trusting, and stable relationships are instrumental to creating a safe space for children's participation (Bijleveld et al., 2015; Buckley et al., 2011; Tregeagle and Mason, 2008). Personal commitment and support from co-workers and line managers, as well as environmental readiness in Tulsa, have all contributed to supporting staff in their practice on the ground. This in turn is supported by organisational buy-in and by national policy supports which are in place to support the work. As Wright et al. note, it is important to develop a shared understanding of the importance of participation among all staff (Wright et al., 2006), to build support at management level, and to identify 'champions' at national, regional, and local levels who will promote the participation of children and young people within the organisation. In the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work activities, there are key champions such as Regional Implementation Officers, Participation and Partnership Officers, the National Child and Youth Participation Working Group, and the National Child and Youth Participation Conference planning group who support this programme of work on the ground. These are key facilitators or agents of change for participation practice across Tulsa structures, procedures, and practices.

The training and development of skills for staff working on the ground have proved beneficial across Tulsa services. This corroborates the literature, which reports that training and capacity-building for staff cultivate the necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities (Council of Europe, 2016; Bell, 2011; UNICEF, 2010; Kirby et al., 2003) to embed participation across the organisation.

Despite the extensive activities associated with the PPFS Children's Participation Programme of Work, these activities rated quite low as factors to support staff in their participatory practice. It could be argued that these programme resources were very new and not yet fully implemented. The exception to this was the participation toolkit, which was frequently identified by staff as an important facilitator to participation.

### 4.4 What Are the Barriers to Embedding Participation in Tulsa?

Despite the improvements at the structural, procedural, and practice level across the organisation, and following the two-year implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, there were still challenges to embedding participation within Tulsa. There was an increase from baseline survey to follow-up in the number of staff agreeing that they face difficulties when involving a child or young person in decisions concerning their personal welfare, protection, or care and in service planning and review. This could be attributed to the training increasing staff awareness of the complexities of supporting 'real' participation in their practice. However, the top three challenges to individual participation and collective participation as reported by Tulsa staff in national survey at baseline vs



follow-up remained largely the same, despite the roll-out of participation training.

There was a perception among staff that children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making, although this was not borne out by data from the children and young people's interviews. There was a sense that parents do not agree to a child or young person participating in the decisions being taken. Also, children and young people have been asked their views before, and from experience they don't believe their views will be taken seriously. This could be deemed a circular argument. If children and young people are asked their views and don't feel that their views are taken into account, then they are more likely to resist participation opportunities in the future. The focus on the importance of providing feedback in the training could address this. It also raises the questions of how safe a space is being created and whether all the required supports are in place to enable children and young people to express their views. For children and young people, the unavailability of social work outside of regular working hours posed a structural and procedural challenge for their voices to be heard.

It is necessary to find ways of engaging the most marginalised children and youth to ensure that their views are taken into consideration (Kelleher et al., 2014). For Tusla management, this was cited as a challenge, as was cultivating a skill set to include different children with additional needs. As Wright et al. (2006) note, it is important to develop a shared understanding of the importance of participation among all staff. For Tulsa management there was a sense that there is not coherence about what participation really means in the organisation, and this is problematic. However, there was some evidence of the training addressing this issue. Resources to do the work also pose a significant challenge for staff, in particular time and capacity. This finding was borne out across the study. Adequate time and resources for staff to be able to build relationships with children and young people, to set up the structures for participation, and to put their ideas into action are commonly cited challenges in the literature (Ewles & Simnett, 2005; UNICEF, 2005). Space and facilities to listen to children and young people were cited as a barrier across different perspectives, and this echoes findings from the baseline study. This means there are structural challenges which still require attention. The conflict of balancing rights and risks and supporting children with additional needs was also problematic, illustrating that the challenges inherent in this work are not easily solved.

# 5

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This section outlines the key messages emerging from the study and recommendations for future policy and practice.

### 5.1 Key Messages Emerging from the Study

- There is strong evidence of children and young people's participation being embedded across Tusla's structures, procedures, and practices.
- The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work, which included a series of actions at structural, procedural, and practice levels, has supported this. In particular, organisation-wide participation training for staff and its accompanying toolkit had a significant impact on staff perceptions of their own capacity to support participation of children and young people, in line with the Lundy Model of Participation.
- Other elements, including environmental readiness, staff's personal commitment to participatory practice, and a strong national legal and policy framework supportive of participatory practice are important factors in children's participation being embedded in the agency and can help sustain participation across Tusla culture and practice.
- Participation at collective level is less advanced and embedded than at individual level, but it has showed significant improvement over the course of the implementation of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work.
- A key facilitator of children's participation is the presence of a trusted adult to whom children and young people could express their views and who would speak on their behalf.
- Barriers to embedding participation include the time for staff to engage in participatory practice and the perception among staff that children and young people don't want to participate or feel that their voice won't be heard.

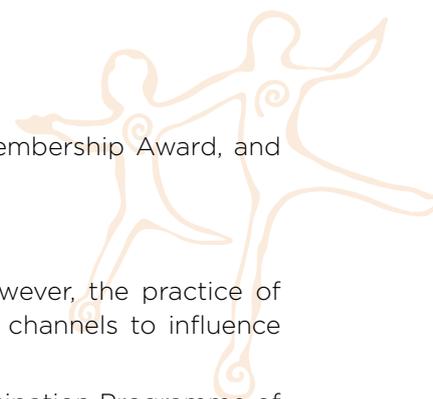
#### **Participation Structures:**

- The PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work contributed to ensuring key structures were in place across the organisation to support children and young people's participation. These included the development of National Children's and Young People's Charters, the National Child and Youth Participation Strategy, and the establishment of the Tusla and EPIC fora. These structures provide a supportive framework for children and young people's participation across the organisation.

#### **Procedures:**

- There was considerable progress in putting procedures in place to support children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely in administrative proceedings, such as the implementation of Meitheal, a child-centred national practice approach to early intervention, and the 'Tell Us' complaints and feedback mechanism.
- Other mechanisms to promote participation and information about the right to participate were the National Children's Charter, National Young People's Charter, National Child and

Youth Participation Strategy, Seed Funding, Investing in Children Membership Award, and Agenda Days.



### Participation in Practice:

- There is evidence of participation being embedded in practice. However, the practice of providing children with feedback and having direct communication channels to influence national policy, service planning, and provision requires improvement.
- In relation to collective participation, the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work activities, such as the seed-funding initiatives, Investing in Children Membership Award, and Agenda Days have supported the development of practice on the ground.
- The Tusla and EPIC fora facilitating collective participation provide a safe space for children and young people in care to communicate their views to Tusla management. There is evidence that the work of the fora has influenced service provision at local level.
- Participation practices are not mainstreamed for all children and young people, and there is a lack of resources to support children with additional needs to participate.
- Levels of awareness of the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work across all Tusla staff were found to be low.
- Children and young people themselves are a key resource who can educate families, foster families, and staff about the real-life experiences of children and young people who are accessing Tusla services.

## 5.2 What Recommendations Can Be Made for Future Policy and Practice?

Following a comprehensive research programme to assess whether children and young people's participation is embedded across Tusla's structures, procedures, and practices, the following recommendations are drawn, based on the findings.

- **National Structures:** The national structures in place under the PPFS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work should be maintained. There should be a 'national lead' for Participation in Tusla's operational programme.
- **Participation – Proof:** Tusla should continue to ensure that all national approaches to practice are child-centred, enabling children and young people to exercise their right to participate safely.
- **Awareness:** Awareness of PPFS participation programme activities needs to be enhanced and staff supported to access the resources and activities available through the PPFS Programme of Work.
- **Investment:** Investing in Children Membership Award™, Agenda Days™, and seed-funding initiatives should be continued.
- **Training:** Continue to deliver training to all Tusla staff. Training should include communication skills and use of non-verbal communication strategies to support children and young people in informal as well as structured settings.
- **Collective Model of Participation:** Continue to support a collective model of participation such as the Tusla and EPIC foster care fora.
- **Direct Communication Channels:** There is a need for further clarity about direct communication

channels to Tusla management for children and young people to feed into national policy and service provision decisions.

- **Ongoing evaluation:** Longitudinal research is needed to track ongoing progress and outcomes arising from the PPS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work.

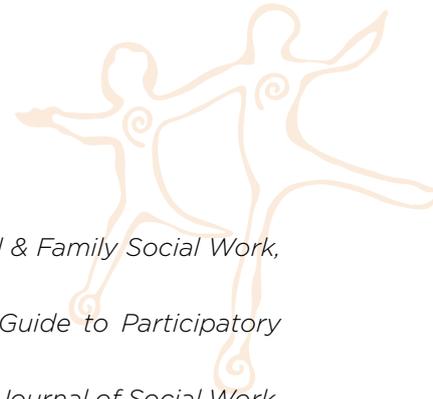
### **Practice:**

- **Children with Additional Needs:** Tusla staff need to address the needs of all children and young people and find ways to include those with additional needs or those deemed 'hard to reach' in decision-making processes at both individual and collective levels.
- **Feedback:** There is a need to improve feedback mechanisms to children and young people about Tusla services and feedback about how decisions are made.
- **Advocates:** There is need for advocates who can support children and young people to have their views heard at individual and collective level. These are a key catalyst for participation practice.
- **Perceptions:** Training should address the perception among staff that children and young people don't always want to participate in decision-making, and explore why staff may still feel that this is the case.
- **Time:** Time to 'do participation' needs to be prioritised in staff roles. This should be a core requirement or competency in specific job descriptions.

### **Concluding Statement**

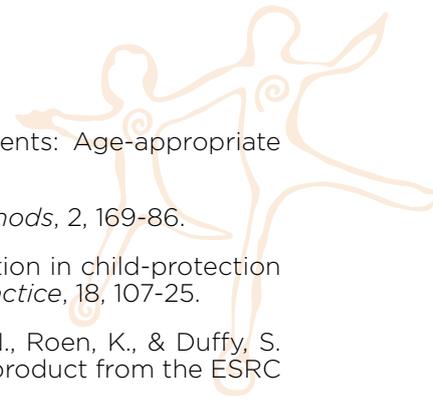
The PPS Child and Youth Participation Programme of Work has been a significant driver in supporting progress to embed children and young people's participation across Tusla's structures, procedures, and practices. There are outstanding gaps and challenges which need to be addressed. Some of these could be addressed by further awareness-raising and implementation of the PPS Programme of Work. Finally, a longitudinal research programme should be put in place to track ongoing progress and to measure outcomes of this programme.

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