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Coordinated, Cohesive and Comprehensive: Strengthening interagency coordination amongst services to support 0-3 year olds and their parents through the *Antenatal to Three Initiative*

Policy Brief:

This policy brief outlines ways in which interagency coordination can support information sharing, learning, and the quality of service provision for parents with children aged 0-3 years, based on the experience of the Antenatal to Three Initiative (ATTI) in Tallaght West.

ATTI involves a collaborative process, engaging a variety of statutory and non-statutory partners in the Tallaght West area, all of whom are committed to strengthening interagency coordination in order to maximise the quality and integration of services for parents and children in the 0-3 age cohort. ATTI is coordinated by the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI).

ATTI was independently evaluated and the findings of this evaluation and recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners are presented here.



Key Points

- Children and families benefit where services and supports in their lives are working together. Effective interagency working improves outcomes for children and their families by creating 'permitting circumstances' or better functioning of front-line services and front-line staff;¹
- ATTI is a multi disciplinary and interagency collaboration that brings people together from local primary care services, early years organisations, the Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital, Tallaght University Hospital, Tusla and specialist family support services to maximise the quality, coordination and access to services for pregnant women and children in the 0-3 age cohort;
- A growing body of research shows the effectiveness of preventative and early interventions delivered through collaborative working^{2, 3}. Preventive and early interventions in the first years are also a cost effective way to improve outcomes for children⁴. ATTI is a universal initiative with a vision that parents and children, antenatal to three, can be informed about and access a continuum of quality local supports;
- The core activities implemented by ATTI include the collation and distribution of a service directory, the provision of networking events that allow practitioners to make connections that support their work, and learning events on topics critical to the development and wellbeing of young children. ATTI has also supported the establishment and development of an Infant Mental Health Network;
- The Infant Mental Health Network is a monthly multi-disciplinary forum for managers and practitioners to expand knowledge and skills to support the parent-child relationship in the early years;
- An independent evaluation showed that ATTI played an important part in focussing service attention on children and families in the antenatal to three age category in Tallaght West and in establishing and developing a multi-agency structure for catalysing that focus. Three out of four survey respondents highlighted that ATTI had played an important role in improving interagency information-sharing and communication relevant to the 0-3s in the area.



Background and Context:

Pregnancy and the early years of life are a crucial period of development which influence life-long health and well-being outcomes. 'The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional - are laid in the early years'.⁵ Early relationships and responsive caregiving play a critical role in the healthy physical, neurophysiological, and psychological development of a child. Prevention and early intervention approaches that support the ability of parents to care for their children and strengthen parent-infant attachments create lasting positive outcomes for children's health.⁶

The contact that parents have with services during pregnancy, birth and early years provides a valuable opportunity to work with parents at a vital stage of development for children. It is essential therefore, that services work together and use best practice methodologies. Research has shown that the connections that parents have with services in a child's life are important and that children benefit when services and supports work together and use best practice.¹

Working together to support the healthy development of all children is reflected in the national policy and strategic context. This includes:

- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020
- Healthy Ireland 2013-2025
- National Healthy Childhood Programme
- The National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026
- Tusla Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme
- First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028.

Under the Government's Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme CDI introduced a focus on the antenatal to three age group, reflecting CDI's work on prevention and early intervention. There are approximately 1000 babies born per year in Tallaght West and 3000 children under 3 years old.⁷

CDI held extensive local consultations with parents and service providers in order to inform the focus of this work. The consultation revealed that there is a strong history of interagency working in Tallaght West, although it tended to be child and family specific. It confirmed the need to focus on the 0-3 age range and identified the importance of interagency communication and collaboration so that parents are aware of all available services.

ATTI Process:

The extensive local consultation highlighted that parents and service providers wanted to see a different way of providing services so that they are clustered, coordinated, cohesive and community based. Following the consultation process a logic model was drafted and circulated to relevant stakeholders.

A Steering Group comprising representatives of agencies and organisations relevant to the antenatal to three age group in Tallaght West was established to guide the initiative and direct the process of building on and enhancing interagency working.

The ATTI Steering Group progressed the implementation of an innovative work programme, whose core activities were designed to improve communications amongst services with the overall aim that parents and children, antenatal to three, are provided with appropriate, coordinated and quality supports. These activities included networking events, high quality learning opportunities relevant to the needs and interests of ATTI Network members, and the collation of a service directory.

Given that ATTI was a new initiative, drawing on best practice and an independent evaluation were seen as critical and CDI commenced a comprehensive evaluation of the process.



Evaluation:

An independent process evaluation of ATTI commenced in 2014. The initial phase captured baseline data against which to measure progress in the later stages of the evaluation process. The purpose of the baseline research was to gather a comprehensive picture of the nature and extent of interagency working relating to children and families in the antenatal to three cohort.

The interim evaluation found that the most significant value of ATTI, as expressed by stakeholders, was identified as its contribution to interagency networking in the Tallaght West area. It recommended that ATTI develop a strategy to support increased linkages between the core health services (the Coombe Women and Infants Maternity Hospital, Public Health Nurses and G.P.s) in the next phase, given their important role in the provision of services for pregnant women, babies and families of young children.

The primary purpose of the Final Evaluation was to assess the extent to which ATTI had realised the outcomes projected in its logic model and the manner in which interagency working concerning the 0-3 age cohort in Tallaght West had or had not developed in the two year period.

Key Findings:

- The overarching conclusion of the final evaluation was that ATTI played an important part in focussing service attention on children and families in the antenatal to three age category in Tallaght West and in establishing and developing a multi-agency structure for catalysing that focus;
- One of ATTI's core strengths was its capacity for information sharing across the breadth of providers relevant to the antenatal to three age group. ATTI also supported communication amongst services particularly through its networking and learning events;
- Three out of four service provider responses in the final evaluation indicated that ATTI has played an important role in enabling them to build awareness of other services relevant to the 0-3 age cohort in Tallaght West over the previous two years. In addition, 67% indicated that ATTI had built increased awareness of access pathways to services for families in this age group;
- Evidence suggests there were significant changes in service providers' positive experience of interagency referrals particularly in i) clarity around reasons for referral; ii) realism of expectation in referral processes; iii) communication during and iv) follow-up post referral.
- A greater shared commitment to promoting best practice in services for children and families in the antenatal to three age group was observed with 46% of respondents asserting that ATTI had played an important role in catalysing improvements in service quality;
- The final evaluation observed that ATTI had primarily contributed to improvements in individual working relationships over and above institutional relationships. The Infant Mental Health Network offered practitioners a practical and tangible hook for interagency coordination. The report also noted that an important start was made to address coordination gaps amongst the core health services working with the 0-3 age cohort by making connections with ATTI and in building engagement with each other.



Recommendations:

Based on the learning from the evaluation of the Antenatal to Three Initiative CDI⁸ recommends:

- That a dedicated space for local interagency work for the 0-3 cohort is provided, based on clear planning, identification of needs and prioritisation of actions. Periodic review of programme activities against agreed outcomes should form part of planning and monitoring processes;
- That interagency working for the 0-3 cohort prioritises preventative support and early intervention. Coordinated, high quality supports should be provided to children and families across all levels of need;
- That networking opportunities and learning events are provided to practitioners across agencies and disciplines in order to improve working relationships, develop a good understanding of one another's work, and improve communication amongst frontline providers;
- That tangible activities which enhance connections should be combined with strategic approaches to support the integration of services. Interagency working needs to be rooted in organisational practice if it is to be lasting and sustainable. Interagency collaboration has to be negotiated, strengthened and facilitated by organisational management in those organisations and agencies;
- That interagency collaboration involves reaching out to sectors that are incredibly busy and constrained by resources. For the 0-3 age cohort this involves a dedicated resource which makes links between the core health services (Midwives, Public Health Nurses, and G.Ps) and their engagement with each other.





References:

- ¹ Statham, J. (2011) Working Together for Children. A review of international evidence on interagency working, to inform the development of Children's Services Committees in Ireland. Dublin: Centre for Effective Services.
- ² Devaney C., Canavan J., Landy F. and Gillen A. (2013) What works in Family Support? Dublin: Child and Family Support Agency.
- ³ Rochford S., Doherty N. and Owens S. (2014) Prevention and Early Intervention in Children and Young People's Services: Ten years of Learning. Dublin: Centre for Effective Services.
- ⁴ Heckman J. and Masterov D. (2007) The productivity argument for investing in young children. NBER Working Paper No. 13016
- ⁵ Marmot M. (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives. The Marmot Review. Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010. London.
- ⁶ Nugent K.J. (2015) Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Health and Children, House of the Oireachtas, Leinster House.
- ⁷ National Child Health Information System (CHIS), HSE, accessed Nov. 2018.
- ⁸ Haran, (2017). Connections and Coordination: Final Evaluation Report of CDI's Ante-Natal to Three Initiative. Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative

Further Information:

For further information on the CDI Antenatal to Three Initiative please see www.twcdi.ie/our-programmes

For the full Final Evaluation Report of the Antenatal to Three Initiative please go to www.cdi.ie