

# THE SOUTHEAST INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH (IECMH) ADVISORY GROUP

## Strategic Plan 2026- 2029

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## Background

### What is Infant Early Child Mental Health (IECMH)?<sup>1</sup>

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (hereafter IECMH) is defined as the emotional and mental state of being of young infants. Their feelings, emotions, sensations, and physiological responses result from their interaction with their caregiving environment. This is frequently how many people interpret the term Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health.

(Zeanah & Zeanah, 2001) define IECMH as the infant and young child's developing capacity (from birth to 6 years) to:

1. Experience, regulate, and express emotions,
2. Form close and secure interpersonal relationships,
3. Explore the environment and learn within the context of family and cultural expectations.

These capacities are best accomplished within the context of relationships in a caregiving environment encompassing family, community, and cultural expectations, and they are the cornerstone of healthy social, emotional and cognitive development.

IECMH can also be described as an interdisciplinary field of theory, research, practice, and policy concerned with supporting the development of a young child's mental health by supporting the relationships between children from pregnancy to school age and their primary caregivers (Simpson et al, 2016)

In its terms of reference, the Southeast IECMH Advisory Group outlines why IECMH is so important by highlighting how "International research is unequivocal about the primacy of the child's early years. IECMH and parental well-being are intrinsically linked, and an extensive and growing body of research shows that attachment focused interventions and those that focus on strengthening the early caregiver relationship led to better infant health and developmental outcomes as well as maternal and parental well-being".

In its terms of reference, the Steering Group goes on to describe how "nationally, perinatal and Infant mental health are now recognized as key areas for service development as detailed in the various government healthcare strategy documents as well as HSE policy and programmes as referenced below. Emphasis is on prevention and early intervention" (South East IECMH Advisory Group, 2025)

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) is used in this document, the term infant Mental Health (IMH) is also used to describe historic structures/initiatives who have traditionally used this term

## The Southeast Infant Mental Health (IMH) Steering Group

Over the past two decades, Ireland has seen significant progress in Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) awareness and practice. Following the inaugural IMH masterclass in Cork in 2006, notable developments have included the creation of IMH Networks nationwide, as well as the initiation of Prevention and Early Intervention Projects (PEIP) and the Area Based Childhood Programme (ABC). Within this framework, the Tipperary Infant Mental Health Project was launched in the Southeast in 2013. This initiative comprises a consortium of child and family organisations that work collaboratively to advance awareness and implementation of Infant Mental Health practices across all child and family services, alongside providing direct support to parents and families in Tipperary.

The Southeast IMH Advisory Group was formed in 2024. The group's terms of reference outline the regional level impetus for setting up the group, namely:

- 1) A key recommendation from the Southeast National Healthy Childhood Programme Governance Group
- 2) Strategic objectives for CYPSC Wexford, Waterford, Tipperary, Kilkenny and Carlow.
- 3) National Government Policy context and supporting implementation of these policies at regional level
- 4) A recognition of the gap in Infant Mental Health Service Provision in the region

The overall aim is to further infant mental health awareness and development of infant mental health informed services across the region.

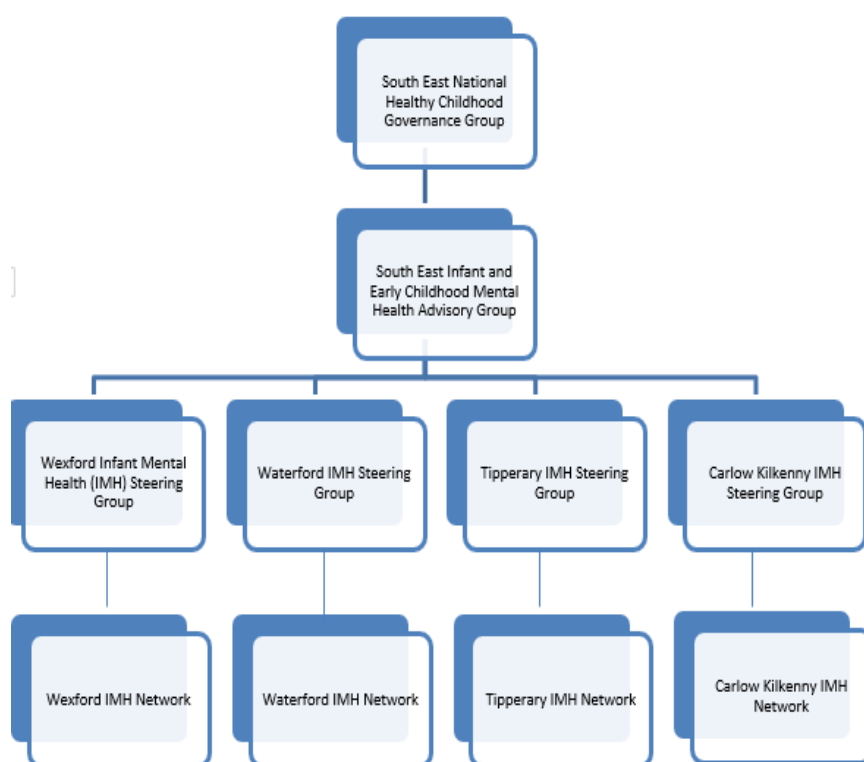
Objectives of the Southeast IECMH Advisory Group:

- To raise awareness of the importance of IECMH amongst key stake holders
- To influence and facilitate an IECMH informed healthcare culture
- To increase participation in infant mental health research, education and development of IECMH competencies among the relevant healthcare and service providers
- To support an integrated approach to the delivery of IECMH informed services
- To support the ongoing strategic objectives of local IECMH Steering Groups and network Groups

In 2025 the Advisory Group decided to engage in a strategic planning process to guide IECMH service development.

## County based Steering Groups and IECMH Network Groups

The Southeast Regional Infant Mental Health (IMH) Advisory Group was established in 2024 to provide overarching coordination and strategic direction for IECMH developments across the region. Within this framework, counties have progressed at different stages as shown below. Together, these developments reflect a growing, region-wide commitment to strengthening infant and early childhood mental health supports



- IECMH Advisory Groups serves a support/advisory function for local county based steering groups

## IECMH Steering Group and IECMH Health Networks

### What is an IECMH Steering Group?

The South East IMH Steering Groups' aims and objectives are outlined earlier. County-level steering groups either focus specifically on supporting IMH Networks or have a wider role in building capacity within frontline services.

## What is an IECMH Network?

The aim of IECMH Networks (often referred to as IMH Networks) is to create an interdisciplinary reflective practice space to support knowledge and practice in IECMH. The Networks aim to equip participants with the skills to facilitate knowledge and practice gain in their own agencies and work teams. They also aim to establish self-sustaining reflective practice and facilitation and ensure reflective practice spaces are accessible to a wide range of practitioners (Brocklesby & Scales, 2023)

## Why is IECMH a Priority for Workforce Development?

(Brocklesby & Scales, 2023) highlight key reasons IECMH is essential for workforce development.

- ✓ It is scientifically proven: Research shows that responsive caregiving is key to a child's social, emotional, and developmental health (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020).
- ✓ It supports children's rights: Ensuring each child's right to have optimum social and emotional development and positive mental health in infancy through responsive and protective caregiving relationships. (UN General Assembly, 1989)
- ✓ IECMH is a preventative & early intervention approach: Adverse early life experiences impacting children's social and emotional development are directly linked to poor mental or physical health, resulting in adverse life outcomes throughout the lifespan. (Hughes, et al., 2021)
- ✓ It has an essential role in addressing the high prevalence of mental health difficulties: There is currently a high prevalence of mental health concerns and a health system which is struggling to meet the level of presenting need of children and young people. (DCEDIY, 2023)
- ✓ It makes economic sense: Upskilling and equipping staff with IECMH training and professional development ensures an early childhood workforce to support parents and families and give children the best start in life, preventing or mitigating adverse risk factors that ultimately impact outcomes for children, their families, communities, and society. (Hughes, et al., 2021)

## National and Local Policy Frameworks

The SE IECMH Advisory Group's work and this strategic plan are shaped by a range of national and local policies and service strategies:

- Young Ireland National Policy Framework 2023 – 2028  
<https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/young-ireland-6782f479-d5da-4f33-85a1-b49e39490912.pdf>
- HSE A Vision for the Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Ireland Supporting document – Children and Young People Health Indicators, 2025
- HSE National Healthy Programme Framework 2018
- The European Child Guarantee, Children’s Right Alliance, June 2021  
<https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/European-Child-Guarantee-June-2021.pdf>
- First 5 A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and their Families 2019 – 2028 <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/first-5-a-whole-of-government-strategy-for-babies-young-children-and-their-families-20.pdf>
- Tusla Parenting Support Strategy & Implementation Plan (Tusla, 2022a)  
[https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla\\_Parenting\\_Support\\_Strategy\\_2022-2027\\_Web.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tusla_Parenting_Support_Strategy_2022-2027_Web.pdf)
- National Model of Parenting Supports (DCEDIY, 2022).  
<https://www.npc.ie/images/uploads/downloads/SupportingParentsDCEDIY.pdf>
- Tusla’s Strategic Plan to Support Foster Carers (Tusla, 2022)  
[https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Strategic\\_Plan\\_for\\_Fostercare\\_Services-2022-2025.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Strategic_Plan_for_Fostercare_Services-2022-2025.pdf)
- Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (DCEDIY, 2022a). <https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2022/11/Nurturing-Skills.pdf>
- Sharing the Vision A Mental Health Policy for Everyone, HSE and the Department of Health (HSE and Department of Health, 2022)  
<https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/sharing-the-vision-a-mental-health-policy-for-everyone.pdf>
- Stronger Together, HSE Mental Health Promotion Plan (2022 – 2027) (HSE, 2022)
- <https://hsehealthandwellbeingnews.com/stronger-together-the-hse-mental-health-promotion-plan-2022-2027/>
- Frameworks for Foundation Level Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Development (2024)  
<https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/IECMHFrameworkDocumentFINAL.pdf>
- Launch of Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit, Department of An Taoiseach (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023)
- A range of strategic developments under the HSE National Social Inclusion Programme and the National Drugs Strategy Action Plan (Department of Health, 2023) are central to advancing national policy and supporting an IECMH workforce capacity-building initiative.
- Creating a Better Future Together: The National Maternity Strategy 2016 - 2026 (Department of Health, 2016)  
<https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/national-maternity-strategy-creating-a-better-future-together-2016-2026.pdf>
- National Women and Infants Health Programme Annual Report (2017)

- <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/national-women-and-infants-health-programme-annual-report-2017.pdf>
- Pathways to Wellbeing. National Mental Health Promotion Plan 2024-2030 <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/pathways-to-wellbeing-national-mental-health-promotion-plan-20242030.pdf>
- Path to Universal Healthcare: Sláintecare & Programme for Government 2025+
- <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/Path to Universal Healthcare Slaintecare Programme for Gov 2025.pdf>
- Healthy Ireland, A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013-2025. <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-framework.pdf>
- Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2024 <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/1e9e4eff-5d44-4950-bfa6-a28f43895d3f/Aistear-FW-ENG.pdf>

### **Local and regional policy context:**

#### **CYPSC**

Countywide CYPSC Children Young People's Plans contain actions relating to IECMH. For example, the CYPSC actions include:

- To promote and facilitate access to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health awareness and resources across CYPSC and partner agencies.
- To build capacity across the membership of CYPSC and allied services to deliver attachment-based parenting programmes and delivery of Solihull (Togetherness) Training
- To increase and support universal access to early intervention and prevention supports for parents
- Promote breastfeeding through creating a supportive environment across key services and communities.

#### **Networks of Care**

The HSE Dublin and South East Women and Neonatal Health Network of Care acts as a supportive partner to the Southeast IECMH Advisory Group. The Network provides guidance to support alignment with the National Maternity Strategy, the National Women and Infants Health Programme and other relevant national maternity, neonatal and women's health frameworks, and to promote coherence across the care pathway. The Network does not hold operational, managerial or service delivery responsibility for IECMH actions, which remain the responsibility of relevant HSE services, Tusla, CYPSC and partner agencies.

## **Infant Mental Health Continuum of Practice**

Deborah Weatherston (2012), building on pre-existing IECMH literature, outlined an IECMH continuum of four levels ranging from promotion, prevention, intervention, and treatment. These levels of intervention align well with the actions in this strategic plan.

- **Promotion - Level 1:** applies to strengthening social-emotional well-being in *all* children and achieves this aim through: information dissemination to parents, families, and communities interagency training to all those working with parents/caregivers in pregnancy and early infancy. Examples of this include Public Health Nursing, Antenatal Education, Parent/Carer information sessions, Early Learning and Care (ELC) and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Infant Massage/ Parent Toddler Groups
- **Prevention - Level 2:** applies to strengthening social-emotional well-being in *all* children, particularly those with higher risk levels, given their life circumstances. It achieves this aim through information dissemination to parents/Carers, families, and communities, interagency training to all those working with parents in pregnancy and early infancy and identifying early signs of social, emotional, or behavioural difficulties. Examples of this include Public Health Nursing, Infant Massage, Circle of Security Parenting Programme, Togetherness- The Solihull Approach cascade model, Newborn Behaviour Observation, Home visiting
- **Intervention – Level 3:** includes developmental, relationship-focused early intervention for children who are at risk of developing poor outcomes (often identified through Level 2). This involves services for children pre-birth to 3 years, integrating an infant mental health approach into their work with families. Examples of this could include Home Visiting and Family Support such as the Community Families Programme and the Traveller Health Community Peer Workers Programme. This could also include any practitioner providing a direct service to babies and young children.
- **Treatment or Specialist Intervention - Level 4:** focuses on cases where the infant-parent relationship is at risk and requires specialist intervention services for both the parent/infant and child dyad. This is called infant-parent psychotherapy.

## Background to development of IECMH Strategic Action Plan

The **Southeast IECMH Advisory Group** members gathered for a planning day on 1 December 2025. During this session, they explored and discussed several key questions:

*Consider why you are involved in county/regional steering groups? Why is this important to you and your work?*

*Thinking big! If there was a green field with no restrictions, what do you want for infants, young children and families in the Southeast?*

*Thinking of what you want for infants, young children and their families **in terms of your specific work role**, and the **particular context** you work in?*

*What are some **key, achievable priorities** for the regional steering group, linking these to the group's objectives?*

<i>What structures/governance/resources need to in place to <b>support the implementation</b> of these priorities?</i>
<i>What are the <b>enablers/opportunities</b> to support the steering group achieve these priorities?</i>
<i>What are the <b>barriers/challenges</b> to the steering group achieving these priorities?</i>

A number of key priorities were identified during this session; these form the foundation of this strategic plan.

A robust discussion on the enablers and challenges to achieving the actions in a strategic plan were also discussed. Barriers identified included resource/staffing issues, pressures on a system and staff often responding to crises and competing priorities, and difficulties with the term infant mental health.

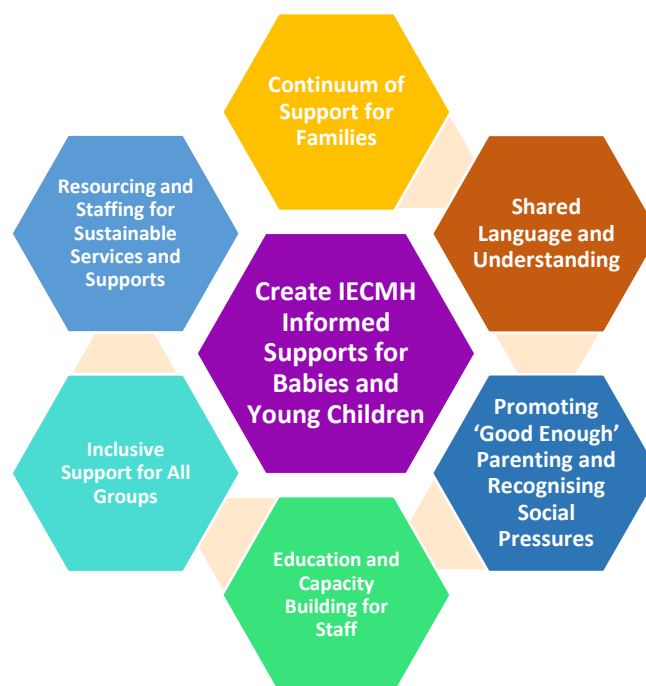
In terms of enablers, the commitment of the Advisory Group members, changing structures (which could also be a barrier), a history of collaborative working across sectors and the evidence base for early intervention were highlighted.

Through discussions the following vision for the South East IECMH Advisory Group was agreed.

## Vision of the South East IECMH Advisory Group

### **Create IECMH Informed Supports for Babies and Young Children.**

The South East IECMH Advisory Group envisions a region where every individual who interacts with babies and young children possesses the knowledge and skills necessary to nurture and support foundational baby-parent/caregiver relationships. This commitment extends to all professionals and community members, ensuring that within their respective roles, they are equipped to foster the earliest and most crucial relationships in a child's life.



Vision Area	Description
<b>Continuum of Support for Families</b>	Establishment of a seamless continuum of support for infants, young children, and families; responds to evolving needs, especially at points of change and transition.
<b>Shared Language and Understanding</b>	Developing a common language around the wellbeing of babies, young children, and families; enhances communication and collaboration among practitioners, families, and communities.
<b>Promoting 'Good Enough' Parenting and Recognising Social Pressures</b>	Emphasises 'good enough' parenting; acknowledges social pressures faced by parents; supports families in navigating challenges compassionately.
<b>Education and Capacity Building for Staff</b>	Comprehensive programme of education and capacity building; ensures all staff have access to training and resources to support infants, young children, and families.
<b>Inclusive Support for All Groups</b>	Ensure no group is overlooked, recognising and supporting the role of fathers, and considering the specific needs of Traveller families, families experiencing homelessness, families living in IPAS accommodation, and families from minority ethnic backgrounds.
<b>Resourcing and Staffing for Sustainable Services and Supports</b>	Adequately resourced and staffed services and supports; provides high-quality, accessible support; services are responsive, sustainable, and meet diverse community needs.

## Strategic Action Plan

See national and local policies and programmes that relate to these priorities on page 5 and 6:

Number	Priority Area	Objective	Target Group	Actions	Completion Timeframe	Lead Responsibility	Stakeholders, Partners and Guidance
1.	Governance structures	The SE IECMH Advisory Group will have a long-term sustainable governance structure to reach its aims and objectives	South East IECMH Advisory Group	<p>Review Terms of Reference of South East Advisory Group</p> <p>Support review Terms of Reference of county level steering groups</p> <p>Review, map membership of South East Advisory Group and county level steering groups and advice core membership of each Group and consider task groups</p>	<p>Q2 2026</p> <p>Q3 2026</p> <p>Q3 2026</p>	<p>South East IECMH Advisory Group</p> <p>County based Steering Group Chairs and the South East IECMH Advisory Group</p> <p>County based Steering Group Chairs and the South East IECMH Advisory Group</p>	<p>CYPSC</p> <p>HSE and Partner Agencies</p> <p>Tusla and Partner Agencies</p>
2.	Funding	The South East Advisory Group will work to identify actions that require funding and to work together to develop	Service users and relevant practitioners	The Advisory Group may establish task groups at certain times to create business plans and applications for funding.	Ongoing	Relevant task group of the SE IECMH Advisory Group	<p>CYPSC</p> <p>HSE and partner agencies</p>

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Number	Priority Area	Objective	Target Group	Actions	Completion Timeframe	Lead Responsibility	Stakeholders, Partners and Guidance
		business proposals and applications		<p>Collaborate with Tusla and CYPSC to identify opportunities for joint actions.</p> <p>Identify and apply to relevant funding streams</p> <p>Create a business proposal for a South East IECMH Co-ordinator</p>			Tusla and Partner Agencies
3.	IMH service developments	<p>Advocate for a national IECMH strategy</p> <p>Advocate for universal and targeted supports when needed including home visiting support</p>	All families in the Southeast	<p>Map current IECMH related service provision and gaps across the continuum of support.</p> <p>Advisory Group to advocate for a national IECMH strategy with relevant stakeholders. Work with relevant agencies, for example NHCP and Tusla National Infant and Early Childhood Support Coordinator, National ABC Manager, National Parenting Lead</p>	<p>Q4 2026</p> <p>Ongoing</p>	South East IECMH Advisory Group	<p>CYPSC</p> <p>HSE and Partner Agencies</p> <p>Tusla and Partner Agencies</p>
4.	Supporting IMH practice in the Southeast	Ongoing professional development training in IECMH across all levels of	All practitioners and services supporting infants, young	Map current IECMH training provision and uptake in the region in line with the National Framework for IECMH	Q4 2026	SE IECMH Advisory Group and Tusla National Infant and	Tusla National Infant and Early Childhood Support Coordinator

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Number	Priority Area	Objective	Target Group	Actions	Completion Timeframe	Lead Responsibility	Stakeholders, Partners and Guidance
		knowledge & practice	children and families.	<p>Continuous Professional Development (CPD).</p> <p>Form a training task group to develop a capacity building plan in line with the National Framework for IECMH CPD. This plan will outline training options including the HSEland Infant Mental Health e-learning modules and half day Skills Programme and the Togetherness Foundation training.</p> <p>To develop an annual training plan for the South East.</p> <p>Support the Tusla National Infant and Early Childhood Support Coordinator to identify an IMH Quality Framework such as the IAIMH Competencies Framework and Endorsement and to support its implementation.</p>	Q3 2026 to begin	Early Childhood Support Coordinator	<p>CYPSC</p> <p>IHAs in the South East</p> <p>h East</p> <p>National Healthy Childhood Programme</p>
5.	IECMH Promotion – Parents, Families &	Parents and carers will have increased knowledge and awareness about	All parents and carers	Create a Task Group to map current awareness raising material available.	Establish Task Group Q3 2026	To be agreed	Tusla National Infant and Early Childhood Support Coordinator

Number	Priority Area	Objective	Target Group	Actions	Completion Timeframe	Lead Responsibility	Stakeholders, Partners and Guidance
	wider Community	babies’ social and emotional development.		<p>Seek nomination from Communications Teams to support the development and delivery of a Communications plan. As part of this, the work will include work on the use of positive language.</p> <p>Collaborate with CYPSC, HSE &amp; other national organisations, to adapt/ develop IECMH parent-friendly material.</p> <p>Develop an information dissemination plan with CYPSC, HSE &amp; interagency partners including Parent Hubs. Include focus on minority groups for example, Roma, Travellers and families living in homelessness and IPAS centres. Parents experiencing mental illness.</p> <p>Actively name and target Dads in all awareness raising activities</p>			<p>CYPSC</p> <p>HSE IHAs in the South East</p> <p>National Healthy Childhood Programme</p> <p>Irish Association for Infant Mental Health (IAIMH)</p>

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Number	Priority Area	Objective	Target Group	Actions	Completion Timeframe	Lead Responsibility	Stakeholders, Partners and Guidance
				Regularly distribute information resources for parents in partnership with local perinatal, services, <b>PHNs, GP practices, HSCPs</b> libraries, Early Learning Centre and community services			
6.	Research development	The Southeast IECMH Advisory group contributes through research to promote IMH as an evidence-based model of best practice	Local and National service providers/ groups Universities  Psychology Research Committee	Develop relationships with academic partners in SETU and Psychology postgraduate programmes to identify and collaborate on research.	Ongoing	SE IECMH Advisory Group	Relevant Universities and South East Psychology Research Committee.
7.	Stakeholder engagement	The Southeast IMH Advisory group will ensure that the voices of families are heard when developing IMH services in the South East.	Programmes Delivered to Early Years e.g. Circle of Security	Advisory Group to work with Patient and Service User Engagement Officer to ensure service users voice is heard throughout the work on this strategic plan	2026-2029	SE IECMH Advisory Group	

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## Appendix- Explanation of Acronyms used

ABC	Area-Based Childhood Programme
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CDC	Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard
CYPSC	Children and Young Persons Services Committee
ELEC	Early Learning Education and Care
ETB	Education Training Board
GP	General Practitioner
HSE	Health Services Executive
IAIMH	Irish Association for Infant Mental Health
IECMH	Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health
IMH	Infant Mental Health
IHA	Integrated Health Area
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Services
NHCP	National Healthy Childhood Programme
PHN	Public Health Nurse
PPFS	Prevention, Partnership and Family Support – Tusla
SETU	South East Technological University
SG	Steering Group