

“Listening to our voices?”

A survey of Parents' experience of being listened to when their child is in care



2010

listening TO OUR voices?

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“ A man from (...) chaired the meeting... he looked me in the eye and treated me with respect... I felt the meeting was handled well and fair ”

Listening
to our
voices?



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive



Limerick
Social Service
Council

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acknowledgements

“ They need to listen to what parents have to say... show parents what to do instead of taking children off them ”

With all research it is important to acknowledge and thank those who were central to ensuring the success of this project.

We would like to acknowledge the parents who participated in this research. They willingly gave up their time to ensure that the information we obtained is representative of their experience. We believe that this research will help inform service delivery into the future and help reduce the stigma that parents experience when their children are in care.

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The Steering Group

Tim Hanly (HSE), Gildas Gordon (HSE)
Muriel O'Meara (HSE)
Anne McCarthy (Limerick Social Service Council)
Helen Walsh (Clarecare)
Majella Hynan (LSSC)
Eileen Healy (North Tipperary Community Services)
Lorraine Hennessy (HSE)

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executive summary

The study aimed to gain an understanding of parents' of children in care perceptions on their experience of being listened to by the Health Service Executive. Forty parents who currently have children in care in the three Local Health Office areas (Clare, Limerick and North Tipperary) participated in the process via telephone survey and follow up focus groups.

The research was divided into five separate sections which looked at their experience of being listened to on the telephone, in one to one meetings with social workers, at formal meetings, by the foster parents or residential staff that care for their children and finally, in relation to discussions on access arrangements.

All parents highlighted how powerless they feel once their child is in care. They felt that once their child came into care they were no longer important. The majority of parents wanted it acknowledged that they are still the child's parents regardless of what they might have done in the past.

They spoke of often feeling confused and not understanding the procedures of the Health Service. They also spoke of not knowing what changes they needed to get their child back or to improve their access arrangements. They also spoke of when they made the agreed changes to their behaviour new obstacles were being put in place. A significant number of parents asked that social workers display more empathy towards them and to understand how difficult their situation is.

Some parents acknowledged their past mistakes but felt that they should be given the chance to move on. They spoke of experiencing a lot of stigma in society and would like a greater understanding of their situation and the difficulties they experience. The parents wanted social workers, other professionals or foster carers to focus on their strengths. They would like that any positive changes they make are acknowledged as this is often the impetus they need to keep going.

The majority of parents felt that the Family Advocacy Service was a valuable support to them as it offered them an alternative means of getting their voice heard.

The majority of parents surveyed preferred individual contact with their social workers to contact over the phone as it enabled better personal interaction and offered more opportunities to get more information on their child. Parents would like their social workers to make more contact with them and to build up a positive relationship.

Most parents felt formal meetings were intimidating and felt that more could be done to change this. Some parents felt that they were listened to at these meetings, that they were handled fairly and respectfully and that they received good information on their child. Parents valued the presence of the advocacy worker as a support. They also felt the presence of an independent chair was important as this added a more balanced perspective.

A significant number of parents were frustrated with the level and the quality of access. Often when they raised concerns with social workers, very little, if anything changed. Parents would like greater flexibility around facilitating access and more information on how decisions around access arrangements were made.

“ Foster carers and social workers promote self-confidence and self-esteem of children in foster care by ...working in partnership with families ”

The majority of parents felt that having a good relationship with the foster carers was important as this kept informed on what is going on in the child's life and helped them be more positive around the child being in care. However, the majority of parents felt they did not have a positive relationship with the foster carers. They would like to improve this relationship. They would also like foster carers to show more compassion to the parent and to treat their personal information confidentially.



introduction

policy context

The Health Service Executive has a stated policy of giving service users the opportunity to give feedback on their experience of Health services. The National Children's Strategy Children's Strategy; "Our Children Their Lives" (2000) promotes a philosophy that services to children and families will be strongly influenced by a greater understanding of their views and needs. Whilst there has some HSE formal feedback processes of listening to children and carers such a system has not been available to the parents of children in care.

The Irish Government has developed Community Participation Guidelines for Health Services issued under National Health Strategy Quality and Fairness – A Health System for You (2001).

These Community Participation guidelines states-

"that provision will be made for the participation of the community in decisions about the delivery of health and personal social services" (Action 52).

The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) also promotes the role and importance of involving families as appropriate. They state that-

"The families of children are involved in their care, in partnership with social workers and foster carers unless this is detrimental to the well being of the child..."

"Foster carers and social workers promote self-confidence and self-esteem of children in foster care by ...working in partnership with families"

"Parents, extended families and other significant others are consulted in the information gathering phase..."

National Standards for Residential Care 2003

Text to be supplied

rationale for the research

The Family Advocacy Service is a voluntary agency, independent of the HSE who works with and supports parents and families whose children are in care. In 2008, The Family Advocacy Service recognised a significant gap in Ireland in understanding the experience of parents' of children in care and how their voices are heard. In response to this the Family Advocacy Service approached the lead Local Health Manager for child care services in the former Mid West area to facilitate a process of consultation and research. This process aimed to provide an opportunity for service users, in this case, parents of children in care, to give feedback on, to highlight areas needing improvement and to indicate areas of consumer satisfaction. It was agreed that the research and consultation would focus on the key area of communication and give parents' perspectives and experience in this area.

A Joint HSE and Family Advocacy Service Steering Group were established to oversee the research, to develop the terms of reference and to identify the independent researchers.

Recently there has been negative publicity regarding care services. This consultation process aims to be constructive and balanced in its approach, where the feedback will be used in a meaningful way to improve the care system for both children and parents. This report will suggest some key recommendations for child care practice and service delivery into the future.

This research is the first exercise in the country where the views of parents of children in care have been researched, making the findings of the research more unique.

methodology

The study aimed to gain an understanding of parents' of children in care perceptions on their experience of being listened to by the HSE. The research was divided into five separate sections which looked at their experience of being listened to on the telephone, in one to one meetings with social workers, at formal meetings, by the foster parents or residential staff that care for their children and finally, their experience of being listened to in relation to organizing access.

All parents who currently have children in care in the three Local Health Office areas (Clare, Limerick and North Tipperary) were contacted by mail to participate in the study (Appendix 1). This resulted in forty parents participating in the process via telephone survey and follow up focus groups. While the majority of respondents were mothers seven fathers participated from the three LHO's.

A qualitative research method was employed which enabled the researchers to gain rich, in depth information from a small number of participants (Mason 1996) while exploring and understanding the individuals' perceptions of the world (Bell 2002)

An interview template was designed which was influenced by the views of the steering group (Appendix 2). The participants were informed of the questions by the Family Advocacy Service prior to the interview in order for them to think about the answers and to overcome any anxiety around the interview process.

The decision to gather data by telephone was influenced by a number of factors. The main advantage of telephone interviews is found when the sample is dispersed geographically. The telephone is also a cost efficient and accessible method of gathering data as most people have access to a mobile phone (Robson 1993). Telephone interviews also offered the participants the opportunity to remain anonymous and thus facilitated a higher level of participation.

Care was taken at all times to keep the identity of the participants anonymous. Only first names were used and only information relating to the research questions were obtained. Sensitive information on the child or family was not sought.

The information from these interviews was then compiled and the participants were invited to focus groups which presented the findings and they were given the opportunity to reflect on this. The groups also gave the researchers the opportunity to determine the accuracy of the findings and to facilitate the participants to prioritise the changes they would like to see happen.

Significantly, there was general agreement in the focus groups that the feedback from research reflected their views as parents. The parents said that getting this feedback on the research was positive for them. It made them feel that they were not alone as the research was highlighting that others had similar experiences.

Following the focus groups, the parents were also encouraged to get involved in the presentation of the findings of the research.

limitations of the study

The study elicited the opinions of 40 parents of children in care through the telephone and focus groups. It did not seek the views of foster carers, social workers, family advocacy workers or children in care. This resulted in only one perspective and omitted the perspective of professionals, foster carers on the challenges they face when working with parents to meet the needs of the child in care. However, as the research aimed to get the perspective of parents of children in care it was felt that the sampling frame was adequate to meet this purpose.

The views obtained in this sample are the views of all parents in the region. However, it is important to be note that the findings do present a very unique perspective on the experiences of some parents of children in care.

Finally, the findings are presented as themes rather than detailed statistical analysis.

literature review

This section will explore the literature relating to objectives of the research. It will present some of the key findings in relation to current research on parents of children in care and the challenges facing social work staff and parents when children come into care.

research on the voices of parents of children in care

Parents of children in foster care constitute a group whose voice has generally been unheard in client satisfaction research (Kapp and Vela, 2004). Palmer (1995) suggests that parents of children in care tend to be marginalised by society, experience a lot of social stigma, and subsequently feel antagonistic toward authority figures. He argues that this may have discouraged child welfare professionals from obtaining data from them on their experiences.

Where parents have been surveyed there is a strong tendency for parents to be highly critical of the processes and outcomes of child protection interventions (see Dale, 2004). However, researchers are agreed that the views of many parents can offer sophisticated and insightful contributions that are of significant value to the development of good children protection practice (Dale, 2004).

challenge for social workers

Literature suggests that the relationship between parents and social workers in child protection cases tends to be both complex and difficult. (see Mendes, 1999; Thomson and Thorpe 2004; Forrester, McCambridge, Wassbein and Rollnick 2008). Parents are often struggling with profound difficulties or personal crisis at a time of the involvement of child protection workers, they often still love their children, and the fact that they are responsible for the child's removal only complicates their grief with guilt. (Burgheim 2002:2).

Mendes, (1999) argues that it is very difficult for workers to balance the needs and wishes of both children and parents, even disempowered parents for whom many have genuine empathy, when their primary focus has to be on protection of children. This poses many challenges including how to be honest with parents without creating hostility, how to be empathic without colluding with unacceptable behaviour (Forrester, McCambridge, Wassbein and Rollnick 2008).

It is evident from research into parents' experience of social workers that there are many skilled and committed children protection professionals. Characteristics of social workers that were valued by parents included being supportive, listening carefully and effectively, having skills that could promote cooperation, being 'matter of fact' and being human. Positive qualities of particular social workers were acknowledged as making an important difference to parents (Dale, 2004)

However, there were also examples of workers who were uninterested, ineffective, unsupportive, unreliable and unavailable (Dale, 2004). This style tended to result in diminished possibility for meaningful partnership and tended to create and reinforce patterns of interaction characterised by resistance, such as denial, non-engagement and even threatening behaviour in clients (Dale, 2004)

partnership with parents

The development of a working partnership with parents is usually the most effective route to providing care for children. Fleischer, Warner, McCulty and Marks (2006) recommend that interventions emphasise the strengths of the family, where the capacities, talents and competencies of each family member are identified. Thomson and Thorpe 2003 also propose a 'strengths based approach' which recognises that the majority of parents have a commitment to their children. They recommend that interventions do not shy away from addressing the individual and the family reasons why the children are in care but it does this in the context of supportive relationships between parents and workers, built on trust and respect for human dignity. When parents feel that a positive relationship has been formed with a worker they can be very responsive to challenges to change.

Sinclair and Grimshaw (1997) go further and suggest that for partnership with parents to be meaningful they must be given the chance to play an active part in childcare planning. They need to understand the process, to have clear and appropriate information about the duties and procedures of the health authority, and their rights within that system. Sinclair and Grimshaw (1997) state that only when parents develop an honest relationship with their social workers can they contribute effectively to planning the care and hence the well-being of their children. They also argue that parents who feel that social workers listen to their views are more likely to participate in the planning process.

conclusion

This literature review presented an analysis of the literature on parents of children in care experience of the provision of child protection services. This review highlighted that there is no literature available in an Irish context on the voices of parents of children in care. The literature presented here refers to that available from the U.S. and the U.K and Australia. This highlights a large void in our understanding of the challenges that these parents experience and makes this research and its findings more relevant.



presentation of findings

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Introduction

The research is divided into five separate sections which explored parents' experience of being listened to over the telephone, in one to one meetings with social workers, at formal meetings, by the foster carers' or residential staff that care for their children and finally, in relation to organizing access visits. The findings of the research will be presented under each of these headings. The research will present an outline of parents' positive and negative experiences and an outline of parents' views of what could change or improve under each of these sections.

The findings will begin by presenting some general comments on how parents perceive their lives; supports that they feel would make a difference to them and also their experience of the Family Advocacy Service. While the study did not ask about these directly the majority of parents spoke on these themes.

How parents feel about their situation

Parents talked about how powerless they feel. They felt that once their child is in care that they are no longer important. The majority of parents wanted it acknowledged that they are still the child's parents regardless of what they might have done in the past. Some parents felt that once their child came into care all contact with social work ceased and that they were left in limbo where they did not know what was going on and did not know what actions they could take if any to get the child back. They felt that they are not given hope that they might get their children back. Parents felt that they should be given more guidance support and direction on how to change their behaviour in order to get children back.

"They need to listen to what parents have to say....Show parents what to do instead of taking children off them."

Most parents spoke about how they felt the goal posts were constantly changing and new barriers were being raised when they addressed their issues. The parents felt unclear at times on what they needed to address to achieve more access or to get their child home. They felt that even when you did what was asked of you and made the changes they were not sure that things would improve for them, with some suggesting that even when you made the agreed changes that new obstacles were then put in their way. They described how this process resulted in them feeling powerless and disillusioned.

Some parents acknowledged their past mistakes but felt that they should be given the chance to move on. They spoke of experiencing a lot of stigma in society and would like a greater understanding of their situation and the difficulties they experience. The parents wanted any meetings they had with social workers, other professionals or foster carers to focus on their strengths and not to keep dwelling on the past. They would like that any positive changes they make are acknowledged as this is often the impetus they need to keep going.

Some parents felt that more preparation for reunification could be provided to help support this process and to ensure that the child's needs are met. Others felt that better provision of in-home parenting skills would be valuable. This suggests awareness among parents of their limitations as parents to meet and respond to the child's needs.

"I have been asking for years for someone to come into people's homes....helping to keep families together by someone...showing people what to do. Bedtime routines, how to keep kids under control, how to treat kids instead of roaring and shouting."

Parents questioned whether research will make any difference.

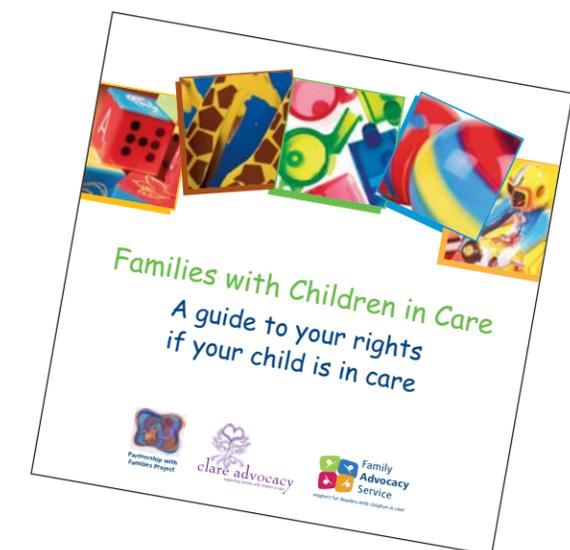
'We have heard this all before and thought that things would change and they didn't. I think it is only an exercise to tick a box.'

Advocacy service

The majority of parents felt that the Family Advocacy Service was a valuable support to them. They felt the service offered them an alternative means of getting their voice heard and also a support when addressing some of their issues. They also found the support groups meetings very beneficial as this reassured them that they were not alone. They felt that it was important that this service is advertised to all parents with some parents suggesting that they found out about the service after many years of their child being in care. Others highlighted that the booklet for parents on their rights was very useful and it helped to clarify their situation.

One parents summed her experience up,

'It's like when you get kicked out the front door, you can get back in the back door'.



Experience of parents in relation to individual contact with Social Workers

The majority of parents surveyed preferred individual contact with their social workers to contact over the phone as it enabled better personal interaction.

what worked well

Where parents reported that one to one contact was positive they felt that they had a good relationship with the social worker and recognised that the social worker 'had the child's interests at heart'. Others reported that the individual contact was helpful for them and provided a positive opportunity to get good information on their child. They also stated that one to one contact often resulted in some positive outcomes for them and that some social workers are quite helpful in the

One parent sums it saying that their social worker

"listens, not rushing you; not distracted – doesn't answer phone when with me."

what did not work well

The parents who felt one to one contact was unhelpful spoke of having a poor relationship with their social workers. They felt that social workers were not listening to them and they found it hard to get their point across.

A significant number of parents described feelings of being put down and feeling judged by some social workers. They also felt that there was too strong a focus on the negative aspects of their lives.

They expressed frustration when social workers did not respond to their wishes. Others felt social workers found it hard to understand how difficult the situation is for parents'.

One parent describes how

"I haven't always got it right but I need to be listened to more. Parents need to be listened to more."

Parents spoke of not being kept up to date on their child. Other parents felt that they had to rely on other people and not social workers to keep them up to date on what was happening to their children. One parent states that she often

"communicate(d) through children to get information on them – not social worker."

One parent sums up her relationship with her social worker saying,

"She said she would help me. She didn't get back to me and I felt that I couldn't ring her."

The negative impact of the turnover of social workers, particularly on children was mentioned. Others spoke of how difficult it was when their social worker left especially when this was a positive relationship.

The different standards and practices between social workers were noted by the parents. The parents had very different experiences with different teams. They felt that a lot depends on the quality of the social work team leader and that this impacts on their situation.

Suggested changes and improvements

The parents suggested some changes that they felt would improve their individual contact.

They wanted social workers to spend more time building relationships with the parents. Simply having a cup of tea and a chat was acknowledged as a first step in getting to know the parent. They asked that social workers develop the capacity to put themselves in the parents' position and to

"Not to judge parents so much."

They would like social workers to keep them more informed on their child and meet them more frequently on a one to one basis. Others requested that if social workers commit to doing something for a parent they should follow through on this commitment.

A small number felt that social workers required additional training in order to understand the position of the parent. This was particularly evident in relation to understanding addiction issues.

Some felt that if the relationship had broken down with their social workers they should be able to be assigned another social worker.

Others asked that social workers display greater understanding of them and asked that they slow down and help make them feel more relaxed.

Parents felt that some social workers could do with additional support on their communications skills. They felt that social workers could be more aware of how their body language and tone of voice can tell a parent you are not listening.

They felt that parents and social workers were on opposite sides and that it shouldn't be that way.

Many parents highlighted that better training and more experience working with parents was required for social workers which may help improve the relationship with parents

"I feel strongly that Social Workers who deal with people with addiction problems should have more understanding of addiction and services that are there...." The majority of parents in the survey were dissatisfied with telephone contact with social workers.

Experience of parents in relation to telephone contact with social workers

3

The majority of parents in the survey were dissatisfied with telephone contact with social workers.

what worked well

Parents who reported that phone contact with social workers worked well described being able to get to talk to the social worker when they needed them. They also spoke of getting a prompt response to their calls from social workers if the social worker was not available. Some parents also felt that their social worker has a good capacity to listen to them and were willing to keep the parents informed and to act on their concerns. These examples illustrate that there are many skilled and committed social workers.

what did not work well

Where parents found telephone contact unhelpful they highlighted an experience of social workers not returning their calls and an inability to get in contact with social workers promptly or when they needed them. They added that this often led them to feel that they are not valued as the parents.

Others felt that social workers did not listen to them and that their opinions or wishes were ignored or dismissed. They highlighted that this often made them feel that they did not count at all.

“If I am ringing Social Worker...and I leave a message it could take days for them to get back to me.”

suggested changes and improvements

Parents who suggested that changes be made asked for social workers to keep in regular contact, give them more information and be more patient.

“I would say to Social Workers not to be abrupt and take their time. Some Social Workers use big long words and they don't explain things and they have no time to talk to you. They can cut you off the phone.”

A significant number of parents asked that social workers need to listen to their wishes, be more understanding and try to place themselves in parent's position.

Experience of parents in relation to attending formal meetings

4

When asked about their experience of formal meetings there was an overwhelming feeling from all parents that they found them to be a difficult and “intimidating” experience.

what worked well

Even though they are difficult for parents, a number of parents felt that they were listened to at formal meetings. They felt that the meetings offered a venue where their voice is heard; where they can get their opinion across; where their views are taken on board and where they can affect some change.

One parent states,

“you can get your concerns across; they're going to be taken on board there and then.....it means your view is definitely heard.”

Others highlighted that they felt they were treated fairly at the meeting suggesting that the way these meetings are managed can be positive for parents.

“A man from (...) chaired the meeting...he looked me in the eye and treated me with respect...I felt the meeting was handled well and fair.”

Parents reported that they felt that the presence of the advocacy worker assisted them at formal meetings indicating that for some parents support at the formal meetings is important.

Some parents highlighted that the chairing of the meetings by someone they viewed to be independent of the social work department was beneficial. They felt that this enabled them to get their view across and that it improved their feelings of being heard. They also felt that the decisions made were more objective. They highlighted the benefits of having an independent person chairing the meetings. They felt this helped them to contribute more, to be listened to more and also the chair was more understanding if they needed to take a break.

what did not work well

Of the parents that felt nothing worked well a significant number felt that they have little or nothing to offer them. Parents state that they “don't like going to them”, they don't find them positive, found them humiliating and ‘felt gang up on’.

A significant number of parents felt that the meetings tended to focus on the negative aspects in their lives and any positive changes they were making were being ignored.

Experience of parents in relation to attending formal meetings

"...if there is something positive, bring that into the meeting. Bring up the most important points first."

"My past is going against me; keep on bringing this up; people can change."

Some felt they weren't listened to at formal meetings, that they were not facilitated or given adequate opportunities to get their views across and where they did, they felt that their voice is not heard. Others felt that while they were consulted before the meeting and even at times during the meeting they were not part of the decision making process.

One parent added,

"Felt I was listened to when I read out my stuff but when decisions were made I felt no one would ask me what I wanted or thought."

All parents queried the need for such a large number of people to be present at the meeting. They queried what their roles were and whether they needed to be privy to all their personal details.

"There are too many of them around the table. You go in upset; you're a bag of nerves."

A significant number of parents felt that they often did not understand what was going on at the formal meeting and that they are often confused. They reported that there was a lack of explanation of the process at formal meetings. Others felt that they the meetings did not make clear to them what changes the parents needed to make to improve their personal situation and to ensure better outcomes in relation to their children.

suggested changes and improvements

The parents in this survey suggested many changes to formal meetings which they believed would improve the process into the future.

Most parents felt it was important that the meetings focused on the strengths of the parents and any positive changes they made should be acknowledged. This positive feedback is often the impetus they need to keep going.

They felt that all parents should be encouraged to have an advocate or support person with them when the meetings were taking place. They felt that it was essential that this service is promoted to all parents indicating that this is not always the case.

One parents sums up why they would be useful,

"Advocacy worker might help: you could meet her prior to the meeting and talk about needs; if you get stuck for words in the meeting or are afraidshe could talk for you....You need someone on your side, especially if the meeting is intimidating."

Parents believed that it was important for them to be facilitated to attend all formal meetings. They felt that the calling of the timing of the meeting needs to enable and accommodate parents to attend. If meetings are being rescheduled parents attendance should be viewed as being of equal importance to other professionals.

Others suggested that the numbers attending the meetings be examined because they felt there were too many people present at formal meetings. Parents suggested that people attend the part of the meeting that is relevant to them and others asked whether it was possible to get reports from people. They would like to be given a list of attendees at formal meetings in advance.

Others felt that the atmosphere at the formal meetings needed to change. They asked that the pace of the meeting be slowed down. Some suggested that the process and the running needed to be clarified and explained more clearly to them. They suggested that care should be taken to ensure that the parents understand what is going on.

One person explains,

"I found the meeting very rushed; they should slow it down more....They need to go slower on every item."

Others wanted better follow through on all decisions made at meetings. They also asked that to be copied on the minutes and that the minutes should reflect accurately the inputs that the parents have made.

Experience of parents in relation to discussions around access

Parents' experience of their discussions in relation to access was quite varied.

what worked well

A small number of parents felt that they had no concerns in discussing access arrangements with their social workers and that communication with the social worker was good around access. They felt that if they had concerns they could raise them with their social worker and that the social worker would then respond to this.

One parents stated that,

"I wanted my children in different foster homes to meet more. This was taken into account and they do meet more now."

The advocacy service was viewed to be helpful in addressing some concerns around access arrangements. They stated that the advocacy worker is able to get their view across in a way that achieves positive results. If parents and social workers do not communicate well on access issues the advocacy worker can mediate between them.

what did not work well

A significant number of parents felt unhappy with discussions on access. These parents felt that their point of view was not taken on board. Others felt that other peoples' views were being favoured over the view of the parent when decisions regarding access were being made. Others were concerned that social workers did not follow through on agreed actions and that this was very frustrating to them.

A significant number of parents reported that they were unhappy with level of access and did not understand the reasons determining the frequency. Some felt that often the personalities of the social workers and how well social workers got on with the parents often determined how access was arranged.

Parents felt that social workers should demonstrate greater sensitivity and understanding of the parents and how difficult it is to not be able to meet or contact your child.

"It's very hard for any mother to ask can they see their child....these situations need to be handled with care. Social Workers need to be more sensitive to the situation."

Others felt that access was often inconsistent and

"Sometimes, the access even when it is arranged can be cancelled by the Social Worker"

They spoke of being powerless in this situation.

Some parents felt that barriers were being put in place preventing them from building up relationships with their children.

"The children have no contact with any of my family and they are not being encouraged to have contact."

suggested changes and improvements

Most parents felt the need for more reliable access. This suggests that some parents can experience frustration with respect to the adequacy and consistency of access arrangements.

"If a time, date and place are arrange that should be stuck to."

Some parents felt that greater flexibility around facilitating access was needed. They felt greater flexibility was required of some social workers to achieve this while others felt that foster carers could facilitate access more. Others felt that access to their children could be encouraged by foster carers and social workers.

"When access is arranged care workers should encourage him more to come to see me....They should encourage him to come to access...."

Others felt that they needed clearer guidelines on access and that the reasons determining the level of access that a parent receives should be more transparent. They spoke of being frustrated with respect to the rules of access and how decisions are being made.

"I think that there should be very clear guidelines, for everyone's sake...everyone needs to know what's allowed and what is not allowed."

Others felt the need for greater quality in access visits. They made suggestions for it to happen in a nicer setting, for it to be less rushed and for access to their children to feel more 'normal'. They also felt that access visits can be an expense for parents and that they can feel some pressure around this.

Some parents felt inadequately skilled to parent their children or that they were experiencing some difficulty building and maintaining a relationship with their child. They suggested that parenting classes and supports around managing this could be beneficial for them.

"...if they could help with teenagers who have drifted apart. Tips on how to build up a relationship with him."

The parents felt that weekend social work cover would be valuable for them in facilitating weekend access.

"Staff should be flexible with their time. There should be social worker staff on a Saturday. People in UK get access on a Saturday."

Experience of parents in relation to being listened to by foster carers or residential staff (carers)

The vast majority of parents felt that a good relationship with the foster carer or residential staff was important to them and to ensure that the needs of the child are being met. However, only a small number of parents felt that they had a good relationship with the child's carers.

what worked well

Of those who felt that communication with carers was good they spoke about being kept informed about the child and also stated that some foster carers displayed considerable understanding when dealing with the parents. They also appreciated the foster carers and the positive contribution they were making in their child's life.

One parents summed this up,

"They are brilliant; they keep me informed about everything, .very understanding of what it is like for me."

what did not work well

A significant number of parents reported that they have no contact at all with the foster carers. Some parents acknowledge that this was their own fault and stated that the damage caused to this relationship was negatively impacting on their relationship with their child.

Most parents reported that the communication with carers was poor, that their wishes were not listened to. They felt that this was very frustrating for them. They spoke of not kept up to date on how the child was getting on and that this was often upsetting for them.

"When foster carer went on holiday didn't leave us the phone number. When they are away there's no communication."

Some parents noted differences in the qualities of the foster carers stating that some were very understanding of them and their situation while others were very difficult to deal with. Foster carers are asked to respect the parents information and treat this respectfully and confidentiality.

suggested changes and improvements

The majority felt that better communication and more frequent contact would make a big difference to them. The parents felt social workers and foster carers need to acknowledge that they are the child's parents and that this should be valued more.

A significant number believed a better relationship could be developed with carers and that this requires everyone to work together to agree how to meet the child's needs. They believed the advocacy service can be useful to mediate between the parents and foster carers/residential staff.

"I think that parents, foster carers (and) social workers should sit down together and come up with an agreement on how to bring up the child."

Some parents stated that they would like for foster carers to show more understanding of them as parents, to recognise how difficult it is for them to have someone else care for their child, especially at special occasions which can be particularly difficult.

3

conclusion and recommendations

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This section will explore some of three of the findings of the research, relationship with social workers, strengths based working and partnership with parents and will consider what implications these have for HSE practice. It will also propose some recommendations for change which are informed by the parents' views.

While existing literature contends that parents, for various reasons, are highly critical of those they encounter when their child comes into care (Dale, 2004) this study illustrates that parents are skilled in discerning between experiences they found valuable, those they found difficult and changes they believe would make a difference to them and others. Reflecting on these experiences offers us the opportunity to effect change for some parents, that some suggest, are often amongst the most marginalised in society (Palmer, 1995).

This study found that parents value positive relationships with their social workers, foster parents and residential staff as these relationships offer the best means of ensuring that their child's needs are met and that they are kept informed on the child's life. They value a social worker who spends time with them, treats them with respect, listens to them, explains procedures to them and outlines clearly the changes they need to make. These findings are similar to other research (see Kapp and Vela, 2004 and Dale 2004) which highlighted that parents are satisfied with services when social workers aimed to empower clients and demonstrated respect for and understanding of clients; when parents felt that they had been listened to by the social worker, that their perception of the problem had been heard, and they had been involved and consulted; and when social workers were perceived to be empathetic and have a pleasant personality in addition to helpful social work skills. It was evident from this research on parents' experiences that there are many skilled and committed social workers supporting them and their child.

However, the findings also highlighted incidences where parents' relationships were not positive, where they did not feel listened to, where contact was poor, where they felt belittled and where they felt as if they did not count. This often resulted in them feeling disillusioned. This experience is not dissimilar to experiences reported in other research (Dale, 2004, Forrester et al 2008, Thompson and Thorpe, 2003, Thorpe, 1993).

Dale, (2004) contended that the professional style of social workers can have a profound impact on families. He suggested that there is a need for the disparity in social work style to be addressed and believed that there is a need to develop systems for quality assurance regarding the style of professional interventions. This professional style was further explored in a study in the United Kingdom which found that social workers can often use a confrontational style, displaying low level of listening skills (Forrester, McCambridge, Wassbein and Rollnick 2008). This style tended to result in diminished possibility for meaningful partnership with parents and often reinforced negative behaviour in parents. While the study recognised that the combination of a need to challenge parents around difficult issues and a lack of official guidance, research and professional attention to how they should do this appears to have contributed to a style of practice that often appears unhelpfully confrontational. They suggested more reflection on how social workers talk to parents about child welfare concerns which track what works and what tends to decrease resistance. This is essential to ensure that parents receive sensitive and effective responses (Forrester et. al, 2008). One could argue that this approach may be useful when considered against our findings where parents asked that social workers show more understanding of their situation and how difficult their lives can be.

Another aspect of the findings that merits greater exploration is the view of the parents that the negative aspects of their lives dominate most interactions with those involved in the care of their children. They highlighted that this was demoralising for them and often they found it undermining. They asked for their achievements to be acknowledged where possible believing 'a kind word' could make a big difference to a parent. McDonald... 1996 argued that if more effort were invested in enhancing parents' strengths there might be a better outcomes in a greater number of cases. Thomson and Thorpe (2003) propose an approach that focuses on strengths and recognises that the majority of parents have a commitment to their children. This approach does not shy away from addressing the individual and the family reasons why the children are in care but it does this in the context of supportive relationships between parents and workers, built on trust and respect for human dignity. Taking a strengths based approach early on helps to decrease defensiveness and begin development of a respectful, helping relationship (Fleischer, Warner, McCulty and Marks 2006).

When parents feel that a positive relationship has been formed with a worker they can be very responsive to challenges to change. This change is in relation aspects of their behaviour or situation that are subjecting their children to significant risk or harm (Thomson and Thorpe 2003).

The majority of parents wanted it acknowledged by social workers and those caring for their children, that they are still the child's parents regardless of what they might have done in the past and that this should be valued more. The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) states that 'the families of children are involved in their care, in partnership with social workers and foster carers unless this is detrimental to the well being of the child...' For partnership with parents to be meaningful they must be given the chance to play an active part in childcare planning. They need to understand the process, to have clear and appropriate information about the duties and procedures of the health authority, and their rights within that system (Sinclair and Grimshaw, 1997). It is evident from the findings of this research that often parents are confused and do not understand the process that they are involved in. They also have indicated that they find it difficult to get information from social workers, find meetings intimidating with the pace too fast and some felt that if they complained 'things might get worse'.

Sinclair and Grimshaw (1997) state that only when parents develop an honest relationship with their social workers and only when they feel that social workers listen to their views can they contribute effectively to planning the care and hence the well-being of their children. It is important however to note that, while some parents, for whatever reasons will not be prepared to engage cooperatively whatever the skill levels of the practitioners (Dale, 2004) every effort should be made to encourage those parents who are motivated to get involved in the care plans of their children. The parents in this research suggested changes that they believe would improve their experience and the experience of parents into the future. While they expressed concern that this was 'a tick box exercise' it is important that all professionals strive to ensure these changes happen in order to improve the experience of parents, children, foster parents and professionals.

The following recommendations are based on what parents are suggesting in relation to changes in social work practice.

Parents would like

Recommendations

- The procedures explained more clearly to parents when their children come into care
- Social workers to keep in regular contact with the parent when the child comes into care
- Social workers to explain more clearly what is expected of them and what changes they need to make
- To be supported to address their issues
- Social Workers to tell parents about the Family Advocacy Service and facilitate them to attend
- Social Workers and meetings to have a greater focus on the parents' strengths and on the current situation and not to be constantly bringing up the past
- The HSE to acknowledge their positive changes, however small
- A clear complaints procedure in place for parents
- To be able to change their social worker if the relationship breaks down or to have the reasons explained where this is not possible.

Time line

Parents would like social workers to make the following changes:

Recommendations

- Keep parents up to date with information about their children in particular told about medical issues, appointments and if they are going on holidays
- Be more sympathetic and show greater understanding on how difficult it is for parents to have their children in care
- To work in partnership with parents and respect them as parents
- Keep in regular contact with their child's social worker (Monthly at least)
- Challenge foster carers more especially if the foster carer is blocking agreed access
- Develop more consistency around their contact with parents, reviews and decisions regarding frequency of access.

Time line

Parents would like the following changes made to formal meetings:

Recommendations

- To be given information/reports in advance of formal meetings
- To be made aware of the issues that will be raised at formal meetings to allow them time to reflect on them and respond
- To know in advance who is attending formal meetings and be allowed to comment on appropriateness of some of these attendees. The reasons why they are over ruled need to be explained
- The number attending formal meeting to be reduced. People should only attend the part of formal meeting that is relevant to them
- Confidential information on family should only be given to persons on a need to know basis. Only decision makers should have access to all information
- Parents' views should be accurately recorded particularly at case conferences. It is important for parents to know that when and if their child seeks their file under Freedom of Information that positive comments made by their parents and positive comments about their parents are on file to give a fairer and fuller picture
- An independent chairperson to be in situ where possible
- Parents should have copies of all forms they sign
- Review forms for parents should be standardised across the three LHO areas
- Acknowledge progress made by parents and their strengths at meetings
- All formal meetings need some record of decisions made. Parents need to get a copy of all minutes of meetings
- Minutes of meetings could begin with a positive summary rather than presenting the negative first
- Children should be allowed, depending on age, to attend formal meetings or parts of same
- The atmosphere in the meetings to be more relaxed
- Explain decisions that are being made and check that parents fully understand these.

Time line

Changes parents would like in relation to access arrangements

Recommendations

- Reasons determining access to be explained to them
- Greater flexibility around access on special occasions
- Access to happen in places that are comfortable, that allow parents to do ordinary stuff with their children and that do not cost a lot of money
- Foster carers to be challenged if they are blocking access
- Access arrangements need to be agreed and written down
- Greater research and analysis needed on the issue of access arrangements

Time line

Changes parents would like in the to Advocacy service

Recommendations

- To have group meetings available in each county

Time line

Parents would like foster carers and residential staff to

Recommendations

- Focus on the positives in the parent and to be more empathetic. Explore this is training
- Treat their information with confidentiality. Letter to be sent to all carers outlining this
- Try to improve the relationship with parents eg have a chat over a cup of tea.

Time line

Appendix

Appendix

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Appendix

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Appendix

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