

Listening to the Seldom Heard: Hearing the Voice of Children and Young People in Child Protection and Welfare Services

Dr Edel Tierney¹ on behalf of the Child Research Study Steering Group² Tusla Child and Family Agency

Paper published in CRN Children's Research Digest – Dec 2020 – Children Should be Seen AND Heard, Volume 6, Issue 2 page 56.

Background

Legal and Policy context

Participation is fundamental to a child-centred, rights-based approach to service delivery for children and their families. Such an approach is aligned to Article 42a of the Irish Constitution, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is also a requirement of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015–2020 (Department of Child and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2015) and the national policy framework for children and young people (DCYA, 2014).

Tusla's founding legislation, the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, placed strong emphasis on partnership and co-operation with children and families in the delivery of services. Supported by the Child and Youth Participation Strategy (Tusla Child and Family Agency 2019) and the Research Strategy (Tusla Child and Family Agency 2015), the Agency must ensure that the views of the individual child are given due weight in decisions regarding his/her care, having regard to the age and maturity of the child. Tusla is also required to seek the views of young service users as a collective in relation to service planning and review (Tusla Child and Family Agency, 2019; Tusla Child and Family Agency, 2017).

¹ Correspondence to edel.tierney1@tusla.ie

² Table outlining membership in Appendix 1

Participation in Child Protection and Welfare Services

Research in Ireland and internationally has shown that children and young people (CYP) often feel that their voices are not heard in the context of very formalised and bureaucratic child welfare and protection systems (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018; Daly, 2014; Lucas, 2017). Children's participation in the context of child protection and welfare is not only a right but also offers a range of benefits for CYP. These include: ensuring that decisions taken are responsive to their needs, promoting positive psycho-social development, increasing self-esteem and promoting a greater sense of agency in their lives (Cashmore, 2002; Heimer et al., 2018; Kiely, 2005; Kilkelly, 2015; Mason, 2008; Pölkki et al., 2012; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012).

Tusla are working to transform child protection and welfare services and ensure that children and families actively participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In 2017, Tusla launched its first five-year Child Protection and Welfare Strategy (2017-2022). Signs of Safety (SofS) is the national approach to practice under this Strategy. SofS is an innovative, strengths-based, safety-organised approach to child protection and welfare casework grounded in partnership and collaboration with children, families and their wider networks of support and other professionals (Turnell & Edwards, 2017). This approach reflects best practice underpinned by the principles of 'Children First', Ireland's national guidance for the protection and welfare of children (DCYA, 2017).

The implementation of the Child Protection and Welfare Strategy is underpinned by a whole system learning approach (Senge, 1994), which includes a research portfolio. The Tusla National Research Office has oversight and responsibility under this strategy for three research projects to seek to understand the experiences of 1. Tusla staff working on the ground, 2. Parents in receipt of child protection and welfare services, and 3. CYP in receipt of child protection and welfare services. This third strand is the focus of a new innovative research study about to commence in Tusla. There has been little evidence of the direct voice of CYP in relation to the child protection and welfare system in the Irish context, although there have been attempts internationally to do so (Baginsky, 2017).

The Child Research Study

This study, which seeks to understand the experiences of CYP in receipt of child protection and welfare services was put out to tender in early 2020. During the development of the tender, two groups of CYP were consulted about the research design of the study.

Submissions were invited from suitably qualified researcher(s) to carry out primary research on children and young people's experiences of child protection and welfare services.

The focus of this small-scale research project, as outlined in the tender, was:

- To attain a point-in-time capture of young people's experiences of CPW services.
- To involve a cohort of young people (10 years and over) who have experienced either initial assessment and/or Child Protection Conference (CPC) or open to Child Protection Welfare (CPW) in last 12 months.
- To focus on the young people's experience of services, participation in decision-making and participation in safety planning.
- To explore if the young people understand the need for a Tusla worker to be involved with them. Do they know or understand what Tusla is worried about and why they are involved with the family?
- To reflect on the young people's experience of the Signs of Safety (SOS) tools used by practitioners.

The focus is on gaining an understanding of CYP's experiences of child protection and welfare services, but it will also go beyond this to seek to understand CYP's perspectives on what contributed to these experiences. In this way, the research will provide a way to identify what is working well and what might need to change. This is in keeping with the concept that CYP and their families are active participants in this work. Learning from this study will inform further strategies for getting feedback from children and young people.

The study will commence in the coming months (i.e. late 2020). The findings will contribute much needed knowledge to an under researched area in the Irish context and will make

recommendations for Tusla practitioners and managers on how to improve practice at the front line when involving CYP in child protection and welfare services, as well as supporting an identified implementation gap for Senior Managers for the further development of the Agency's reform of child protection and welfare services.

References:

Baginsky, M., Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Beecham, J. & Hickman, B. (2017). *Evaluation of Signs of Safety in 10 pilots Research Report*. Children's Social Care Innovation Programme Evaluation Report. Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London.

Caffrey, L. (2013). Hearing the 'Voice' of the Child? The role of child contact centres in the family justice system, *Child & Family Law Quarterly*, 25 (4), 357-379.

Cashmore, J. (2002). Promoting the participation of children and young people in care. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 26, 837-47. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(02\)00353-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(02)00353-8).

Daly, F. (2014). 'It's About Me': *Young People's Experiences of Participating in their Care Reviews*. Empowering Children in Care.

Damiani-Taraba, G., Sky, I., Hegler, D., Woolridge, N., Anderson, B., & Koster, A. (2018). 'The listen to me project: Creating lasting changes in voice and participation for children in care through a youth-led project'. *Child & Youth Services*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2018.1446825>.

DCYA. (2012). *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. Government Publications.

DCYA. (2014). *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures*. Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Government Publications.

DCYA. (2015). *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making 2015-2020*. Government Publications.

DCYA. (2017). *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection & Welfare of Children*. Government Publications.

Heimer, M., Näsman, E., & Palme, J. (2018). Vulnerable children's rights to participation, protection, and provision: The process of defining the problem in Swedish child and family welfare. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*, 316-323. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12424>.

Holt, S. (2018). 'A voice or a choice? Children's views on participating in decisions on post-separation contact with domestically abusive fathers. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law, 40* (4), 459-476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2018.1519653>.

Kiely, P. (2005). The voice of the child in family group conferencing model. In: Mason, J. & Fattore, T. (eds.) *Children Taken Seriously: In Theory, Policy and Practice*. Jessica Kingsley.

Kilkelly, U., Martin, S., Swirak, K. and Field, S. (2015). *Policy and Literature Review of Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy*. Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Lucas, S. (2017). A children's space? Participation in multi-agency early intervention. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*, 1383-90. <https://doi/full/10.1111/cfs.12356>.

Lundy, L. (2007). "'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal, 33*, 927-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>.

Mason, J. (2008). A children's standpoint: Needs in out-of-home care. *Children & Society, 22*, 358-69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00115.x>.

Pölkki, P., Vornanen, R., Pursiainen, M., & Riikonen, M. (2012). Children's participation in child-protection processes as experienced by foster children and social workers. *Child Care in Practice, 18*, 107-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2011.646954>.

Senge, P. M. (1994). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Currency Doubleday.

Thomas, N. & Percy-Smith, B. (2012). It's about changing services and building relationships: Evaluating the development of Children in Care Councils. *Child & Family Social Work, 17*, 487-96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2011.00806.x>.

Turnell, A., & Edwards, T. (2017). *The Signs of Safety: Comprehensive Briefing Paper: 4th Edition*.

<http://www.aascf.com/pdf/Signs%20of%20Safety%20Breifing%20paper%20April%202012.pdf>

Tusla Child and Family Agency (2015) *Tusla Research Strategy*.

https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Research_Strategy_Final_09.02.pdf

Tusla Child and Family Agency (2019). *Child and Youth Participation Strategy (2019-2023)*.

https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/tusla_child_and_youth_participation_strategy-2019-2023.pdf

Tusla Child and Family Agency (2017). *Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022*.

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

Tusla Child and Family Agency (2017). *Children and Young Peoples Charter*.

<https://www.tusla.ie/publications/children-and-young-peoples-charters>.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009). *General Comment no. 12: The Right of the Child to be Heard*. United Nations

Appendix 1:

Table 1: Child Research Study Steering Group Membership

Name	Role in Tusla
Cormac Quinlan	Director of Transformation and Policy
Colette McLoughlin	Head of Policy and Research
Edel Tierney	NRO Research Officer Chair
Jacqueline Concannon	Partnership and Participation Officer PPFS
Eileen Munro	Resolutions Consultancy
Dorothy Soye	Senior Social Worker
Edel Gordon	Social Work Team Leader
Bridget McGreal	EWS Manager
Siobhan Doyle	Social Care Worker Dublin South/SE/Wicklow
Joy McGlynn	Area Manager Dublin North City