



Galway and Roscommon



An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

A report on parental experiences in TUSLA Child Protection Conferences in Galway and Roscommon

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Submitted to Angela Toolis Area Manager TUSLA

Date: 20/6/2016

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the parents who participated in the study, and who were so willing to give up their time and to express their views so articulately. Also thanks is due to Dr Nuala Connolly and Dr John Canavan in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre for their time and invaluable advice in relation to the academic aspects of this study. Marie would also like to thank Angela Toolis, TUSLA Area Manager and Caroline Duignan, CYPSC Co-ordinator for Galway and Roscommon for their ongoing support for this project, and also Julie O'Donnell Social Work Team Leader and all the social workers in Tuam Co Galway for their encouragement and good humour over the last year.

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Glossary of terms

Child Protection Conference (CPC)

An interagency and inter-professional meeting, convened by the Area Manager for Children and Family Services in TUSLA following a request from the Social Work Service. The request is usually an outcome of initial assessment, further assessment or children in care processes. The purpose of a Child Protection Conference is: to establish whether the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering significant harm; to facilitate the sharing and evaluation of information between professionals and parents/carers; to formulate a Child Protection Plan; to identify tasks to be carried out as part of, or pending, a Child Protection Plan; to specify the appropriate service to carry out the tasks; to appoint a key worker for the purpose of coordinating the Child Protection Plan. The child's parents/carers and the child should be included at the meeting unless doing so would not be in the child's best interests (HSE 2011).

A Child Protection Plan

An interagency plan formulated and agreed at a Child Protection Conference where the Conference confirms that the child is at ongoing risk of significant harm. It outlines the actions that professionals and agencies directly involved with the family need to take in order to ensure the child's continued protection and well-being.

The Child Protection Notification System (CPNS)

A TUSLA Children and Family Services' record of every child about whom there are unresolved child protection issues, resulting in the child being the subject of a Child Protection Plan. The decision to place a child on the CPNS is made at a Child Protection Conference. The CPNS is a securely held national list that records the names of children who have been identified as being at ongoing risk of significant harm and are, or have been, subject to a CPP agreed at a CPC. If it is decided at a Review Conference that the risk has been addressed and the child is no longer at ongoing risk of significant harm then they will be delisted and amended to inactive. A child's name is removed completely from the list once they turn 18 years of age

Child Protection Review Conferences

The purpose of the Child Protection Review Conference is: to build up a picture of the child's current situation; to coordinate the views of professionals; to consider the views of the child and parents/carers; to review the progress of any legal action or prosecution if relevant; to decide on the need for an ongoing formal Child Protection Plan; to review and amend the

Child Protection Plan where necessary; to assess the availability of resources needed to carry out the Child Protection Plan. Review meetings must be held at intervals not exceeding 6 months where a child is the subject of a Child Protection Plan.

Family Welfare Conference (FWC)

Family welfare conferencing brings together the extended family to create durable solutions for children and young people. 'With the support of an independent facilitator, FWCs enable families to gain control, make choices and to take ownership of a situation and its solutions. The approach recognises the centrality of parental and family relationships and informal support networks in promoting the welfare of children and ensuring their safety, while enabling the Agency to meet its statutory and co-ordination functions' (O'Brien/TUSLA 2015:vi).

Section 1: Overview of research study

Background to this report

In May 2015, Declan Quinn, Independent Chair for Child Protection Conferences in Galway and Roscommon, and Angela Toolis, Area Manager TUSLA for Galway and Roscommon Angela Toolis met to discuss the feasibility of conducting research with parents whose children are in the CPC system. This research was thought to be necessary as there is a dearth of empirical research that considers parental accounts of their experiences in the CPC system, particularly in Ireland. Marie Gibbons is already conducting doctoral research in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre NUIG, on another topic, and agreed to conduct the research as part of her role supporting the work of the Roscommon and Galway Children and Young Persons Services Committees (CYPSC). This research ties in with Outcome Three of Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (DCYA 2014); that children are safe and protected from harm. It can also be mapped onto the transformational goals of supporting parents, ensuring quality services, interagency collaboration and co-ordinations. As such, this research has been included as an action in the three year Children and Young Peoples' plans for Galway and Roscommon which have been submitted to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Dr Nuala Connolly in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway acted as a research advisor for the study.

Summary of the research

This research explores the perspectives and experiences of parents whose children have been in the Child Protection Conference system, and have been the subject of a Child Protection Plan. Child Protection Conferences are interagency and inter-professional meetings, convened by the designated person within TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. The purpose of the conference is to facilitate the sharing and evaluation of information between professionals and parents/carers; to formulate a child protection plan; to identify tasks to be carried out as part of a child protection plan; to specify the appropriate service to carry out the tasks to appoint a key worker for the purpose of co-ordinating the child protection plan. Parental participation is an important aspect of these conferences and parents and children are invited to attend, unless there are clear reasons why they should not attend. However, the experiences of parents in this process, from the initial decision to convene a conference right through to when the children's names are removed from the Child Protection Notification System (CPNS) has been relatively overlooked in research, particularly in Ireland. In this

study, the findings from qualitative interviews conducted with parents who have attended a CPC in respect of concerns for their children are presented. Parents are asked to describe their experiences, including their understanding of why the decision was made to convene a CPC, how they were prepared for the meeting, their feelings before, during and after the meeting, if they feel the process has impacted positively or negatively on their family life, and how they responded to the child protection plan that was developed during the conferences. The research explores their views on improvements to how CPCs are planned, conducted and managed, in order to make the process more effective and meaningful for families, which may in turn result in better outcomes for children.

Objectives and Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of parents who have attended statutory child protection conferences in relation to concerns for their children. The research objectives are; to explore parental understandings of the reasons why their children were in the CPC; to consider the support and preparation they received prior to, during and after the CPC; to uncover parental experiences of attending a CPC including the extent to which parents felt listened to, and had their views respected during the conference; to evaluate perceptions of parents on the impact on their family lives of attending a CPC and on the Child Protection Plan for their children that was developed in the conference; to make recommendations for chairs of CPCs and social workers in TUSLA who are involved in CPCs.

Approval for the study was given by the TUSLA Research Office in September 2015 and the data collection took place between November 2015 and February 2016. The study was conducted using qualitative research methods. Seventy five parents who had been in the CPC system in counties Galway and Roscommon, and whose cases were now closed to the CPNS were contacted by letter by Declan Quinn and invited to take part in the study. Follow up phone calls were made by Declan to parents to explain the research in more detail and eighteen parents agreed to consider taking part in the study, and consented for their contact details to be provided to the researcher. These parents were subsequently asked to sign a form indicating that they agreed to contact with the researcher and had provided their contact details willingly. These measures were designed to ensure that this study complies with research ethics and data protection requirements.

The researcher contacted every parent who had expressed an interest in the study, and of these, fourteen were eventually recruited to become research participants. An interview guide

was developed and semi structured interviews were arranged with participants at a location of their choosing; most interviews took place in family homes, two took place at TUSLA buildings and one took place at a parent's work place. Three of the interviews were with couples, at the request of participants, and eight were with individual parents. All interviews were recorded by the researcher, and the recordings were transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. Parents who agreed to take part in the study were informed of their rights as research participants, and had the option to withdraw from the process at any time. Parents were asked to sign a consent form indicating that their participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were assured that the research process would respect their anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained, except in the event a child protection issue arose. The qualitative data that was collected from the semi-structured interviews was analysed using Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in six phases to create established, meaningful patterns. These phases are: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke 2006). This allows the researcher to pinpoint, examine, and record patterns (or "themes") within the data with the themes becoming the categories for analysis.

Literature on parental experiences of CPC

A search of the literature has confirmed that the views and experiences of parents who have attended a CPC on their children has a low profile in the research, and the most recent study in Ireland that considered parental views on their experiences in the child protection system was conducted by Buckley *et al* in 2010. There are only four other published studies on service users experiences of the Child Protection System in Ireland-three in the Republic and one in the North (Spratt and Conlon 2004, Buckley *et al* 2008, Buckley *et al* 2003 and Buckley *et al* 1997). Research was also conducted in 2004 by Brendan Guinan as part of his unpublished MSC in Child Protection and Welfare from Trinity College Dublin, and Canavan *et al* (2008) whose unpublished report for HSE West on parental experiences in the child protection conference system was also made available to the researcher. A theme emerging from the Irish and international research is that many parents view the Child Protection System as far more powerful than themselves 'a power, they believed, that could be used over them in a coercive, tyrannical, frightening and penalising manner' (Buckley 2008:15). However other studies have also reported more positive responses from parents when the focus of the engagement was on identifying supports rather than investigation of abuse. There

are also differences noted in the reactions of parents, depending on whether they are seen as ‘protective’ or ‘abusive’ by Social Workers, and also depending on how their family was first referred into the system. It should be noted that many of these studies looked at engagement with the broader Child Protection System from referral through assessment, including the CPC, and not exclusively on parental experiences of the CPC.

The main themes that emerged from the research include: the lack of preparation and information that parents have prior to conference proceedings that acts as a barrier to engagement (Guinan 2004, Buckley *et al* 2008); the degree of congruence or divergence between parents’ views and that which was held by the statutory authorities about their children (Guinan 2004, Smithson and Gibson 2016, Cleaver and Freeman 1995); how worker qualities and competencies impact on the quality of relationships (Buckley *et al* 2010, Smithson and Gibson 2016); the degree of participation and involvement by parents (Healy *et al* 2012, Slettebø 2013, Corby *et al* 1996); the perception of a power asymmetry between parents and the statutory services (Parton 2014, Featherstone *et al.* 2014).; the impact on outcomes as a result of the level of parental engagement during the conference process (Dale, 2004; Farmer and Owen, 1995; Cleaver and Freeman, 1995, Buckley 2003,2008). Further literature is referenced in the analysis of findings section report in relation to these and other emerging themes.

Profile of CPCs Galway and Roscommon

This section sets out the statistics that have been recorded by Declan Quinn, the Independent Chairperson on Child Protection Conferences in Galway and Roscommon. The data is set out in three areas; the frequency and other activity details of Child Protection Conferences and reviews in both counties; information on attendance of other professionals at conferences; information on Pre- Birth Conferences. The data is set out here in order to identify and emerging trends and to highlight areas that need further examination. It will also highlight areas where data is not currently gathered. Set out below are the tables of the activity levels for CPCs in Galway and Roscommon.

Galway 2015

Total number of CPCs (initial and review)	104
Number of children	256
Initial conference (per child)	88
Review conference (per child)	168
Parents attending	206
Number of children activated on CPNS during 2015	88
Number remaining active during 2015 (reviews)	94
Number deactivated on CPNS	72
Number deactivated without CPC (care/transfer/over 18)	16
Number of children on CPNS at end 2015	72

Roscommon 2015

Total number of CPCs (initial and review)	39
Number of children	82
Initial conference (per child)	29
Review conference (per child)	53
Parents attending	43

Number of children activated on CPNS during 2015	30*
Number remaining active during 2015 (reviews)	34
Number deactivated on CPNS	20
Number deactivated without CPC (care/transfer/over 18)	9
Number of children on CPNS at end 2015	30

*anomaly is explained as 3 children on a CP plan moved into the area.

From an overview of the monthly statistics that provided the data for the year 2015, it is clear that there are fluctuations in activity levels across both counties; the highest level of activity happening in Galway was in December 2015 when 15 conferences took places regarding 43 children, with 12 happening in November regarding 20 children, while the lowest was January 2015 when four conferences took place regarding 6 children. It is interesting that the level of activity increased so much before Christmas. Similarly in Roscommon, 10 conferences took place in November/December while three took place in January, and two in February. There is also a slight drop off in conferences during the summer months- no conference took place in Roscommon and five took place in Galway during August. These fluctuations could be explained by factors such as annual leave and Christmas holidays, however identifying this trend may help with future planning of conferences.

Pre Birth Child Protection Conferences, Galway / Roscommon 2015

The following is an analysis of pre-birth CPC in the Galway / Roscommon area for 2015 compiled by Declan Quinn.

- A total of 12 Initial case conferences were held in 2015 with a further two reviews carried forward from 2014 bringing the total to 14 conferences held in 2015.
- Of the 14 conferences, 12 of the mothers were known to the Social Work Dept. with two not known up until their pregnancy.
- Of the 14 conferences, 10 of the mothers were known to the Child Protection Conference system at some point. Four were not known.

- Of the 14 conferences, 11 of the clients' children were known to the Social Work Dept.
- Of the 14 conferences, nine of these children had been in care in the past or were currently in care. Another parent had her child cared for privately by a family member. Only four families had had no previous contact with the care system for their children.
- Of the 14 mothers at the time of the conference: six were single; five were co-habiting; two were married; one was separated.
- The average age of females was 28.5 years with the oldest aged 39 years and the youngest aged 19 years. Nine mothers were in their 30s, four were in their 20s and one was under 20.
- The average age of males was 33.8 years with the oldest aged 46 years and the youngest aged 19 years. Four fathers were in their 40s, two were in their 20s and one was under 20.
(Not all information was available in relation to fathers).
- The average time from the initial child protection conference request to the mother's estimated due date was eight weeks; ranging from three weeks to seventeen weeks. Conferences were held on average five weeks before the mother's estimated due date.

Support for mothers:

During pregnancy: five mothers had no family support; five had no social supports and were quite isolated; four mothers had family support.

During the CPC: five mothers attended alone; six fathers accompanied the mother to conference and seven did not attend; in total mothers were accompanied at eight conferences by either the father or family member. In one conference neither mother nor father attended.

Ethnic and family background of mothers:

Two mothers were from Africa; two were from Eastern Europe; Nine were Irish; two were from the Travelling Community, five were native to the locality and two had moved from another area.

Decisions of CPC

Seven CPC recommendations were to apply for Care Orders at birth. Seven recommendations were for child protection plans with further reviews.

Analysis of data on pre-birth conferences

It is clearly evident that in the vast majority of conferences (85%) that the mother was known to the Social Work Department. 70% of mothers and fathers were known to the CPC previously. 78% of mother's children were known to TUSLA social work services and were on CPNS. 64% of their children are either currently in care or had been in the past. This previous knowledge of mothers and on occasion fathers, prior to conferences ensures that there is considerable information available. The reports to the conferences varied in size and content, but were informed primarily by information already known about the family from case- files and ongoing contact. There was one Parenting Capacity Assessment completed prior to the conference, which was comprehensive in its scope in covering all areas and this greatly assisted in the decision making at conference. The remaining Social Work reports were of a good standard and were sufficient in allowing decisions to be made but did not have the comprehensive focus of a pre-birth assessment report. The general information for conference came from the social work, medical social work, public health nurse, An Garda Síochána, addiction services, disability services, family support, consultant psychiatrists, and aftercare. There was always a good multi-disciplinary and agency attendance. For two conferences a Consultant Psychiatrist attended and for one a Consultant Obstetrician attended.

The route into pre-birth CPCs is not clear from the information to hand. A quick overall review indicates that in six conferences there was a very active Social Work involvement at the time of the request with ongoing court hearings and the CPC taking place at the same time. Three mothers had moved into the area near their estimated due date, but had been already known to TUSLA Child and Family Agency. One case had been well known to services and planning had taken place seventeen weeks prior to the estimated due date. In two conferences, the young parents came from four families that had extensive contacts with TUSLA social work services over a lengthy period of time. This involved previous CPCs, court and care processes within these families. In both of these conferences a decision was made to apply for Care orders. These two conferences may be indicative of a trend in intervening earlier with families where there has been a recognised history of neglect.

Parental Participation

Parents were very aware of the significance of the CPC. The meetings were recognised as highly stressful and difficult for the parents. In looking at parental capacity and ability it is noted that for three conferences attended by parents that their capacity to comprehend and

their ability to meaningfully participate was very limited. To ensure that parental participation can be at its maximum there will need to be greater attention given to preparation of parents and in the organising of meetings, for example, reducing professionals attending to key personnel so that parents are not overwhelmed. This can occur through timing and greater communication between social worker, team leader, chairperson and parents.

A second area of parental participation concerns the issue of parents attending CPC on their own. As stated, five mothers attended alone with some of the mothers having very limited social or family supports. This poses a duty of care on TUSLA the Child and Family Agency to ensure that where there is limited available family supports that a plan is in place to provide for the welfare of the mother, prior to during and after the conference.

Summary and Conclusions

It would greatly assist parents and the CPC decision making to have a more structured approach to pre-birth assessments. It appears to be an area that has not got great attention in policy or in academic papers. The work of Martin C Calder as described in 'Unborn Children: A Framework for Assessment and Intervention' is excellent in this area. It appears to be widely used in the UK and gives a structured framework for professionals and allows a focused assessment of risk for the unborn and should allow for good decision making. This model could be incorporated as part of our business process under further assessment. It could also dovetail with our protocol with the hospitals on pre births.

Declan Quinn.

Chairperson CPC

1/2/2016

Attendance rates of invited CPC professionals in Galway and Roscommon for 2015

This section looks at attendance rates of professionals from key disciplines, agencies and services who have been invited to attend child protection conferences in Galway and Roscommon in 2015. This data is relevant to the analysis of findings from this study which is presented in the next section. Parents have reported that, on the one hand, they are overwhelmed by the number of professionals in attendance, but are also confused by the non-attendance of professionals who they are expecting to attend and who they feel could contribute to the conference.

Where a professional is invited and is not able to attend, there is an expectation that a report to the conference would be provided and it is not suggested here that reports were not forthcoming where professionals did not attend. The data that has been gathered indicates significant differences in attendance rates across disciplines and agencies in both counties. Rates vary from 0% to 73%. Attendance rates in some instances are based on small numbers, therefore they are subject to considerable fluctuation and caution should be exercised in their interpretation. However, the data suggests that for some professions, low or non-attendance at child protection conference appears to have become the established norm. Improving attendance rates of invited professionals is an area where the Children and Young Peoples' Services Committees in Galway and Roscommon could have an impact

Total; Galway 2015

G.P		Gardai		Addiction Services		PSYCH* Services CMHN*		Cons Psych*		CAMHS* / REIS*		School		Paeds*		EWO*		Probation Services	
INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT
75	3 4%	45	18 40%	33	18 54%	25	8 32%	11	1 9%	14	5 35%	65	34 52%	24	11 45%	10	4 40%	3	2 66%

Total: Roscommon 2015

G.P		Gardai		Addiction Services		PSYCH* CMHN*		Cons Psych*		CAMHS* / REIS*		School		Paeds*		EWO*		Probation Services	
INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT	INV	ATT
22	3 13%	15	11 73%	10	1 10%	7	5 71%	8	1 12%	10	5 50%	21	11 52%	8	0 0%	9	6 66%	1	0 0%

* PSYCH; Psychiatric Services; *Psych*MHN; Community Mental Health Nursing; *Cons Psych: Consultant Psychiatrist;

*CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services; *Paeds: Paediatric Services; *EWO: Education Welfare Officer

Section 2: Findings of study

This section presents the findings from the qualitative research study that was undertaken with fourteen parents who have attended Child Protection Conferences in Galway and Roscommon. While there has been some summarising and restructuring of the parent's testimonies, the researcher has endeavoured to represent parent's views as accurately and as fully as possible. It should be noted that while the perspectives of parents on their attendance at child protection conferences may differ in many respects from the perspective of the professionals involved, it is important to allow for their voices to emerge from this process. As Canavan (2008) points out in his study, parent's views are 'perspectives on what are contested experiences....the key point is that this is how parents experienced situations and whether one agrees or not with their views, this is what they are. From a practice point of view, seeing them clearly expressed should allow for learning' (p51).

The Participants

The parents who participated in this study all currently live in Galway and Roscommon. Three of the parents live in Galway City, seven live in the county in a mix of county towns or rural areas, and four parents live in Roscommon. Not all of the parents are local to these areas and some have come from other counties in Ireland, or different areas within Galway or

Roscommon. Two parents are from outside Ireland. Six of the participants are fathers and eight are mothers. Four couples participated in the study, of which three are married. Two of the participants were from the Travelling Community. In total, the parents in the study had twenty four children under 18, and three parents also had a number of adult children who were not subject to the conference process. No children were reported to have attended any of the conference or review meetings. All of the conferences made the decision to place the children's name on the Child Protection Notification System. The number of conferences or review meetings attended by parents varies from two to eight. Three parents reported that the conference was called shortly after their initial contacts with the social work department, on an emergency basis. Four parents reported multiple conferences going back to 2009; however the majority of parents attended an initial conference in 2014, with a review meeting held in either 2014 or 2015. For the small number of parents who had been in the system for a number of years, the first conference was a distant memory and they sometimes were unclear in their recollections of the initial meeting. Those parents who had a first conference in 2014 had more precise and reliable recollections of both the initial conference and the review meeting. All parents had attended at least one initial child protection conference and one review, and all cases were closed to the CPNS at the time the interviews were conducted. However, five parents reported that they are still receiving either a child protection social work or a family support service from Tusla. Parents have been assigned pseudonyms in this section to protect their identities.

Analysis of findings

The findings and analysis are presented in a chronological format, from before the initial conference through to the concluding review meeting where the case is closed to the CPNS. The findings represent parent's experiences of the process, including how they were prepared for the initial conference, their emotions and reactions before and during the conference, their experiences in the time period between the initial conference and the review meeting. It also reflects parents' recommendations for conference chairs, social workers and other parents who are in the system. The findings are analysed with reference to the literature on this area.

(A) Preparation for the Initial Child Protection Conference

In this section, the parents' views on how they were prepared for the CPC will be analysed. This includes the information they received on how the conference would be run and

conducted; their understanding of the purpose of the conference and the reasons why it was called; their perspectives on the possible implications of the conference; access to the social worker's report, and other professional reports before the conference, and their reactions to these reports; finally it will outline their views on the others invited to attend the conference.

Information:

All of the parents reported receiving a letter from the social work department containing information about the time date and location of the conference, and a list of attendees. Five of the parents report that they either met their social worker, or had a conversation over the phone before the meeting, where information was given on how the meeting would be conducted and what they could expect during the meeting. This is important as the literature suggests that information is an important aspect of participatory practice (Katz 1997). Fiona expressed how this information helped her to prepare for the conference:

'The social worker called and told us all we needed to know, she called to the house and went through everything. That really took the edge of it for us'

Two parents were asked to come in on the morning of the conference in order to receive information on the conduct of the meeting. As Ciara recalls:

'We were just told to be there at a certain time, if we wanted to we could have gone in 15 minutes earlier, a half an hour maybe and they could talk through what was going to happen'

Therefore, half of parents in the study report not receiving adequate information in advance of the conference that they felt they needed to prepare themselves, and as a result, a number of these parents did not realise some of the key aspects of the conference until it was underway. As Paul recalled:

'I didn't know how it would be run though, with the minute taker and that. It wasn't until we got there that we realised that'

Two parents recalled that they were not fully informed that the meeting was to be a child protection conference beforehand. This is best illustrated by Martin's comments;

'Before....it wasn't mentioned at all that this was a child protection conference, it was just a 'meeting'. They were calling it a meeting. It sort of dawned on me during the meeting what it was'

Ciara had a similar experience:

‘She called it a conference, there was nothing ‘child protection’ about it at all....’

The lack of information on how the conference would be run, who would participate and what parents could expect is reflected in other studies such as Guinan (2004) who found that professionals did not fully explain to parents the nature and purpose of a child protection conference beforehand. This resulted in them not having a good understanding of the process and of what they could expect, and what expected of them in terms of their participation. This finding also reflects more up to date research which also found that parents often feel ill prepared in terms of understanding the impact of the conference on their family’s life and having access to information and reports in advance (Smithson and Gibson 2016).

Parents’ understanding of the reasons a CPC was convened

This section pays attention to what parents perceived were the reasons why TUSLA had decided to convene a CPC in relation to their children, following an assessment process. This is important as if the conference is intended to foster change, and ensure children’s safety, then parents should be aware of the child protection concerns that have been identified prior to the conference. Parents reported widely differing accounts of their knowledge and understanding of the reasoning underpinning the decision to convene a conference. Helen was very clear and had been well informed:

‘She said it was because of the neglect of the children, the neglect and the violence at home that has really impacted on the children’

Mary was a little less sure:

‘Probably over my drinking.... I thought ‘I have no problem’

Martin however reported that:

‘We had no clear idea really, why it was going ahead’

Aoife felt that her children should not have been in the CPC system in the first place and completely disagreed with the rationale to convene a conference. She expressed a view that it was called because the professionals had run out of ideas as to how to manage the problems presenting:

‘The point is, a case conference was not appropriate for that, it was too severe for our case, there was no need for it but basically no one knew what else to do’

This lack of clarity as to the reasoning behind the decision to convene a conference is common to many of the testimonies of the parents in the study, and is a finding that is reflected in other studies. It would appear that without adequate information on the reasoning behind the decision to call a conference before hand, parents are trying to put the pieces together during the conference, and this can act as a barrier to engagement and participation. It would also appear from Aoife’s testimony that holding a CPC without fully explaining and justifying the rationale can lead to a build of frustration and resentment with the child protection system even before the conference begins.

Parents’ understanding of the possible implications of a CPC for their family

This section considers parents worries and concerns as to what implications the CPC might have for their children, and for family life. Parents were asked what they understood were the possible implications of the child protection conference for their families. The majority of parents in this study reported they had one major fear and worry going into the conference; they all feared that a **likely** implication or outcome of the conference was that their children would be removed from their care. This finding replicates the findings of other studies (Farmer and Owen 1995, Corby *et al.* 1996 Darlington *et al.* 2010) who reported that parents can be defensive in child protection conferences, and are often concerned about their child being taken into care. Fiona reported:

‘What I thought about it was that the kids would be taken off us, ...that was my biggest fear’

Alice had an additional fear:

‘I went into the meeting with that fear, big time. I actually thought ‘My God! (child’s name) is at school and they’re going to take her from the school and I’m not going to see her’.

Only two parents in the study reported discussing this fear with their social worker prior to the conference. Helen was able to ask the question of her social worker, and appeared to be reasonably reassured by the answer;

'I asked her, and she told me yes the children can be taken away, but there is a lot of things you need to do to make sure everything is OK. So I asked her that and she told me and I decided to do everything, to fight so that didn't happen'

However, other parents in the study report that even though they were extremely worried and fearful that their children might be taken from them and placed into care as a direct result of the conference, they did not have a conversation with their social worker as to the likelihood that this might actually occur. Alice recalled:

'I didn't actually know and I was afraid to ask the question'

Martin suggested that this fear is widespread for parents whose children are in the child protection system:

'When you hear 'child protection' you think 'Christ, there goes the kids' and you have that mind set'

It is worth considering possible reasons why parents may not engage in discussion with their social worker on the possibility of care proceedings being instigated as a result of the conference; perhaps they are hoping to appear cooperative, are feeling overwhelmed or are uninformed as to the process by which a child can be removed from parents. As information sharing is an aspect of participatory practice, perhaps more attention and acknowledgement needs to be given to this concern prior to the conference, so that parents have a realistic idea as to the range of possible outcomes.

Parent's views on other invited participants to the CPC

This section explores parents' reactions to the information they were given prior to the conference as to the other attendees. For the most part, the parents in the study report that they knew in advance who would in attendance. For a number of parents, the social worker provided the information verbally, but the majority of parents got the information from the invitation letter. John was one of the parents who was informed verbally:

'The social worker told me who was going to be there'

Niamh recalls her emotional reaction to seeing the list of invitees in the letter:

'I was upset when I saw everyone who would be there. I thought, well if it's all about (names child) there shouldn't be anyone else only those who know him, I couldn't understand what some of them had to do with it'

Helen also got the information from a list or letter:

'The social worker sent me a list of who would be there.....more than 15 people were to be there and I said 'God.....what kind of conference is this....?'

The parent's responses indicate that this aspect of the conference does cause some anxiety prior to the meeting. One finding is that where parents are given the information verbally, rather than gleaned from the invitation letter, there is more opportunity for discussion as to the roles of the other participants and this seems to allay some of the anxiety described by the parents. Four parents in the study reported feeling they had little or no input into who else would be attending the meeting, and that this was a matter entirely in the hands of the social work department. This in itself was a source of anxiety as Tom recalls:

'We just thought that they'd know best, that they know best because we weren't in a position to say 'such a one should be there'.

This finding reflects the feelings widely expressed that parents have little or no control over the conduct of the meeting and this has been substantiated in other studies (Farmer and Owen (1995) and Corby *et al.* (1996)

Access to social work reports before CPC

A common finding in other studies that look at parental experiences of child protection conferences is that parents rarely have sight of professional reports beforehand. In Canavan's study (2008) none of the parents said that they received written reports from social workers in advance of meeting. Twelve of the parents in this study had a similar experience- they report not seeing the written social work report before the meeting or getting access to the written report the morning of the conference. However, two parents report seeing the report well in advance of the meeting. Paul recalled that:

'He called out to the house and he went through a copy of the report'

Three parents recall being contacted by the social worker before the meeting and informed verbally as to what would be in the report. Tom explained:

'We didn't see it actually....she called and she told us what she was going to put in it...'

Six parents report being handed a copy of the report on the morning of the meeting; Alice's vivid description highlights her reactions to this:

'The social worker called me into one of the rooms.... chairs all lined up around the walls and she handed me this form.... I'd say there must have been at least 10 pages in it- that was the report. There was no one I could ask about it, I was just basically told 'this is the report, the meeting is in 10 minutes and this is what we're going to be talking about'

Three parents say they only became aware of the contents of the report as it was being read to during the conference. As Martin remembers

'We didn't see a report before the meeting; we heard it on the day'

The implication of not seeing the social worker's report in advance is that parents feel they are on the back foot rather than being well prepared to listen and process information, assessments and reported concerns. It is also clear from parents' responses that those parents who did see the social work and other reports prior to the conference report that they felt better prepared and were more likely to engage in the conference process.

Feelings –Emotions; before the CPC

In the lead up to the conference, parents report experiencing a range of emotional responses to the upcoming meeting. Twelve parents reported distressing emotional responses such as anxiety, worry, sadness, panic, anger, or fear.

'I was freaking out and I was having panic attacks a few days before the meeting'

'She was in an awful state, a terrible state like, and I was really really angry'

Worryingly one parent reported feeling suicidal in the days before the conference, and suggested that her partner felt the same way:

'I did feel suicidal at times, we both did, there's no getting away from it'

The majority of the negative emotions expressed in the parent's testimonies reflect the findings of other studies, however, having suicidal thoughts does not appear to a finding in any other studies, and cannot be generalised as a common reaction or feeling. At the same time it should be recognised that, depending on a parent's frame of mind before the meeting, this is a possible, although extreme, response to the stress that they are under in the days before the conference and practitioners should be mindful of this when they are preparing parents. In this case, the researcher checked with the parent to ensure they have received adequate support in relation to her suicidal ideation.

Tactics and strategies

Two of the parents reported developing a tactic or strategy before the meeting. Interestingly, one of these parents, Mary, had been in the system the longest and had experienced more conferences and reviews than the other parents. She reported:

'There's always tactics going in. You need plans, you need to prepare yourself.... To me a case conference is like a battle, there might be some scrapes and scratches but I'm coming out intact'

Helen was new to the system but appears to have been very well prepared by her social worker, and consistently in all her responses indicates her preparedness:

'I prepared by doing things right, I went to the parent - teacher meetings, I make sure they have lunch and I put them in afterschool...'

This finding suggests that parents who have been in the system for a while develop their own emotional resilience to the stress in the lead up to the conferences and review meetings, whereas parents who are new to the process often lack the same emotional robustness and may need additional support to develop an appropriate coping strategy. By focussing on positive practical tasks, it appears that Helen was able to offset some of the stresses that engulfed the other parents in the time immediately before the conference. The language used by Mary where she describes the conference as 'like a battle' reinforces the idea that parents are preparing themselves for the conference, however the idea that a conference would become a battle is probably an impression that social workers would strive to avoid.

Advocacy

Very few parents in this study brought a support person or advocate with them to the conference, despite being stated in the invitation letter. Parents seemed unsure on this point

and three parents reported that had wondered if they needed legal representation. There appears to have been little in the way of discussion with social workers on this point, and when parents do ask about this, there is an apparent lack of discussion or advice from social workers as to who may or may not be appropriate to attend. This may explain the low attendance rates of parenting advocates. Alice recalls

'I was wondering do I have to go legal wise, do I have to bring a solicitor? I asked the social worker that and she said 'No'. She said 'you can bring someone with you if you want'....but I had no-one to bring with me and I didn't know who to bring me anyway'

Tom felt that this should be explored more with parents in the preparation stage

'I think there should be a family member or friend there who knows the family well, they should be top priority. For future reference, families might be able to suggest who should be there, they might be able to add people who could help'

(B) Process- engagement and participation

In this section the researcher considers how the parents experienced the CPC process, including a focus on the relationships they had or formed with social workers that supported their engagement in the process, their experiences of participation during the conference and how they perceived their contribution to the decision making processes.

Relationships with social workers

Relationship based practice is well recognised in the literature as having a pivotal impact on levels of professional engagement and the effectiveness of subsequent interventions. The literature is clear that developing effective relationships involves complex processes that operate at a number of different levels. According to Connolly, White and Satka (forthcoming) the social work task has been characterised as an environment where there is complexity, uncertainty and risk, however the development of an effective relationship between the social worker and the parent can result in better outcomes for children and families, and create a more comfortable and rewarding experience in the process. In this study, most of the parents spoke favourably about interactions with social workers, social care workers and conference chairs. They were also able to articulate what they valued about these relationships during the time of the conference and review process, and to express what

they perceived as barriers and challenges to the formation of relationships. The researcher was aware that her position as a TUSLA employee may have influenced positive descriptions of relationships to some degree, however this appears to have had a minimal impact as parents also shared negative opinions of social work, social care, family support staff and conference chairpersons who they had also interacted with. Three themes emerge from parent's perspectives; support and help; trust and respect; and the ability to listen.

Support and help

Parents speak positively of their social worker where the social worker is supportive and where they perceive that the conference can assist them by providing access to practical help. Alice said

'She helps me and it's allowed that I can ask for help and that's what matters. When I was supported to ask for help, the help materialised but when I wasn't supported I got no help. They also had a social care worker with my daughter and she was brilliant, absolutely brilliant, fantastic, we loved her to pieces, she was a huge support to me as well as my daughter. A diamond, absolutely'

Trust and respect

Parents in the study spoke about their experiences of feeling respected by the social worker. There were a range of experiences expressed, however most responses indicated that parents place a high value on feeling that their social worker treats them with respect, and how this leads to the development of trust. Niamh spoke about the impact of respectful relationships:

'I had a connection with my social worker. That's very important, if you respect someone they will open up to you, if you treat them like a human being, it's about respect and to be treated fairly'

Tina was emphatic:

'She had a lovely way of getting to know us, we felt we could really speak to her, it's a hard thing to do. They need to be able to communicate without taking your self-respect away. She was able to do that'

The ability to listen

The ability to listen is highlighted in other studies as being a key characteristic of an effective relationship. Maria felt the ability of her social worker to listen was critical in the context of the child protection conference:

'I did feel listened to, the support I got from the social worker; that gave me more confidence to speak'

These themes are replicated in the literature, such as in the study by Booth and Booth in 2005 who found that parents developed less positive relationships with social workers who talk rather than listen, instruct rather than advise, and fail to address people's practical needs for support, and that these characteristics quickly alienate parents and forfeit their trust. Current research also demonstrates the value that parents place on supportive child protection practitioners both for how they engage with them, and how their support can lead to meaningful change (Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Gladstone et al., 2014; Smithson & Gibson 2016).

Views on the others in attendance

As reported earlier, most parents had information on other professionals who were invited to attend the conference. However, even being forearmed with this information, parents reported finding the reality of the attendance of large numbers of professionals to be very intimidating. As Fiona recalls

'There was a big crowd, everyone around the table, like, Oh God..... I knew there was going to be a load of people, but just seeing them all sitting there, it was intimidating all-right'

Aoife recalls how her social worker tried to make this more comfortable for her:

'They let us turn up a little bit early so we wouldn't be walking in on everybody, which I did appreciate but it was still stressful, and the next thing all these people started piling in...'

This anxiety, coupled with confusion as to who certain people were, why they were in attendance and what their roles were, through to a perception that there was more people in attendance than they had prepared themselves for are key findings. Niamh described not being clear why certain people were in attendance;

'There was one or two people that I didn't know why they were there, I wasn't expecting them to be there, and to this day I don't know what they were doing'.

Another issue that parent's highlighted is that they had no way of preparing themselves for what these other attendees may say about them during the conference, as the vast majority of

parents had not seen any professional reports before the meeting convened. A number of parents expressed dissatisfaction with the contributions of other professionals and reported that they were shocked by some of the verbal and written reports. Helen remembers listening to a school principal speaking;

'He made me feel very bad during the meeting'

Gerry recalls being angry at what he called a '*surprise attack*' from one professional who reported that they had overheard him and his partner having a row:

'Me and herself had a row on the phone....We didn't know that was going to be brought up. That shouldn't have been brought up, everybody has rows...'

Another issue that caused parents to be concerned is the non-attendance of some the key professionals in their lives. The absence of some professionals who parents are expecting to be in attendance as they are listed as invitees can be confusing for parents who are left wondering why these professionals have not attended or sent reports. As Tom recalls

'The OT wasn't there, the schools weren't there, the Psychiatrist wasn't there, the GP wasn't there.....they sent in apologies. There was 11 at in total. There was two people I didn't know who they were'

Other parents wondered why their GPs were not in attendance. Tina queried about the absence of CAMHS

'They weren't at the meeting, I don't know why? There was no report at all. They could have added something to the meeting'

On a practical note, some of the parents reported that the other attendees introduced themselves to the chairperson rather than the parents, which is a small issue but one which seemed to upset parents when it did occur. As Niamh said

'They introduced themselves to the chairperson and not to us'

Two parents reported that they did not realise they would have to introduce themselves to the large group and that this was intimidating for them. Aoife recalled the stress that resulted

'I don't think we should have had to introduce ourselves, we were clearly the parents. Maybe that should be done by the chairperson as it's intimidating enough without having to introduce yourself'

Parental perspectives of honesty and accuracy in the professionals' reports

As most parents reported having little prior information as to what was contained in either the social work or other professional reports, it is little surprise that many parents felt there were inaccuracies or untruths, new information, or lack of completeness in these reports. Ideally, these issues would have all been resolved prior to the conference, but when this does not happen, parents are often struggling to listen to reports that, from their perspective are not accurate, truthful or complete, or that contain information they have never heard before. John felt that the reports were generally accurate:

'I think all angles were covered. Everything was taken care of; they did a good job'

Tina also had a positive recollection of the social worker's report:

'We came across as respectable citizens in the social worker's report. It gave us some status in front of the crowd'

However, the other parents all had contrasting views on the level of accuracy or completeness of the reports.

Alice illustrates how she felt listening to information she said was new to her:

'What she said verbally to me leading up to it, was not what was in the paper. That was the first time I heard it'

Mary expressed her shock and anger after hearing what she perceived to be an inaccuracy in the social work report

'That still plays on my mind, the fact that she didn't do her homework, she's supposed to be looking out for him, but that was wrong, and it still got into the report, I had such a grudge against her since then'

Maria used similar language when expressing that she felt that once something is in the report it goes unchallenged:

‘They need to do their homework a bit more and they need to make 100% sure that is it true because once they say it, it becomes gospel’

Emotional responses during the CPC

All the parents described a range of emotional reactions and responses during the conference. These emotions ranged from embarrassment and shame, through to anger, fear. Words such as ‘trauma’ and ‘devastation’ were used frequently to describe the emotional stress of the conference. Tom summarised his feelings very clearly:

‘We were devastated, devastated, devastated going in, devastated coming out, devastated with fear, not with anger. I had anger but..... the anger I had was just fear, fear, the fear was 10 times worse coming out of it’

Physical responses during the CPC

A number of physical reactions during and in the immediate aftermath of the conference were also recalled by parents. Tom reported:

‘It was so traumatic....I have diabetes and my readings went up through the roof’

Alice recalls how:

‘I could feel my own heart going thump thump thump and I thought I was either going to go into a panic attack or have a heart attack....I was just stuck to the seat....I was thinking ‘Am I going to live through this?’

Similar responses and reactions have also been found in other studies; Smithson & Gibson (2016) found that for most parents, the conference was an extremely stressful and emotional experience, and that this is not fully appreciated by the other professionals involved.

Parent’s Voice during the CPC

This section considers how parent’s felt they were able to express themselves and contribute to the discussion during the CPC. Research shows that often parents find this a very difficult aspect of attendance and generally, parents are unsuccessful in expressing themselves and having their voices heard.

Listening

All the parents described how they listened attentively to what was being said. Some parents felt that that listening was their only active contribution to the conference. This is a finding in other studies where the power asymmetry in the conference can have the effect of silencing parents. As John says

'I was just there to listen basically. I was just listening carefully'

Ciara recalls

'We were listening more than contributing if that makes sense'

Other parents described how difficult it is to listen, especially when they are hearing something for the first time. The majority of parents described how they listened, with a degree of hyper-vigilance for any sign that that children were going to be removed, and how as a result they were struggling to hear anything else that was being said. Fiona describes this clearly:

'..like, we had to try and take in what he was saying. I had to let some of it go over my head. The thing at the back of my mind was just shut up and let them talk and then they won't take the kids'

Niamh also recalled

'When they're talking to you you're just hearing the worst things. You really are fearing the worst, you're listening out for the worst....like there were good reports in there...but you didn't hear that....you know...like it's awful frightening in the conference'

Alice had a similar experience

'You're listening but you're kind of wondering what the hell is going to happen? Are they taking my child or whatever?'

Right of Reply

Once parents had listened to the various reports being read out, some parents felt that they were able to reply and were supported in doing so. As Mary says

'You'd always be given time to talk after each report. You could always reply, either agree or disagree, and defend yourself'

For other parents this was not a straightforward process, and it is clear that some parents who may not be used to speaking out at meetings find this very difficult. As Paul says

'I was trying to explain it....I wasn't able to explain it....'

Fiona remembered how this was a difficult process and somewhat of a balancing act

'You're trying to get your point across but I'm not very eloquent in my wording, sosometimes I sound like I'm getting thick when I'm not but I'm just trying to stand up for myself kind of thing, that's hard...you're trying to defend yourself but you can't go overboard defending yourself or they'll be saying you're in denial or you're contrary'

Others reported that they were simply feeling too intimidated to be able to reply to the reports. Niamh says:

'I was just too intimidated. I just admitted my faults. I couldn't really defend myself I was too intimidated'

Being Listened to

Those parents who spoke up felt that they were listened to by the chairperson and the other attendees. John describes this:

'They listened well, yeah.If I had something to say, I was given the opportunity to say it, everyone listened'

A number of parents reported that they had met the chairperson before the meeting and this helped them to feel that their views had been recorded, even if they did not speak out in the conference. Niamh recall how this helped her during the meeting

'Meeting the chairperson beforehand, we were able to talk, like we wouldn't be able to talk in front of all those people so it was good because we were talking, just we were trying to put our point across. That was good, the fear didn't go but that was good'

Risk and suspicion

Lord Laming (2003) has recommended that social workers hold a 'healthy scepticism' and 'respectful uncertainty' when responding to parents where there is a risk for their children. However, the literature also suggests that having their parenting questioned, and being treated

as a risk to their child is a 'belittling and dehumanizing' (Smithson and Gibson 2016:6). In this study, a number of parents reported that their view points were treated with a degree of scepticism, and expressed how this made them feel. Tina recalls getting this sense:

'They were thinking we weren't authentic....They were very suspicious of us'

Tom had a similar experience

'We just felt our views were taken with a pinch of salt. We were on the back foot the whole time with them'

Paul reported:

'I tried to explain that to them and they didn't see it that way, they were just assuming that he was in danger. It's just, my child wasn't in danger but going by the report, he's in danger, but he wasn't and I couldn't say that'

Fiona's account uses similar language to the findings in Smithson and Gibson's 2016 study:

'To be made to feel that you can't look after your own kids... it made me feel small, it did. It made me feel really small, like. I felt very belittled...'

It appears from these findings that while parents feel they will be listened to if they speak up, many parents find this process very difficult and as a result make very little contribution to the meeting.

The decision making process

The extent to which parents felt that they participated in or contributed to the decision making processes during the conference is explored in this section. Horwath and Morrison (2000) suggest that it is of crucial importance to involve the parents as much as possible in decision making. A frequent finding in other studies, however is that parents rarely feel they have input into the decision making process.

Wanting to appear compliant

The majority of parents in the study reported that they acted in a manner that suggested compliance or agreement with the child protection plan as it was being discussed and decisions were being made. Paul recalled:

'It was like this, we'd have done anything, anything, anything they asked us to do we'd have done, we just had to agree to do everything, you know'

Niamh felt she had little choice but to agree:

'I'd have agreed to any of their demands just to get out of it. We had no choice in the matter really. I'd be too afraid to say much really. I had met too many strangers at that stage, that I was so intimidated and frightened. I just didn't want to make bad situation even worse'

Maria's summary of how she felt reflects many of the parents' responses

'I feel a bit stupid trying to explain this but we went along with what they said so I suppose they must have thought we were agreeable. I don't think I disagreed as such, but I can't swear that I was actually voluntarily agreeing. It felt more like being backed into a corner.... the stakes are so high it's hard not to be agreeable if they're offering you a way out of losing your children'

Holding ground

In contrast, some of the parents felt they exercised some degree of control over decisions that were made during the conference. Mary was adamant that she had contributed to the decision making process:

'I always had the reins. The chairperson would look to me for my views. I agreed with a good lot of it, sometimes I'd disagree'

Martin recalled what happened when he disagreed with a decision to have someone come into the family home in the mornings to help out;

'I did object though, they were more or less putting it down on paper as agreed but I said 'No' and that was the end of it'

Tom also recalls that he objected to a decision regarding one of his children:

'I spoke out and I said that won't be happening, it wasn't the right thing to do for him so I said no to that'

These parents all reported that their views were listened to, and they felt they did have some influence over the decision making process to differing extents. However, Tom also recalled

that he worried he had gone too far with his inputs and objections to some proposals, and that for a few days after the meeting he was fearful. As he puts it:

'You don't know how they perceive you, they might think afterwards 'Jesus you couldn't leave a child with them' and just turn up and take her'

Power and authoritative practice

As is to be expected in a system where parents are usually involuntary participants, there were frequent references to power and a shared perception of a power imbalance in most of the parents' testimonies. Martin felt the power imbalance was evidenced in terms of not feeling believed;

'It's a power thing, no matter what I said, she (the social worker) was going to be believed'

Tom suggests that he was aware of a power differential, but it did not stop him from contributing:

'They had the upper hand.... we knew they had the power, we knew that going in, the dogs on the street knew that, we knew that they had the power, but at the same time that didn't stop us from speaking out, like..'

The theme of a power imbalance and the perception by parents that the child protection conference system is authoritarian is a frequent finding in other studies (Parton 2014, Featherstone *et al.* 2014). It is also acknowledged that power and authority are factors inherent to the child protection process itself and this has been identified in other studies as a constraint to parents' participation (Darlington *et al.* 2012). Smithson and Johnson in 2016 found that the presence of a power imbalance combined with parents' lack of influence, and the fear their children may be removed minimised opportunities for dissent and had the effect of silencing some parents.

For social workers and conferences chairs, a key message from research is that the use of professional power and authority can be experienced as belittling by parents, and they may feel this marginalises them during the conference. However, as has been shown in this study, the perception of a power differential does not necessarily silence all parents. This suggests that the impact of the power imbalance can be minimised if parents feel a sense of respect and a non-judgemental attitude from the chairperson. These perspectives highlight the

complexity and one of the dichotomies of the child protection conference. In order for parents to 'buy in' to a child protection plan, it would obviously help if they felt included in the decision making process. It needs to be stated that parental participation in itself is not the ultimate goal of child protection conferences and that some decisions are taken to ensure the safety of children that are rightly non- negotiable. However, research clearly shows that parental participation is possible at all levels of a child protection conference, and parents' views should be sought out and listened to during the decision making process, even if they are then overruled by the chairperson who is making a professional and evenly balanced judgement in order to keep children safe. The research suggests that parents feel validated once their opinions were sought (Darlington *et al.* 2012) even if they were acted upon or not.

Plan agreed in advance.

Seven of the 14 parents interviewed expressed a view that the child protection plan had been discussed and to some extent agreed on by the professionals before conference. This is a finding that is reflected in other studies (Buckley 1997, 2003, Guinan 2004) and suggests if parents feel that decisions have been pre-ordained, they are less inclined to feel that they have been listened to, and are more likely to feel more alienated and marginalised in the decision making processes. Martin expresses this clearly

'They had their minds made up on the decisions anyway so it didn't matter really what my views were. Everything was written down in stone before we even got there. They only wanted us to agree to do what they had decided'

Tom expressed a similar response:

'No matter what we said to them, we were already sentenced.... before we ever went into the room...I thought this is a done deal, they've already made up their minds, they had discussed it already outside, it was all wound up, like 'hang on we'll meet these people and we'll entertain them, but we have it solved already'.

These findings suggest that parents can feel dismissed during conferences if they sense that the plan has been pre-decided. Feeling that nothing is up for negotiation and that professionals are not disposed to critically examining alternatives put forward by the parents is baffling for those parents who feel able to make their own representations. As Guinan (2004:78) puts it 'This is particularly astonishing for parents who believed that they proffered reasonable contributions and realistic suggestions/ recommendations to the conference for

consideration'. Tom's description of being 'entertained' rather than included vividly illustrates this point. For the chairperson, there is a need to strike a balance in the deliberations so that parents feel that the decision making process is transparent and inclusive, and that their suggestions and recommendations are given serious consideration. This will help to foster a sense of clarity for parents as to why decisions have been made in the way they have, even if they do not necessarily agree with them.

Complexity of conference and the role of the chairperson

The crucial role of the chairperson, tasked with managing the conduct of the conference, the flow of information, the complexities of ensuring parental participation, the formation of a child protection plan while at the same time chairing a meeting dominated by different disciplines and professionals, cannot be underestimated. Tina recalls the conference as being a tense meeting;

'There was a tension in the room that affected everyone'

From the parents' perspectives, the chairperson has a major influence on their experience of the conference. A chairperson who is perceived as supportive, non-judgemental, honest, respectful but with the ability to highlight key issues is seen by parents as being the most effective in terms of their engagement. John spoke about his perception of the chairperson

'He was honest, the chairperson, he has a job to do but he doesn't make it difficult, he's strict but he's fair, he's blunt. I find anyway, he did a great job. I appreciate the honesty anyway'

Fiona recalled the support she had received from the chairperson at a difficult point in the conference:

'I got upset so (the chairperson) did come out to us and he did talk to us and he explained everything and he was really calm and he calmed me down loads and we went in again and had the meeting and then afterwards he asked if we would meet with him, he's a really nice man. I really appreciated that'

Gerry felt that the chair should have intervened at a point when he questioned the relevance of some contributions:

'I felt that (the chairperson) should have intervened, said we don't want to hear that, let's just concentrate on the matter in hand here'

In contrast, Aoife felt the chair had intervened appropriately to move the flow of information on;

'In fairness to the chairperson, he said to her 'we're not here about that, we're here about (child) being safe'.

Helen recognised that the presence of her ex-husband contributed to the complexity of the conference;

'My ex-husband...was putting pressure on the conference to take my children from me... He was putting huge pressure on everyone, telling lies... he blackmailed me at the conference... he called me names, calling me prostitute'

Parenting in different contexts

Another complexity of managing the conference is taking into account the impact of culture on parenting. Helen who is of African origin reflected her sense of feeling alienated when the conference did not reflect her culture;

'What I expect the conference to do is to work in a community where there are different cultures, so they have to try to bring it into other people's cultures, to make this move. That didn't really happen as there was only one culture –the Irish culture, my own culture was neglected, which is not good, so I couldn't relate the reports to my own family and my own culture'

Post conference

The time period immediately after the conference is a sensitive one when parents are trying to absorb the information they have been given during the meeting. Parents were asked to describe how they experienced this time and how it was handled.

Debrief.

Very few parents reported the immediate post conference period as being a structured phase of the conference, and it appears that practice in the area means that parents support needs are generally not accommodated once the meeting has ended. Martin recalls how the meeting ended;

'They all just got up and left and we were left standing there wondering what to do for the best'

This can mean that parents are left with unanswered questions and concerns that may go unaddressed until they speak to the social worker on their next visit, or in Fiona's case look up information on the internet:

'Even at the end of that meeting I still didn't understand what it meant, and what it meant for the kids, I didn't understand it, Only when I went home I checked up on the internet to find out what it meant, I hadn't a clue....'

Tom was very clear as to the critical nature of the immediate post conference period

'They just got up, pushed their chair in and put the file under their arm and out the door as fast as they could....There was no talk afterwards and that's an awful cock up for the social services, You should be brought into a room afterwards' and the social worker that knows that family should sit them down and say 'this is what happened here, this is how I see it, this is it'. That should be done. Instead we just came home and had a cup of tea and just tried to put back the pieces...'

Liam had a similar experience:

'When the meeting ended we just got up and left the room with everyone else. I didn't speak to any of the professionals. I don't remember the social worker ever calling out and explaining exactly what has gone on. There's defiantly room for improvement, sometimes... they (parents) might feel stupid in front of everyone. Someone should come on a one to one and explain what exactly what has just happened'

In contrast, two parents report that they met with either the social worker or the chairperson very shortly after the conference ended. Both are clear that this debriefing intervention supported them to move on and to start to focus on the plan. As Helen recalls

'My social worker.... was there for me right away and she talked to me about everything that happened, she spoke to me about what would happen now and what I needed to do to move myself on. She calmed me down and made me feel better'

The period between meetings

For all parents in this study, the initial conference was followed by a review meeting, usually after a six month time period had elapsed. Five of the parents in this study reported that there was one review meeting after the initial conference, at which time the case was closed to the CPNS. The other nine parents had more than one review meeting before closure. A finding

in other studies is that parents often feel that the time period between the initial conference and the time when the case closes to the CPNS is difficult and stressful, and that communication with the social worker is essential during this period to ensure that parents are receiving feedback on progress they are making. Otherwise, as Smithson and Gibson (2016) found, the emotional impact this state of ‘limbo’ can have on parents and their children may not be recognised by social workers. A number of parents in this study spoke about this time period being intensely stressful for them. Gerry described family life during this time period:

‘For the 6 months between the conferences, our house went into lockdown. We couldn’t live like that again, it was depressing, all of us....miserable. We slept on a sofa every single night out of fear that something would happen and he’ll be taken. We had an awful 6 months’

Aoife recalls:

‘We were scared to put a foot wrong; we were scared to make a small mistake like everyone else is allowed to do’

All but two of the parents in this study reported that they accepted to varying degrees that there were child protection issues that needed to be addressed, and it appears from the findings of this study that once parents receive the minutes of the meeting in the post, many start to work on meeting the objectives of the child protection plan. Fiona explains that she started to work through the plan before meeting the social worker:

‘The social worker did come up the week after and he did talk to us about what went on but we had already got the letter with the minutes by then. We knew the plan of what they wanted for the kids, so we started working on the stuff’

However, generally there appears to be less social work activity in this period according to some parents’ accounts; a finding that coincides with other studies which suggests that the level of social work support between conferences is lower than before the initial conference (Guinan 2004). Given that the majority of parents report feeling unprepared prior to, during and after the conference, there may be diminished returns from parental activity post conference, without adequate social work support. The momentum for achieving improved child protection outcomes is dependent to a great extent on the parent’s capacity and motivation to work through the actions in the plan, yet some parents report that that they feel that they needed more practical help to make progress with the plan than they are given

during this period. Alice recalls how confusion as to who was to make a referral and then a delay in accessing a service as the provider was on maternity leave, meant that she attended two additional reviews. Other studies suggest that parents can become impatient with the process if they feel they are making progress on the child protection plan but are still subject to ongoing review meetings. In this study, a number of parents also talked about their hopes that their case would be closed after one review meeting, and then their disappointment when it was decided to keep it open. Fiona explains this well:

‘They decided to call another meeting, I was very disappointed but I know he just wanted to see how we got on in the new house and the new environment. So it was fair, but I was still disappointed’

Martin was more pragmatic when he heard there was to be another review:

‘We wanted it closed but we said ‘just another 6 months, sure that’s grand’

Maria describes being disappointed after making progress but still being called back for another review:

‘We hoped that this would be the end of it all and they’d accept that we had made progress and that no one was at risk’

It may be that there is a lack of congruence between parental and professional views of both risk and progress, that can result in more review meetings being conducted than are strictly necessary to ensure that the objectives of the child protection plan are being met. This coincides with the findings of Smithson and Gibson (2016) that parents felt their cases had continued for too long, even when they were doing their best to bring the child protection process to a close. Where progress is being made and recorded by the social worker during the time between the initial conference and subsequent review meetings, it may be appropriate for some parents to be able to trigger a review meeting at an earlier interval than six months. In this way, parents would feel they have more control over the process and the sense of being left in limbo for 6 months may not be as acute.

Review meeting

Common findings in other studies that look at the CPC process are that parents do not experience the review meetings as being as stressful as the initial conference. This study has similar findings; in the lead up to the review meeting parents reported they were less fearful and experienced less physical and emotional symptoms related to stress. Parents again report

that they receive little in the way of preparation for the review meeting, other than knowing the date, time, location and the list of invitees. Parents in this study perceived that the purpose of the review meeting is to check on progress made on the child protection plan that was formulated at the initial meeting. Many parents reported that the review meeting is a much more predictable and comfortable experience. Fiona recalled

'It was a lot better experience then the first, a lot more comfortable, very little negative feelings'

Alice described her experiences between both the initial conference and the review meeting and suggested it reflected the process she herself was on;

'The first one was atrocious, there's no comparison, the only comparison is that there's a scale and one meeting was at the bottom end and the other meeting was at the top end. I was on a process myself'

Niamh remembered that there were less people in attendance, and how this helped:

'There weren't as many people so that made it easier. We just got that sense that everything was more positive'

There is a consensus in how parents describe their experiences when comparing the first meeting and the second meeting. Two issues emerge that may explain this; firstly parents felt that they had developed relationships with social workers and secondly they felt that social workers had more information that added to a completeness in reports of the children's circumstances, which left parents feeling they were under less scrutiny or suspicion than the first meeting. Tina recalls getting a sense that more information had been gathered.

'There was some work covered on the ground that we didn't know about. We felt at ease, it was a whole different kettle of fish that second meeting'

Emotions during the review meeting

Parents report that their emotional response before and during the review meetings were less intense than the initial conference. Paul explains this

'We were looking forward to the next one, we knew we had done everything, we even asked was there anything else that we could do. We were a lot more confident, we got praise in there'

Martin remembered

‘There wasn’t the same anger that I had at the first meeting’

Fiona reflected on the difference between the meetings and highlighted the role of the chairperson in the review meeting:

‘The first meeting.... I felt put down, small but not in the second one. Just not being doubted, he listened to what I said and my reasons for it and I felt much more supported’

These findings are reflected in other studies that compared the experience of parents in the initial conference and the review meeting (Guinan 2004) and found that the review meeting is generally described in much more favourable and positive terms by parents.

Emotions after closure

Once the case has been closed to the CPNS, parents report mixed emotions, ranging from apprehension that they would have to endure the process again at a future point, to relief, and happiness that they had come through the process.

John recollection sums up the range of emotions described by other parents:

‘It was nice just to have it over with, but I was weary, would we need them again?’

Paul remembers:

‘Oh we were happy, we were very happy’

Fiona recalls feeling:

‘Relief, just so relieved’

Tina felt the decision to close the case to the CPNS reflected well on her and her husband:

‘We kind of felt vindicated I suppose, more than anything else’

Maria was clear:

‘When we heard it was closing off, we were ecstatic really... Thrilled and delighted and really happy’

Child's name on CPNS

A number of parents reflected on the inclusion of their children's names on the CPNS system. All parents report they were aware of this, having being informed by the conference chairperson at the conclusion of the initial conference. In general parents were pragmatic in how they viewed this system with a number of parents using the same language; 'the lesser of two evils'. Paul felt:

'It is the lesser of two evils thinking that we might have lost him in the first meeting''

Fiona summed up her understanding of the system:

'When it was closed their names are on the system, I don't understand that, why they'll be there until their 18? There's nothing really I can do really, as long as I don't fall into my old ways and they start missing school, otherwise I'm not really too worried'

However, six transcripts show that parents were still unclear as to the implications of this and a number of parents had questions on the operation of this list which they posed to the researcher. These questions relate mostly to the issue of data protection, and who has access to the list. Three parents queried if the child would in any way be disadvantaged by being included on the list when they apply for courses or jobs in the future. Parental confusion as to what it means for children to be listed on the CPNS is one that could be easily addressed with more specific information on these points being made available to parents after the decision is made to list the children. Two parents were adamant that in their view, the inclusion of their children's names on the list was a box ticking exercise that only added to parental stress levels, rather than a safeguarding activity. As Aoife reports

'I think his name was put on that to cover their backs, in the sense that....not enough was done to help us and putting his name on that list did nothing, only added stress and pressure'

It does appear that parents need more precise information and also assurances from TUSLA on the implications of their children being listed on the CPNS- what it means for the child and under what circumstances can the information be used in the future. It is not clear from the responses of parents in this study that parents had access to this information other than a general idea that their children's names are on a centralised list until they are aged 18 years but are noted as 'inactive' once the case is closed to the CPNS.

Reflecting on impacts and outcomes

All the parents in this study have seen their children's cases closed and are currently listed as inactive on the CPNS. Parents were asked to reflect on the positive and negative impacts on their family life as a direct result of the child protection conference process and the child protection plan. In contrast with other studies, and despite feeling unprepared and finding the process difficult and stressful to endure, most parents in this study were able to identify a number of positive impacts and improvements that the conference and plan has had on their lives. This is an area that would benefit from more research to determine which specific areas have seen improved outcomes and to identify what aspects of the conference process are the enablers or facilitators for these perceived improvements.

Positive

Many parents recognised that the conference and the child protection plan had brought about positive changes and improvements in their lives. Only four of the 14 parents were unable to identify any positive impacts. Parents highlighted that their parenting had improved; they had better access to appropriate support services; they had more awareness and control over their personal circumstances; the experience had brought them closer together as a family and that their children had benefitted from the plan. Mary reported the practical impacts of the conference on services for her son

'I know he needed a lot of assistance, appointments.... you'd nearly be top of the list a bit quicker'

Paul reflected that the impacts of the conference and plan were:

'Definitely positive.....looking back at it, it did scare us but I think it was a good thing because we just put our heads down and decided that we're not going to let it go any further. That was the good thing about it because at the time it made it us realise that things were out of control.....'

Niamh was adamant that the conference and the plan had brought about significant change in the life of her family

'In the end.... it made an awful difference. It was the worst thing that ever happened and the best thing that ever happened. The change is fantastic, 100 times better. That wouldn't have happened on its own without the plan'

Helen reported that the conference and plan had helped both her and her children in different ways;

‘....it made me understand more about the Irish culture and what they want for the children in whatever they are doing....it helps my children as well because they know that I am fighting for them, fighting for their education, fighting for their survival’

It appears from these responses that the majority of parents in this study are able to pinpoint positive impacts as a direct result of engaging in the child protection conference system and the child protection plan, despite finding it a disempowering, fearful and stressful process. While most of the research supports the importance of positive experiences for parents in effecting change (Fauth et al., 2010, Smithson & Gibson 2016), this study indicates that despite finding the process to be generally a negative one, parents still reported positive changes. The researcher accepts that some parents may have been affected by her position as an employee of TUSLA when reporting on positive outcomes and impacts, despite all assurances on confidentiality given during the data collection process. However, these findings are still pertinent to the study and raise questions regarding the potential impact on outcomes and change, if parents were to have more positive experiences of the child protection conference system.

Negative

As is to be expected, all parents reported that the conference process had some negative impacts. However, most of the negative impacts described have more to do with the conference system, than with the child protection plan itself. This directly contrasts with the positive impacts listed above, which are mostly concerned with the child protection plan rather than the conference system. Negative impacts are reported as being associated with the stress of the conference system on physical and emotional well-being; the worry and fear of being in the system; the perception of being subject to an unfair, unneeded and/ or undeserved process; the feeling of being subjected to ongoing scrutiny and the ‘gaze’ of other parties that does not diminish after the conference process concludes, and the impact of feeling labelled a bad parent or having their children’s name listed on the CPNS. Only four parents felt that the child protection plan itself had negative impacts on family life. Gerry felt that the plan was not helpful at all, and put constraints and demands on family life that were unwarranted. He also reported that even though the case has been closed for several months,

his family are still being monitored excessively by other parties outside of the statutory child protection system, and he attributes this directly to being in the conference system;

'It's ridiculous at this stage.....Every little thing is still an issue, there was too many people brought on board. It should have been a closed knit group, and when it's finished, it's finished. It's finished for them but they're all still watching us. It's like an episode of Eastenders. I feel like I'm still going through it all. Like them still calling me. He flooded the bathroom in school last week and the principal and the teacher both rang me, talked to us about it, and then they said to us, that would they contact the social worker, TUSLA, and inform them of it, why like?'

It is apparent that the implications of the conference for some parents can linger well beyond the administrative closure of the case to the conference system, and can impact on day to day family life in unexpected ways, as Gerry's testimony shows. In these situations, there is an onus on TUSLA to work with partner agencies to develop appropriate responses to the post conference period. These responses should be proportionate and should take into account the inactive status of the children on the CPNS, while at the same time remaining vigilant to any new child protection concerns that may arise. In the example here, it is unlikely that flooding a school toilet would reach a social work threshold, but it raises questions regarding professional judgements on what constitutes a child protection concern, and what does not.

(C) Parents' recommendations for the conduct of future conferences

Parents were asked to make recommendations to TUSLA that may help with the conduct of future conferences. All respondents were asked for their recommendations for future child protection conferences. An overview of recommendations made by the respondents are outlined in the tables below, reflecting parent's recommendations for chairpersons, for social workers and for other parents who are new to the CPC system. Many suggestions are similar and are only listed once, with the corresponding number of parents who made the suggestion noted.

Parents' recommendations for chairpersons

Recommendation	Number of parents making suggestion
Just listen, everyone deserves a chance like, just need to listen to all sides, good or bad, you don't go in there because you're brilliant, you go in because have a problem or need treatment, any of those things,	Listening mentioned by 10 parents; being given a second chance mentioned by 5 parents.
No-one who isn't known to the parents should be there at all....We should have been consulted about all that before- hand.... and the parents should see the reports beforehand or people should not be allowed in...there should be no guns pulled on the parents during the conference.	Six parents spoke of the value of meeting the chairperson before the meeting, and suggested that the chair person should enquire as to their preparedness, and be ready to delay/cancel the meeting in the event that the parents report they are unprepared.
And then at the end of the meeting when everyone gets up and leaves the room, that someone should sit down with them, maybe make them a cup of tea, don't interview them just let their feelings be heard then, with the chairperson, just listen to them.	De brief- mentioned by six parents.
I'd prefer them to be honest. Honest is very important, be blunt, don't sugar coat it, especially when it involves a child.	Honesty mentioned by 5 parents.
It helps to know that the chairperson is independent, we didn't know that the chair doesn't have fixed ideas about us but it would really help if you know before- hand that the chairperson is only going on what he hears today, parents need to be told that.	Stressing the independent nature of the chairperson more- 3 parents.
It goes back to that attitude and realising that this person is hurting, or else this parent wouldn't be here in the first place	Attitude, empathy, welcome received- mentioned by three parents.
A cup of tea.....	Mentioned by four parents.
There should be a different process for families that ask for help. If you're asking for help, you're not refusing it, but it has to be the right protocol for it, we asked for help and we didn't get help. We got more added onto it, more onto our backs, more stress.	Four parents felt that the conference process was not an appropriate forum for parents who indicate very early on that they are looking for help and support.

If someone holds their hand up and says 'yeah I did', and then the chairperson should note that and it shouldn't have to go around the room so much so that the same thing keeps coming up again. It just needs to be recognised, just move on.	Managing the flow of information- mentioned by four parents.
I think though that they need to check that the social worker has called out before and met you and discussed a family member attending with you as a support person as sometimes you're going into this, and you don't think you need it until you're in there and it's negative and then it's too late so you definitely need that family support, or just someone even outside the family who will support you, so I definitely recommend that chairpersons chase up with social workers that that has happened.	Ensuring parents have an advocate or a source of support mentioned by four parents.
The chairperson needs to know that...when they are dealing with the African community in terms of taking their children they have to be very careful, African children...they will hold you up physically and spiritually, you are taking the child from the community...if other families find out my children are involved with social workers, they don't want them to play with my children. So the family gets a bad reputation.	Cultural competencies- mentioned by one parent.
The setting is so important, get it away from the local busy bodies,	The appropriateness of the setting, mentioned by one parent.
There should be a letter to parents and children about their rights.	Rights/ information leaflet mentioned by one parent

Parents' recommendations for Social Workers

Maybe they should explain more, some of that didn't sit well with me...not enough resources goes into that side of it...they concentrate the resources else-where and there's not enough priority going into preparing parents for this....	Better preparation mentioned by 11 parents.
Make sure parents know the facts otherwise they're totally unprepared when they go in.	Access to social work and other professional reports in advance of the meeting- mentioned by 7 parents.

I suppose, like if we're able to talk more. I'm probably a shy person and I wouldn't have said much but I probably wanted to have said more and explain more about what went on.	Creating more opportunities for listening to parents, mentioned 7 times.
They need to call it what it is, rather than when you're thrown into it and you realise it's a child protection conference, it's a big smack in the jaw like.	Transparency and clarity in language used; mentioned 6 times.
Maybe explain a bit better (what the role of the chairperson is) maybe that was my fault, when I look back, I assumed, I just assumed that the reports were being put in, I was stupid, really.	Clarify the role and independent nature of the chairperson- mentioned 3 times.
Between these conferences there was a couple of social workers that changed, with the family, that's a bit silly, you'd meet a new social worker and they'd be asking you stupid questions that you've gone through already	More consistency with information sharing when there is a staff turn-over- mentioned 3 times.
Sometimes the family gets nervous, and very upset, the social worker needs to calm them down...explain to them 'we are not here to take, we are here to repair'. Let them know you are here to repair and not to destroy, the parents might calm down.	Reassurance- mentioned by 5 parents.
A cup of tea or coffee it might break the atmosphere, that we're all here together, to help me and my daughter, not to attack you. That would break down the barriers and get more of a relationship going.	Access to tea, coffee mentioned 4 times.
They should bring out the cultural differences more, reputation is so important (in the African culture), the social workers can affect that.	Cultural competencies mentioned once.
After this thing was closed off, they should have contacted everyone and said 'listen, we're finished now, unless it's very very serious... or something, please don't contact us with mickey mouse stuff'. It's ridiculous at this stage, when they say it's knocked on the head, they should mean it's knocked on the head.	Following up with agencies and services who have been party to the conference process. Mentioned twice.

Parents' recommendations for other parents new to the CPC system

If parents can, if they should talk up more..., talk beforehand if you can, keep in touch with the social worker. Looking back I would have preferred to have met the social worker more before the conference.	Look for support from the social worker before the conference/ speaking out more. Mentioned by 11 parents.
Two points- get briefed before and be made aware of what might happen and what won't.	Be prepared- mentioned by 8 parents.
Meeting the chair is crucial, you can say your piece there even if you haven't the courage to say it in the meeting.	Meeting the chair before the meeting, mentioned by 7 parents.
Don't agree to everything and bring someone with you	Dissenting and advocacy, mentioned by 6 parents.
Just stay calm really, the more you fight it the worse it's going to be because at the end of the day they're there for your kids and when I got that into my head things went a lot easier, so just listen, and take on board what's being said and if you don't agree just say it but for the most part they're there for your kids. The first one is the worst, they're a bit smart with you when you're trying to defend yourself, especially if you're not prepared for it, and the first one is the worst. They won't be as freaked out in the next meetings.	Staying calm, listening, and recognising the process. Mentioned by 5 parents.
You have to be very strong to survive that stress without going mad but parents need to know that there is light at the end of the tunnel and as long as you can make the changes, things will get better.	Hopefulness mentioned by 3 parents
Realise that you are not in Africa and you are in Ireland. So the parents have to understand that problem has come, and how to sort out the problem. Don't try and fight the system.	Cultural considerations- mentioned by one parent.

Section 3: Conclusions and recommendations for practice

This section sets out the key findings of the research study and for each finding listed, a corresponding recommendation for practice has been developed. The summary of findings and recommendations for practice should be read in conjunction with the parents' recommendations as listed above.

Summary of Key Findings

1. The majority of parents reported not having all the information they needed on the purpose and conduct of the conference and most parents report not having access to written copies of any professional reports in advance of the meeting. The parents who reported being fully prepared by their social worker and having access to professional reports prior to the conference were consistently more positive in their description of their engagement and participation during the process.
 - **Recommendation for practice:** A protocol for parental preparation to be developed and activated prior to parental attendance at child protection conferences. Language used by social worker during preparation phase should be unambiguous. All TUSLA professional reports and other professional reports (where available), to be made available in hard copy to parents 5/7 days in advance of the conference. Conference to be delayed if parents have not had access to social work report prior to conference so that parents can read the report and clarify all matters with the social worker before proceeding with the conference.
2. Parents are not always clear on the range of the possible implications of the conference; all parents in this study were fearful that their children would be removed from their care.
 - **Recommendation for practice:** Acknowledgement by social worker of this fear prior to conference and explanation of the actual process by which children can be removed from parental care to be given, if appropriate. Cultural competency and up skilling may be required in relation to the impact of culture on parenting broadly and more specifically on parents in the child protection system.
3. Parents experience a range of emotions prior to the conference ranging from confidence through to panic, fear and suicidal thoughts. Parents also report a range of distressing physical and emotional reactions and responses during the conference.
 - **Recommendation for practice:** Acknowledgment of emotional impact of conference on parents as part of preparation. Discussion on advocates and supportive persons should take place prior to conference. The social worker to offer advice on how to

prepare for conference, and particular support needs to be met if parents are acutely affected by the process.

4. Parents speak mostly favourably about interactions with social workers, social care workers and conference chairs, and relationships are described for the most part as being supportive, helpful and respectful.

➤ *Recommendation for practice:*

Practitioners to engage in reflective practice to ensure that their practice continues to correspond to social work values and principles, when engaging with parents.

5. A large number of attendees at conferences can be intimidating for parents. Parents report not knowing all of those in attendance, and being confused by the non-attendance of other key professionals known to them, who they are expecting to attend and who they feel have information to contribute to the conference.

➤ *Recommendation for practice:*

Ensure that only those who are thought to be essential for information sharing and the development of the child protection plan are in attendance. Number of invitees to be kept to a minimum and justification to be sought by the chairperson when a large number of professionals are invited. Parents to be consulted on other participants prior to the conference and their input sought (where appropriate). TUSLA to proactively engage with other professionals and agencies to ensure that attendance rates improve for those invited to child protection conferences. The CYPSC to work with agencies and services to ensure they have the information required to meet their obligations under the Children First framework. Training to be provided by TUSLA to partner agencies, specifically on their obligations regarding child protection conferences. TUSLA to offer clear guidelines to partner agencies on how to manage their interactions with children and parents once the CPC process has ended, specifically related to the reporting of new child protection concerns.

6. Parents recognise that they have the right to reply to concerns put forward and feel for the most part, that they are supported to do so. Parents also feel that when they speak up, they are listened to. However it can be difficult for parents to speak up in the meeting, and many prefer not to.

➤ *Recommendation for practice:*

Parents to be supported by social worker to speak up at the conference or arrangements to be put in place to allow their voice to be heard if they prefer to not speak directly to the conference. For example; meeting and speaking to the chairperson prior to the conference, the use of advocates to support parents, inviting parents to write a letter that is read out on their behalf during the conference.

Training to be provided to social workers locally in Galway and Roscommon on how to ensure parents' views are represented fairly to the conference.

7. Parents who disagreed or dissented when a decision was being made, report that they were listened to and their views were respected. However, very few parents reported dissenting or disagreeing during the decision making process.

➤ *Recommendation for practice:*

Social workers and chairpersons to check assumptions that parents are consenting during the decision making process if they are not actively dissenting. Parents who offer alternative suggestions or who disagree with decisions to be listened to and their contribution acknowledged and reasons as to why their suggestions are accepted or not should be given.

8. A number of parents were of the impression that the child protection plan had been agreed between the professionals in advance of the meeting.

➤ *Recommendation for practice:*

Parents to be informed of the independent role of the chairperson and the decision making process to become clearer and more transparent.

9. Parents perceive that there is a power differential between themselves and the professionals, but this awareness does not necessarily prevent parents from participating if they feel they are being treated fairly.

➤ *Recommendation for practice:*

Training to be provided to social workers and conference chairpersons on how to manage the power asymmetry that is a characteristic of the child protection conference system to ensure it does not silence parents. Training on participatory practice to be arranged to ensure that parents are involved as much as possible in the decision making process.

10. Parents are not routinely debriefed after the conference and most report feeling confused and unclear as to the outcome of the conference.

➤ *Recommendation for practice:*

Debriefing to become a structured phase of the conference. A cup of tea should be offered. Parents should meet with the chairperson and social worker as appropriate to work through the matters that have arisen during the conference and to ensure that parents are clear on decisions that have been made, and what is expected of them.

11. Parents report that there is a dip in the intensity of social work activity in the immediate post conference time period.

➤ ***Recommendation for practice:***

Social work input to remain intensive in the days and weeks after the conference to ensure there are no barriers to parents in relation to the child protection plan.

12. Parents do not experience the review meetings as being as stressful or as traumatic as the initial conference.

➤ ***Recommendation for practice:***

The process of relationship building and information gathering could become more effective if more time is spent with parents and children prior to the initial child protection conference; however this may not always be possible in the event of an emergency conference or if the parents are hard to reach or are resistant to social work interactions. If parents are open to engagement with social workers, some of the time that was previously allocated to writing a long and detailed child protection conference report could be more appropriately spent in getting to know the parents and preparing them for the conference. To assist this process consideration may need to be given to the length of reports and a review of the template for the social workers report to the CPC may be required to ensure reports are no longer than necessary.

13. Most parents can identify a number of positive impacts on their family life as a result of the child protection plan. Negative outcomes identified by parents tend to be linked more to their experiences of the conference process itself rather than the child protection plan.

➤ ***Recommendation for practice:***

Training on outcomes focussed/ relationship based practice for social workers and chairpersons. Improvements in the experience of parents in the child protection conference system should support better outcomes for children.

14. Parents have concerns regarding the CPNS and are unclear as to why their children will remain listed until they are 18 years.

➤ ***Recommendation for practice:***

Better information to be provided by chairpersons if decision is taken to list children on the CPNS. Develop a system whereby some referrals to the CPC could be diverted to the Family Welfare Conference process at an early stage; in these circumstances, a FWC plan may then be reviewed in the CPC without a requirement to list children on the CPNS. It may also be appropriate for some parents to be able to trigger a review meeting at an earlier interval than six months if they are making progress on the child protection plan.

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