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**TúsLA**  
An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

# Through the Eyes of the Child

**A Study of Tusla Child Protection  
& Welfare Intervention**

**A research study commissioned by Tusla - Child and Family Agency**



Stephanie Holt, Robbie Gilligan, Louise Caffrey & Eavan Brady,  
School of Social Work & Social Policy,  
The University of Dublin, Trinity College.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CP&W - Child Protection and Welfare

CPC – Child Protection Conference

SP – Safety Plan

SN – Safety Network

NCCIS – National Child Care Information System

CPWS – Child Protection and Welfare Strategy

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

Understanding children’s experiences of child protection and welfare services is central to a child-centred, rights-based approach to working with children and young people and to improving service quality since it may lead to more relevant and informed decisions, which are more likely to be implemented. Better understanding children’s experiences is also part of an evidence-based practice and policy approach to service evaluation and development. Informed by a consultation process with two groups of children and young people that took place in June 2019, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, commissioned a research study in 2020 to capture the views of children and young people who are the recipients of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare services. This report documents the findings of that commissioned research undertaken with twenty children and young people, focusing on their experiences of engagement with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in Ireland.

### Methodology

Drawing on learning from similar studies in other jurisdictions and in response to the research questions posed in the Tender, an exploratory qualitative study using semi-structured individual interviews was employed in order to capture the participating children’s subjective and lived experiences - to see the world through their eyes, as experienced by them. Qualitative methods are often used in social work research to explore sensitive topics and to offer an insider perspective that can inform evidence-based practice. From an organisational learning perspective, interviews also enable the contextualisation of experiences and understandings.

Following dual ethical approval processes (Institutional TCD and Tusla REC), and with the oversight of the Steering Committee, participating Tusla Areas and key Tusla personnel were identified to support the research. Lessons learnt on the challenges of recruiting children to participate in any research project and specifically in research on sensitive topics and with those groups considered vulnerable, informed the process adopted for this study. Taking the most inclusive approach possible to sampling, all children who met the most basic inclusion criteria – their age at the point of building the sample – was the only initial criteria that mattered. This considerably reduced any possible influence of professionals on the sample. A process of purposive sampling then followed, resulting in 20 children and young people completing an interview on their experiences of engaging with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The recruitment of children was significantly supported by identified Gatekeepers in the three areas. The final sample of children included 12 females and 8 males who were aged between 10 and 18 years of age at the point of interview.



## Findings

Overall, many of the children considered that involvement with Tusla had had a positive impact in their lives. They could see for example, how the original issues that had demanded Tusla's involvement, had become more manageable, how family members had taken more charge of change in their lives, how the resources of the family had been mobilised in new ways, or how they or their family had found ways to access new supports beyond the family. The children identified reduced conflict in their family relationships and increased support, both informal and formal for their parents which they considered had made a difference to the quality of family life. The children could identify various changes for themselves personally, ranging from improved mental health to having more support and fewer worries about family life. They also reported examples of how Tusla involvement had resulted in positive changes in their siblings' well-being and behaviour. Many children talked warmly about Tusla workers whose interventions and genuine care for them had been instrumental in achieving that positive change. They also identified issues and concerns where they thought there was room for improvement in the process.

The children's narratives highlight that fear, stigma and misunderstandings about Tusla's role can act as barriers to their engagement with Tusla. Fear sometimes was about their concern that Tusla involvement could result in the family being broken up, fear could be about what others might say about Tusla's involvement – and that fear was connected to the stigma they felt would be associated with their contact with Tusla. They recalled this fear of the possible consequences of contact with Tusla in terms of themselves or their family in the early stages of engagement, but fear and uncertainty was also experienced at critical moments along the way, for example when they worried about what was going to happen at a meeting or when an important decision was being made. For many children, this fear became a barrier to their ability to hear and absorb information about why Tusla was working with their family and what Tusla was doing. This difficulty could be further compounded by professionals using hard to understand language. Fears and hard to understand language meant that many children ended up unclear as to key aspects of the child protection processes in their lives.

While there was certainly diversity in the sample of participating children in terms of age, gender, reason for involvement and length of involvement, emerging clearly from their narratives was a broad consensus on what they said matters to them. Open and honest communication was considered by the children as a critical ingredient in trust building. Children tell us that having a child friendly understanding of what is going on when Tusla are involved is really important to them and that this understanding needs to be unambiguous and timely. To this end, the children identified how the use of additional communication tools helped them to build their trust in the process and the key adult

involved with them. Some of the Signs of Safety tools and processes clearly have the potential to support communication between the children and adults involved.

Building trust with the child takes time, but when seen through the child's eyes it is key to successful intervention and crucially to addressing the barriers they identified that can impede their engagement with Tusla. The participating children highly valued adults who they liked and trusted, who they felt genuinely cared about them and would represent and take account of their wishes and feelings in decision making. The children were also very clear that trust was both hard to build and easy to lose. It could be undermined by any turnover of staff without the children understanding why they were leaving and without having the impact of their leaving acknowledged.

Child participation is an important guiding principle for Tusla and for national policy and the children told us clearly that they do want to be involved in what is going on. However, their opinions varied a lot on how to 'do participation'. Through the eyes of the children in this study, participation was as much about feeling that what they had to say mattered and was taken into account, rather than simply about them getting what they wanted. The outcome is therefore not necessarily what children are judging when considering their satisfaction with decision making. Rather, the process is important to them in its own right. The children's narratives also told us that they need support for participation to take place effectively. This support includes being prepared for what will happen at big meetings, knowing who will be there, what will be said and who will hear it.

For children in general, and certainly for the children in this study, school is a hugely significant place - perhaps the most important part of their lives beyond their family. Relations with peers and teachers are very influential in terms of confidence, sense of self-worth and social inclusion. The children in the sample were acutely sensitive to how peers and teachers interpret their involvement with Tusla. They reported a lot of stress around the risk of losing face among peers should their Tusla involvement become 'public'. They also had concerns about the possible effects of sharing information about their family life at Child Protection Conferences and similar events.

## Conclusions

The unique and insightful contributions from the twenty children and young people who participated in this study, reflects existing knowledge whilst simultaneously bringing new perspectives on how children and young people experience engaging with child protection and welfare services. To that end their contributions allow us to conclude with suggestions for improved processes, whilst also highlighting some challenges that need to be addressed.

Through the child's eye, we understand that children need communication processes that are tailored to their needs and support their understanding of what is going on, every step of the way. Open and

honest communication was considered by the children as a critical ingredient in trust building, as was being helped to understand why information was shared and why decisions were made. Children also had their own unique understanding of what participation meant to them. They understand participation as a mechanism for being heard, informed and ‘taken seriously’ and not necessarily being in the room with professionals when decisions were being made. Trust seemed a critical and foundational quality of a relationship where it emerged and without which, there may exist no opportunity for children to explore or express opinions or feel their opinions have an impact. Ultimately, children were clear that it was important to them that they could understand what was going on, that they felt understood by the key adult working with them, and that the adult would represent and take account of their wishes and feelings in decision making.

While children valued the interest and concern of teachers about their welfare, social work decisions to meet the child in the school, perfectly reasonable in practical terms, could cause children a lot of discomfort when they then had to account for this to their peers in the fishbowl world of school. This is certainly not to say that social workers should abandon work in or with schools, but our findings certainly demonstrate a need to proceed with sensitivity on this front and to discuss openly with the child their concerns and how best to manage them.

Finally, child protection services step into the child’s wider world when Tusla staff make contact. That child’s world includes family, neighbours, friends, school and their connections to sporting, cultural or youth organisations, as well as possible connections to other professional systems (for example Child and Adolescent Mental Health). The people in these various settings may provide valued support day-to-day to the child and assist them directly or indirectly in managing the challenges that have prompted Tusla to step in. The children’s responses have demonstrated to us that a full understanding of the child’s experience of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare services and interventions requires an appreciation of how wider services, resources and family/community connections interact to enact the particular child protection and welfare *eco-system* (services plus other community assets) for *this* child. Therefore, an exclusive focus on understanding *service*, risks obscuring wider *protective experiences* offered potentially within this eco-system. Children spoke frequently about how helpful or stressful the interaction of Tusla with other actors, contexts and systems could be in their lives. This seems an important message to inform Tusla interventions and assessments.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and context to the research

Transformed social meanings of childhood have led to a changed conceptualisation of children who are no longer seen as ‘objects of concern’, but as active, agentic, social people with the capacity to make sense of their own world and who construct and create social relationships within that world (James & Prout, 1990). This approach to capacity and rights is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which sets out the child’s right to express his/her views freely in matters affecting him/her and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity (United Nations, 1989). Further, children have rights to protection and care, and services responsible for the care or protection of children should be of an appropriate standard (The United Nations, 1989). Taking account of children’s perspectives and experiences in service design and delivery can be understood as an integral part of operationalising the concept of ‘child participation’.

Understanding children’s experiences of child protection and welfare (CP&W) services is therefore central to a child-centred, rights-based approach to working with children and young people. Echoing this framework, nationally, children’s rights to participation and voice are enshrined in the Child Care Act 1991 and, since 2015, in Article 42A of the Constitution. Further, the national child protection and welfare guidelines, *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*, identify the child’s right to be ‘heard, listened to and taken seriously’ and in accordance with their age and understanding, to be involved in matters and decisions that may affect their lives (DCYA, 2017, p. 48). Finally, the concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports on Ireland by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, published on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2023<sup>1</sup>, recommends that Ireland ‘strengthens measures to promote meaningful and empowered participation of all children, including children in disadvantaged situations, within the family, the community, schools and in the realm of policy making at the local, municipal and national levels (2023, p. 5).

Recent National Children’s Strategies have articulated a strong policy commitment to better understand children’s lives across all sectors and ensure that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective lives (DCEDIY, 2019; DCYA, 2012, 2015; Department of Health and Children, 2000). Tusla Child and Family Agency was established in 2014 and is the State agency responsible for improving child wellbeing and outcomes. Its responsibilities under the Child and Family Act 2013 include offering care and protection for children whose parents have not been able to or are unlikely to be able to provide the care the child needs. The Agency is required to maintain and develop

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<sup>1</sup> <https://assets.gov.ie/220136/d2f2ea1b-28af-44f9-8d19-53f707e5abc6.pdf>

the services needed to deliver supports to children and families. This includes strengthening interagency co-operation to ensure children and families receive a seamless response to needs. Further, Tusla is required to ascertain and give weight to the views of children so that they help to shape the Agency's policies and services. Finally, it is tasked with undertaking research relating to its functions and to provide information regarding those functions to the Minister.

In 2019 Tusla developed its first participation strategy, spanning the period 2019-23 (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2019), aiming to embed participation of children in the Agency's culture and operations through an integrated programme of work (Tierney, Kennan, Forkan, Brady, & Jackson, 2018). The associated work programme introduced national children and youth participation training and a toolkit for practitioners (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2016). Of relevance, the introduction of Signs of Safety as the national approach to practice in Ireland in 2017 is a key element of Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022. It aims to support a transformation of child protection and welfare (CP&W) services to ensure that children and families actively participate in the decisions that affect their lives (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2017)

Indicative within the rights-based approach are several other reasons that necessitate understanding children's experiences of the CP&W system. Firstly, understanding children's experiences is essential to improve service quality since it may lead to more relevant and informed decisions, which are more likely to be implemented. Indeed, better understanding children's experiences is part of an evidence-based practice and policy approach to service evaluation and development (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2019). Further, understanding children's experiences is important since research strongly suggests that for individual children, feeling heard supports child well-being; affecting children's self-esteem and self-efficacy (Sinclair, 2004; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). Moreover, when children in the CP&W system are not heard or given a chance to participate in decisions that affect them it can negatively affect their emotional well-being (Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010; Nybell, 2013).

With a stated commitment to children's participation, Tusla commissioned a research study in 2020 to capture the views of children and young people who are the recipients of Tusla CP&W services, in order to understand their experiences to inform the ongoing implementation of the Child Protection and Welfare Strategy (CPWS) and frontline practices with children and young people. This present report documents the findings of that commissioned research undertaken with twenty children and young people aged between 10 and 18 years of age at the point of interview.

## 1.2 Signs of Safety

Signs of Safety is a strengths-based, safety-organised approach to CP&W casework. It is fundamentally grounded in supporting professionals to develop constructive working relationships with children and young people, families, and their wider networks of support, as well as with other professionals, while maintaining a strong focus on safety. A defining feature is that Signs of Safety aims to support families, and individuals naturally connected to them, to bring to the table, and, if safe to do so, implement their ideas for how they can provide safe care for their children, to avoid the statutory agency imposing its own solutions (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Relationships are central to the approach and the interaction between worker and service recipient is considered the 'key vehicle for change' (Turnell & Edwards, 1999, p. 13).

Signs of Safety tools and processes aim to 'give children a strong voice in child protection work and to more actively involve them in assessment, in understanding why professionals are intervening in their lives and in safety planning' (Turnell & Murphy, 2017, p. 38). As such, children and young people's participation features in each step of the approach and a key Signs of Safety principle is that all written and spoken statements should be in plain language that can be easily understood by all service-users including children. The Signs of Safety tools include '*My Three Houses*' (or equivalent variations, for example, '*Wizards and Fairies*' or '*My Three Planets*'), '*Words and Pictures*' explanations and child relevant safety plans. '*My Three Houses*' provides a visual, child-centred tool to undertake child protection assessment and planning with children. The '*House of Good Things*', '*House of Worries*' and '*House of Dreams*' mirrors the Signs of Safety mapping process that is used with adults and older children. '*My Three Houses*' therefore helps facilitate an understanding of, from the child's perspective, what's working well, what are we worried about and what needs to change (Weld & Parker, no date). '*Words and Pictures*' aims to provide children with an age-appropriate explanation that professionals and parents agree on about child protection concerns and safety planning, and to directly involve them in safety planning. The safety plan may include a '*Safety Object*'. This is an object (e.g. a toy) that the child chooses and always leaves in a chosen location. If the child moves the '*Safety Object*', the '*Safety Network*' people need to ask the child are they okay. The child can move the object to test that the system works (Turnell & Murphy, 2017). Further information regarding Signs of Safety, as well as visuals of the tools used with children are available from the Tusla website.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.tusla.ie/services/child-protection-welfare/publications-and-forms/social-work-and-signs-of-safety-information-leaflets/>



### 1.3 Conceptual framework: Whole system learning

A whole-system ‘organisational learning’ approach (Senge, 1994) is embedded within the CPWS and the study reported on here is part of Tusla’s programme for wider action research through the parent and staff surveys. Therefore, the current research incorporates a number of systems thinking concepts (Caffrey & Munro, 2017; Dekker, Hollnagel, Woods, & Cook, 2008; Hummelbrunner, 2011; Munro, 2005) in order to ensure that the research findings are not reduced to a summative assessment but rather are actionable to the purpose of continual organisational learning. (Dekker et al., 2008; Munro, Turnell, & Murphy, 2016; van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2015). The current study has focused fundamentally on gaining an understanding of children’s experiences but also goes beyond this to seek to understand, from the child’s perspective, what has contributed to these experiences. The research therefore provides a way to pinpoint what is working well and what might need to change. This is in keeping with the concept that children and their families are active participants in CP&W work and so outcomes are co-produced (Fish, Munro, & Bairstow, 2008). In this sense the research design has privileged the need to understand how children, as individuals, respond to the frontline practices they experience.

### 1.4 Introducing the research

This study provides a point-in-time picture of children’s experiences of Tusla’s CP&W services, from the perspective of the children engaged with those services. The study was designed to answer the following key research questions as requested by the tender:

- How do children experience Tusla’s child protection and welfare services?
- What is the experience of children of their voices being heard in decisions that affect them in child protection and welfare provision?

The TCD proposal submitted in response to the Request for Tender issued by Tusla, was successfully approved in February 2020, with a timeline to complete by July 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted this planned timeline as face-to-face interviews with children were not possible due to public health restrictions. While some phases of the research were commenced in 2020 (ethical approval process; literature review), sampling and recruitment were initiated in June 2022 with interviews completed between August 2022 and January 2023.

The research tender was informed by a consultation process with two groups of children and young people that took place in June 2019. One of the groups, an established ‘Youth Advisory Committee’, comprises 18 young people aged 13-18 years, six of whom (aged 14-17 at the point of consultation) advised on the research tender. A second ‘Youth Advisory Panel’ also contributed to the consultation process for this research tender. Six members of this panel, aged 14-17, advised on the tender design.

Both groups were asked the same questions regarding appropriate ways to engage with children and young people about their experience of Tusla; approaches to data collection, location of data collection (if appropriate); features of the sample, including inclusion and exclusion criteria; recruitment processes; and how to communicate the findings.

#### 1.4.1 Methodology

Owing to the dearth of empirical research in this area in an Irish context, and in response to the research questions posed, an exploratory study using qualitative methods was considered to be the most appropriate research design (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This decision was reached, drawing on learning from similar studies in other jurisdictions, including the UK (Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2016), Estonia (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017), Spain (Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, & Pastor, 2017) and Norway (Husby, Slettebø, & Juul, 2018), where qualitative methods, largely focused on semi-structured individual interviews were employed, in order to capture subjective experience (Silverman, 2011). Furthermore, and drawing on the research teams’ experience, research on a sensitive topic that seeks to explore the views and experiences of a vulnerable group, which children who are engaged with the CP&W services can be regarded as, is more likely to involve a qualitative methodology (Liamputtong, 2007; Øverlien & Holt, 2018, 2021). Indeed, qualitative methods are often used in social work research to explore sensitive topics or to understand the lived experience of a person, offering an insider perspective that can inform evidence-based practice (Padgett, 2008)

Notwithstanding the advice from the consultation that Tusla carried out with children to inform the parameters of the tender and specifically some stated preference for survey-based research, reservations about pursuing this methodological approach were highlighted. Firstly, the likely problem of poor response rates that are generally associated with survey methodology was considered. Secondly, we reflected on critically important ethical concerns for children’s well-being in terms of asking them to answer survey questions about potentially sensitive material without adequate support. Thirdly, a survey approach also carries certain GDPR related issues. These considerations influenced our decision to pursue qualitative semi-structured individual interviews. Whilst acknowledging that quantitative methods can be used successfully in children’s research, qualitative data nonetheless provides richer meaning and context to the children’s experience (Øverlien & Holt, 2021). Qualitative methods allow respondents to communicate their own subjective experience, which Freeman and Mathison (2009) argue is more suited to authentic research with children. Furthermore, qualitative methods, in contrast to quantitative approaches, allow for a more emotive dataset and understanding of the child’s world (Grover, 2004).

The goal with the interview therefore is to capture the lifeworld of the child and the meaning they attach to it (Winter et al., 2017) to the best of our (adult) abilities, i.e. to see the world through the

eyes of the child, as experienced by them. As such, we aim to cover both the factual and meaning level, that is; what happened and when, as well as what meaning the child ascribes to what has happened. Semi-structured interviews provide a framework for discussion while allowing for probative follow-up and affording children sufficient control to direct the discussion to issues unanticipated by the researcher (Mabry, 2008). This method also ensures that misunderstandings on the part of the interviewer or interviewee could be checked immediately (Brenner, Brown, & Canter, 1985). Importantly, in terms of the objective of organisational learning, interviews enable the contextualisation of experiences and understandings (Bryman, 2016).

#### 1.4.2 Research Study Steering Committee, study design and rationale

In accordance with the Request for Tender, a Steering Committee was established from the outset of the project with the overall aim of supporting the research. This Steering Committee comprised of Tusla staff and other relevant professionals and representatives and met six times over the lifetime of the project<sup>3</sup>.

Once both institutional (TCD) and Tusla ethical approval was secured, an initial meeting with the Steering Committee (as constituted above) was convened in order to agree the three participating Tusla Areas and identify gatekeepers to support the research team in accessing the proposed sample of participants. The three Tusla Areas for the fieldwork were chosen by the commissioners for the research team, with the selection influenced primarily by the Areas that were considered to have the capacity to provide the support the project would require at local level. While each Area had both urban and rural areas, none of the participating Areas included large urban centres which undoubtedly affected the complexion of the achieved sample and the participating children's lived experience. A further consideration is that the selected Areas did not have certain facilities within their catchment, for example Direct Provision Centres/Homeless Hubs, which again affected the profile of the achieved sample and the nature of experiences reflected in the data. This was agreed with the Steering Committee from the outset as a limitation of the study. Future research should seek to capture the experiences of families in larger urban areas, and in relevant forms of specialist provision. One Tusla employee on the Steering Committee was agreed as the link person connecting the local Gatekeepers and NCCIS individual in each area. All three local Gatekeepers held senior/managerial roles in their respective areas.

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<sup>3</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for the Steering Committee membership

#### 1.4.3 Sampling and recruitment strategy

One of the earliest challenges facing the research team was the restriction on the age of the potential sample, with no children under 10 years of age meeting the inclusion criteria. Restricting the involvement of children on the grounds of age does not stay true to the inclusive nature of research with children, particularly when there is clear evidence of the involvement of children as young as five years of age in similar research (De Clercq et al., 2022; Finan, Salveron, & Bromfield, 2016; Gorin, Baginsky, Moriarty, & Manthorpe, 2021). The lead author has experience of interviewing very young children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse and is an established advocate for inclusive research practice (Øverlien & Holt, 2018, 2021). The challenge for the commissioners and for the research team was to respect the advice of the consultation process with children and young people who informed the research design (including specifically the age restrictions) whilst also conducting inclusive research. As argued elsewhere (Øverlien & Holt, 2021), it is the responsibility of the research team to provide a safe space for any child to participate and to have the skills to engage a child of any age. It should not be the responsibility of the child to 'prove' their capacity to engage, whether that proof is determined on age or any other grounds. For future research projects, we would strongly recommend the inclusion of younger children, in line with international research practice in this field and elsewhere. This would consequently have implications for the methods of engaging children in the interview process, relying more heavily on creative art and play methodologies (Tatham-Fashanu, 2022).

From the outset, it was agreed that the sampling of cases would be purposive rather than random, seeking to represent a range of case types in order to achieve a sample that represented, in so far as it was possible, the sample of children engaged with Tusla. Heterogeneity of cases was therefore targeted in terms of (but not restricted to) reflecting the following criteria, whilst also anticipating a degree of overlap of intersectionality between these categories:

- Age
- Gender
- Regional distribution (including rural/urban representation where appropriate)
- Disability (child and/or parent)
- Ethnic minority status
- Reason for referral (to include child or parental mental health, addiction, domestic violence and physical, sexual and emotional neglect and abuse;
- Families in homelessness 'Hubs' or Direct Provision;
- TESS involvement

The study sampling strategy operated broad inclusion criteria, with only children not meeting these criteria being excluded from the study. This strategy ensured that only parents, or children themselves, could influence the children's involvement. The inclusion criteria applied was as follows:

- Children aged 10 – 17<sup>4</sup> years of age on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2022, who have experienced either initial assessment and/or child protection conference (CPC), or are open to CP&W in the previous 12-18 months. This criterion was in keeping with the parameters of the study established by Tusla in the RFT.

Children were considered not eligible for inclusion in the study on the following grounds:

- Where they were under 10 or over 17 years of age on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2022.
- Where they had not experienced either initial assessment and/or CPC or are open to CP&W in the previous 12 -18 months.
- Where they were in care when the sample of eligible children was being collated<sup>5</sup>.

#### 1.4.4 Building the sampling frame

Reflecting the case categories listed above, a blank sampling frame grid built in Excel was distributed to the NCCIS contact in each of the three areas. With consideration for the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied, each of the three areas individually returned the sample frame with the anonymised details of all children meeting the selection criteria and comprising of the categories and case types outlined above<sup>6</sup>. Selecting the sample in each of the three areas rigorously adhered to the following steps:

1. The data set for each area was cleaned and checked and in all three areas returned by the research team for confirmation, further information or clarification, cross checks etc.
2. Once each individual area data set was finalised, a robust analysis of each area's data set was conducted to capture a picture of the area in terms of the cases and characteristics of same<sup>7</sup>.
3. Each set of case characteristics was further drilled down into, to ensure that the final sample selected in each area, was representative (in so far as it could be) of the total population of in the sample<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> While children could only be included in the sampling frame between the ages of 10-17, a number had turned 18 at the point of interview.

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions to this exclusion criteria arose when a child selected for inclusion in the sample and agreed to participate, was received in to care, subsequent to the sample frame being built.

<sup>6</sup> Please see appendix 2 for an example of a completed grid.

<sup>7</sup> Please see appendix 3 for an example of this first stage analysis prior to sampling.

<sup>8</sup> Please see appendix 4 for an example of the second stage analysis engaged in before the sample was selected.

4. An initial anonymised sample of eight children was given to the local gatekeeper in each area who liaised with the social worker for the case and directly with family: Parents first, then the child (this process is outlined below in detail).
5. When a child did not engage (or their parent/guardian/s did not consent for them to be engaged), the sample frame was returned revisited, always with an eye to representation in each area, as per step 3 above.
6. The fifth step of identifying children for invitation to participate continued until the sample of 20 was reached.

The Participant Information Leaflets<sup>9</sup> and Consent Forms<sup>10</sup> were passed on by the Gatekeepers to the parent(s)/guardians of the children selected for inclusion. Following parental consent for the child to be invited to participate, Participant Information Leaflets<sup>11</sup> and Assent Forms<sup>12</sup>, in age-appropriate language, format and design, were provided to the child, again through the Gatekeepers. This material clearly outlined what the research was about, what was expected of the participants, where the information would go/would be used for; e.g. what the plans were for dissemination, and all ethical considerations that the child needed to understand. The Information Sheet also stressed that there was no obligation on the child to participate and that they could withdraw their assent to do so at any point in the process, without any negative implications for them. Once the child indicated their interest in participating, and in the spirit of prioritising the child's voice and facilitating the child's participation, the child was given the choice of directly contacting the researcher themselves, their parents could contact the researcher on their behalf, or the gatekeeper could contact the researcher. In the latter case, this contact could also involve an introductory meeting between the researcher and the child. Provision of WhatsApp/text was also included as an option to support an older child making direct contact. In all cases, the gatekeeper facilitated that contact on the child's behalf. It was then the responsibility of the research team to ensure assent/consent was secured before the interview commenced. This is discussed again in the ethics section later in the chapter.

The challenges of recruiting children to participate in any research project and specifically in research on sensitive topics and with those groups considered vulnerable, has been extensively commented on in the literature. Specifically, where gaining access to vulnerable children is dependent on a range of gatekeepers, including professionals, parents and carers, children may never be invited to participate because of adult concerns about potential harm to the child arising from that participation (Race &

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix 5

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 6

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 7

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 8

Frost, 2022). Gorin et al. (2021) also caution that when social workers are charged with identifying children for inclusion in research, they may exercise their own discretion on which child to include and which to exclude. Mitigating against these established limitations, a clear strength of the sampling and recruitment process involved a conscious minimisation of the role of professionals in deciding what children were invited to participate in the research and what circumstances might influence their inclusion or exclusion in the sample. Taking the most inclusive approach possible to sampling, all children who met the most basic inclusion criteria – their age at the point of building the sample – was the only initial criteria that mattered. This considerably reduced any possible influence of professionals on the sample. Once the research team identified the sample of children to be interviewed, their parent/guardian had to give their consent for the child to be invited to give their assent to participate. This is discussed further in the ethics section below.

#### 1.4.5 Role of the Gatekeepers

The role of the Gatekeepers in this research was pivotal to the success of the recruitment process and is a key learning that will be taken going forward by both the research team and the commissioners. Several factors in the approach taken by the Gatekeepers are worth a brief mention:

Firstly, the Gatekeepers were wholly committed to the success of the research process in each of their own areas and this was reflected in their commitment to the research from the outset. Care was taken in all communication with the research team, with positive ‘turnaround’ responses, to what was most likely intensive periods of demand, for clarity and further information on the sample set. Secondly, the interviewers were given a very brief verbal profile on the child they were interviewing – for example if the child was chatty or shy, or little tips that might enhance the interview process. Thirdly, successes in recruitment have to have been influenced in part by the time given to explaining the purpose of the research to parents and then to children. The patience and genuine interest the Gatekeepers showed in the process, was evident in their care of child participants and their parent(s) on the day of the interview, where transport was provided, or at the very least the gatekeeper was there to meet the family, introduce the child to the researcher and wait until after the interview to close off the process and/or bring the child home. The warmth of engagement and the rapport with both families and with the research interviewers was palpable. Finally and notwithstanding that busy managers were acting as Gatekeepers, the fact that the primary focus of their working day became the research, ensured that the process ran smoothly, everyone was minded but overall, the clear message communicated was that this research was important and what the research participants had to say was important.

#### 1.4.6 Conducting the interviews <sup>13</sup>

As stated earlier, the method of data collection involved one-to-one semi-structured individual interviews with the 20 participating children, at a time and at a location agreed between them and the local Gatekeepers. A variety of locations were utilised, including Tusla offices, Foróige and similar youth centres and one interview which took place in Trinity College Dublin.<sup>14</sup> A semi-structured interview schedule guided the topics discussed in the interview<sup>15</sup>. However, interviewer skills also facilitated free narrative from the participants, allowing them to give voice to and co-construct the interview. As such while all interviews covered the same broad range of topics, the interview ‘journey’ varied hugely, with the child driving the pace and route of that journey to varying degrees. The research team’s experience in engaging children of all ages in difficult conversations about sensitive aspects of their lives, was instrumental in eliciting those views and perspective. All interviews were digitally recorded with participants’ permission and transcribed verbatim.

With specific reference to the need to create ‘safe emotional spaces for children to fully inform and express their views’ (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2019, p. 3), each interview began with an informal chat in order to ease the participant into the interview format and re-confirm that the participant understood the purpose of the interview and was willingly giving their consent to continue with the process. Careful attention was given throughout all interviews to both verbal and non-verbal cues, with opportunities for breaks in the process or ending of the process, as determined by the interviewee<sup>16</sup>. The participant was offered control of the recording device and offered an ‘opt out’ of any questions or discussions they did not wish to answer or engage in. All the interviews closed by checking in with the participant that they had been given a chance to say everything that was important to them regarding their experience of engaging with Tusla and had been offered an opportunity to contribute anything that the research interview had not addressed. For the purpose of contributing to learning for the research process regarding the inclusion of children and young people in research, the participants were asked to comment, where it was possible to do so, on their experience of the research interview – specifically if they would participate again, now that they understood fully what participating involved. All children who answered that question, confirmed that they would participate again, even where that participation was upsetting for them. All participants

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<sup>13</sup> This research adhered to Children First 2017(National Guidance on the Protection and Welfare of Children)(DCYA, 2017) and to DCYA’s (2012) Ethical guidelines on the conduct of research with children.

<sup>14</sup> This involved one participant who had moved from the Tusla area where they were sampled from, to a Direct Provision centre in Dublin.

<sup>15</sup> See appendix 9.

<sup>16</sup> Only one young person accepted the offer of a break in the interview when they became upset while telling their story. After a short break, the young person engaged again with the interview.



were given a small non-monetary gift as a token of appreciation for their time and their views. They were not informed of this gift in advance of the interview.

Across the three participating areas the total sample included 279 children, from which 21 children participated in interview. One completed interview was not included in the final sample for ethical reasons. In this one case, a very short interview conducted with a young participant raised concerns for the interviewer and research team, that the participant did not fully understand the purpose of the interview and did not demonstrate an understanding of the questions they were being asked. The focus of the interview was altered shortly after the interview began when these concerns emerged with the focus of the ensuing conversation focused on everyday things like school, Christmas etc. As such, the final sample set included twenty completed interviews.

Reasons given for non-engagement included parents not wanting to engage with the process, parents not wanting their child to engage with the process, largely due to other issues or commitments or appointments that the child had on at the point of invitation, parents open to their child engaging but the child not wanting to engage, children expressing interest in engaging but then declining on the day of interview, not turning up for interview or were sick on the day. While for some of these children, stated illness may have been their way of exercising their ability not to consent to participate, two children who failed to turn up for their initial interview, subsequently re-arranged an interview time and followed through on that second appointment. The interviews were between 15 and 70 minutes long, with an average of 45 minutes per interview.

#### 1.4.7 Analysis

As stated, with the expressed permission of the participants, all interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed verbatim. Data was coded and analysed thematically using an inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Boyatzis (1998) maintains that thematic analysis is suitable for exploratory research when little is already known about a phenomenon.

Once all the data was collected, formal analysis began involving all team members, with each interview transcript read and coded by a minimum of two team members.

#### 1.4.8 Ethics

With a stated and acknowledged responsibility towards the ‘researched’, whose dignity and well-being is absolutely integral to the integrity of the research, the researchers’ responsibility is to conduct ethical research that protects the research participants and respects their rights. Comprehensive attention was given to the ethical considerations involved in this research, involving a dual ethics

approval process<sup>17</sup> and a dual DPIA approval process<sup>18</sup>. Ethically sound research is said to reflect three fundamental core features: Ensuring voluntary informed consent; doing no harm; and the guaranteeing of confidentiality and anonymity. The research design adopted for this project ensured that participants were safeguarded across each of these three core features. This is discussed in more detail below.

#### *Informed consent*

In terms of seeking children’s agreement to participate, as well as securing parental consent, it is also important that children provide their assent to take part. The gatekeeper in each of the three participating areas was asked to use the relevant Information Sheet to discuss the research with the children once their parent(s) had given permission to do so. At this stage then, the gatekeeper was asked to facilitate an interview time with the researcher for children who were happy to participate. On the day of the interview, the researcher once again talked the child through the Information Sheet using age-appropriate language. The children were informed that while their parent(s) had given permission for them to speak to the researcher, it was now up to them to decide if they wanted to participate. Notwithstanding considerable intervention and explanation on behalf of the Gatekeepers, there were many participants who did not fully understand what they were participating in. The research team spent further time explaining this, using the language/text of Signs of Safety to support that understanding. For example, each child was told *‘your social worker may have talked to you about the things that are working well in your family and also what could be working better in your family. Today I am really interested in finding out from you, what is working well with how Tusla work with children and young people and what Tusla could be doing to make it work better’*.

#### *Confidentiality and anonymity*

In accordance with the Children First Act 2015 and as reflected in Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (DCYA, 2017), there exists an obligation to report any disclosure to the Child and Family Agency made by a participant that indicates the harm of a child. Equally, should a participant disclose any thoughts of harming themselves, this would warrant a breach of confidentiality. Adhering to sound ethical research practice and as a requirement of the research ethics approval process, a disclosure protocol was put in place<sup>19</sup>. This ensured that a

<sup>17</sup> Research ethics approval was granted by both the REC in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, TCD, and by a bespoke Research Ethics Committee established by Tusla for the purpose of this study.

<sup>18</sup> TCD Data Protection Office and Tusla DPO approval.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 10.



consistent approach was applied to incidents where confidentiality may be breached. Participants were fully informed, both verbally and in writing of the necessity to breach confidentiality if such a disclosure was made.<sup>20</sup>

Every effort was also made to protect the anonymity of all participants, with all data generated anonymised, removing any identifying details such as identifiable data on the family unit, locations and services. Participants were made fully aware of the possibility of their data being used in conference papers, articles, agency reports and other academic material in the information leaflet provided to them and on the consent form, in line with GDPR regulations.

*Ensuring no harm*

There is a justifiable need for greater ethical concern when including children in research on sensitive topics, however this can be outweighed when it is in the best interest of children that the research is conducted (Øverlien, 2010). In a discussion on domestic violence research with children, Øverlien (2010) argues that “research not only needs children, but children need research, and research can have an empowering effect on children in need” (p.90). The National Consent Policy states that “children should not be denied the possible benefits of research participation but instead should be afforded the opportunity to participate in research on matters that might affect them” (National Consent Advisory Group, 2013, p. 70)<sup>21</sup>. Every effort was made to ensure that the likelihood of any participant experiencing either psychological or physical harm through participation in the research was minimised and that additional safeguards were put in place to protect participants, acknowledging the sensitive nature of the research topic. The inclusion and exclusion criteria set out earlier in this chapter were one aspect to ensure the safeguarding of children who participated in the research. Alongside this, measures were put in place as a further means of addressing the need to conduct ethically sound research with children ensuring ‘no harm’ through participation.

1.4.9 The sample

The sample of twenty children who participated in this study comprised 12 females and 8 males, aged between 10 and 18 years old. The breakdown and spread of ages is represented in the following table:

Age of Children	Number & Gender of Children
10 years	2 male (James & Liam)

<sup>20</sup> In one interview, the child disclosed information that prompted concern for the interviewee’s safety and welfare. Having discussed this concern with the child, the PI made a referral to the local gatekeeper.  
<sup>21</sup> On 20<sup>th</sup> December 2022, the HSE published the HSE National Policy for Consent in Health and Social Care Research. The policy outlines how to safely and ethically conduct the consenting process of health and social care research across the HSE and funded organisations.

11 years	1 female (Clara)
12 years	5 (3 female & 2 male)(Peter, Adam, Molly, Aisling and Nadia)
13 years	1 male (Eoin)
14 years	2 female (Sophia & Ruby)
15 years	2 female (Sadie & Sineád)
16 years	3 (2 female & 1 male)(Ciara, Leah & John)
17 years	2 males (David & Scott)
18 years	2 females (Cathy & Aoife)

The analysis of their anonymised data prior to and as an integral part of the sample selection process, highlighted the range of issues and concerns that had brought them to the attention of Tusla. Domestic violence and abuse, parental mental health and addiction issues were dominant threads connecting the participants, with some implications identified for their own well-being. While not asked any specific questions in interview about the reason/s their family were currently or had been involved with Tusla, many participants chose to share varying levels of detail about those reasons.

In addition to discussing the nature of their engagement with Tusla over time, the participants also talked about a range of other supports and resources that they were connected in with as a result Tusla involvement. They also identified and discussed a range of supports and resources that they had engaged with themselves, unconnected to Tusla. The agencies and organisations the children were involved with included Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), HSE Disability, Youth Action Programme (YAP), Foróige, and a whole range of community based after school programmes for children. While the commonality of issues and concerns across the sample is evident from the analysis of anonymised data, the research engagement through semi-structured individual interviews highlighted the unique experience for each child, all of whom were on a similar journey of Tusla involvement in their family’s life.

1.5 Reflections on the research process

The empirical evidence highlights the challenges that other research projects across many jurisdictions have experienced recruiting children and families experiencing statutory intervention (Gorin et al., 2021; Gorin, Hooper, Dyson, & Cabral, 2008; Hayes, McGuigan, Pinkerton, & Devaney, 2014; Ogle &

Vincent, 2022; Östberg, Wiklund, & Backlund, 2018). Similar to those other projects, this present research was not without its own challenges, not least the time and resources required with recruitment, considerably above and beyond that set out in the original tender. Late cancellations for interviews, or children failing to show up, extended the period of fieldwork beyond what was anticipated at tender and research design stage. This perhaps was exacerbated by the distance travelled to interview sites with all sites located approximately an hour and a half drive away for the researchers. On reflection, the challenges of recruitment were offset to a degree by the sample design, where an inclusive approach to sampling insured the minimisation of local professional influence in the final group of children invited for interview. As stated earlier, the local Gatekeepers were a key ingredient in the successful recruitment of the final sample of twenty children. This required considerable investment of Gatekeeper time to provide the support children and families required to ensure children's participation.

### 1.6 Summary

This chapter has provided an introduction to this study conducted with twenty children and young people regarding their experience of engaging with Tusla: The Child and Family Agency. Positioned within a rights-based approach to working with children, the study reported on also reflects international and Irish policy commitments to better understand children's lives and ensure that they have a voice in their individual and collective lives (DCEDIY, 2019; DCYA, 2012, 2015; Department of Health and Children, 2000; United Nations, 1989). This commitment also serves as a reference point for research with children, as reflected in the research design adopted for the purpose of this study, which promotes the participation of children in research about important aspects of their lives. It also prioritises the views and perspectives of children as it provides a point-in-time picture of their experiences of Tusla's CP&W services, from their own unique perspective.

The next chapter provides a review and analysis of the international literature relevant to this research project. Chapters three and four present the findings of this study, as told through the voices of the twenty participants. Chapter five provides an analysis and discussion of those findings, in the context of the literature reviewed. Chapter five concludes with some brief implications for policy, practice and research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this literature review was to provide context for the current study. We sought to identify key learning from existing national and international research in relation to children's experiences of child protection and welfare services and participation in decision making in this context, and to inform the research design of the current study.

The literature was gathered via an iterative process including i) a search of key databases (e.g. Academic Search Complete, Scopus, Web of Science) and ii) snowball sampling. The research questions at the core of the current study guided the literature search and review process:

1. How do children experience Tusla's CP&W services?
2. Do children feel their voices are heard in decisions that affect them in CP&W provision?

### 2.2 Defining child participation

In addition to exploring children's experience of the CP&W system generally, this research set out to understand whether children feel their voices are heard in decisions that affect them in CP&W provision. The concept of 'child participation' is central to this second research question.

Propelled by changed social meanings of childhood, there has been growing acceptance that children should be more involved in decisions that affect them (Jans, 2004; McCafferty, 2017; Sinclair, 2004). Inherent to this development is a changed conceptualisation of children, no longer seen as 'objects of concern', but as active, agentic social people who construct and create social relationships (James & Prout, 1990). Despite growing acceptance of the principle of children's participation, the concept of participation is itself contested and there remains uncertainty about how to effectively involve children (McCafferty, 2017; Sinclair, 2004)

Tusla uses the term 'participation' as 'the involvement of children and young people in decision-making on issues that affect their lives' (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2019, p. 10). Participation is conceptualised at two levels. While 'individual participation', pertains to personal issues, concerning children's welfare, protection or care, 'collective participation' concerns public issues affecting children collectively, including service planning and review (Tierney et al., 2018, p. 1). Further differentiation can be made within these categories. Within collective participation, Sinclair (2004) delineates between decisions affecting children in terms of service planning and services delivery (about influencing policy) and those that involve service evaluation.

An important aspect of the rights framework is that the legislative framework does not confer on the child the right to be the main decider. Rather the emphasis is on the importance of adults listening to children and taking their wishes and feelings into account (in accordance with the child's age and maturity) when adults make decisions that affect children's lives. This may involve a decision which is contrary to the child/children's wishes but thought to be in his/her best interest. As Sinclair (2004) points out, the acknowledgement of children's right to participate alongside their need for protection is an important reconceptualization from the paternalistic notion that accepting responsibility for someone should result in taking responsibility away from them. An important further consideration in the concept of participation is the diversity of children, including circumstances, interests and capacities. This necessitates designing a variety of engagement types (Sinclair, 2004).

### 2.3 Models of participation

Various models of child participation exist (c.f.e. Butler & Shaw, 1996; Caffrey, 2013; Hart, 1992). These models conceptualise participation across a spectrum, distinguishing forms of non-participation, including 'manipulation', 'therapeutic terrorism' (Butler & Williamson, 1996), 'coercion' (Caffrey, 2013), 'decoration' or 'tokenism' (Hart, 1992) from meaningful forms of participation in which children are informed so that they understand the issues and are consulted for their input and, where their wishes and feelings are acted upon, at least in as far as adults are open to changing their minds based on them (Butler & Williamson, 1996; Caffrey, 2013; Hart, 1992).

Following from its adoption within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Tusla has adopted the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy, 2007) as a core practice model for Tusla staff and funded partners (Tierney et al., 2018). This model helpfully conceptualises the realisation of a child's right to participation into four chronological steps. First, 'space' - children are provided with the opportunity to express a view in a space that is safe and inclusive. Second, 'voice' - children must be facilitated to express their view. Third, 'audience' - the view must be listened to. Fourth, 'influence' - the view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

### 2.4 The extent of child participation

In reviewing the literature there is an apparent gap between the 'ideal' in terms of participation and what happens in practice (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Wilson, Hean, Abebe, & Heaslip, 2020). In their state-of-the-art review of literature regarding barriers and facilitators to child participation in CP&W services, van Bijleveld and colleagues (2015) note that participation is 'not happening enough' (p. 136).

The authors note that children report feeling that they have limited opportunities to participate in decisions relating to their lives.

One large-scale, quantitative Danish study of young people's (aged 12-17; n=2334) involvement in the 'processing' of their case reported that participation was more likely among young people who have more contact with their case worker, fewer changes in worker, and who were considered less 'vulnerable' (Lausten & Kloppenborg, 2022). While the authors report that many young people in this study did report having 'some' or 'high' levels of involvement and participation in their case processing, a small group of vulnerable people reported low levels of participation (e.g. those with special educational needs, those with reported absences from school).

### 2.5 Children's experiences of child protection & welfare systems

While larger Irish studies have investigated children's care experiences (McEvoy & Smith, 2011), fewer studies have specifically explored children's experiences of the Irish CP&W system. More than a decade ago, Buckley and colleagues (Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2018; Buckley, Whelan, Carr, & Murphy, 2008) interviewed 13 young people aged 13-23 years on their experiences of the CP&W system. Most recently, Tusla interviewed 19 children with experience of the CP&W system, and analysed 53 HIQA Inspection reports from 2013-15 (Tierney et al., 2018).

Irish research reports diversity in children's experiences of the CP&W system. For some, social work intervention was experienced as a stressful and unwelcome experience, while for others it was a welcome support. In terms of participation, it was found that while children often found opportunities to participate, services were described as intimidating and stressful, and in keeping with international experiences (Cossar et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2020), child protection intervention was perceived as difficult and emotional (Buckley et al., 2018). For some, social work intervention was experienced as shameful and stigmatizing (Buckley et al., 2018; Ellis, 2016).

While most children in Buckley and colleagues' (2008) study were aware of the reason they had been removed from their parents' care, some claimed they were never really told why. This echoes findings across the international literature, which suggest that most children do not initially have a clear understanding of why they were contacted by the CPS, even where their worker tried to explain it to them, and have a limited understanding of professionals' role (Wilson et al., 2020). It is common for children to initially feel confused and anxious, and usually their greatest fear is that they will be taken away from their family (Wilson et al., 2020). Children report finding it hard to focus and understand due to emotional stress and emphasise the need for clear and understandable information as well as time to absorb it (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2014; Woolfson,

Heffernan, Paul, & Brown, 2010). Similarly, in cases where children are removed from the home, they often show little to no understanding of the reasons for this and do not expect it (Burgund & Zegarac, 2016; Pölkki, Vornanen, Pursiainen, & Riikonen, 2012). Fear, anxiety, anger, sadness and confusion are common, although some children at the same time find the intervention helpful and appreciate social workers' help (Gorin et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). In contrast, a recent and relatively large-scale study (n=100) of children's experiences in English Local Authorities using Signs of Safety found that almost all children interviewed were aware that they had a social worker and had some form of understanding about why the social worker was working with their family, most commonly understanding that they were there to help (Gorin et al., 2021). It should be noted however that, although this was a large sample, participants were invited to take part by the family's social worker. This may have influenced the sample selection.

Buckley and colleagues' (2008) research identified that a key factor mediating children's overall experiences of the CP&W system was whether children viewed social work intervention as something they were subject to or a process in which they were active agents, indicating the importance of participation in children's overall service experiences. In keeping with this finding, international research has found that children who felt well informed were most positive about social work investigations, even in cases where they did not agree with the intervention (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Woolfson et al., 2010)

Recent Irish research found that children reported spaces where their voices were heard but that they didn't always feel heard (Tierney et al., 2018). There are currently no large-scale studies of children's experiences of the CP&W system in Ireland, however, a large-scale consultation with 211 children who live in the care of the Irish state found a consensus that young people should be consulted more on decisions being made about them. Children reported that they were not always asked for their opinion on decisions made about them and almost all participants in the study called for more consultations, such as the study they were participating in, suggesting that children value being asked about their experiences of services (McEvoy & Smith, 2011).

## 2.6 Perspectives on participation

The literature suggests that children and workers feel strongly that participation in decision-making is important (Buckley et al., 2008; Gorin et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2018; van Bijleveld et al., 2014; van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2015). Indeed, it appears to be important even when a child or young person's views are not ultimately acted on. According to children the act of being listened to is more important than getting what they wanted (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Indeed, many children in

Buckley and colleagues' (2008) study demonstrated awareness of the challenges of the social work role in balancing completing priorities and emphasised the importance of issues being explained in terms they could understand.

However, while there is a consensus among professionals regarding the *need* for participation, there is limited agreement as to *what* participation involves; for example, providing information versus asking for views (van Bijleveld et al., 2014; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). In their study of Dutch case managers (n = 16) and Dutch young people (n = 16), van Bijleveld and colleagues (2014) found that there was a considerable gap between case managers' perspectives on participation, its prevalence in practice *and* the perspectives and experiences of young people in receipt of CP&W services. While case managers viewed participation as strategic or instrumental in this study – and as a way of ensuring a child's cooperation, young people understood participation as a mechanism for being heard, informed and 'taken seriously' (p. 257).

In their qualitative synthesis of evidence relating to children's experiences with child protection services, Wilson and colleagues (2020) point to the key issue of participation in the early stages of CP&W involvement. The authors emphasise the importance of providing understandable information to children and young people and – perhaps crucially – giving them time to absorb this information. These experiences of 'early stage' work with social workers in a child protection context may, for some children, be a critical (and possibly first) experience of being listened to and receiving information from adults, particularly if they have had difficult experiences in their family home (Pölkki et al., 2012). Conversely, children can feel extremely upset where they feel they have no influence on important decisions affecting them (Tierney et al., 2018) and report a lack of participation affecting their sense of identity and ability to come to terms with past trauma (Buckley et al., 2008).

## 2.7 Key role of relationships

The literature strongly indicates that the relationship between professionals and children strongly mediates children's perceptions and experiences of the system (Buckley et al., 2008; Gorin et al., 2021; Henriksen, 2022). Indeed, nurturing relationships, trust and continuity have been identified as essential for collaboration and for helping children feel confident to contribute and participate in decisions that are made about them (Henriksen, 2022). As Cossar and colleagues (2016, p110) point out, without a trusting relationship, there may exist no opportunity to explore or express opinions and feelings 'let alone feel that those opinions had an impact on decision-making' (Cossar et al., 2016, p. 110). Further, research suggests that children may be hindered from asking for help due to fear of



being placed in care, loyalty to family members or fear that the abuse might escalate (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). In this context, a trusting professional relationship may be particularly important.

In their Danish study, Lausten and Kloppenborg (2022) reported that those young people who experienced frequent contact with case workers and had limited changes in case workers reported higher levels of participation (Lausten & Kloppenborg, 2022). This is perhaps unsurprising given the *potential* to develop and cultivate trusting relationships. Conversely, children report that turnover of professionals supporting them create a considerable barrier when it comes to establishing trusting relationships (Gorin et al., 2021; Henriksen, 2022; Tierney et al., 2018). In Ireland, children have reported that the absence of access to a social worker outside normal working hours obstructed their participation as it was a missed opportunity for connection (Tierney et al., 2018).

Children and young people report the importance of speaking up themselves or speaking with a trusted adult who can advocate for them, whether family, social workers, or friends (Tierney et al., 2018). Key workers were important for children as a trusted adult who could listen and advocate for the child to social workers or other professionals (Tierney et al., 2018). Internationally, there is some evidence that independent advocacy, which involves listening and empowering children and young people by helping them to represent their views, supporting them and protecting their rights through a child-led approach, can positively impact on child participation, particularly children's attendance at meetings (Thomas et al., 2017).

## 2.8 Mechanisms of relationships

Children report the importance of reciprocal, normal conversations rather than interrogative 'bossy' 'business like' 'judgemental' style to feel engaged and respected and that participation is not tokenistic (Buckley et al., 2008; Tierney et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2020). Informal settings, for example chats over coffee or while driving felt more normal and safer to children (Tierney et al., 2018) and children emphasise workers' good humour and relaxed manner (Buckley et al., 2018; van Bijleveld et al., 2015) as well as being kind (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Workers can engage with children in a variety of ways, including reading, drawing, and playing games and football. Younger children particularly enjoy engaging through play and children report these activities are important for trust and (from children's perspective) friendship (Gorin et al., 2021).

Children report that it can help for social workers to use a child-centred, pictorial tool. The main benefit reported by children of Signs of Safety's 'My Three Houses' tool was that it helped them to open up to social workers and express their worries and hopes in a way that felt less intense (Gorin et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2014; Ogle & Vincent, 2022). While the vast majority of the 46 children

experiencing this tool in Gorin and colleagues' (2021) study found it helpful, a minority did not like the tool. Their reasons included preferring talking, a dislike of feeling forced into sharing information, struggling to discuss their feelings, and having to repeat the activity with another worker (Gorin et al., 2021). Some children disliked it because they did not understand its purpose (Finan et al., 2016; Östberg et al., 2018), and one was upset that they did not get to keep the drawing (Finan et al., 2016). There is little data available on children's self-reported experiences of Signs of Safety's *Words & Pictures* tool nor the '*Safety Object*'. However, in a small-scale study, children in Belgium reported positively on the creative use of '*Words and Pictures*' and one child reported that its use helped them to better understand their parent's perspective (De Clercq et al., 2022).

Regarding Signs of Safety processes, children have reported that the '*Signs of Safety Network*' helped the family to come together (De Clercq et al., 2022) and that because of the '*Safety Plan*' they knew what to do if there were issues at home they were worried about (Hayes et al., 2014). However, some children also reported feeling shame, anger and resistance about involving the network and widely sharing what had happened (De Clercq et al., 2022). Children reported positively on having some choice in selecting the '*Safety Network*' and who they told about their circumstances (Östberg et al., 2018). In a small study of four 12-14 year olds' experiences of the Child Protection Conference in an authority using Signs of Safety, participants reported feeling nervous, shy and scared. However, overall, their experience was positive, and attending was associated with the development of life skills and experienced as cathartic. However, some children felt the onus was on them to prove they were mature enough to attend (Ogle & Vincent, 2022).

Across studies, children's accounts of using tools and processes highlight the importance of social workers' wider communication skills while using them (Gorin et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2014; Ogle & Vincent, 2022). It is important to children that workers demonstrate they are listening (van Bijleveld et al., 2015), including doing so attentively without being absorbed in taking notes (Gorin et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2018), using non-verbal behaviour such as making eye contact (Tierney et al., 2018), and asking relevant follow up questions that demonstrate understanding (Gorin et al., 2021). Further, being available and reliable were highlighted as important to children in their professional relationship (Tierney et al., 2018; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Children articulated the importance of being believed when they reported concerns as well as their need to have a private and confidential space where they could talk without being overheard, and feeling assured that their information would remain confidential (Buckley et al., 2018; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017; Sanders et al., 2017; Woolfson et al., 2010). Relatedly, whether professionals share information with children is important



(van Bijleveld et al., 2015). In Buckley and colleagues (2008) study, children were concerned where they perceived their social worker lacked expertise or experience. Where children do not like the way social workers communicate, or where the family had a previous bad experience of social work, children may choose to not engage with the social worker (Gorin et al., 2021).

## 2.9 Wider organisational and cultural context

Seminal studies of CP&W systems have emphasised the importance of understanding children's experiences as informed by the wider system that children, professionals and families are situated in (Munro, 2011; UNICEF, 2021). In particular it highlights the importance of understanding how wider services, resources and mindsets interact to produce the CP&W system that children experience.

Both international (Pölkki et al., 2012; van Bijleveld et al., 2015) and Irish studies (Buckley et al., 2008; Burns & McCarthy, 2012; O'Mahony, 2020, 2022) highlight the impact of a lack of resources and associated lack of opportunities for quality time with children. The recent Annual Report of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection (O'Mahony, 2022) highlights that while Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) reports evidence of positive feedback from children and families who come into contact with Tusla, they also highlight concerns in relation to the management of referrals and safety plans, care planning and staffing levels. Further the report highlights longstanding under-resourcing of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) that has 'left it unable to meet the needs of many vulnerable children and young people' (O'Mahony, 2022, p. 5). Adopting a systemic understanding of children's journeys through the CP&W system, these wider issues are likely to affect those experiences.

Alongside these organisational issues, various studies highlight the impact of practitioners' own sense of their skills, abilities, and competence in working with children (Pölkki et al., 2012; Tierney et al., 2018). Professionals report challenges to involving children, including the level of risk, children's best interest, the views of family members, and the age and capacity of child (Tierney et al., 2018). Further, some professionals report specific difficulties seeking individual views of 'harder to reach' children including Travellers, LGBT, children with disability & refugees (Tierney et al., 2018). In the Irish context, Tusla recently provided a national training programme and toolkit to staff to support child participation. The evaluation found a significant increase in staff self-reported skills and understanding of child participation. However, some staff perceived a need for further training (Tierney et al., 2018).

A wider socio-cultural image of children as vulnerable and in need of protection as compared to an image of children as knowledgeable social actors also appeared in the literature as a barrier to participation, and arguably impacts on both societal, organisational and practitioner focus and

expectations (Kiili, Itäpuisto, Moilanen, Svenlin, & Malinen, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). Similarly, an organisational focus on risk management and protection can shape the extent of and nature of child participation (van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

## 2.10 Conclusions

The literature in this area to date is largely qualitative with a small number of quantitative studies identified. These quantitative studies add useful insights regarding the wider 'spread' of participation highlighting key issues, for example the limited participation of vulnerable children and young people. The perspectives of children, young people and professionals are present in the literature however, there is a greater focus on the views of young people as compared to children. Perhaps most notably in the context of the current study, the perspective of young children remains largely absent from the literature relating to participation. There is also a notable absence of the perspectives of 'vulnerable'/'hard to reach' children and young people. The differing perspectives and understandings of what participation is noted within the literature highlight the complexity of this area of practice.

The literature reviewed points to the key importance of understanding the experiences of children when engaging with CP&W services along with their experiences of participation; this is a pivotal area for both practice and policy. There are a limited number of studies in Ireland examining children's self-reported experiences of CP&W services. The aim of the current study is to contribute to closing these gaps in knowledge by providing a point-in-time capture of children's experiences of child protection services in Ireland.

## CHAPTER 3: PRE-ENGAGEMENT AND INITIAL ENGAGEMENT – THE CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVE

### 3.1 Introduction

Both this chapter and the following one present findings from the interviews with the twenty participating children. They seek to represent the views and concerns of the children as directly as possible, reflecting the remit of the overall study. This chapter has a focus on their account of experiences relating to the early phases of contact with Tusla, including their recollections from the period when they had just begun to learn about the prospect of contact. The next chapter presents accounts relating to the range of experiences from ongoing engagement with Tusla after the initial phase. The reader will find echoes of similar points at times across the two chapters.

### 3.2 Learning about Tusla becoming involved

In each interview, participants were invited to think back to the time before Tusla became involved in their lives. For some, this had been a relatively recent episode. For others, a number of years had passed since the initial contact, possibly reflecting a series of re-engagements between the family and Tusla over the full period since the outset. As part of this look-back, the children were also asked for their recollections of their thoughts and feelings in the period between discovering that contact with Tusla was a possibility, and the first actual meetings. It seems that a number of influences were framing the children’s expectations. Most typically, children remembered learning about the prospect of Tusla becoming involved from a family member, sometimes older siblings, but mostly mothers. They generally saw themselves as being in the background, rather than as a central figure in the process.

Nadia (12) remembers learning from her older sister, whom she recalls was also apprehensive about the prospect of Tusla’s arrival.

**Nadia:** ..... I was kind of worried and kind of scared sometimes when it happened- I didn’t think about anything just myself - just scared myself.

**Interviewer:** Ok so when your sister said there’s people going to come over about what’s happening in the family, did she think it was a good idea or was she a bit worried, do you think?

**Nadia:** A bit worried.

**Interviewer:** Ok and did she say that?

**Nadia:** Yeah.

#### 3.2.1 Worries about Tusla in their Lives

While the children trusted the views or advice of family members, there were also other voices in their lives. Ciara (16) recalls her friends having a very different view of Tusla compared to the trusting view conveyed by her mother. She reflects back on the conversations her twelve-year old self had with friends at the time.

Everyone I talked to... it was more so a rumour that every kid is supposed to know that Tusla are bad people, they take you away and all of that. That’s what you were told and that’s what everyone believed.

Children recalled the prospect of Tusla becoming involved in their lives as ‘scary’. This sense of apprehension was shared across the age range. They reported various reasons for their fears. Some were worried that they might be in trouble, or that they would lose face in front of their friends. Others feared the powers that they or their friends attributed to Tulsa; that children could be removed from their home. Their fears were often amplified by a lack of clear understanding of what was going on and why. Sadie’s (15) comments reflect this concern.

**Interviewer:** ok and were you concerned ..... about coming to see Tusla?

**Sadie:** Yeah I didn’t really understand it, I thought I was in trouble, I didn’t really know what was going on.

**Interviewer:** Ok and what made you think that you were in trouble?

**Sadie:** Cause before like, cause mum mentioned stuff with the guards and I didn’t know really what Tusla was, so I thought, honestly I thought I was gonna get taken away from Mum and Dad so I was a bit worried about that but..

Many of the children also had a concern, not just for themselves, but also a worry about what they imagined as the implications for the family if Tusla were not happy. Some of the children reported being wary of what they said to Tusla, and the picture they gave Tusla of their family life.

Sineád (15) conveys her sense of obligation to assist the family in putting its best foot forward.

So like for me Tusla was always very scary, like social workers are coming, gonna whip us into shape, gotta clean my room, gotta do this, that, the other, to get ready for when they're here so that they don't see anything as wrong.

There was also an issue about the possible reaction of peers to news about Tusla's involvement. Some children had seen how peers had responded to the notion of a social worker calling to a family. This could lead to negative judgements about the family gaining currency within the peer group. Nadia (12) recalled a prior episode in her classroom some years ago that had coloured her thinking.

**Nadia:** I think like - cause one time this girl had a social worker in our class - I think 3rd class - and kids behind her back were saying 'oh she has a social worker, her parents - something happened to them, like oh my god her parents keep fighting'.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so they think bad things have happened in that house?

**Nadia:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And do you think as well that kids will think that if social work are involved that maybe kids will be taken away from their family?

**Nadia:** Yeah.

### 3.2.2 Uncertainty and confusion

Many of the children said that they learned from their mothers that Tusla were becoming involved in their family's life. This engagement with Tusla was something they saw as being negotiated within the adult world. In general, they felt on the periphery in terms of the details of this process or its origins. Generally, they did not have a problem with this status, although this view might evolve with age. From their accounts, it seems that some of the children had been unclear on key details right from the outset. Some of the children in the study, such as Adam (12) admitted that they did not know anything about social workers, when they first heard that a social worker was likely to visit their home on behalf of Tusla.

**Interviewer:** And who told you that the social worker was coming?

**Adam:** My mum.

**Interviewer:** Your mum did. And did you know what a social worker was at the time?

**Adam:** No.

Similarly, David (17) spoke of how little he knew about the reasons for Tusla's first visit when they became involved after a referral from the school.

**Interviewer:** And did you understand why they were knocking on the door?

**David:** Not really, no.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any feeling about it? That it was a good thing or a bad thing?

**David:** Well I knew it wasn't good like.

**Interviewer:** It wasn't good, ok. So in terms of what wasn't good about it, was it not good for you or your mom or your family?

**David:** It wasn't good for the family like yeah

Ruby (14) also recalled with great clarity, her uncertainty and confusion about what exactly Tusla was, what it did, and who the people were who made the visits for them. As she recalled it, Tusla suddenly '*just came to our house*'.

**Interviewer:** Ok and did your mum or dad tell you they were coming to the house?

**Ruby:** My mum said that there was someone coming for an appointment to talk to me.

**Interviewer:** Ok and did you know who or why that was?

**Ruby:** No.

**Interviewer:** So someone's coming for an appointment - that could be like I don't know it could be - it wouldn't be a teacher, who else might it be.. did you have some idea about what it was about?

**Ruby:** No.

### 3.2.3 Concerns about privacy

Many of the children had a strong sense of personal and family privacy. They explained how they were often reluctant for their friends to know about Tusla being involved in their family. Cathy (18) recalled how negatively involvement with Tusla may be seen by others.

**Cathy:** I think it's what, you know, once you mention Tusla, a lot of that can be down to, like that once my sister mentioned it to people, and they all came back to me and were like 'oh so your parents hit you', you know, that's the first thing they're gonna think of is how you're being treated at home.

**Interviewer:** Yeah so it's a negative perception?

**Cathy:** Very, very negative.

**Interviewer:** And that's part of why you wouldn't choose to open up that conversation?

**Cathy:** No, it wouldn't be the first thing I'd go to bring up.

**Interviewer:** and is that, and because of what they might think - that their thinking on it is negative?

**Cathy:** Yeah I'd be worried about that and worried about what they're gonna think about my family you know.

#### 3.2.4 First impressions – getting started

The children were, unsurprisingly, cautious in their first actual encounters with Tusla. Most reported finding these meetings with social workers a challenging prospect. They sometimes had given them a lot of preparatory thought.

Ciara (16) recalls that she was quite resistant to engaging with the social worker. Conversations with friends had made her wary of this contact with Tusla. In her first meeting, she was determined not to be drawn into a conversation and to get through the meeting on her terms. In her vivid recollection, she admits to having been quite hostile and defensive initially.

**Ciara:** Yeah, I remember that it was at home in my living room. I remember she sat opposite me and she was explaining who she was and why she was here because everything that was happening at home wasn't normal [.....] she explained all of this [but] because of what my friends had told me, I was just, I wasn't listening at all, I was just like ok [...] actually if I'm being honest I was high point disrespectful to her. Like I didn't want to give her an opportunity to say anything or to trick me or anything. Trick me into saying something or something like that because yeah. I was like 'no, this is not happening'.

Although she set out not to listen, Ciara conceded that some of what the social worker had said did sink in, despite her clear intention that this should not happen. She saw that the social worker had a point when saying that things at home were 'not normal'. But this also made things more complicated for Ciara. She could now see how much the social worker grasped about what was going on and how hard it would be to try to deceive her. She showed an impressive ability to shift her position in response to the persuasive powers of the social worker.

**Ciara:** Like when she explained it all I was like 'oh well she does have a point, that wouldn't happen at such-and-such a friend's house, or I've never seen this happen or my friends don't talk about this happening and stuff like that, so she has a point'. I guess if she knows all this and like Mom told me she's here to help, everyone else told me that's not the case. But I'm like, but if Mom says it, I should trust her. And what she was saying was right like how what was happening isn't normal and how she's here to help us and I was like.. yeah well.

**Interviewer:** When she was leaving were you a little less anxious than before she came?

**Ciara:** I was a little bit more anxious because I was like 'God they know about everything that's happening so I can't lie. I can't be like 'oh yeah everything's fine, don't worry'.

#### 3.2.5 The influence of early-stage experiences in the relationship with Tusla

Ciara's story underlines how dynamic the process of engagement can be. Each relationship between a child and a social worker or other professional has its own unique starting points – for the child and the adult. The child may bring fears and expectations, or even misunderstandings. They may bring baggage from prior experience or from the influence of supportive or sceptical family members or peers. The relationship between the child and family and the social work service evolves over time. It may be subject to shifts in viewpoints according to the quality of relationship that develops. In Ciara's account, there is a hint of the first green shoots of trust appearing in her mind in response to the way the social worker had made her case. This is a reminder how the trajectory of the working relationship is always open to positive influence. Just as the starting points where worker and child meet may vary widely in each situation, so too may the influences that shape the ways in which the emerging relationship or connection develops from there (or not). One other point of note also echoed in some of the other children's responses is Ciara's mother suggesting that the social workers could be helpful, a reminder of how parents can colour a child's view of Tusla intervention one way or the other.

While some might convey a neutral to positive view of Tusla, there were others who might sow seeds of doubt about Tusla's intentions in the minds of children. Influenced by her parents, Leah (16) recalls her caution in discussing anything that happened at home outside the home, lest Tusla hear about it.

**Leah:** Yeah see I sorta had the mindset of, that only happened at home, you don't bring it up, because they're gonna ring Tusla, Tusla are bold people who come and take children away, cause that was sort of the image we had from our parents.

A number of accounts underline how important the initial contact with social workers could be, a point evident in Ciara’s account above and in what Molly (12) recalls here. Her mother had told her the social worker was coming. Although Molly didn’t know what social workers did before she had the first meetings, things did become clearer:

**Molly:** Like they said that they help children and families with some issues that they have and so they start to like ask me how I feel, has something happened or anything like that, and I told them everything as well and so they understood what was going on and all that.

This first meeting often proved to be a valuable opportunity for social workers to provide clarity and reassurance, and for both sides to share information about different concerns. Peter recalled his first meeting and how the social worker helped him understand why they were involved.

**Peter:** Just explaining what they are and all. Like if your parents had a fight or anything they help with it and all.

**Interviewer:** Ok, ok. So did you understand why they were talking to you?

**Peter:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** It made sense that they were there?

**Peter:** Yeah.

But there were also differing views of the first meeting. It didn’t necessarily leave every child fully satisfied as in the case of John (16) and his understanding of why the social worker was there

**Interviewer:** Ok so thinking back, would you feel that you knew why she was there?

**John:** Eh, kinda, to a certain extent

Not everyone was unsettled by any lack of clarity. Ultimately James (12) was relaxed about the connection with social workers. For him the puzzle at the beginning was figuring out what exactly social workers did – and whether their being there was a good or a bad thing.

**Interviewer:** Did you understand why they were there, you said to me you weren’t really too sure

**James:** No I wasn’t sure

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**James:** Cause I didn’t know if social workers were there if something bad happened or if something good happened, I didn’t really know what they were at first.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any worries about that?

**James:** No

**Interviewer:** No you were just happy to go with it?

**James:** Yeah.

Sineád (15) recalls being pleasantly surprised by how nice the social workers were when she first met them. This eased her initial apprehension that she might somehow, as she saw it, put her foot in it in the conversation.

**Sineád:** I think it was, Jane had just come in to talk to my Mum but she was really friendly and I was like scared of her at first cause I was like, this is a social worker, what if I say the wrong thing and she just up and takes me and we’re gone, but she was really nice when I actually spoke to her. I thought they were all just gonna be rock hard, no smiles, just very very straight to the point, but they weren’t, they were like friendly always.

She found the way she was treated affected how she responded. She warmed to the clarity and friendliness of the social workers. She saw herself rising to the challenge of playing the more grown-up part granted to her as the family’s relationship with the social workers unfolded.

**Sineád:** [At the outset] I was still one of the kids, I wasn’t an adult, but then because of my household I was treated like an adult, I was told everything anyway, but then after a while they said they’d ask me little things in front of my Mum, small things that like, really just told them a little bit about what was going on and I answered honestly cause like that’s what they were here for, and they knew most of it anyway.

**Interviewer:** So how did that make you feel that they were asking you stuff that they knew you knew but they were treating you in a more, kind of adult way?

**Sineád:** Honestly kind of, I was scared but at the same time I was like, ‘well they’re treating me like an adult so I’m gonna act like an adult’.

While the chemistry that developed between the social workers and the children was important, both in their first contact and in the early working relationship, we have also seen how other factors could



affect developments – for example, the influence of parents and peers. In Sineád’s case, the presence of her brothers in the process was important and reassuring:

**Interviewer:** you mentioned that yourself and your brothers were seen together, was that a good thing? Did that make you feel better? Or do you think it would have been better if you were on your own?

**Sineád:** I think it made me feel better because I knew that they were there and that I could see what they were doing and I could see that they were with me and that they weren’t gone, because I think a part of me would have panicked if I wasn’t with them cause I was like, well they’ve taken them now and it’s just me. I’m next or I’m not gonna be taken at all and then we’re gonna be really upset that they’re gone so I’m thankful that we were in the same room. That was better to be at home.

While the initial meeting seemed very formative in how the working relationship would evolve for the child, there were other points that emerged as meaningful for the children in terms of how the process developed in the immediate period beyond the first meeting.

### 3.2.6 Important aspects of the initial process

As the children reflected on developments in the period immediately after the first meeting, a number of issues surfaced as relevant in terms of the children’s assessment of what influenced development for them.

#### *Level of involvement*

There were varied views about the level of involvement they felt they had had within the process. In some instances, they reported being seen later than others in the family, or felt they had fewer opportunities to engage with the social workers or the wider process. Some resented this. But for others there seemed almost a sense of relief at being spared exposure to the personal stress they seemed to see as linked to deeper involvement. As with other aspects of the working relationship with Tusla, the children did not necessarily take a single view on the issue. Some seemed more relaxed about being part of the process once they had a better sense of what was involved

Nadia (12) was one of the cautious children in regard to engaging with social workers. She recalls that the social workers spoke to her ‘*a little bit*’ but this was ‘*after they talked to my sister, my Mom, my Dad*’. She didn’t mind being down the queue. She went to her room while the social worker spoke to her parents. She found that it helped her manage her worries to ‘*just go and like not think about it*

*that much*’. She also made clear that she didn’t mind not being involved in the meeting with the rest of the family:

**Interviewer:** Ok. Would you have liked to be in the room with your sister, your Mom and your Dad when the social worker was talking?

**Nadia:** Not really, cause everything [was too much].

**Interviewer:** Ok so it’s easier for you not to be in the room.

**Nadia:** Yeah.

#### *Feeling comfortable in interviews*

On a later occasion, Nadia had an opportunity to speak with a social worker on her own (with a translator present). Her English is quite good, but she knew it was helpful sometimes to have the possibility of going back to her mother tongue language where she would have the choice of speaking with greater depth. The interpreter’s presence may also have offered some kind of symbolic recognition to Nadia. In this one interview, she felt able to give her point of view. Answering the social workers’ questions about her family life, she recalls giving a pithy response (and a glimpse of her sense of humour):

**Nadia:** Kind of - like how do you feel about your family like.. I like them a lot better when they don’t fight in front of me because it makes me worried.

**Interviewer:** Yeah sure. And did you feel ok saying that? Did you feel safe enough to say that?

**Nadia:** Yeah.

Nadia’s account is a reminder of the importance for the child of feeling sufficiently comfortable in the process, so that they can trust the process enough to share their side of the story. The presence of the interpreter may have been part of the supportive context that helped Nadia share her thoughts in the interview. Supports that helped children feel comfortable in an interview might have taken different forms for different children.

#### *Really feeling heard*

Sophia (14) said she felt heard by the social worker despite an initial doubt about whether they would understand her concerns. But then she realised the social worker did actually want to hear about her worries, those that she had written down in the exercise the social worker had given her. This one

meeting from a year previously had made a big impact on Sophia. The fact that she felt the social worker had *listened* to her had made a strong impression:

**Sophia:** I didn't think she really understood me, but I know she was listening.

**Interviewer:** Ok. And how do you know that? What was she doing that made you feel she was listening?

**Sophia:** Cause she was talking to me about them [her worries], but I didn't really think she'd understand.

**Interviewer:** Ok. And was it her repeating things back to you or?

**Sophia:** Yeah.

Having a strong sense of being listened to was an important issue for Sophia in investing in the relationship with Tusla, and she was likely speaking for others on this point also.

#### *The importance of clarity*

As noted earlier, first meetings offered the chance to promote clarity and the sharing of information. Ruby (14) reported an experience that involved a lot of delay and vagueness as she recalled it. She remembers being left with a lot of uncertainty after the first meeting. The social worker had met with her mother first and then she was called in to the room.

**Ruby:** He just said that 'I'm here to talk to you about stuff', but he never really told me why.

**Interviewer:** Ok. So when he said he was there to talk to you about stuff, did you know what he was talking about?

**Ruby:** No. He just asked me how I was, how I was doing in the school and stuff and then let me go..... He said like 'there's stuff going on [in the family]' and yeah.. [but] I didn't know why and he didn't tell us so I was like..

Ruby went on to recall that it took two or three more meetings before the social worker gave some more information: 'It took like a month or something for him to say what happened'. When he told her about the issue:

**Ruby:** Yeah. I was like - he told me and then I was like 'that never happened' and then I was just shocked.

**Interviewer:** Ok and what did Tom say to that?

**Ruby:** He didn't really say anything. He was just there. And he asked me if it ever happened and I was like no and stuff like that, but he didn't really do anything, he kind of just sat there, looked at me.

**Interviewer:** Ok and you used the word 'shock' there, like you were shocked going 'what's he talking about'. Did you feel that Tom kind of reassured you?

**Ruby:** No.

#### *The language used by social workers*

The issue might sometimes be what was said (or not said) to the child, or what the child hears. But there was also the issue of *how* something was said. The language social workers used could also be an issue, as Aisling (12) explained. She found it hard to understand what social workers were telling her about what they were there to do. As far as she was concerned, they used words that were far too big and hard to understand. She used a theatrical stretch of her arms to emphasise the size of the words. This all left her confused. But she also thought that some of the Signs of Safety activities had helped her get a better sense of what was going on.

**Aisling:** At the start when they explained they were here, I was confused a bit.. I didn't really understand them.

**Interviewer:** Was it because of the words or...?

**Aisling:** Sometimes big [gestures big with her arms out wide] words.

**Interviewer:** Ok, and what do you think they could have said differently?

**Aisling:** Well maybe [doing more] with the activities?

**Interviewer:** The activities like the three houses? that helped you understand?

**Aisling:** Yeah.

Various issues were mentioned by the children relating to this issue of understanding what social workers were doing in the family situation - and the messages they were trying to transmit. For example, James was unfamiliar with what social workers did and he was not alone in that. Aisling struggled with what she saw as the complex language that the social workers were using.

#### *Stress as a barrier to absorbing information and 'thinking straight'*

Sineád (15) reminds us in this next quote that there is a lot going on in this stage of the process. She acknowledged that her head was scrambled with all the things she was trying to deal with at the point

of the first meeting. This meant that she had little space to accommodate or absorb new information that the social workers might be trying to pass on.

**Sineád:** I think that even if they did explain it, I wouldn't have listened, cause I was so in my own head about them taking me if I did this wrong but then I wasn't sure what wrong was so I was in my own head about trying to figure that out, I wouldn't have even heard it.

David's (17) comments echoed Sineád's point about the disruptive impact of all the things they were trying to negotiate in this phase of contact. While the social workers sought to strike an upbeat note and emphasised the wish to not cause any problems, David's instinct was to be wary. He felt that the family had lost its equilibrium in the wake of social work involvement and this had an effect on his clarity of thought.

**David:** I remember them explaining like obviously they're not there to cause any disruptions or whatever, they're just there to help d'ya know and get stuff in order or whatever.... At that time yeah I was kind of not super happy that they were there. I know they were trying their best to help but.. it was still a worry – that they were there at all – even if I wasn't too sure why they were there to begin with – none of this makes sense is what I am saying, but I guess maybe none of their involvement made sense.

**Interviewer:** That sounds like it was confusing for you? [nods in agreement]. Is there anything they could have done differently to make it less confusing?

**David:** I honestly don't know – everything was so all over the place in the family, it was hard to think straight.

#### *The challenge of communicating about their concerns*

Some children agreed that talking about their concerns could be hard. Eoin (13) could remember doing work sheets in one of the sessions with a social worker. On further exploration, these seemed to involve the 'Three Houses' exercise from the Signs of Safety programme. He was one of a number of children who agreed that writing things down sometimes made it easier to then talk about those things:

**Interviewer:** ..... sometimes with some of the children the social workers ..... ask them to talk about different houses, draw houses..... do you remember doing anything like that? The three houses - your house of worries or your house of dreams or your house of - does that make sense?

**Eoin:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** ..... Did you think it was a good thing - did it help you to say what was on your mind? Cause sometimes young people say to us 'we find it hard to talk about it but can actually write it down or we can maybe draw a picture about it' or something like that. So do you think it made it easier to say things or?

**Eoin:** I suppose, yeah.

#### *3.2.7 The use of creative approaches*

While there was support expressed for the use of pictorial or written materials to assist communication, there were also reminders that the use of written materials may not be without its complications. Adam (12) recalls that he and his older brother were given 'homework' by the social workers when they met them in school, the same day that they did the 'My Three Houses' exercise. They were asked to fill in a booklet to explain more about their experience of difficult things that had happened. However, Adam was frustrated that the social workers turned out later not to be interested in the work the two boys had done on their booklets. He remembers feeling upset to hear the social worker say that 'they didn't need' the book and that Adam could 'take it back' when he went to give it to the social worker.

**Adam:** [it was a ] Waste of time, we'd done the book, all the work on the book...

**Interviewer:** Was it upsetting for you?

**Adam:** Yeah. I was just very sad at the time.

**Interviewer:** Ok. So you were sad at the time and you were doing this exercise which sounds hard because you're writing down all the hard things aren't you?

**Adam:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. And nobody talked to you about it – what you'd written down?

**Adam:** No.

Adam's upset seemed to be linked to his feeling cheated of an opportunity to discuss what he had written and to have his effort and his experience and point of view honoured. There seemed something symbolic for him in what had happened. A busy social worker and a child at an emotionally fragile stage of the process may interpret the same incident in quite different ways.

#### *3.2.8 Children's concerns about measuring up*

While there is a clear group of the children who 'got' the point of writing things down and found this helpful, there were also some alternative views. Sineád (15) spoke of how she found the Signs of Safety exercises 'very intimidating' recalling that the process felt like a 'test'. She recalls the fear and

apprehension about approaching the task – amplified by all the rumours that she had heard about Tusla’s focus on protecting children by taking them away:

**Sineád:** I was very scared. So I was like, ‘if I do this wrong, then they’re gonna take me but how do you draw a house wrong? I just remember them saying that we had to draw the house for them and then they would talk to my Mam or Dad about it - it was like a test that I didn’t really know how to do properly - I didn’t know the rules.

Sineád in her point here reflects a wider concern among some of the children about the potential implications if they didn’t measure up to Tusla expectations because, in their eyes, they didn’t ‘*know the rules*’.

### 3.2.9 Concerns about privacy and encroachment by Tusla into school life

Another issue that arose related to concerns about privacy about Tusla’s presence in their lives. There were children who reported how the Tusla intervention had spilled over into school life, something they found brought challenges. The social workers came to see Adam (12) in school during the school day; he remembers being ‘*confused*’ about why they were meeting him in school and wondering to himself ‘*what did it have to do with school?*’. He still recalls clearly the discomfort of having been called out of his classroom and then having to answer questions on his return.

**Interviewer:** When you went back to class did anybody in your class say ‘where were you?’

**Adam:** Yeah, it was a bit awful really.

Privacy was not some kind of abstract issue for Adam. His answer hints at the kind of personal exposure the Tusla visit represented for him at school both on the day of the visit and beyond.

Nadia (12) recalled meeting social workers once at home, but it was a brief conversation. Then one day at school, two different social workers arrived to talk to her unannounced. They came to ‘[find out] *like what’s my opinion or kind of talk about how I feel*’. Like Adam, Nadia felt some unease at the visit.

**Nadia:** It came out of the blue. Yeah and they said that they wanted to talk to me. We had to talk about like - a couple of fighting things, and that’s it.

**Interviewer:** Ok so you’re sitting in class and then your teacher says ‘Nadia, someone’s here to see you’. What did you think? Were you kind of going ‘who’s that’ or?

**Nadia:** I was kind of worried I got in trouble or something.

Nadia and Adam’s stories remind us that well intentioned and reasonable actions by adults may still have unintended consequences for children who may be left confused or worried about the implication of sudden school visits, not least explaining these away to inquisitive peers. To social workers, school may seem like a neutral and convenient space in which to engage with a child, but for the child, besides its educational role, school is also an important social space, sometimes a place of respite from troubles at home. Both of their accounts are a reminder that for children, such school visits by social workers can prove disruptive to their privacy and feel like some uneasy collision of home and school life.

### 3.2.10 Room for improvement

Finally, there were two issues where children found room for improvement in Tusla’s performance or for more attention to the child’s experience in the situation. Leah’s (16) family were referred to Tusla because of a concern raised by a sibling with a teacher. She still recalls what she saw as a lack of follow through by Tusla, despite what she saw as a promise that they would also talk to the remaining children on their own:

**Leah:** Yeah, then Tusla came in, they talked to my mother for about 45 minutes to an hour, and we were told they’d be talking to us as well on our own and that never happened, and then they left and there was no word from them again.

**Interviewer:** Ever? Or just for a good while. And that was it?

**Leah:** That was it, they left, never came back, I never heard from them again

While her expectations about wider contact with the family may not have been matched by Tusla’s eventual appraisal of the situation, Leah’s comment is a reminder that there may be multiple views of what is happening or has happened among family members and between social workers and family members. Confidentiality may be a frequent constraint, but Leah’s point suggests that the fullest possible communication to keep everyone up to date may represent a good investment for future trust and relationship building with all those involved.

Aoife (18) recalled an emotionally charged event in her own and her siblings’ lives. She thought they should have been given the chance to talk through some of their worries and concerns about what had happened. Aoife felt that professionals should have talked more with and listened to the children and given them a chance to air their concerns and feelings.

**Aoife:** Talk to them to see how they feel because like one day we just woke up, my Mum was in hospital and we had to go to my aunts.

Aoife's comment is a reminder about the strong emotional dimension to what goes on in the contact between children and social workers, and the importance of attending to this aspect of the work.

### 3.3 Conclusion

A lot happens in the child's mind in the period between learning that Tusla are to be involved with the family and their actually meeting the social worker. Many did not know much about social workers and Tusla beforehand. Parents and peers could influence expectations about Tusla and social workers. While peers were reported often as sowing doubt, parents sometimes were reported as encouraging about Tulsa, although others seemed to cultivate a wariness among family members.

The children were often apprehensive about their peers knowing about their impending contact with Tusla (or the underlying reason). The contact was not considered a good thing in their eyes for either themselves or their family. Many children recalled being fearful of what they imagined could be the possible disruptive impact of Tusla's involvement in their own and their family's life

This first meeting seemed to be a pivotal point in the whole relationship with social workers. The chemistry established between the child and the worker could influence the trajectory of the whole relationship and where positive, could serve to counter to some degree, negative messages about Tusla's role that the child had already received from family members or peers. The first meeting could be an opportunity to address fears and lay the groundwork for a more collaborative and less wary atmosphere in future engagement. To that end, children valued receiving a clear explanation at the first meeting as to the role and purpose of Tusla and social workers, and this served to reassure many.

The children set a lot of store by the quality of their relationship with the social worker where that became relevant. Personal qualities in the social worker such as friendliness, could make a big impression and could help to win round those who were initially sceptical. Children seemed to especially value feeling listened to by the social worker and judged this by the extent to which the social worker engaged with their concerns. This seemed closely linked to the child beginning to trust the social worker and the process. While the children did not use the word directly very much, the importance of trust seemed implicit in a lot of what they sought in the relationship with the social worker. The social worker should prove worthy of their trust.

Children varied in how much they wished to be involved with the social worker. Some were glad to not have too much responsibility in the process which they often saw as the business of their parents. But others liked to know what was going on and to play a part to the degree they wished. Understanding what was going on however, was important for children, and the language – the actual words used by social workers, were mentioned in this. Simpler words were said to be easier to understand.

Some children admitted that it could be difficult to talk about their concerns and for some, writing them out in some way could help them communicate. The written exercises with Signs of Safety received favourable mention. Two reservations were expressed, however, about writing exercises. One child was very disappointed that the social worker had not 'taken up' the 'homework' he had been given by the social worker. This child had expected that the worker would be interested in what he had to say and to honour the effort he had invested in the work. Another admitted to finding the exercises 'intimidating' since it felt like a test where the wrong answer might lead to unknown but bad consequences.

Children were concerned about the idea of meeting social workers in school. They found this uncomfortable since it gave rise to awkward questions from their peers. This links to the wider point earlier of contact with Tusla not necessarily being perceived as a 'good thing' by and for the children.

In terms of room for improvement by Tusla, one point mentioned relevant to this pre-engagement and initial engagement phase was the importance of honouring promises. One child recalled being told that they and the remaining children in the family would be spoken with in the family as part of the process, but this did not happen. In many ways, communication was at the heart of the children's concerns. They wanted adults to check regularly that they understood what was going on, to really listen to and respect their concerns, and to help the children with processing the emotional impact of the family issues involved. They supported the effective use of creative and supplementary ways to supporting communication. They also recognised how feeling comfortable in the interview setting could help communication, and how what helped in this regard may differ for different children.



CHAPTER 4: WHAT CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SAY MATTERS TO THEM

4.1 Introduction

The twenty children who participated in this study reported on the nature of their engagement with a variety of Tusla staff over time, in addition to a range of other supports and resources provided by non-Tusla agencies that they were linked with. As such, these children had many professionals and services in their lives, often at the same time and interacting with each other. Their experience of Tusla involvement was also taking place against the backdrop of school, peer groups and the daily hum drum of family life. While there was certainly diversity in the sample of participating children in terms of age, gender, reason for involvement and length of involvement, emerging clearly from their narratives was a broad consensus on what they said matters to them. They were equally lucid about the approaches, actions and activities they found unhelpful. This chapter focuses on seven aspects of professional and other adult involvement in their lives and the context within which that involvement takes place, as told to us from the children’s perspective. The seven aspects they said mattered to them are as follows:

- 1. Being listened to
- 2. Knowing what is going on
- 3. Having a say when decisions are made
- 4. ‘It’s my business’
- 5. The right kind of support, when needed, from adults they like and trust
- 6. Friends, family and other activities
- 7. That things may get better

It is important to acknowledge a continuity of some issues in this chapter that were raised in the previous chapter. For example, the issue of stigma and understanding what is going on. These issues are dealt with again in this chapter as they are ‘running stories’ for the children, occurring at different points along their journey through the CP&W system. With consideration for what children said mattered to them, we reflect at the end of the chapter on possibilities for positive engagement that could be maximised by Tusla going forward.

4.2 Being listened to

I think for me because of what I went through, I think for me my views are as important as the adults because I can give the little insider's perspective, it’s like a double spy situation but at the same time I don’t, there’s always that fear that nobody is actually listening, because I’m still a child. Sineád (16)

All of the participants were asked in interview to tell us about their experience of being listened to by the professionals in their lives. The answers many children provided to this question demonstrated that they were keenly aware of how and when they were listened to. Echoing Sineád’s views in the quote above, their answers also indicated that being listened to mattered to them. Through the words of the participating children, this section provides clear examples of when they felt they were listened to and also when they did not feel listened to.

CASE STUDY 1: BEING LISTENED TO

Responding to the interviewer’s question ‘how would you know that you are being listened to, Sineád (16) replied: *‘I think there’s a difference in listening because you have to and listening because you want to’*. When invited to explain this statement a little, Sineád (16) described listening because the worker *‘has to’ as the information the young person gives to them going ‘in one ear and out the other..... they kind just sit there, look at me, look at what I’m saying and then turn immediately to something else’*. Conversely, a professional who listens because they want to, is *‘taking in the information.. soaking it up.. taking it and... giving a response based on the information given... they jot it down as an important issue. It’s listed as something.’* This ‘evidence of being listened to’ and understood was highlighted as something really important by Sineád. While Sineád stated that she had experience of Tusla workers listening because they have to and listening because they want to, she describes in this next quote how in her interaction with her Tusla worker Amy, that she feels listened to because she believes Amy ‘wants to’:

Because she makes it very clear, she’s kind of like, when I say something to her she’s like, it’s sounds like this, and then she gives me a summary of what I’ve said, she makes it clear that she’s listening to me because she gives me evidence that she’s listening to me. I think for me I just need to know that I’m being listened to with evidence and proof, I guess.  
Sineád (16)

4.2.1 ‘Someone who actually does something’

A number of aspects of being ‘listened to’ that Sineád highlights as important in her interview extract, were also suggested by other participants. Children identified an action that their social worker took following a request from them, as evidence that they had been listened to. When asked for example for qualities of an ideal worker, Ruby (14) gave the following response:

Someone who listens, someone who actually does something. (Ruby, 14)

Both John (16) and Ruby (14) gave examples of the worker 'doing something' in response to a concern a child has raised. In their individual interviews they both explained that they had concerns about wanting contact time with their respective Dads. This request of contact time with their Dad mattered to them - they asked for this to be arranged and it was. For both young people, this was evidence for them of being heard. Also referring to 'evidence', Ciara (16) told us that she knows she is being listened to and understood when what she has told her worker is reported in meetings:

Also, when I'm at a meeting, lot of things I've told her - like I've told no one else - not my Mom, not my Dad, not my siblings - it's there, it's written on a piece of paper and she listens to me and that's there. (Ciara, 16)

#### 4.2.2 'She talks to everyone individually and like she gets everyone's words'

Another clear example of a request being listened to and resulting in a positive outcome for a family was provided by David (17). In interview, David talked about social work concerns about the family home '*not been in check and it's been a mess or whatever*', resulting on one occasion with his younger siblings having to '*move out of the house for a weekend to my [relative's] house*'. David reflected on the most recent occasion where the social worker, Yasmin, raised concerns about the house and was considering the younger children having to move out again. On that occasion, David said that his Mum and himself asked to be given a chance to sort the house out and that Yasmin gave them a few hours to do that. From her action, David concluded that Yasmin '*listened in that sense...she's kind, she listens, she gets everyone's word. Like she talks, she comes to the house and then she talks to everyone individually and like she gets everyone's words*'.

#### 4.2.3 'Soaking it up'

The experience of being listened to as genuine interest in the young person's views that Sineád and Ciara have provided, was also reflected on by two other young participants who considered they were being listened to if the worker was not talking over him (Peter, 12), while Liam (10) said he knew that his worker was '*100% listening to us [when] she wasn't doing anything and then listening to us, so like rummaging through her bag, listening and stuff like that, she wasn't doing that*'. The focus on him that Liam refers to, also reflects the importance Sineád places in the case study on her worker '*soaking it up*'. Conversely, Scott (17) was not happy that the social workers who visited his family were more engaged with his parents and '*didn't really talk to me as much*'. They were only focused on the Mum and Dad, '*that's pretty much it. They weren't focused on me*'. The result for

Scott was that he did not really know the workers and '*didn't really like them*'. Being listened to for Scott in this instance was being included.

#### 4.2.4 'Instead of me speaking about it'

While in Sineád's case study it is clear that she is comfortable talking to her worker, not all participating children were. Clara (11) for example was very clear in her interview that she did not like talking about her personal life and said that '*if a child wanted to talk or didn't wanna talk, they [social workers] shouldn't pressure them about it cause sometimes it's really hard to talk about something*'. For Clara and other participants who did not like talking, it was important that they had different options for communicating. These included the activities engaged in but perhaps more importantly concerned how the worker could follow the children's guide with 'what helps' them – for example talking or writing or drawing and individualising the approach to meet the child's need and level of comfort.

Aisling (12) was one of a number of participants who talked very positively about using '*My Three Houses*' to tell their story. Aisling tells us here why writing things down is an '*easier*' way for her to communicate:

I felt it was nice, instead of me speaking about it, I could just write it down and they could read it and I wouldn't have to say it. (Aisling, 12)

There were many other examples provided by the participants about the different ways in which the worker was able to engage with them in a way that the children enjoyed. Liam (10) for example talked about how his social worker '*played games like Guess Who and she asked a little bit of questions like you [are] asking me right now*' while James (10) was clear that being brought to the park and getting '*milkshakes or drinks and stuff*' was preferable to '*just talking*'. Some of the older participants also enjoyed talking while '*going for spins*' (Leah, 16) and Sineád (15) highlighted an activity she enjoyed that involved talking with her worker while doing something else – '*like yesterday we walked my dogs or, like while we talk, we'll get coffee sometimes*'.

#### 4.2.5 'Telling me what to do and not listening to me'

A number of young participants also gave examples of not feeling that they were listened to or that what they had to say was not valid or important to the professional they were trying to communicate with. Scott (17) said that he felt that his school principal was not listening to him because he was '*interrupting me all the time*'. In the second case study outlined below, Leah (16) also gives an example of where she felt she was not listened to or engaged with in a way that would support the worker to get to know her, understand her and give Leah the message that what she had to say mattered.

CASE STUDY 2: NOT BEING LISTENED TO

In this interview extract, Leah (16) is telling the interviewer about her interaction with the Tusla worker, following a CP&W incident where Leah was invited to make a formal complaint about her parents.

**Leah:** she comes in and she's like well, talking to me like I'm a 3-year-old here. I didn't like her one bit...

**Interviewer:** And what didn't you like about her?

**Leah:** She talked to me like I was a child and that I wasn't capable of understanding or talking for myself, and that I wasn't capable of making my own decisions. Like [she said] 'oh your mother said you should do this or do this', and [she] refused to listen to why I didn't want to do it, but like she did seem like she was a nice person, but she definitely didn't seem like she was a teenager type person, much more of a child type person. I was like that's not very... what's the word for like telling me what to do and not listening to me?

**Interviewer:** child-centred?

**Leah:** yeah.

Acknowledging that the worker seemed like 'a nice person', Leah however takes issue with the approach taken, one that she does not feel is tailored to her age and maturity and where she feels treated like a child rather than a teenager and not listened to. Leah made reference a few times in her interview to the importance of the worker approach being 'child-centred'. This is also touched on in the second example she provides of not being listened to when a report was completed on her without her involvement:

**Leah:** Whenever my report thingy went into Tusla, there was fuck all information about me, it was like 14 year old girl, x had happened in this household, 5 or 6 sessions in thingy, 'magic, job done', then she [social worker] comes out and meets me, and it also said on my thing [report] that I was [names disability] but did not in any way explain that and what it meant for me.

**Interviewer:** And do you know who did that report? Had they met you?

**Leah:** They had not met me [her stressing the 'not'] its mad isn't it – I mean... that makes zero sense to me, I don't see how that can work and even my [names other Tusla worker], she doesn't like how that works, like she really thinks it should be - you meet the child first, and [then] discuss what that child needs.

4.2.6 'Two sides to every story'

There were other examples provided by the children where they felt that their family's side of the story was not being heard, and consequently that their wishes and feelings were not being taken into account. This left them feeling that they had no influence.

For example, Cathy (18) felt that in her situation, other professionals' views were prioritised over her family's views, leaving her feeling that both sides were not being heard. While Cathy acknowledges in

her quote that '*they do listen sometimes*', her narrative perhaps raises a question about the importance of clear communication and expectations being managed unambiguously.

Even when you tell them there's things that you don't like about that, I don't think they really care, I think they're just gonna go on ahead and do it anyway. That's my opinion. They do listen sometimes but not to everything. It's like what they want to hear they listen to.  
(Cathy, 18)

For another participant, Ruby (14), an unsubstantiated allegation that brought Tusla into her family's life, could have been resolved, she believed, if both sides of the story had been heard from the beginning. In this next quote Ruby is telling the interviewer that although she had told Tusla social workers repeatedly that this allegation was false, that nobody listened to her and that she felt ignored.

Yeah if they just listened at the start because the end of it was just the same as what I was saying didn't happen and then [one year later] they finished off 'it didn't happen'. (Ruby, 14)

4.3 Knowing what is going on: what helps and hinders children's understanding of Tusla involvement with their family

Building on the earlier themes raised in chapter three of children not always fully understanding what was going on with respect to Tusla involvement in their family, a number of issues concerning both knowing and not knowing were sustained in their accounts. These included their understanding of a clear beginning and ending of Tusla involvement with their family, and why involvement began and ended. Children did not always understand what their Tusla worker was doing and the participants also held views on how much children should know about what is going on. Their understanding of what was going on was directly linked to adult communication with them - both Tusla and other adults including their parents.

4.3.1 'I was like kind of hurt at first that I wasn't told this but that the same time I understood why I wasn't told this, cause like I was and still am a child'

The question of how much children should 'know' about what was going on in their family that had caused Tusla to be involved with them and what exactly Tusla were doing with the family, was discussed in almost every interview. With some of the participants, this generated interesting debate, as touched on in the quote from Sineád at the start of this section, about balancing the need to understand with the need to be protected from 'adult' issues.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were quite mixed views across the sample of children regarding the level of knowledge or understanding children should have on the reason for Tusla involvement and the nature of that involvement. Sometimes this related to the age of the child and at other times it related to the role the child played in the family – perhaps where a child felt that they were carrying responsibility for siblings or parents, they were more likely to have more information and also more likely to want to understand the reason for Tusla intervention and the nature of that intervention.

James (10) for example felt strongly that it was important that Tusla workers should talk with and listen to children. He was also very clear on what that conversation might look like, with his next quote perhaps reflecting the need for child-centred approaches to communication:

They should talk to the kids, not the exact same as they do to the adults, cause that might like, ruin their childhood, but then, like, a bit similar, like tell them what’s going on, if they do something, it’s not just gonna like come out of nowhere, they’re gonna tell them what they’re gonna do, they won’t just like bring it out of nowhere [...] they’d have to talk in more of a, not childish way, like an understandable way. (James, 10)

As reflected in her earlier quote, Sineád (16) described herself as ‘quite conflicted’ on the issue of how much children should ‘know’ about Tusla involvement, raising the following questions in interview:

Are they treating me like an adult or a child? What are people treating me like? Cause you’re very confused on that’. (Sinead, 16)

Sineád talked about reading the letter sent out to her parents in preparation for the Child Protection Case Conference and feeling ‘*very scared*’ about the level of detail in the letter which she described as having ‘*multiple pages*’ with ‘*every concern in detail*’. Sineád said her Mum had already tried to explain why Tusla were involved but that her Mum had clearly ‘*really toned down and like sussed out what was the least concerning way to say it*’. However in this next interview extract, Sineád explains how she felt on reading the letter, which perhaps raises the need for adults to check out what the child’s understanding is at key points along the way – like in advance of the CPC and having received the letter:

**Sineád:** I wasn’t concerned about it at all because of the way she [Mum] explained it but reading the page it was like ‘holy shit!’

**Interviewer:** Would have it been useful for Amy and Jane [Tusla social worker and social care worker] to be with you while you were reading that?

**Sineád:** Erm no cause I was fine with reading it, I was just like kind of hurt at first that I wasn’t told this but that the same time I understood why I wasn’t told this cause like I was and still am a child. I really shouldn’t know these things from the beginning but I’m glad that I know them so I can see that something we’re doing in my house is something we’re not supposed to be doing so I can correct it and I can fix it, I can make it stop.

The views and experiences of many of the participating children very much echoed what Sineád described as ‘*a very thin line between being treated like a child and being treated like an adult*’. This thin line appeared to be influenced by how much the children knew about what was going on in their family, how much they wanted to know, and how much information they were given by the adults involved. It is worth noting that the age of the participant did not seem to impact this. James (10) as one of the youngest participants held very similar views to the older children, suggesting that it is worth considering their role in the family and not just their age when information sharing is being decided on. One of the challenges that this raises however, is the issue of how much information children can/should cope with. In the next section we see a clear example of this tension playing out where not knowing what is going on can lead to the child worrying.

4.3.2 ‘[I] just wanted to see if it was good or bad’: when not knowing can lead to worried concern

Some young participants said that they did not always understand what was going on in terms of what a worker was doing or why. This was exacerbated for children when there were multiple workers coming in and out of their family’s lives and the child did not fully understand what each worker was doing. In this next case study, James (10) talks about regular meetings between his mother and the social workers in his home which had involved the adults going into another room to watch a video. It is important to note that analysis of James’s interview indicated that he regularly took some adult responsibility by having a say in family decisions. He also presented as acutely aware of his Mum’s anxiety issues and his brother’s behavioural issues. Acutely attuned to these issues, we can clearly pick up his worry about whether things were ‘good or bad’ when he did not know what was going on:

**CASE STUDY 3: NOT KNOWING**

In his old house, James (10) remembers sliding doors separating the kitchen and the sitting room. When the two Tusla workers came to meet with his Mum, he said the three adults went into one of the rooms to ‘*show my Mum the videos, how to help with doing stuff*’ and that they would close the sliding doors ‘*for some reason*’. James remembered trying to ‘*peak in*’ but that the workers just closed the door to him, so he said in interview that he did not try it again. James was very clear that he did not like the fact that he did not know what was going on but was keen to point out that he ‘*didn’t really care* [what was going on in the room], [I] *just wanted to see if it was good or bad*’. The



following is a brief exchange between James and the interviewer when he is asked if he would ‘*have liked maybe if they had explained to you what they were doing?*’

**James:** Yeah

**Interviewer:** Yeah? so was it not knowing?

**James:** Yeah

Despite James’s curiosity regarding what was happening behind closed doors and cognisant of the position of responsibility he describes holding in the family, James does not recall any explanation forthcoming as to what the activity involved, leaving him unsure and then worried about whether the interaction he was excluded from was ‘*good or bad*’. While closing the doors is perhaps intended as a way to protect the child from adult ‘business’, James clearly experiences it as being excluded. Another participant Scott (17) also felt strongly about being shut out from conversations. Stating that his social workers ‘*didn’t really share information*’ Scott said they ‘*kept it shut*’ and as a result, he didn’t feel that they ‘*really have respect for me*’. For Aoife (18), a large information gap created as she saw it by nobody telling her why she was not living with her parents, was filled imaginatively by her, leading to resentment and considerable tension in her extended family. This is a clear example of how lack of explanation can lead to lack of understanding, carrying the potential for already vulnerable situations to be aggravated.

Illustrative of the diversity in the sample, another ten-year-old boy, Liam, said that while he too did not understand why Tusla was coming to talk to his parents, this lack of understanding was not an issue for him as he said, ‘*I’m not really interested in that*’. Similarly, the interviews with Nadia (12) and Sophia (14) suggest that they were very much on the periphery of Tusla involvement, with ‘*I don’t know*’ a common response to interviewer questions. In both cases, Tusla involvement seemed primarily focused on their parents, with older siblings in both families involved, but not Nadia and Sophia. When asked by the interviewer why her sister was included in the family conversations with the Tusla workers and she was not, Nadia replied:

Because my sister knows everything that was happening - there were fights - she heard everything, she saw everything so... (Nadia, 12).

In both Nadia and Sophia’s interviews, they were able to clearly articulate a reason for Tusla involvement, so they did know and understand why Tusla was involved with their family. In both cases however, neither child appeared to understand what exactly Tusla was doing with their family with both girls talking about siblings and parents shielding their involvement and framing this as a protective measure. Also in both cases, the girls appeared to have acquiesced to this position.

4.3.3 ‘They told me things are not great again’: Understanding the ebb and flow of Tusla involvement in their lives  
One of the features of Tusla engagement for participating children concerned how it was communicated to them and how they were helped to understand the beginning and ending of Tusla involvement in their lives.

In this next case study, twelve-year old Aisling reflects on her experience of Tusla involvement with her family over a number of years. We can see that Aisling clearly understood why, at different times, Tusla became more and less involved with her family. For Aisling there were clear and understandable endings and beginnings to Tusla involvement because both her mother and her Tusla worker are telling her why.

**CASE STUDY 4: UNDERSTANDING WHY TUSLA MIGHT ‘COME AND GO’**

Aisling (12) said that Tusla had been working with her family for a long time – she didn’t know exactly when, but she is in 6<sup>th</sup> class now and thought maybe it was in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> class when she met her first social workers, so she said she was probably around 9 years of age. Aisling said that after a while, ‘*the reason why Tusla came, that reason kinda just started getting smaller and smaller*’ and that the social worker was not calling as much. Aisling said that ‘*then eventually when Tusla was going to leave, it kinda just went all back...*’. Asked by the interviewer if she meant that the problem that caused Tusla to start working with her family had come back again, Aisling said ‘*Yes. They [Tusla] stayed*’. In the conversation that follows, Aisling is able to help the interviewer understand that when the problem is bigger, Tusla stay until it starts getting smaller again. When the problem is getting smaller, Aisling also said that her worries are getting smaller. Tusla stay involved with Aisling and her family, only talking about ending their work with the family when the problem is getting smaller. When Tusla recently decided to stay working with her family, it was because her Mam told Tusla that the problem was getting bigger again. Aisling found out when her Mam and Tusla told her that ‘*things are not great again*’.

In this case study Aisling tells us that she has a good understanding of this ‘ebb and flow’ of Tusla involvement – conversations with her Mum and the Tusla worker has helped her to understand that involvement increases when the problem gets bigger and reduces when it gets smaller. Another participant, Sineád (16), also talked about how, as she understood it, the level of intensity of Tusla involvement was related to how well her family was doing. While Sineád did not specifically detail if this had been explained to her, she did describe Tusla ‘*loosening the leash, or like zooming out the camera, they didn’t need to watch us as close or look after us as much.*’

Ciara (16) also told us that her parents and her Tusla worker told her that Tusla involvement was ending. In contrast to Aisling and Sineád above, while receiving the message clearly that Tusla involvement was ending, Ciara said however that she did not fully understand, or was helped to

understand, why this decision had been made. In this next extract, Ciara explains that while she was initially pleased to be told that Tusla involvement was ending, that it did not really make sense to her with how she felt the family was functioning. As such, she knew what was happening but did not know why:

**Ciara:** I was glad, like she's gone - 'my works done, it's fine now'.

**Interviewer:** Ok and did it make sense that she was gone? Were things better in your house?

**Ciara:** It didn't make sense that she was gone. It was like 'oh but like things are kind of like this'? And then when things kind of took a turn, that's when I was introduced to my new social worker.

A key point in understanding or knowing what was going on in the context of this 'coming and going' of Tusla workers seems to be how that message was communicated to the child and whether or not they understood it or that it made sense in their world of understanding what was going on for their family.

#### 4.3.4 'They kind of just stopped coming': Understanding why workers have gone

Other children talked about experiencing the ending of Tusla involvement as 'drift' and not knowing or understanding that Tusla ending had occurred, because this was not communicated clearly to them. As Sadie (15) describes in the following exchange with the interviewer, drift without communication for her meant that there was no 'official' end to Tusla's involvement. In the absence of a clear message that involvement was ending, Sadie therefore said that she did not feel she was supported to understand why involvement was ending. As a result, there was no clear message for Sadie symbolising the ending of the relationship:

**Sadie:** I mean it worked out fine, drifting, but back then I would have preferred the message saying 'I don't need to talk to her anymore and all this'.

**Interviewer:** Yeah cause that would have conveyed a message to you that you're actually doing ok?

**Sadie:** Yeah.

Fourteen-year-old Ruby also could not recall any conversation where she was told Tusla involvement was over. While she said she remembered her very first social worker Tom '*just disappeared*', she said her subsequent and final Tusla workers '*kind of just stopped coming. It just stopped. Like I saw them a lot less like. They just stopped coming and then I guessed it and then my mum said it was finished*'. While it seems here that Tusla had communicated the ending of their involvement with Ruby's Mum,

neither Tusla or Ruby's Mum have communicated that to Ruby, until she '*guessed it*' and her guess was confirmed by her Mum.

#### 4.3.5 'Some of them were doing different things and then some of them were just doing the same thing': Understanding the purpose of the worker's involvement

Some children who had multiple Tusla workers coming in and out of their lives, were not always clear about the purpose of each worker's involvement, what exactly they were doing and why. Ruby (14) for example reported having about six or seven social workers over an approximate one-year period. Ruby said that she understood that the multiple workers were taking '*a turn*' working with her.

James (10) also talked about multiple Tusla staff being involved with his family, sometimes over very short periods of time. While James could not remember if he had been given any reason why these workers came and went, he had concluded for himself that perhaps those workers were a '*start off [social worker] I don't think she was an actual social worker*' (James 10). James did say that he found this changeover of staff '*disruptive, cause like, all the different social workers do different stuff, so that was like a big change*'.

#### 4.4 Having a say when decisions are made

'Having a say' was a theme that ran throughout the children's narratives, both in answering direct questions on this topic but also in other comments they made on other topics. This tells us that 'having a say' was an issue that they had in mind, independently of our questions, and where they brought different and interesting angles of their own to the discussion. Some of this discussion centred around decision-making fora including large professional meetings, whether or not and in what way, children could or should be invited to participate. The children also talked about other important decisions taken outside of that formal forum that they experienced either positively or negatively. Many of the participants had clear views on how much weight their views should carry in decision making. This section starts with children's views and experiences of attending formal meetings where important decisions are taken. Other fora and experiences are then considered.

Among the older children, there was experience of formal meetings where decisions were being made about them as individuals and about their family. This included Leah (16), Ciara (16), Cathy (18), Aoife (18), David (17) & Scott (17). In these instances, the meetings were convened by Tusla and involved a range of professionals in attendance, including teachers, therapists, An Garda Síochána, GP's etc. As the next two case studies illustrate, their experiences were quite mixed. In this first case study, Aoife

(18) poignantly reflects on a powerful experience of having a say in a decision that was made for her and her sibling following a request she made at a professional meeting about her having access to family members over Christmas.

4.4.1 ‘It made me feel like she was actually going to follow up on what I thought’

CASE STUDY 5: HAVING A SAY

The following quote from Aoife’s interview illustrates the connection between being listened to and having a say. In this example, the worker demonstrates to Aoife that she has listened to and accounted for Aoife’s ideas and perspective when making her professional decision.

I thought, instantly when she was actually asking me questions like ‘how would you feel about this’ [if there was a concern about her safety] and I just felt like wow, this woman’s actually asking me how I feel, and she was writing notes down after I said how I feel, so it made me feel like she was actually going to follow up on what I thought, and then after the meeting was over, she had sent out me a letter [and sent relevant family members a letter as well] about what the plans were for Christmas, and for the rest of the year. And my things that were in it that I wanted, and why I expressed went through, obviously some things didn’t go through, and looking back, it wasn’t really a good idea, so she did listen to what I wanted but made them... better... do you get me?

In this quote, Aoife provides a powerful reflection on her take on participation in decision making and her rationale for why that matters. Aoife recalled her feelings about being truly heard in that encounter and that *‘whatever I felt in that moment, I think that she actually cooperated with me, and interacted with me’*.

Across almost nine years of her family’s engagement with Tusla, Aoife also remembered times of not knowing what was going on for herself and her siblings and why Tusla was involved. She gave examples of Tusla professionals whom she considered had not listened to her. The above was one of two stand out experiences for Aoife during that period of involvement. This really mattered to Aoife, as her experience up to that meeting with Liz of ‘having a say’ had been different, as she explains:

Everybody else was meant to take care of me, but everybody else was just for themselves, and they wanted what they wanted, they didn’t want to hear what I had to say [or my sibling]. They made a decision for us and that was it, cause in their eyes, we were children, we don’t need to make decisions, we don’t need to be heard, but I think we do because we seen it all, we lived it, no one else has, and we were going through the pain. (Aoife, 18)

4.4.2 ‘Does my opinion even matter like, does my say matter?’

In this next case study, Cathy (18) talks about her experience of attending two CPC meetings over the previous year.

CASE STUDY 6: FEELING UNSUPPORTED

Cathy (18) described her experience of the first CPC meeting as very upsetting and ‘tough’ because she did not feel prepared for the depth of information shared. Cathy said that she had received the same letter as her parents, telling them what would happen at the meeting and who was going to be there, but she said it was *‘harder when I was in there listening to everything...it all got a bit too much and I just didn’t want to listen anymore.’* Cathy talks about the challenge of attending that meeting for a young person and she describes the impact of this on her ability to ‘have her say’:

I didn’t say everything I wanted to say to the school, in a way I was very nervous. I was angry and I thought all of these things in my head that I would have liked to say, but there was so many, that meeting was not nice. We were all sitting around in a circle on chairs and when everyone’s looking at you, people that know you and know your family, well schools like, they know of us, when they’re sitting there looking at you like... Yeah I’m just sitting there like, god knows what you already think of my family, does my opinion even matter like, does my say matter?

The experience of information overload and exposure that Cathy experienced as challenging in that meeting and prevented her feeling she had real opportunities to have her say, was compounded she felt by how the meeting ended and where the family were left alone to deal with the emotional impact and fall-out. Cathy recalled how herself and her parents *‘just had to go home and get on with it’*, describing the atmosphere at home as *unhappy* and of them all just having *‘a shitty week’*. When asked in interview what would have helped herself and her parents that day, she replied:

I think Tusla should have a meeting with, not with everyone there, but just the family after, and explain... I think they should sit us down after it, talk to us when all the professionals aren’t there.

Cathy also described a second CPC meeting which she said was a follow up to the one outlined above. This meeting she said was a more positive experience for her and her parents, partly because she felt that she was better prepared and partly because she felt that there had been improvements in the family situation which were acknowledged by the professionals in that meeting.

The two contrasting case studies tell us some important things about participation and ‘having a say’. In Aoife’s case study we see a clear example of Aoife experiencing participation because she feels that her perspective is considered important and is included. Cathy’s case tells us about the importance of supporting children to have their say and that the right support conditions need to be in place for that to happen.

In contrast to Cathy’s mixed experience, three other participants talked positively about their involvement in large professional meetings. Firstly, David (17) talked about attending two CPC meetings with his parents, members of their ‘Safety Network’, Tusla professionals and other professionals, including school principals. David said that he felt well prepared for the meeting, his social worker Yasmin had explained to him what was going to happen and who was going to be there.



David said that he understood the purpose of the meeting was *‘to go over things that are going well, what needs to improve and where, like if Tusla still needs to be involved’*. He felt he had a good understanding of why Tusla was involved so for him there were no ‘surprises’ in terms of what was discussed and who was in attendance.

Secondly Leah (16) described a very positive ‘big meeting’ that was convened by Tusla but held in her school where a lot of professionals involved with her were invited and her parents attended also. Leah said it was important to her that she had some say over who attended the meeting as there was one Tusla professional she did not want at the meeting and this request was respected. Leah said that she experienced the meeting as very focused on her and what she wanted and felt that she had been included in the decisions taken and that her ‘say’ had been taken on board.

Thirdly, Scott (17) told us that while he had attended a recent big meeting of professionals convened to consider his ‘safety’, that he was not in the room for the whole meeting, instead just attending *‘for a little bit. I’d wait in a waiting room and then they’d bring me’*. Despite only being there for part of the meeting, Scott was confident that he had an opportunity to say what he wanted to say at the meeting. This was important to him as he explains:

It was really important because they were trying to think of if I’m still safe where I am, still safe at home. (Scott, 17)

#### 4.4.3 ‘I think Jane [social worker] should just do her job and do what she’s supposed to do instead of letting the kid do whatever he wants’.

An interesting point to pick up here is whether involvement in decision making is about the young person getting what they want – as Leah did above. This contrasts somewhat with Aoife’s case, where while some of her wishes were acceded to, she was clear that she did not get everything she wanted and that that was ok. Emerging strongly from Leah and Aoife’s cases is that they both felt heard and involved in the decision-making process. The outcome is therefore not necessarily what children are judging when considering their satisfaction with decision making. Rather, as Aoife’s example illustrates, the process is important in its own right.

In terms of having a say in general, children were asked whether social workers should do what children want in relation to decision making. Liam (10) said *‘well not really cause a kid might just like ask them to do this and they’re not really allowed, so I think Kate [social worker] should just do her job and do what she’s supposed to do instead of letting the kid do whatever he wants.’* Eoin (13) also said that *‘obviously a child can’t control every single thing that they [social workers] do. It really depends on what age they are. If they are young enough then like obviously they can’t.* Like Liam, James (10)

also did not feel that social workers should do what children want them to do regarding decision making, explaining that *‘cause maybe kids have a bad idea’*. James did assert however that if he had strong feelings about the decisions or choices that were being made for him, that he would ‘speak up’:

I mean if it was bad stuff about me, yes I’m speaking up definitely, but if it’s like stuff about me in like, just a normal way, yeah, I mean I don’t really mind but if it’s something bad about me I’ll speak up. (James, 10)

We also had some interesting discussion with the children about their attendance at meetings and being involved in decision-making with professionals and other key adults in their lives. Three broad questions emerged out of that discussion – firstly whether or not children should be at the meetings; secondly how younger children may need protection from involvement in those meetings; and thirdly, what alternative methods of representing young children’s views and experiences might look like. These are discussed now.

#### 4.4.4 ‘If there’s gonna be a meeting about the child, the child should have to be there cause it’s about them’

Regarding the first question of whether or not children should be at the professional meetings, Sadie (15) was clear that if there was a meeting arranged where the professionals involved with her family were discussing her case and making decisions, that she would *‘prefer to be around the table to hear what people are saying about me’*. However, when asked whether she thought that she should be allowed to attend, she was equally emphatic in her response, stating ‘No!’. Sadie explained her reason for this response, drawing what she saw as similarities between Tusla meetings and parent/teacher meetings in school, telling the interviewer that:

I feel like it would be one of those situations where the parents get to talk instead of like the child butting in. I don’t know, I feel like it would be one of those situations where it’s just parents. (Sadie, 15)

While Sadie was clear that in principle *‘if there’s gonna be a meeting about the child, the child should have to be there cause it’s about them’*, she was unsure how she herself would feel about attending. She felt that she might not be comfortable as *‘I feel like everyone is just staring at me cause, I mean it is about me, but I mean like having Mum and Dad there as well, that would help cause like I know them, I don’t really know the other pile of people in the room’*. Sadie also said that having her (non-Tusla) therapist at the meeting would make things easier as *‘they would understand’*. This perhaps echoes the earlier point about the conditions of support needing to be in place in order to enable



participation and ‘having a say’. It also extends to the idea that children can be ‘at the table’ without being physically present, where they are not comfortable attending.

Having a say in who attended the meeting and what they heard about the young person and their family was something that Ciara (16) did not feel she could ask about, which again raises the question of preparation for and support at those meetings:

I feel like it’s like all up to them. They’re the professionals, I’m just basically here. I’m not sure. I only remember like ever like just being told ‘there’s going to be a meeting and you should get a letter’ and they told me briefly who’s going to be at the meeting but then when I got the list of people there was like two or three people that were there that I was like ‘oh I didn’t know they were coming’. But like it wasn’t a big deal it was like ‘oh I didn’t know they were coming’, but this kind of looked like this was part of their job so it was understandable that ‘oh yeah they’d be there’. (Ciara, 16)

Picking up on Sadie’s point about adults getting to talk instead of the child ‘butting in’, Sineád felt that there was a risk that *‘as a child your word is taken less into consideration. Your word is not as important as the adult’s words are because they’re the adults, they have more experience in life than you, they know better than you’*. Sineád however did not agree with this view of children’s view having lesser value, stating that *‘as someone who’s been through quite a bit’*, that her voice and view was important.

#### 4.4.5 ‘They’re too young’ and should not hear it

Regarding the second point, there was some debate amongst the participants about whether the age of the children should influence them having a say in decisions that are made about them, including attending decision-making meetings like CPCs. A number of children like Ciara (16) thought that children’s involvement in decision making is a good thing and felt strongly against children being excluded because of their age:

When they use your age against them like ‘oh yeah you’re the kid, I’m the adult. I know better’, it’s more so ‘yeah but like this is about me, I’m telling you this, so you should listen to me’ or at least ‘oh well you have a point’. More so that, not ‘you’re the kid, you’re just supposed to sit there, listen and whatever I say goes’ like that. (Ciara, 16)

However, for some of the younger participating children, it was less clear whether they themselves did not want to attend the meeting, or whether they are picking up on adult messages that they are too young to attend. Aisling (12) for example said she would not want to attend *‘because they’re*

*talking about, maybe it’s something private what my mam told them and they don’t want me to know about it’*. This perhaps implies she is unsure if adults do not want her to go. Similarly, Adam (12) said that he had asked his Mum if he could go to one of those meetings but his Mum said *‘no because they’re for over 18’*. He concluded from this that he was probably *‘too young for meetings. Like probably wouldn’t understand anything’*. Referring to her younger siblings, Cathy (18) felt strongly that younger children should not attend the CPC meetings to have their say in the decision-making process, because in attending, they would be exposed to hearing a lot of information that she believed *‘they’re too young’* for and should not hear – that they should be shielded from the harsh reality of what Cathy herself described as *‘tough’* to listen to. Cathy did feel strongly that her siblings’ views should be represented however, and this is explored next.

#### 4.4.6 ‘There are many ways to be heard’: Helping younger children ‘have their say’

While Cathy said that her siblings’ views were presented to the meeting she attended by their individual worker and the family social worker, she felt nonetheless that it would have been better and fairer to capture a direct representation of their own views and wishes to present to the meeting. Stating that *‘there are many ways to be heard’*, Cathy suggested the following methods of capturing views of younger children as a safe way to facilitate them ‘having their say’:

Like there is younger ones [siblings] that like wouldn’t have been able to write, but the older ones maybe [could be asked] to write down what they think of it all, write it down from actual, from their words, like video maybe, so they can actually hear their words for words and their voice for voice. I think it’s just too young to hear any of that. (Cathy, 18)

Picking up a little on Cathy’s point, Adam (12) said that his social worker represented Adam’s view *‘at one of the big meetings, he got me to write down on a piece of paper everything. Like what I felt about. And he basically just said he’d be the voice of me’*. Another young participant, Liam (10) was somewhat indifferent regarding whether or not children should be asked what they think about the decisions that are made, stating: *‘well yeah, they can but they don’t have to...it’s not really a big difference’* either way.

#### 4.5. ‘It’s my business’

This section presents the views and experiences of the participating children on the sensitive issue of how, why and in what way information that is personal to them and their family, is shared. The school is one setting where this issue arises for the participants, but it is not the only one. The other arena where this arises is the peer group, where the children want to have influence over what their peer

group know about their ‘business’. In the opening case study, Ciara (16) raises a number of issues that were echoed across many of the other interviews.

4.5.1 ‘Does everyone need to know everything?’

**CASE STUDY 7: AN INVASION OF PRIVACY**

Prior to the ‘big meeting’ with a lot of professionals (CPC), Ciara said that she understood her School Principal only ‘*knew the things I came into school about, like [I] told her about and she’d go back and contact Tusla about it. She only knew that*’. However, Ciara talked about feeling unprepared for the level of detail that was shared at the CPC when her School Principal ended up knowing ‘*everything that happened [in Ciara’s family], I was like ‘oh God this is like no*’.

**Ciara:** I was really upset. You could see that she didn’t know all this was happening. She was kind of nodding her head and I think she said it ‘I didn’t really understand all of this’. It was kind of obvious that she didn’t know because she kind of gave that look, really listen like ‘oh ok so I should be aware of this’ - like if I come in looking sad, it could be a possibility that something happened. Sometimes I don’t say everything or tell them everything.

**Interviewer:** Is that kind of like because you want to be in charge of what people know about your private life?

**Ciara:** Yeah that’s exactly it – I know some people like teachers have to know some important stuff but does everyone need to know everything? It’s a bit rough to be honest – like your life is open wide.

**Interviewer:** So what I hear you saying is that on the one hand it’s good that the school know because then perhaps they’re looking out for you and they’re more sympathetic if you don’t have your homework done or whatever. But on the other hand it sounds like it feels a little bit of an invasion of your privacy?

**Ciara:** Yeah it does. It does.

Ciara’s case study reflects the ambivalence and uncertainty that many children expressed about their teachers knowing their ‘business’. While Ciara (16) acknowledges the benefits that can come from teachers knowing what is going on for her at home, it is less clear for Ciara and some other participants how the rules of information sharing are agreed. In this case study, Ciara is talking to the interviewer about her experience attending a large professional meeting about her family. Ciara makes a couple of clear points in this case study that other children and young people also shared similar views on.

4.5.2 ‘It’s nice to know that they understand what’s happening’

An interesting point raised in Ciara’s case study and reflected on by other participants relates to the importance of the school knowing their family situation so that the school can be supportive and understanding – where adults knowing ‘*their business*’ brings benefits. As Ciara’s interview progresses, she concedes:

[That while it is] not the best of feelings [that] they know everything that’s happening, but then it’s also nice to know that they understand what’s happening. So if I come in one day and it’s like this, they kind of have a rough idea, so if they call me behind after class it’s like

well yeah so, they kind of know. So there’s no point in kind of hiding anything. They know. They clearly keep it to themselves, they’re not going to tell everyone ‘oh yeah like this is what’s happening’. (Ciara, 16)

Touching on the earlier point of having some influence over the information teachers had, Sineád (16) thought it would be helpful if teachers were given ‘*a vague description of what is going on for the child and why they might be stressed*’. Clara (11) said she did not mind professionals including teachers having her personal family information ‘*cause it’s not a bad thing*’ while Ruby (14) was somewhat ambivalent about teachers knowing, stating ‘*I was like it’s whatever*’ but also confirmed that it didn’t bother her. Aisling (12) also said she was also ‘*ok*’ with teachers knowing, with John (16) explaining why:

I don’t mind it cause it kinda gives them an insight of why, you know, if I was ever in a bad mood someday, you know, not to start just fucking shouting at me, you know just to be fairly, you know, understanding. (John, 16)

4.5.3 ‘Everyone kind of had a glimpse at my life you know’

However Ciara (16) also makes her feeling clear that information sharing has left her with no privacy and that her life was ‘*open wide*’ for everyone to see and know what was going on. Cathy (18) similarly said her attendance at her first CPC felt that ‘*everyone kind of had a glimpse at my life you know. I wouldn’t have been the type of person to tell people my business, you know, it’s my own business, so, and then there was things brought up, like my mental health, and I felt uncomfortable about that*’. Cathy described this loss of privacy and feeling exposed as ‘*tough*’ with Ciara saying it was ‘*a bit rough*’.

4.5.4 ‘I just don’t get the school knowing every bit’

This challenge of exposure Cathy referred to above was compounded for her and for many children who said they did not understand the rules of engagement for information sharing – specifically the reason for information sharing, who information would be shared with and what the boundaries were for this sharing of their personal family details. While they may have known who would be in attendance at the meeting, they said they were not informed with whom their personal family information would be shared. While some level of information sharing is understood as necessary and is ok, where information sharing begins and ends and with whom, was less clear, with Ciara asking:

‘Was there a point of a principal or someone from school knowing that? That doesn’t really do any big favours for me in school, so I was thinking ‘what was the point of that?’ (Ciara, 16)

In the above quote, Ciara questions the rationale or justification for information sharing with her school. Adam (12) also did not understand the level of information sharing with his school, telling us ‘I just don’t get the school knowing every bit’. James (10) however seemed more confident about the boundary of information sharing and did not ‘mind them [teachers] knowing’ because he trusted that ‘the teachers aren’t gonna like, tell the students, like my whole lifeline’. James also said he needed to be clear on why teachers would be told his personal information. Giving the example of recently getting a new teacher who did not know he had a social worker, James considered that ‘the only way I’m gonna tell him, if he asks about it cause I’m not just gonna go up to him, ‘oh I have a social worker’, cause that’s just random.’ Sharing information on a need-to-know basis and minding his privacy are important to James. Similar to Ciara’s earlier questioning of why people had to know, James needs a clear rationale for this.

#### 4.5.5 ‘If I want them to know my stuff, I’d tell them’

The second arena of special relevance to issues of privacy that participating children raised was the peer group. Having control or influence over peers ‘knowing their business’ was also important and this is an area where children seemed to be able to exercise more control over who knew what. They also had a clear rationale and strategy for controlling and sharing personal information.

Feelings of fear and stigma that were outlined in the previous chapter seemed to continue here and was one reason children gave for continuing to want to maintain privacy. While James (10) said ‘I don’t care really what they think or what they say’, he was also very clear that he did not want his friends to ‘know my business cause, it’s just like if they spread it around and add lies, that’s gonna be horrible, so that’s why I don’t tell them’. Peter (12) was also very clear that ‘If I want them to know my stuff, I’d tell them’, saying that if asked why he had missed school to attend the interview for this study, that he would say ‘I’ve a doctor’s appointment’. James said he had come to an arrangement with his youth worker regarding privacy and calls his youth worker his uncle if he meets his friends and that his youth worker ‘plays along with that’.

Echoing the issue raised earlier about understanding the rules of engagement, some children said they were unsure about what they were ‘allowed’ to tell people about their family. Ciara said she ‘chose’ not to tell most of her friends, only telling one friend who ‘asks a lot of questions about it’. Ciara said

she confided as much as she was ‘allowed to’ tell her friend, because as she understood it, ‘Like a lot of things are private, confidential, between you and your family, no one else. What I could tell her, I told her’. Similarly unsure of what he could and could not share with friends, Liam (10) concluded that his friends were ‘not really supposed to know’, while Aisling (12) said that while she would not volunteer the information to her best friend Ruth, if Ruth ‘asks about it I will tell her but if she doesn’t I won’t’. Even when her best friend was her cousin and therefore her family, Aoife (18) says ‘I felt really close with my cousin Sara, that I’d tell her anything.. [but] obviously I kept some things to myself, but I’d tell her about social workers, and sometimes she had been there when social workers had just called, and like she’d wait in my bedroom though, she wouldn’t come down to a meeting’. In interview, Aoife also talked about managing her privacy by changing her story about why Tusla was involved, explaining ‘I was just trying to make me feel better’ and ‘get people off my back’.

#### 4.6. The right kind of support, when needed, from adults who are liked and trusted

[Having] ‘someone there that I can trust, that I can talk to. If anything happens at home, I can really trust that they’ll understand what’s happening at home, they can definitely help’. Ciara (16)

The opening quote from Ciara reflects the views of other participating children, that knowing they and their family were not on their own and having the right kind of support, when needed, from competent adults they liked and could trust, mattered to them. These adults included Tusla and non-Tusla professionals in addition to adults in their ‘Safety Network’.

In the case example below, Sineád (16) provides a clear example of her social worker, Jane, being responsive to Sineád’s mother who was distressed and asking for her children to be taken into care. In interview, Sineád told how important it was that she could call her social worker ‘whenever and we know that she would pick up the phone or if she was busy, she’d call us back’.

#### CASE STUDY 8: THE RIGHT KIND OF SUPPORT WHEN NEEDED

**Sineád:** Once I came home to my brothers crying, they were all over the place and my Mam was on the couch sobbing, she was hysterical and she was like ‘go, pack a bag you’re going, Jane’s on her way, you’re gone’. But then Jane would come and she’d be like ‘we don’t want to take you’. I think she would call Jane a lot because she relied on Jane, Jane was a very big support over that time. She would come down as soon as she could and she would be there.

**Interviewer:** And so, part of it is Jane coming the minute she's needed so there's that kind of immediate, I can rely on this person to actually rock up and then her reassurance - so Mums saying 'pack a bag', Jane's saying 'don't pack a bag, it's ok, we'll get this sorted'.

**Sineád:** yeah cause Jane always calmed my Mum down, she always made us feel like nothing was getting changed, we were gonna be fine and we were fine. I think it was just the fact that we could see she came as soon as we needed her, she was there as soon as, she was like a superhero for us because she was like one of our first supports that actually, was a support and not just there once and gone, so I think that little reassurance that we had there and then when she was in the house, we knew my Mum would be calm anyway because my Mum really liked Jane.

**Interviewer:** She trusted her?

**Sineád:** Yeah, we knew everything would be fine, once Jane showed up it was all grand.

Having a responsive worker who they could trust was not the experience of every child in this sample. Adam (12) for example stated that when his Mum phones to talk to the social worker, that the social worker *'never picks up but like when they [social work] need her [his Mum], my Mum will pick up. But when my Mum needs them, they don't pick up'*.

#### 4.6.1 'I take everything she taught me with me'

In Sineád's story we can also see the reassurance that Jane is giving Sineád and her siblings that they will not be taken into care. While Sineád did recall having periods of respite with relatives while her Mum engaged in therapeutic support before returning to care for the children full-time, the support when needed was an important part of Sineád building that trust. Getting this support from an adult who is liked and trusted is also clearly important in Sineád's narrative. For Sineád, trusting Jane was also about her Mum liking and trusting Jane, and Jane's intervention ensuring that Sineád and her siblings were *'gonna be fine and we were fine'*.

While Sineád's case study refers to a period of crisis, the importance of the workers response and presence as an intervention is clear. Another participant, Aoife (18) also reflected in interview on a valued piece of therapeutic work with a worker she liked and trusted that helped her resolve negative feelings she had towards her parents while also starting the process of rebuilding her relationship with her mother. While it is not clear from Aoife's interview if this worker was Tusla employed, the significance of this relationship to Aoife is worth reflecting on in this interview extract.

**Aoife:** We'd talk about how we feel, she had me build my relationship with my Mum because I was blaming my Mum and Dad for a lot of things, so Ursella had me build that relationship up and she taught me stuff that no one had ever sat me down and told me, she was straight forward, and she taught me why [certain things had happened in her life], and

she taught me how to deal with it. I take everything that she taught me with me, like if I'm ever worried, keep a journal, even though it doesn't get rid of the memories, but you feel like it lifts something from you.

**Interviewer:** So she taught you skills for life for dealing with hard times and difficult things and that made a big difference.

**Aoife:** Yeah.

While this intervention took place some years earlier, Aoife's narrative is nonetheless an important reminder of the long-term preventive value of good therapeutic supportive work, delivered at the right time and by a trusted adult, underlying the power of trust in a helper. Similar to Sineád, Aoife believed in Ursella because of the quality of their relationship which was built on trust. Integral to this intervention was not just what Ursella said to support Aoife in resolving her anger towards her parents, but also and perhaps more importantly, how she helped Aoife to rebuild relationships and also build 'skills for life'.

#### 4.6.2 'She would actually... care'

The children were clear that they liked and trusted professionals who they believed genuinely cared about them and wanted to understand and help them. There was plenty of evidence of what the children saw as professionals genuinely caring about them and this clearly mattered to them. James (10) for example, knew his social worker *'cared a lot'* because he could see in *'the way that she wasn't just there to get paid for her job, she would actually like care, she would actually do her job properly, it was good'*. Leah (16) also talked about the importance of feeling that her worker *'seems to genuinely care'*. In this next interview extract, Leah (16) explains why she trusts her worker, highlighting a number key issues to that for her – that he is genuine, he cares, he is reliable and responsive and he is competent because of his expertise in an area of disability relevant to her case. While this is not a Tusla worker, the approach taken and the value to the young person is important to include.

**Leah:** I mean he's wrote papers and stuff like that, so I feel like it's sort of a combination of him knowing what he's talking about, as well as, he seems to genuinely care, he's come in, I haven't seen him in 6 months, but I had a meeting in my school, I rang him up, it was his first day back from holiday, and he came to the meeting.

**Interviewer:** Sounds like he's, he has your back.

**Leah:** Yeah he does, always.



#### 4.6.3 ‘Him knowing what he’s talking about’

In the above interview extract, Leah also highlights the importance of her worker being competent and taken seriously by other key actors in her life when she states *‘him knowing what he’s talking about’* is important to her. This was not the experience of all participants. Social workers who had not ‘done their homework’, as the child saw it, by reading their file in preparation for meeting them, or recommending an intervention or service without meeting them, were not demonstrating genuineness and were not seen as competent. Crucially, the children were left unconvinced that this worker could deliver on providing the right kind of support when needed.

#### 4.6.4 They were not ‘trying to hide anything from us’

A key element of getting the right kind of support from adults who are liked and trusted, was the child experiencing honesty in their engagement with that adult. Liam (10) for example talked about honesty as important, where he could trust a professional where he believed they were not *‘trying to hide anything from us, that made me feel safe’*. For Aoife (18), honesty was also an important part of her building a significant therapeutic relationship:

I got attached to Ursella cause I really felt safe with Ursella, she was telling me the truth..  
sometimes she’d only have an hour, so I would cherish that hour, I never cancelled on  
Ursella. (Aoife, 18)

Conversely, lack of transparency and honesty in the reason for intervention in her family, left Ruby (14) unsure that she could trust Tusla intervention going forward. Ruby talked in interview about meeting with her social worker many times over a period of approximately one month without being told by any adult (her parents or her social worker) why Tusla were involved. While this was confusing at the time, it has longer term implications for Ruby’s trust in the agency, should the family need intervention again.

#### 4.6.5 ‘Child-centred not time-centred’

Reflecting on the right kind of support delivered by the right kind of professional, Leah (16) considered herself *‘very lucky’* that her worker was someone who understood her well and that she gets along with. She was also very dismissive in interview of interventions that follow what she called *‘a predetermined plan thingy that we would work on for 5-6 sessions’*, considering this approach to provide support *‘very like ‘time-centred’, not ‘child-centred’*.

In this next extract we can see Aoife’s sadness and lack of understanding with the ending of what Leah (16) earlier referred to as a *‘time-centred’* piece of work:

I felt like Ursella was part of us, and when Ursella had to leave, because she had said that, my social worker had told me, her time was up with me, I felt really sad because Ursella was, I would have loved Ursella to be there till the end ...like I just felt like everything was just falling apart cause I felt like Ursella was my glue and I just wanted Ursella back but they told me I couldn’t have Ursella back. (Aoife, 18)

For both Aoife and Leah, the importance of the piece of work being tailored to the child’s needs – being child-centred – is critical in their view to responding to where the child is at. While the intervention that Aoife received from Ursella happened some time ago, the ending of the intervention and significantly the ending of this important relationship, impacted quite negatively on Aoife who expresses that she was *‘falling apart’*. Using Leah’s term, a *‘child-centred’* approach for both of them, is about the intervention being uniquely designed and delivered to the child, for as long as the child needs it. The ending of relationships without the child understanding why, can otherwise be experienced traumatically. It can also undermine the child getting the right support, when needed, from adults who are liked and trusted.

#### 4.6.6 ‘Kinda sad though cause I’ve known her for like [...] years.

The potential for the child to experience support when needed from an adult they liked and trusted could also be undermined when the worker left their family, or the intervention ended before the child felt they were ready for that ending, or without them understanding it was going to end.

Many of the participating children reported having many different workers coming in and out of their lives and of experiencing the ending of the relationship as simultaneously confusing and emotional. James for example talked about his worker Eileen leaving left him *‘kinda sad though cause I’ve known her for like three years, two and a half years. I’ve missed Eileen a lot.’* Liam (10) similarly reflected that his worker *‘was a nice person, I kind of feel sad’*. For young people like John (16), while he understood the ending of Tusla involvement as a clear message to that *‘Everything is all right I suppose..[a] bit of a relief as well you know’*, at the same time however, he also expressed a sadness with the loss of a cherished adult in his life: *‘you’re kind of like, kinda miss this, so used to it but...’*. While the issue of how they understood and were helped to understand why workers had to leave has been dealt with earlier in this chapter, it was not clear from the children’s narratives how their expressed loss and sadness was managed and acknowledged by Tusla staff.

Other children talked about the impact that that workers coming in and out of their lives had on their ability to build relationships and trust, with workers *‘changing all the time’*:

**Cathy:** So you know to be honest, they were changing all the time, I have, I had about four, you know they were in and out, there was so many of them.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so in terms of building up a relationship with any of them?

**Cathy:** You couldn’t really do it cause they’re, there was about 4 of them you know, and then one left and then one was here, and then there was a lot of times where you couldn’t get contact to them, whether they were off or whatever.

The issue of relationship building emerged throughout much of the other interviews. Having built a relationship with one worker who she described as *‘once in a lifetime’*, Sineád (16) remembered her concern that her family was not going to *‘get this [relationship] again with another worker’*. Even when initially pleased with her worker, Sineád described how she was *‘kind of suspicious of it, I was like...this isn’t gonna last’*. In this next quote, Sineád describes feeling sad and disappointed when those suspicions were confirmed:

A few weeks later, she got swapped out and I was upset then cause I was like...well I was just getting used to Ciara and now she’s gone., like I was used to Jane, that was fine, but I was just getting used to Ciara and then she was gone too. (Sineád, 16)

When asked what mattered to her and was important in helping her at this point in her life, 12-year old Molly stated:

[Someone] that would stay and I would trust them.. yes [someone] who would actually stay for maybe like at least more than a few months and then I would trust them actually. (Molly, 12)

#### 4.6.7 ‘Once you start building trust with someone, it’s kind of hard to move onto someone else to try and build trust with them too’

David (17) was the only participant in the study who experienced one consistent social worker appointed to his family from the beginning. In the next interview extract, David is very clear that the trust built up over time with the one consistent person was critical for his Mum building a relationship with that worker:

**David:** Cause like the first time, like my mum wouldn’t really tell Yasmin anything because she didn’t really trust her. I think over time my mum’s trying to tell Yasmin a lot cause Yasmin’s made her aware that she needs to know everything so that she can help her.

**Interviewer:** So has Yasmin been the consistent one from the beginning?

**David:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is that important do you think for your mum?

**David:** Yeah because once you start building trust with someone, it’s kind of hard to move onto someone else to try and build trust with them too. So I think it’s better if you have one person the whole time, so then you know they’re there to help. Cause loads of people have different characteristics, so once you find a social worker and they’re there from the start and then like halfway through they switch with someone else, you have to learn that person’s characteristics, you have to learn to trust with that person.... and that can be exhausting – and each time they move on, then maybe the trust can’t build up as far as the first time, cos you are always wondering ‘why should we bother putting effort and trust into this relationship, if we just have to start again? So it’s better for a family to have one social worker for the whole time they’re with the family.

The complexity of relationship building was also touched on by David towards the end of the interview when he returned to the issue of ‘trust’:

So trust is building but it can only go so far – at the end of the day Yasmin has the power to take the kids so it will never be 100% trust, even though it has always been Yasmin, from the beginning. (David, 17)

#### 4.6.8 ‘Because we trust them, they’re family’

A number of the participants also identified members of their *‘Safety Network’* as adults who are liked and trusted and could provide the right kind of support if needed. Where those adults were identified by the participants, they were members of their immediate or extended family.

The participants who talked about their *‘Safety Network’* were very clear on the purpose of it, though for many, this purpose had not yet been tested. Peter (12) knew that he could go to his Nan or his Uncle if he or his siblings were worried about anything. Ciara (16) similarly identified extended family in her *‘Safety Network’* who had been invited to the *‘meeting, they were aware of everything that was happening cause they also got the letter that we got’*. Sineád (16) described her Nan and her cousin

as ‘an extension of my parents - they were my safety network’. While some participants said that they were involved in identifying their own ‘Safety Network’ members, other participants talked about the decision being made for them. Choosing their own network members or having them chosen for the children did not seem significant. All of the participants who talked about the ‘Safety Network’ were positive about it, for many of the reasons that Sineád (16) explains:

[The Safety Network is] ‘a good thing because she’s more close to the family because we’ve known her for years so we’re kind of a lot more open with her than we are with the social workers...so with a family member, we trust them, they’re family at this point so I think it’s a good idea to have that and have her be able to reach out to the social worker if there is anything going on. (Sinead, 16)

Cathy (18) similarly considered that the ‘Safety Network’ worked because ‘they’re our family like’ and as such that the support provided to her Mum had helped her Mum to make the changes that needed to be made. For Scott (17), establishing a ‘Safety Network’ with extended family members was important to him because he ‘got connected’ with relatives. For Scott, this connection involved ‘talking a lot’ where there had not been much communication prior to the ‘Safety Network’ being established. This ‘connection’ with a family member who had similar mental health concerns as him was an important development in the work his Tusla social worker did with him.

4.7 Family, friends and other spaces

It was clear from the conversations with the participating children that there were other arenas of their lives and the spaces that they occupied that were important and mattered to them. These included their immediate and extended family, their peer group and a range of local services and activities they were involved in.

4.7.1 I’m [constantly] watching: Children’s surveillance of parents

The importance of family to the children emerged clearly in the data, as did the protective and supportive roles that they took on when their parents were not able or available. While many of the participants acknowledged that their family experiences pre Tusla involvement were not ‘normal’ and not ok, they were also fiercely protective of their parents. Leah (16) for example was very critical of her mother’s physical abuse of herself and her siblings but was equally clear that ‘I didn’t wanna get my parents in trouble for anything that they had done cause I was like here, I can deal with an odd slap here and there’. Leah felt that her parents had to be protected and that any wrongdoing by them against her was less important than the overwhelming reality of tragedies the family had experienced. It was also clear from the interviews, and as set out in the below case study, that despite Tusla

involvement, children continued to carry a degree of responsibility for the safety and well-being of family members.

CASE STUDY 9: WATCHING

Sineád (16) said that she has a permanent and watchful eye over both of her parents and knows the dangers signs to be aware of. Acknowledging that her Mum is ‘actively trying to get better’, Sineád says she worries about the potential negative impact that ‘other people in her life’ can have because in the past those people were ‘insulting her and bringing up what she did before’. This for Sineád meant that she watched ‘over my Mom constantly, just to make sure she wasn’t doing anything she had been doing so that she got better’. Sineád described how she was also watching her Dad, the other adult in the home. This watchfulness concerned his substance misuse, where she explains that ‘even now, I’m watching, cause he’ll usually drink like whiskey and coke, your average drinks, I’ll watch the ratio and make sure that there’s more coke to whiskey and if there’s more whiskey to coke....’

4.7.2 She tries to protect - (she says) don’t come out until it’s finished: Siblings protecting each other  
Many of the participants were also concerned about their siblings and what they were exposed to in terms of the issues that demanded Tusla involvement in their lives. Cathy (18) said that while she found her parents behaviour ‘hard’ to deal with, that she would have been ‘more worried about my younger siblings..., it wasn’t obviously good for my younger siblings to see’.

Also taking a protective stance towards her siblings and perhaps making choices about her family’s needs rather than her own, Leah (16) remembers wanting to be taken in care but putting that wish to one side for the sake of her siblings:

I was like I want, I don’t want to be here anymore, I want Tusla to come take me away, but then it was like, I have younger siblings and at that stage they were only babies, and I was like ‘oh shit if they take us are we gonna be separated’. (Leah, 16)

As a younger sibling, Nadia (12) said that she was scared for her sister who she described as protecting her in high conflict episodes between their parents in their home. Recalling that she ‘heard them [parents] screaming but I don’t know what happened’, Nadia said that her sister ‘tries to protect - (she says) don’t come out until it’s finished’. Nadia said her sister was someone she could talk to if she was worried or upset. Clara (11) also named her sister as someone she would rely on, saying ‘I do talk to her a lot about stuff’.

#### 4.7.3 'It was like a weight off my shoulders cause they would comfort me': The importance of friendships

For some participants, friends were a particularly important source of comfort and support. Molly (12) for example said that *'I don't really trust anyone right now. The only one person I trust is one of my friends who has a similar situation like me. That's the only person I trust actually - he's currently my toppest best friend. We kept promises to each other a lot like not to cry alone, [to] cry together'*.

Sineád (16) also described how in the early days of Tusla involvement with her family when she was stressed and anxious about being taken into care, that her friends would make her feel better and help her take her mind away from this concern:

'It was like a weight off my shoulders cause they could - would comfort me, they would tell me that 'you'll be fine, they're not gonna take you'. Like often times we would be eating lunch and I'd start crying and having a panic attack because maybe I'd got a text message that once I got home one of the social workers wanted to talk to me'. (Sineád, 16)

Eoin (13) talked animatedly about meeting up with a group of friends in the town, *'hanging out'* with his pals and taking bus trips to local towns. Describing weekdays as a bit of a drudge because of school, Eoin described weekends as *'gas'* when he would *'go out and meet my mates.. and go off all over the place.'*

Leah (16) spoke about the difference that entering secondary school had made for her in making friends, finding others she identified as her *'tribe, my people, it's great'*.

Two participants stated clearly however that they had 'no friends' (David, 17 and Clara, 11).

#### 4.7.4 Importance of community resources and leisure activities

Across the sample of children there was evidence that involvement in sporting and leisure activities was important to them. Family involvement in boxing had led to Eoin's (13) enthusiasm for the sport, attending his boxing club every day. For James (10), a similar family history of involvement in gymnastics made him keen to get involved, stating this was something he hoped his social worker could help with. For both Eoin and James, pride in their family's achievements in these respective sports was driving their interest and involvement as was the desire to follow positive male role models in their family.

Aoife (18) and Cathy (18) both referred positively to their respective brothers' involvement in football, with Aoife saying: *Rory's very, if he has something wrong with him, he'd probably just go straight to football, play football, and after that he's a new person, so he likes to be busy if he's going through*

*something*. Cathy also said she enjoyed baking as a relaxing activity while Eoin also said he did baking as part of an activity linked with school with a group of other boys.

#### 4.7.5 It's like a home away from home nearly: Youth clubs and youth services

Common across many of the participants was involvement in local youth clubs and youth centres, some of which they had engaged with themselves and others they had been referred to, or connected with, by their Tusla worker. Attendance at these services was reported as at least once a week, with some children reporting attending multiple times a week. Scott (17) told us about a youth project he is involved with where he is really enjoying being involved with other young people developing podcasts. They also have a leadership programme that he is considering doing.

Describing his youth centre as a *'home away from home'*, John (16) said it was more than somewhere to go and that he would be *'devastated' if it closed.* John explains why:

Yeah, like, you know if there was ever a problem at home you could ring up the worker here and talk to them, even that you know, some-day come in, just cup of tea, talk about what's going on, and then another day might go get something to eat or might do, It's like a home away from home nearly. (John, 16)

Peter (12), Eoin (13), James (10) and Aisling (12) also talked about the project they attended as a fun place to go, where they made friends, hung out and played games. Many of the participants who attended these services/projects were very clear that they were different to Tusla because they were not about the *'emotional stuff'* (John) and were *'fun'* (Aisling). They also understood as John's quote states, that there would be somebody to talk to them if needed. For many, there was an understanding that the project worker was connected with and could communicate with the Tusla worker if needed.

#### 4.8 That things can get better

All of the participants were asked what, if any, difference Tusla had made in their lives. The children identified changes for themselves personally, changes in their parent's relationship and general well-being, changes in parent-child relationships and finally in their siblings well-being and behaviour. While the majority of changes identified were seen as positive, some participants could not identify any positive impact and for some, they considered that their situation had deteriorated.



#### 4.8.1 They made all [the] fighting with my mom and dad stop

##### CASE STUDY 10: No Fighting

Many of the children credited Tusla involvement with reducing (if not always ending) conflict between their parents. Such ‘fighting’ as they saw it may often have involved domestic violence. Peter (12) explained that that his parents had attended ‘loads of meetings’, with Tusla and this had been good because ‘they made all [the] fighting with my mom and dad stop’.

Eoin (13) also spoke about his parents ‘fighting’ and said that he thought Tusla involvement had ‘made things at home a lot better... I suppose that’s it. Things at home got better since we met them. Feel calmer yeah. The house has got a lot quieter’.

Finally, Cathy (18) also noted big improvements in her parents relationship: ‘my parents have been a lot lot better, changing their relationship too, how they get on...things are a lot better yeah.. no fighting no, nothing that was happening before, nothing.

#### 4.8.2 Having ‘people to talk to’

There could also be other issues worrying children in addition to parents fighting. Sineád (16) told of the benefits from how her parents had responded to Tusla’s presence: *‘it was a positive change, we were able to stay in our home and see this change happen because our parents wanted us there, they didn’t want to get rid of us’*. Sineád understood that change had happened in part because her parents wanted that change to happen, but she also said that their having support in the form of ‘people to talk to’ had also helped. Similarly, Sadie (15) said that Tusla had also helped her parents (and Sadie herself): *‘because they helped mum and da sort everything out and all this and the support worker, like it probably reassured mum that there was somebody that I could talk to other than her’*.

#### 4.8.3 ‘Now I’m kind of, quite a lot calmer, you know’: Changes in children’s well being

Many children identified changes in themselves since Tusla had become involved with their family. Some linked such change directly to something their Tusla worker had done with the child, or the family, or to help they had also received from other organisations via Tusla as well.

John (15) reflected on his life before Tusla was involved, explaining that *‘there was a lot of kind of anger back then, and I didn’t really know how to manage my anger, now I’m kind of, quite a lot calmer’*. John attributed the change in himself from struggling with his anger to being *‘a lot calmer’* to the influence of his social worker Lisa. John said that Lisa would *‘come and calm me down, [and then helped me get to a point where] I was able to calm myself down then’*. As John saw it, having Lisa in his life made him feel safer, Ciara (16) also commented on *‘feeling safer’* thanks to Tusla involvement:

Way safer at home. Now I know from how I feel right now - I know from how I felt then - I did not feel safe. I did not like the feeling at home. But I thought this was normal and I thought

that everyone else felt the same way. So this was normal, quote on quote, normal to me. Now I feel way safer. [I] know that that was not a safe space to be in. (Ciara, 16)

For some other children, understanding better what was going on in their family meant they worried less about their parent/s. As James (10) observed *‘I kind of understand more, so, [it] hasn’t got worse actually, it’s been getting better.’* He explained how for him, this change was slow and incremental. He explains that before Tusla social workers were involved he was resistant to the idea of getting help:

Before I had social workers, it was kind of like, I don’t want help with it... [problems] just kind of like building up .. [so it’s now like].. like slowly [getting] better and better. (James, 10)

Aisling (12) recalled worrying a lot, primarily about her Mum, before the social workers came. These worries had since *‘vanished’* and she put this down to changes flowing from Tusla involvement and the family becoming engaged with a youth/family service. Acknowledging that things were now a *‘bit better for everybody’* in the family, she thinks a big change for her is that she feels that she is *‘more [sociable], I’ve made more friends’*. Aisling also reckoned that her friends could also see those changes in her: *“Maybe I was a bit happier, I’d hear my friends say to me that Aisling is a bit happier, she’s more alive [...] from when I started I was quiet, I didn’t really wanna talk, now I’m this big person who’s happy, likes to talk”*.

Like Aisling, Cathy (18) could see changes in herself thanks to Tusla involvement. She talked about previously struggling with her mental health, something she linked directly with family and school related issues. She knew her friends had been worried about her as there were *‘days there where I just wouldn’t spend time with them, I’d just completely switch off my phone for a time’*. She feels different now; a close friend told her that she sees *‘complete changes’*, that *‘a lot of things have changed but for the good’*.

Two other participants talked about being linked in with additional resources by their social worker. Adam (12) loved the horse-riding camp that his social worker helped his Mum find for him and Peter (12) talked about his social worker organising an activity weekend away for his family which he really enjoyed. This led to spending time together *‘miles away from here’* doing activities he clearly enjoyed. Critical also however was that there was *‘no fighting’*.

Leah (16) thought the work Tusla workers had done *‘made a difference for me personally’* but could not identify any positive changes from Tusla involvement for her family as a whole.

#### 4.8.4 ‘We talk a lot more now, we almost never talked and when we did it was arguing’

Some children thought Tusla involvement had improved parent-child relationships in their family. Sineád (16) talked about her Mum being *‘a lot more open about how she was, she usually wouldn’t tell me how she was feeling but she was a lot more open about that’* and her dad had become *‘a lot more active in my life.....we talk a lot more now, we almost never talked and when we did it was arguing’*.

John (16) could also identify a positive shift in his relationship with his mother, saying *‘she’s a better understanding, you know, cause when she’s listening to me she wouldn’t really be listening, but when someone else relays it to her she’s able to listen more’*. Leah (16) thought that listening to the advice of her Tusla worker had helped her relationship with her father:

[she said] “have a conversation and then I talked to him and it actually went well, and I was like ‘what the fuck, this man can be rational’, cause we’re both really stubborn. (Leah, 16)

#### 4.8.5 ‘Because she’s like - when she’s talks then she’s less stressed at times’

Several participants observed positive changes in their siblings. Sophia (14) thought that her sister found having a social worker helpful, because *‘when she’s talks then she’s less stressed at times’*. James (10) also highlighted positive changes in his brothers’ behaviour that he attributed to his Tusla worker, Mia. He stated that *‘the boys would calm down, wouldn’t fight as much, and they wouldn’t like, throw tantrums as much’*.

Cathy (18) noted that her siblings are *‘just so much more happier now’* since Tusla involvement. In her view, this change was due to a number of things including improvements in her parents’ relationship but also other connections and resources that their social worker Lily secured:

Lily helped my brother get into football, and now he’s stuck to it, you know, they would have helped them in that way yeah, getting them into things and just getting them out to do things. Lily was always on the ball when it came to those things. Lily was very good like that for finding out information, or football groups [...]. (Cathy, 18)

#### 4.8.6 ‘Not really any difference to be honest. Just feels the same but just worse’

Five of the twenty children in the study could not identify any positive change resulting from Tusla involvement, and for one participant, things had become worse.

Nadia (12) described herself as a *‘worrier’* who overthinks things and that Tusla involvement with her family had not made her worry any less. While Tusla was involved with her family over the previous

year, she had only met the social worker once but could not identify any change – positive or negative – in her family’s situation arising from Tusla involvement. Sophia (14) said her family situation was *‘kind of.. It’s in the middle’* and no worse or better but pretty much the same as it was when Tusla started working with the family. Ruby (14) echoed the views of Sophia and Nadia stating there was no difference at all. Reflecting on her difficulty managing her *‘anger outbursts’* and the advice she had received from her social workers, Clara (11) stated:

They just say ‘oh do this like, train your brain to do this’ but it never works, just never works’. (Clara, 11)

Finally, Molly (12) talked in interview about her *‘head getting worse’* with the stress she was experiencing with her family situation. Having Tusla involved in her life had not made a difference for her, rather as she says:

Not really any difference to be honest. Just feels the same but just worse. (Molly, 12)

### 4.9 Other possibilities for positive engagement

All children were asked in interview about their experiences of and views on Signs of Safety tools and processes. Of note, there was significant variation in their accounts of their exposure to and familiarity with these tools and processes, including *‘My Three Houses’*, *‘Words and Pictures’*, the *‘Safety Object’*, *‘Safety Plans’* and the *‘Safety Network’*. A number of children could not recall for certain whether or not they had completed these activities and the accounts of some participants suggested they were mixing up the activities. For example, Peter (12) was the only participant to confirm using *‘Words and Pictures’*, but it was an activity he described doing himself with the social worker, and not one his parents were engaged in. While as already reported through the two findings chapters, many of the participants had completed the *‘My Three Houses’*, there were no accounts however of engagement with the *‘Safety Object’*, and five of the twenty participating children stated they had had no engagement with any of the Signs of Safety tools.

Given participants’ preference for a variety of ways to engage, and particularly methods of engagement that did not necessarily focus on spoken conversation, the findings would suggest potential for greater use of *‘Words and Pictures’*. Similarly, while there is no evidence of children using the *‘Safety Object’*, some participating children certainly considered the potential of this specific tool as a safety support, both for themselves and their siblings. Aoife (18), explains in this next quote how

it could have been helpful for her when she was younger, as it would have prompted significant adults in her life to ask critical questions:

Cause with me, I would be afraid to come to my aunty and say ‘I’m really worried about this’ or ‘I have a problem’, that I’d want her to notice that there was something wrong with me, that she’d have to ask, and then I’d be like, ‘oh yeah well I am worried about this’. So I think the idea of moving an object would really help people that have difficulties of just like coming out with [it]. (Aoife, 18)

In agreement, Michael (10) saw the potential benefits of the ‘*Safety Object*’, stating ‘*I think so, like for example if someone would not tell you to tell you this happened, it would probably be a good sign to help*’. Clara (11) similarly had no experience of this tool but saw the potential of it, saying she would like to ‘*start something like that with my little brother*’. John (16) however considered that he would not need the help of the ‘*Safety Object*’ in his safety planning, explaining ‘*I think if there was something wrong, people would just kind of know, I wouldn’t say it but, you know the way you’d know some days if someone wasn’t 100%*’.

‘*My Three Houses*’ has already been reported on across the two findings chapters, with some variation in the accounts of the participants on how positive or otherwise their experience of the tools had been. Contrary to Sineád’s (15) ‘*scary*’ experience as reported in the chapter 3, we saw earlier in this chapter how Aisling’s (12) was both familiar with the tool and very positive about her experience with it. Other participants were less certain, with Sophia (14) saying she found it equally difficult to talk about and write about her feelings so therefore did not like the ‘*My Three Houses*’ exercise. Molly (12) also expressed some reservation about writing down her worries in the ‘*My Three Houses*’ exercise, but for different reasons, explaining:

I didn’t fully put everything because I’m not like 100% sure if I can trust them or not.  
Currently for me it’s hard to trust people like this fast. (Molly, 12)

While Michael (10) understood the purpose of the exercise was to help the social worker to get to know him better, others, like Ruby (14) stated that she did not fully understand why she was doing it. Cathy’s (18) experience implied a specific misinterpretation of the exercise. Although the exercise should include wider worries, she suggested that the narrow focus on worries at home was too narrow, as the problems a child or young person might be experiencing, could be less about home and more about their life outside of home.

‘*Safety Planning*’ and the ‘*Safety Network*’ were the other two Signs of Safety tools most reported on. They were reported inter-changeably, where for most participants, having a ‘*Safety Network*’ was part of their ‘*Safety Plan*’. As reported on in an earlier part of this chapter, all children who were familiar with safety planning and the ‘*Safety Network*’, named various family members as those that were part of their ‘*Safety Network*’.

#### 4.10 Summary

This second findings chapter provides a snapshot of a point in time interview with twenty children whose opinions presented in this chapter reflect their views at the point of interview. Notwithstanding that caveat, this chapter provides articulate and insightful accounts from the participating children about ‘what matters to them’. A number of key messages emerge from this chapter.

Their narratives tell us that they are keen to have opportunities to ‘have a say’ in the conversations that take place, both about them as individuals and about their families. They are also clear that they need to be supported in this process. Similar to appreciating diverse methods of communication, they were also clear that there were many ways to be heard – and that participation did not necessarily involve being in the same room as professionals and other adults when decisions were being made. The approach of the worker in opening up that ‘conversation’ was also important, including engaging in activities the children were comfortable with, like playing games or going on outings. It was important for children to feel that they mattered, their experience mattered and their views counted for something when professionals took the time to be with them. Their sense of disrespect and injustice was also palpable when they did not feel listened to.

The children have also told us that ‘knowing what is going on’ is really important to them and that clear and timely communication is key to supporting that understanding. Children are clear that knowing everything is not necessarily appropriate nor something they are asking for – they are clear that as children, they may need some protection from ‘adult business’. However knowing enough to allay undue concern and worry is also important but understood as ‘a fine line’.

Related to this, children told us clearly about the pressures that professional intervention can create for children, when their personal information or information they feel is private, is shared with other key players in their lives. It is important to note that children are telling us that they are not always clear about the rules of engagement for information sharing. This can be very upsetting for them when they are not told that information is going to be shared, they do not understand why that sharing is taking place or the level of information that needs to be shared. This raises the critical importance for children of these rules being communicated clearly and perhaps repeatedly so that the rationale

for sharing what they consider their private family business is understood, even if they do not like it. In the arena of their peer group, there is evidence of their agency in deciding who gets to know what, their rationale for sharing and the strategies employed to control what they have control over.

In some respects, having the right kind of support, when needed, from adults who are liked and trusted, involves a ‘perfect storm’ of a worker who can connect, demonstrate that they genuinely care and want to help at a point in time when the child is open to that help. A number of children told us that trust was a critical ingredient in this engagement but that trust was both hard to build and easy to lose. The quality of their relationship with their worker, the approach the worker took to the work with them and the quality of the work engaged in, were therefore all important contributory factors in the building of trust for the children. This could easily be undermined by the turnover of staff without the children understanding why they were leaving and the impact of them leaving acknowledged.

Family and friends continue to be of significant importance to the children as they navigate their way through Tusla involvement with their family. It is clear that throughout this involvement, that children continue to occupy positions of responsibility and care for family members, including parents and siblings. In this regard, the ‘*Safety Network*’ was reported on positively by all children and young people who chose to talk about it. Significant among the reasons for this positivity was the fact that they were family, with support flowing from within the private boundaries of the family, albeit with oversight from professionals.

Finally, the earlier findings chapter highlighted the stigma that can precede Tusla engagement with a family, and both findings chapters have illuminated how children and young people experienced aspects of Tusla engagement as very challenging. Being able to identify positive change arising from that engagement therefore mattered to the participants as it meant the challenges were worthwhile.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters, we presented a detailed account of what the children said about key aspects of their encounters with Tusla. In this discussion chapter, we explore certain overarching issues based on our overall analysis of the whole dataset, and how the findings resonate with selected wider evidence on children’s experiences in child protection. We approach this task using two lenses, noting that the lens used always frames the picture seen. For the purposes of this report, we suggest that there are two central entities in the study: Firstly, the **children** and secondly the **child protection process**. Applying perspectives linked to these entities helps uncover different and complementary insights as to some of the issues and meanings that we have identified. Using the ‘children’ lens helps us to see more clearly how their identity and status as children shapes and frames their experience of child protection—what happens to them, how they respond, and how they see both. This approach to discussing the study findings using a ‘children lens’ arguably echoes broad conceptualisations of child participation as outlined in earlier chapters (Fish et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2004). It is also in keeping with a rights-based approach as advocated by the UNCRC (1989). Secondly, we review selected key aspects of how the child protection process plays out and how it is seen from the child’s perspective. This view from both lenses helps shine fresh light on the practice of child protection.

Before entering the discussion proper, we draw attention to one further perspective that we think is vital to a full understanding of the issues involved: The wider set of ecological influences on children’s experience of the CP&W system. Seminal literature emphasises the importance of understanding children’s experiences in the context of the wider systems that children, families and professionals are located in (Munro, 2011; UNICEF, 2021). The evidence from the participating children in this current research demonstrates that their experiences of CP&W services are not informed simply by their relationship with their social worker or social work services. Rather, the participants told us that there are many other interacting systems that influence their experience of CP&W services – including their family and peer relationships, their school life, and their community, as well as leisure activities they are engaged in. In turn, these other aspects of their lives are influenced by their experience of CP&W services. In this sense, children themselves and the CP&W services they experience can be seen as nested in a wider ecology. In effect, when seen in interaction, the child, the child protection service and their wider ecology may be seen as the *child protection system*.

In our view, the child’s experience and the progress of the child protection process can only be fully understood against the backdrop of this wider ecology and its powerful interactive influences. Everything the child or Tusla does is somehow subject to this wider influence. In both of the findings



chapters, the relevance of wider ecology shines through regularly in the data in children's references to school life, friends, peers, recreational activity and more. This ecology, we suggest, has an interactive influence on each child-Tusla encounter, and on wider developments in the child's life, and is therefore implicit in all of what follows in this chapter.

## 5.2 The children's perspective

We found it a privilege to meet the children and listen to their stories. We are left with a number of strong impressions. Firstly, each child is different and brought their own unique story and set of experiences to the conversation. Secondly, they all had their own clear and distinctive views on what was of concern to them. Thirdly, we were deeply impressed by the wisdom, compassion, and sometimes humour that they brought to their testimony. Fourthly, there was no single child viewpoint in what they collectively told us – their views differed according to the particulars of their experience and context. While variation in circumstances and experience was the norm in the sample of the children (and deliberately 'baked in' through our sampling strategy), there was, however, one common thread discernible across all of what the children said. In their own way, each child wished to have their own concerns listened to and respected. While the specifics of those concerns differed from child to child, there were recurring themes which we seek to reflect and represent in this chapter of the study.

We found the children to be insightful and articulate in expressing their views. They saw themselves as concerned actors in what for them was the family 'drama' linked to Tusla involvement. For many, this word 'drama' seems to capture the sense of disruption, uncertainty and fear that characterised their encounter with the child protection service – feelings that were also documented in other research in this area - for example, in Wilson and colleagues' (2020) synthesis of qualitative evidence on children's experiences with child protection services. Children and young people in the current study saw their presence in the family as earning them a right to opinions and to be listened to, and to the degree they wished, in relation to this drama. They did not necessarily expect adults to follow their wishes, but they certainly wanted to have their wishes heard and respected. We would emphasise that the children were very nuanced in their approach to the linked issues of having a say and being heard. They frequently indicated that they did not expect the adults to simply implement their wishes; for them the issue was to be seen as legitimate 'players' in the process and to have that status and their views respected. Similarly, recent international research has found that even when children did not necessarily agree with an intervention by social work, if they felt well informed they were positive about social work investigations (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Woolfson et al., 2010).

Age was not a barrier or a determinant, although broadly the depth and range of complexity of what the children could process (and recall) in discussion did increase with age. However, younger children often showed a remarkable ability to drill down into what they saw as the essentials very quickly, and to do so with an impressive clarity and articulacy. Regardless of age, we also found the children to have a strong capacity to act agentially in response to the unfolding story of their family and the engagement with Tusla. They were not and did not wish to be seen as passive observers, rather they were concerned actors with the capacity to formulate clear views. They had their own concerns and views which they thought had validity, and they wished for these to be heard. It was clear that they often did achieve this sense of being heard and respected, but also their accounts suggested there was still a lot of scope for improvement on this front.

In keeping with previous research (Gorin et al., 2021) we found that children chose whether to engage with their social worker. They had concern for their parents and siblings, they had worries for themselves and their family members (Buckley et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2020). There may not always have been consensus, or harmony, or peace in the family, but there was very often an appreciation of familiarity and loyalty. The children were often fair-minded, acknowledging the strengths and challenges they found in daily life at home. The children were also conscious of how others outside the household and family might interpret the arrival or presence of Tusla in their lives. They often feared the stigma that they thought could attach to them or their family because of the contact with Tusla. This fear of stigma was a recurring theme in their accounts. Indeed, this sense of stigma associated with receiving social work intervention is also reflected in existing Irish and international evidence on this topic (Buckley et al., 2018; Ellis, 2016).

There are some other issues that we can flag here and to which we will return in the following section. Children did want to be involved in what was going on but their understanding of concepts such as 'involvement', 'participation' or 'decisions' did not necessarily align with adult or policy norms or assumptions. This 'gap' in perspectives on participation is also observed in international research on this topic; for example, in their study of Dutch case managers and Dutch young people, van Bijleveld and colleagues (2014, p257) found that while case managers viewed participation as strategic or instrumental and as a way of ensuring a child's cooperation, young people understood participation as a mechanism for being heard, informed and 'taken seriously'.

## 5.3 The child protection process

Overall, many of the children considered that involvement with Tusla had had a positive impact in their lives. This finding aligns broadly with other Irish research that has pointed to a diversity in

children and young people's experiences of the CP&W system (e.g. Buckley et al., 2018). They could see for example, how the original issues had become more manageable, how family members had taken more charge of change in their lives, how the resources of the family had been mobilised in new ways, or how they or the family had found ways to access new supports beyond the family. Many found that the ground had somehow shifted over time in some positive ways thanks to Tusla involvement.

It is important, however, to qualify this message in two ways. Firstly, while clear improvements were identified, there were often, and perhaps inevitably, still some outstanding issues. Where there was positive movement, it did not always equal resolution. Secondly, while there was progress on the challenges the family faced, the children had much of interest to say about the *process* by which change was prompted or not. While some offered examples of how the process was managed helpfully, there were also many suggestions both for improvement and about the challenges needing to be addressed. In this section, we review some key issues and aspects relevant to their comments on this process

#### 5.3.1 Tensions and points of difference

The child and social worker may seem to share a common project – securing the safety and well-being of the child. The evidence from the children in the current study, however, is a further reminder that a child protection intervention is a very complex undertaking where a genuinely shared sense of that common ground is not easily achieved. Part of the challenge lies in the reality that this work and the efforts to 'connect' also occur under time and other pressures. Emotions may be running high and children may be experiencing high levels of stress (Wilson et al., 2020). Child protection interventions may be both difficult and emotional experiences for children (Buckley et al., 2018). The demands of the process are likely to create tensions for both 'sides'.

Inevitably, there are many points of difference in how professionals and children join the process. Children experience a power differential (Gorin et al., 2021) based not only on age. The children typically are also less familiar with the process and its formal language (especially the 'newcomers'). These different vantage points and different levels of power and capacity mean that the children and social workers might be said to be looking at the issues through different ends of the same telescope. Different starting points – and different priorities and expectations - may lead to different perspectives – and tensions, despite the essentially shared purpose of the contact. The children in this study seemed to have priorities that they sometimes saw as threatened by the process. There were, for example, concerns about risk to family stability and reputation, or to how their peers saw them and

their family in light of the association with Tusla – potentially related to the stigma associated with social work intervention mentioned above (Buckley et al., 2018; Ellis, 2016). This was particularly evident in the early stages of engagement. They also may have had different expectations of the child protection process: As to how it might unfold in terms of timelines, level and focus of engagement and more. While the workers' expectations might be influenced by the norms and timelines of their working world, the children's expectations were influenced more by their personal and domestic worlds and the associated pressures and urgencies. Their concerns included who precisely Tusla would engage with and what exactly Tusla would do.

Negotiating the tensions in the process is challenging, but the key from the children's perspectives seems to be the need to respect and check in with each child's own unique set of concerns. Clarifying and honouring those concerns for the children depends heavily on the quality of communication, as in their feeling that the adult is listening attentively (Gorin et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2020).

#### 5.3.2 Communication

In line with the existing evidence (van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2020) the children attached a lot of importance to the quality of communication they experienced in their contact with Tusla workers. This issue proves relevant for several reasons. It influences how much the children invest in or engage with the process; it also has a clear bearing on the likely impact or effectiveness of the intervention. Some key points are worth unpacking further.

##### *Risk of communication gaps*

The children's comments highlighted the significance for them of their understanding of what was going on. There were many examples of how messages transmitted were not necessarily the same as the message received. What the professional intended to be heard was not always how the message arrived, with many contextual factors leading to potential divergence between the understandings of the children and social workers. This is certainly not to suggest that such difficulties were pervasive. The children's responses flagged, however, that there did seem to be considerable potential for gaps in communication to emerge, which could in turn lead to critical gaps in understanding.

##### *Role of structural factors*

Shortcomings in communication are not necessarily the result of the personal qualities or efforts of the people directly involved. It is clear from our data that there are also structural factors which play a part. These factors may impair the child's capacity to absorb or retain what is being said (Jobe &

Gorin, 2013; van Bijleveld et al., 2014; Woolfson et al., 2010). Examples of such factors include the stressful nature of the encounter from the child's perspective (Wilson et al., 2020), or the child's fear of the imagined consequences of Tusla intervention based on the comments of others. Differing levels of cognitive capacity may also affect the child's ability to process or grasp the full meaning or significance of what is being said. In the existing literature there is evidence that children who were considered 'vulnerable' (e.g. those with special/additional educational needs) reported lower levels of participation in their experiences of CP&W services (Lausten & Kloppenborg, 2022). This highlights the potential need to pay close attention to the experiences of such groups. Adult or official language or terminology may be unfamiliar to the child and may obscure the message received. Cultural difference may also lead to subtle barriers in understanding.

#### *Communicating through parents*

A further complication for both groups is that much of the communication about the intervention as related by the children in this study may take place with and through the parents (or older siblings). In many instances, children reported that they were influenced or informed about what was going on by their parents (or by older siblings). This is not to imply that there is no direct child-social worker communication with the remaining children, but there was evidence of the influence of parents and of differentials in terms of which children in the family got most professional attention (no doubt for sound reasons).

#### *Foundational role of communication*

The overall lesson from our analysis in relation to communication is twofold. Firstly, communication is a foundational and easily underestimated part of the child protection intervention. Secondly, the complex and unfolding process of intervention suggests that adults must therefore check frequently and carefully with each child for their understanding of what is being said, planned, etc at points along the process. There may be different ways to support communication and understanding. Some of these are already evident in the children's responses, but focusing on the potential for creative modes of communication to promote engagement is worth a mention here.

Children and young people in the current study often mentioned that they valued opportunities to write things down in their efforts to communicate about their concerns. 'Creative' and informal forms of communication may also help children feel engaged and respected when engaging with CP&W services (e.g. Gorin, 2021; Tierney et al., 2018). Participants in the current study did not necessarily see writing, for example, as replacing the spoken word but nonetheless identified that putting things on paper could be a helpful supplement. Where mentioned, and in line with the evidence, children

were largely positive about use of Signs of Safety's '*My Three Houses*' tool in supporting difficult conversations about their feelings and their family (Hayes et al., 2014; Ogle & Vincent, 2022). Some children said that they did not like the tool because they did not understand its purpose (Finan et al., 2016; Östberg et al., 2018) and for one child, this lack of knowing or understanding aggravated an underlying fear of Tusla involvement. There were no findings in this study relating to '*Words and Pictures*' but the potential for the '*Safety Object*' as a safe communication tool for children was highlighted by a number of participants. As such the children's accounts tell us that Signs of Safety is not the dominant frame of the children's experiences in this study. Where it did emerge, in particular the '*Three Houses*' and the '*Safety Network*', it was reported on largely positively but it did not dominate the children's accounts.

Where such supplementary approaches cited above were used, in keeping with other research (Finan et al., 2016), children were sensitive as to how their writing or drawing was received. They valued when adults clearly processed what the children had put on paper, as in taking time to discuss this with them. A number of examples suggested that they could be especially hurt where adults did not engage with the written material which the child had produced as requested. They interpreted this omission by the adult as a lack of genuine interest in their views, and as a sign of their not being seen as a 'player' in the process. The children's responses in this regard are a reminder that in addition to words and images, action or inaction can, in their eyes, be interpreted as a form of (symbolic) communication (De Clercq et al., 2022; Gorin et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2018). Children's experiences as to forms of and supports for communication with and by children in child protections may be a rich area for further investigation given the apparently limited work on the issue to date.

#### *5.3.3 Good communication as a gateway to effective participation*

Good communication opens doors not only to promoting the child's understanding but also to effective participation by the child in the process of child protection. This key role of communication was evident in existing literature and noted as central to the relationship between a child or young person and their social worker, particularly the importance of being heard and able to speak with a trusted adult (Tierney et al., 2018). Communication was also central to children's experiences of using particular Signs of Safety tools (Gorin et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2014; Ogle & Vincent, 2022). Participation by children in decisions affecting them is an increasingly accepted principle, and part of Tusla policy (Tusla: Child and Family Agency, 2019). The issue of differing *perspectives* between children and professionals was raised earlier and is also evident in the literature on participation and children's experiences of CP&W services. Differing views are reported between practitioners and

children on their respective *understandings of* what participation is – for young people participation was about being heard and recognised, while for practitioners it was more about ensuring cooperation (van Bijleveld et al., 2014; van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Similarly, the responses of the children in this study suggest that the adults and children in child protection also may differ to some degree in what they understand as ‘participation’ or a ‘decision’.

For the children in this sample, participation seemed to be as much about understanding what was going on, or why certain ‘decisions’ were being made, as about close involvement in making the decision. For example, there were many mentions of the discomfort children felt about meetings with them being arranged in their school. For them, this choice by Tusla workers represented a decision, but one over which they felt they had had no influence. When adults use the terms ‘participation’ and ‘decisions’ they may often mean ‘bigger’ set piece decisions such as at formal case conferences. Yet, as already noted earlier, children’s responses suggested that they did not always want to make certain decisions, but rather to feel well briefed on what was to be decided and how and to have their wishes and feelings accounted for – a point related to findings of van Bijleveld and colleagues (2015) who observed that the act of *being listened to* can be more important for a child than getting what they wanted. Also, the implications of less visible or obvious ‘micro’ decisions may loom larger for the child in their daily world. For the five children in this study who did attend formal professional meetings including case conferences, their experiences mirrored that of the four children in Ogle’s (2022) study who reported feeling nervous, shy and scared. In keeping with Ogle (2022), positive experiences for the children in this present study were directly linked to understanding the process and the players involved, including the extent of information sharing that would occur. For the remaining children who had not attended such meetings, ‘being heard’ did not demand that they would or should attend. Rather, for all participating children, two things were important: That professionals created supportive contexts to facilitate meaningful conversations about children’s views and experiences, and that they felt that these were taken into account at the formal meeting.

Perhaps the most important insight from the children in this regard is that there is no simple consensus on what should happen, no single template for how to do general child protection from their perspective. But they did have one shared point: Each child wanted to have their own concerns listened to and respected. For the children that was their ‘bottom line’ in relation to satisfactory participation.

#### 5.3.4 Children’s view of relationships with helping adults

For the children, trusting relationships with adults took time to mature and cultivate and did not happen automatically. Contact over time did not guarantee the emergence of a relationship with a given professional. In a sense, the adult had to ‘earn the stripe’ of relationship through a mix of likeability, reliability and trustworthiness over time. In keeping with previous research we found that a relationship of trust seemed very precious for the child, and very influential in achieving the aims of the child protection process (Henriksen, 2022; Lausten & Kloppenborg, 2022). Trust seemed a critical and foundational quality of a relationship where it emerged. Indeed, previous research indicates that without trusting relationships, there may exist no opportunity for children to explore or express options or feel those opinions have an impact (Cossar et al., 2016). Trust in this sense can be seen as both the *fuel* for and the *effect* of a positive person-centred relationship with the child. However, their narratives told us that trust could be hard to build and easy to lose. In some ways what the children saw as a ‘relationship’ was one where there seemed to be three key conditions met: That they could *understand* what was going on, that they *felt understood* by the key adult working with them, and that the adult would represent and take account of their wishes and feelings in decision making.

#### 5.3.5 Continuity of worker

Continuity of contact with the same Tusla personnel was another issue that figured directly or indirectly in children’s comments, where time and consistency of contact could help to cultivate the conditions for trust between a given child and professional (Gorin et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2018). Some children noted a pattern of seeing different people across their encounters. They valued seeing the same faces, although this familiarity was only one ingredient in building what they saw as a positive connection.

There may be many valid reasons for different people appearing at different times. These may also be people playing different roles which the child had not yet learned to distinguish between. But the adults should not underestimate the impact of turnover in who meets the child. Irish and international evidence suggests that turnover of professionals supporting them creates a considerable barrier when it comes to children establishing trusting relationships (Henriksen, 2022; Tierney et al., 2018). The children’s accounts in the current study indicate or imply similar issues: Such turnover makes nurturing the child’s sense of understanding and trust more difficult. It makes building on previous discussion and shared recall of what was said or agreed more challenging. It also prevents the adult referring to previously mentioned personal interests and preferences of the child, the recollection of which demonstrates to the child that they remained in the mind of the adult concerned. Continuity of contact aids communication and could contribute to building understanding and the more elusive and less



attainable but valuable sense of trust. Where trust has emerged, disruption to that relationship of trust may mean that it is very difficult to enable the child to invest in similar commitments with professionals in the future. Nonetheless, existing research suggests that while poor experiences of social work can impair children's trust and willingness to engage, some children may go on to have positive and productive relationships with a new social worker, following a poor experience (Gorin et al., 2021). Whatever the reasons for turnover in who meets the child, our findings suggest that where it occurs the impact of this type of turnover in the child's eyes needs to be acknowledged. This is a first step towards mitigating its potentially corrosive effects.

There were also, however, some examples where short-term contact had enduring positive impact, where even one interview was remembered as powerful and positive a long time later. In this instance, the child felt listened to as an equal player in the engagement, where she felt her wishes were considered, and where she felt understood. While there are many influences on the experience of contact and communication between children and professionals, these examples are a reminder that good chemistry and positive rapport grow out of the commitment and connection that may arise between two people in whatever length of time is available.

#### 5.3.6 Connecting with resources in the wider ecology of the child and family

We could also see that establishing relationships with other significant adults in the child's ecology was important in securing progress in the process, including for example school teachers who were trusted not to share the child's story unnecessarily, and youth workers who could be trusted to act as an 'uncle' if the child inadvertently met friends while out with this youth worker. Communication with (and between) those significant adults across those domains was experienced by the children as helpful and supportive, once two conditions were met - the children trusted the adults involved and they were clear on the purpose of the communication. The '*Safety Network*' is a good example of this working well for children, where trusted adults in the child's ecology were an agreed part of the plan to ensure a child's safety going forward. Importantly, trust built in one domain could facilitate trust building in another domain of the child's life, potentially increasing the 'pool' of supportive adults in the child's ecology. Making connections across the various systems in the child's world, opening up opportunities for the child and family to be engaged in other professional (non-Tusla) services and community resources and local community services and supporting their engagement in leisure activities had positive effects. For many participants, it led to an expansion of the resources available to both the child and the family. This importantly resulted for many participants in a more accessible, 'acceptable' and non-stigmatising 'wrap around' of supports and resources for the family. Supporting

and building such positive connections for children in their wider ecology could be a powerful and enduring legacy of Tusla involvement in the life of a child and family.

## 5.4 Summary

This chapter has provided a synthesis of the findings of this research project with twenty children and young people regarding their experience of engaging with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. This synthesis is grounded in the literature review provided in chapter two.

This chapter has set out clearly the individual position of each child who brings their own unique story and set of experiences to the conversation. While many of the children considered that involvement with Tusla had had a positive impact in their lives, they nonetheless had much of interest to say about the process by which change was prompted or not. Their unique and insightful contributions chime with existing knowledge and also bring new perspectives on how children and young people experience engaging with CP&W services.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 Introduction

Understanding children’s experiences of child protection and welfare services is central to a child-centred, rights-based approach to this work with children and young people. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency commissioned a research study in 2020 to capture the views of children and young people who are the recipients of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare services. This present report has documented the findings of that commissioned research undertaken with twenty children and young people aged between 10 and 18 years of age at the point of interview.

Following on from chapters one and two which present an introduction and a review of key messages from relevant research literature, chapters three and four of this report cover the core findings of the study. They represent the testimonies of those twenty children and young people who generously shared their views, experiences and observations with us. Conceptually and methodologically, this research has positioned children as active, agentic social people who construct and create social relationships. To that end, the findings chapters follow the orbit of the child’s journey through child protection and welfare services, through the eyes of the children. We have presented their views and experiences of engagement with Tusla from their perspectives – that is, understanding what it is like to be a child and have child protection and welfare services involved with you and your family.

This final chapter concludes with a brief discussion on selected key themes in the study, presented through the lens of the child’s eye. This focus reflects the central purpose of this study, to uncover children’s lived experience of their encounters with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. We also consider some action points for policy/practice and identify potential areas for future research.

### 6.2 Summary of Key Findings

#### 6.2.1 Through the eyes of the child: Positive impacts of engaging with Tusla

Overall, many of the children considered that involvement with Tusla had had a positive impact in their lives, where the original issues that had demanded Tusla’s involvement, had become more manageable for the child and their family. The children identified reduced conflict in their family relationships and increased support, both informal and formal for their parents, which they considered had made a difference to the quality of family life. Related to this, the children overall could identify various changes for themselves personally that had occurred in different ways, ranging from improved mental health to having more support and fewer worries about family life. They also

reported examples of how Tusla involvement had resulted in positive changes in their siblings’ well-being and behaviour. Various factors contributed to these improvements in their view, including Tusla helping their siblings access extra-curricular activities and also to the effects of their home becoming a happier and safer place to be. Many children talked warmly about Tusla workers whose intervention had been instrumental in achieving the positive changes and whose genuine care for them and their family was much appreciated.

#### 6.2.2 Through the eyes of the child: Barriers to engagement with Tusla

The children’s narratives highlight that fear, stigma and misunderstandings about Tusla’s role can act as barriers to their engagement with Tusla. Fear sometimes was about their concern that Tusla involvement could result in the family being broken up, fear could be about what others might say about Tusla involvement in their lives – and that fear was connected to the stigma they felt would be associated with their contact with Tusla. They recalled this fear of the possible consequences of contact with Tusla in terms of themselves or their family in the early stages of engagement, but fear and uncertainty was also experienced at critical moments along the way, for example when they worried about what was going to happen at a meeting or when an important decision was being made.

For many children, this fear became a barrier to their being able to hear and absorb information about why Tusla was working with their family and what Tusla was doing. This difficulty could be further compounded by professionals using hard to understand language. Fears and hard to understand language meant that many children ended up unclear as to key aspects of the child protection processes in their lives.

An important key message from the children therefore concerns the formative influence of the initial engagement phase in shaping their confidence in the process, and crucially their full understanding of Tusla’s approach.

#### **Action point for policy/practice.**

- Acknowledging the barriers to children’s understanding and engagement, children may need repeated conversations about the reason for, and purpose of, Tusla involvement, and to check their understanding of next steps at each stage of the process;
- Children appreciate having their fears of Tusla involvement acknowledged and receiving reassurances about Tusla’s broad policy to support the family to stay together.

### 6.2.3 Through the eyes of the child: Communication and trust building

Responding to what the children identified as barriers to engagement, their narratives also provide some ideas on what might shift those barriers for them. As stated above, providing clear child friendly information that is checked and rechecked for understanding through the process is clearly important. Open and honest communication was considered by the children as a critical ingredient in trust building as was being helped to understand why information was shared and why decisions were made. Children tell us that having a *child friendly* understanding of what is going on when Tusla are involved is really important to them and that this understanding needs to be unambiguous and timely. To this end, the children identified how the use of additional communication tools helped them to build their trust in the process and the key adult involved with them. Some of the Signs of Safety tools and processes clearly have the potential to support communication between the children and adults involved.

Building trust with the child takes time, but when seen through the child's eyes, it is key to successful intervention and crucially to addressing the barriers they identified that can impede their engagement with Tusla. The participating children highly valued adults who they liked and trusted, who they felt genuinely cared about them and would represent and take account of their wishes and feelings in decision making. The children were also very clear that trust was both hard to build and easy to lose. It could be undermined by any turnover of staff without the children understanding why they were leaving and without having the impact of their leaving acknowledged.

#### Action point for policy/practice

- Children need to be supported to understand many aspects of Tusla's engagement with their family, including what Tusla is doing, why interventions are happening, when and why pieces of work finish up, and why workers leave. Staff training and supervision could support this with a focus on the child's eye, with each contact with children more attuned to how the child sees what is happening in their immediate world;
- Children can be supported to understand when information is communicated clearly using easily accessible language;
- Children value multiple approaches to communication and being listened to. This included Signs of Safety tools. Practice could maximise opportunities for using these and other similar approaches with children.

### 6.2.4 Through the eyes of the child: What participation looks like

Child participation is an important guiding principle for Tusla and for national policy and the children told us clearly that they do want to be involved in what is going on. However, their opinions varied a

lot on how to 'do participation'. Through the eyes of the children in this study, participation was about having meaningful conversations with professionals who they trusted and who provided opportunities for them to have a say in what was going on. Participation for these children was as much about feeling that what they had to say mattered and was taken into account, rather than simply about them getting what they wanted. The outcome is therefore not necessarily what children are judging when considering their satisfaction with decision making. Rather, the process is important to them in its own right. The children's narratives also told us that they needed support for participation to take place effectively. This support includes being prepared for what will happen at big meetings, knowing who will be there, what will be said and who will hear it. Having an opportunity to debrief with the family social worker after important meetings was also highlighted as important in supporting participation.

#### Action points for policy/practice

- Children may need to be offered many ways to communicate and be heard, including writing their views down and drawing a picture to represent their views;
- Successful child participation needs the provision of preparation and support – not just at important formal events like Child Protection Conference meetings, but also in every day matters as well;
- For children who attend Child Protection Conferences and other 'big' meetings, being supported to attend means being given clear information about who will be attending and why, how long the meetings will go on for, what information will be shared and what decisions may need to be taken;
- Some children may not want to be in the room with professionals when decisions are being made. They may instead want to be offered opportunities and mechanisms to have their views represented and heard.

### 6.2.5 Through the eyes of the child: School life concerns

For children in general, and certainly for the children in this study, school is a hugely significant place - perhaps the most important part of their lives beyond their family. Relations with peers and teachers are very influential in terms of confidence, sense of self-worth and social inclusion. The children in the sample were acutely sensitive to how peers and teachers interpret their involvement with Tusla. They reported a lot of stress around the risk of losing face among peers should their Tusla involvement become 'public'. They also had concerns about the possible effects of information being shared about their family life at Child Protection Conferences and similar events. For the children there were two ways in which their school life could interact with their child protection journey. Social workers might need to consult teachers about the child's progress in one-to-one conversations or in more formal

fora such as Child Protection Conferences. Children valued the interest and concern of teachers about their welfare. Apart from such contact with teachers, social workers could also use the school as a neutral venue to meet the child.

It became clear in our study that there could be hidden and unintended effects for the children when social workers step into their school world, particularly in the early stages of intervention. Social work decisions to meet the child in the school, perfectly reasonable in practical terms, could cause children a lot of discomfort when they then had to account for this to their peers in the fishbowl world of school. Similarly, there were instances of discomfort where certain information was shared with teachers. This is absolutely not to say that social workers should abandon work in or with schools. Our findings demonstrate, however, the need to manage this contact in a child-centred way, proceeding with sensitivity on this front and discussing openly with the child their concerns and how best to manage them. Returning to the point at the beginning of this paragraph, school is so important in children's lives that it is essential that there is a strong, sensitive and supportive collaboration between schools and Tusla for the benefit and all-round protection of the child.

#### Action points for policy/practice

- Tusla meetings with children in their school setting may be especially valuable but require careful planning. Children need the purpose of these meetings clearly explained, and any of their concerns to be acknowledged and addressed;
- Children are most likely to have concerns about the reaction of peers to their contact with Tusla, or about the level of information teachers may have or need about their home lives. These concerns are most likely in the early stages of intervention. Our data suggests that with careful discussion and attention to their worries, child friendly ways can be found to resolve any concerns.

#### 6.2.6 A reflection on the wider ecology of the child's experience of engagement with the child protection and welfare service

Child protection services step into the child's wider world when Tusla staff make contact. That child's world includes family, neighbours, friends, school and their connections to sporting, cultural or youth organisations, as well as possible connections to other professional systems (for example Child and Adolescent Mental Health). The people in these various settings may provide valued support day-to-day to the child and assist them directly or indirectly in managing the challenges that have prompted Tusla to step in.

The children's responses have demonstrated to us that the child protection service needs to work in tandem with what our data showed us was the wider child protection and welfare eco-system in the child's life. A full understanding the child's experience of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare services and interventions requires an appreciation of how wider services, resources and family/community connections interact to enact the child protection and welfare *eco-system* (services plus other community assets) for *this* child. Therefore, an exclusive focus on *service* risks obscuring wider *protective experiences* available, potentially, within this wider eco-system. This eco-system can exert real influence in children's lives (for good or ill). Children spoke frequently about how helpful or stressful the interaction of Tusla with other actors organisations and systems could be in their lives. This seems an important message to inform Tusla interventions and assessments – the wider eco-system as an influential presence and potential resource in each child's life.

#### 6.3 Potential for future research

The key findings presented above require careful consideration as to their implications for policy and practice. We also suggest that these findings also provide enticing opportunities for a 'deeper dive' response in terms of future rounds of research. In this concluding section, we identify potential research opportunities that flow directly from this present research project, in addition to other wider opportunities for relevant research. This is an indicative rather than exhaustive list:

1. Building on the findings of the current study, we identify the following research areas to capture children's views and experiences of child protection and welfare intervention, not fully reflected in the current study, including the perspectives of:
  - a. Children younger than 10 years of age;
  - b. Children living in large urban centres;
  - c. Children living with disabilities;
  - d. Children from ethnic minority backgrounds;
  - e. Children living with domestic violence.
2. Wider opportunities for research to include:
  - a. A companion retrospective study focused on the perspectives of Tusla professionals;
  - b. An ethnographic study to capture observations of practice by directly observing the interaction between children and social workers. Such a study would also include interviews with children, social workers and others working with them, following the period of observation. This type of contemporaneous research generates very



powerful and insightful research evidence as demonstrated in the work of Harry Ferguson in England and Jonathan Scourfield in Wales;

- c. A study on the breadth and depth of Signs of Safety implementation – perhaps looking at case records to capture initial understanding of how Signs of Safety tools and processes are being implemented, with interviews to follow up and provide a deeper understanding of what aspects of Signs of Safety work, why, and in what context;
- d. A study of interactions between schools and child protection and welfare services to identify issues arising from the experiences of children, teachers and social workers with a view to informing a protocol for school-Tusla co-operation;
- e. A study involving participant observation of Child Protection Conferences, similar to the one by Ogle and Vincent (2022) would provide an insight into the resources and practices that can support children’s participation effectively;
- f. An exploration of the potential for public education in mitigating the stigma and fear associated with Tusla involvement with families. This would offer a more robust understanding of community perceptions of Tusla and possible ways to reduce levels of fear and stigma associated with intervention.

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APPENDIX 1: Steering Committee membership

Cormac Quinlan	Assistant National Director for Practice Reform (Chair)
Dr Edel Tierney	National Research Officer, National Research Office (Co Chair)
Joy McGlynn	Tusla Area Manager Dublin North City
Siobhan Doyle,	Social Care Worker, Dublin South East
Eileen Munro,	Professor Emeritus, London School of Economics
Dorothy Soye	Signs of Safety Practice Lead
Colette McLoughlin	Service Director, National Office Services & Integration
Edel Gordon	Principal Social Worker CIC & Fostering
Bridget McGreal	Regional Manager Educational Welfare Service

APPENDIX 2: Completed sample grid on Area X

Creds for the Research	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Primary Reported Concern	Current Report Type	Process Stage	Length of time on SW	Initial Assessment Completed	Priority	CPNS Status	Previous CPNS Entry	Category at CPC	Disability Record
30001	Female	13	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	18/08/2020	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30002	Male	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	18/08/2020	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30003	Female	12	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	05/11/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30004	Male	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	25/07/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30005	Male	17	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	27/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30006	Female	12	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	02/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30007	Female	12	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	24/09/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30008	Female	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	24/09/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30009	Female	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	13/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30010	Male	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	12/08/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30011	Female	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	12/08/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30012	Male	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	04/09/2020	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30013	Female	16	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	04/09/2020	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30014	Female	16	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	02/10/2020	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30015	Female	13	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to Another Agency - Close	14/10/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30016	Male	16	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	16/10/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30017	Male	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	27/10/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	Yes	Neglect	No
30018	Male	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Neglect	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	04/01/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30019	Male	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to Another Agency - Close	15/02/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30020	Male	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Neglect	Safety Planning	27/07/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	Yes	Neglect	No
30021	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	23/07/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30022	Male	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	23/07/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30023	Female	19	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	23/07/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30024	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	18/11/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30025	Female	12	Black - any other Black background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	19/11/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	Yes	Emotional Abuse	No
30026	Male	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	28/01/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	Yes	Emotional Abuse	No
30029	Male	18	Sexual Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	04/06/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	Yes	Emotional Abuse	No
30031	Female	16	Sexual Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	Sexual Abuse	Divert to PPFS - Close	23/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30032	Female	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	29/09/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30034	Male	10	Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	01/12/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30035	Male	15	Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	01/12/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30037	Female	17	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	16/07/2020	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30038	Female	14	Emotional Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	16/07/2020	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30039	Male	10	Not Stated	Emotional Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	15/03/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30040	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	06/10/2021	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30041	Male	16	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	10/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30044	Male	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	11/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30045	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	11/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30046	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	13/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30047	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Physical Abuse	Divert to PPFS - Close	18/01/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30048	Female	18	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	18/01/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30049	Male	12	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	09/02/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30050	Female	18	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	19/01/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30051	Male	12	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	09/07/2021	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30052	Male	18	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Physical Abuse	Divert to PPFS - Close	11/03/2004	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30053	Female	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	29/04/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30054	Female	14	White Irish Traveller	Child Welfare Concern	Sexual Abuse	Alternative Care	24/10/2007	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30055	Male	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	21/12/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30056	Female	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	21/12/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30057	Female	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	21/12/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30058	Female	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	13/08/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30059	Female	15	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	02/12/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30060	Female	12	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	12/04/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30061	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	27/04/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30062	Male	15	White Irish	Neglect	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	29/12/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30063	Male	16	Not Stated	Child Welfare Concern	Neglect	Alternative Care	19/07/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30064	Female	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	10/07/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30065	Female	14	White Irish	Neglect	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	13/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30066	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	16/11/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30067	Female	12	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to Another Agency - Close	25/11/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30069	Female	11	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	09/07/2021	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30070	Female	15	White Irish	Sexual Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	04/06/2021	No	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30071	Female	15	White Irish	Sexual Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Alternative Care	15/07/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30072	Male	16	Emotional Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Initial Assessment	30/07/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30073	Female	17	White Irish	Sexual Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Initial Assessment	30/07/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30074	Male	13	White Irish	Neglect	Sexual Abuse	Initial Assessment	13/08/2021	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30075	Female	12	White Irish	Neglect	Sexual Abuse	Alternative Care	03/09/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30076	Male	14	White Irish	Neglect	Neglect	Alternative Care	26/11/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30077	Female	13	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	09/09/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30078	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	21/09/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30079	Female	13	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	21/09/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	No
30080	Female	16	White Irish Traveller	Neglect	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	24/10/2007	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes
30081	Female	14	White Irish	Physical Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	26/04/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a	Yes



Code for the Researcher	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Primary Reported Concern	Current Report Type	Process Stage	Length of time to complete Initial Assessment	Priority	CPNS Status	Previous CPNS Entry	Category at CPC	Disability Record at Child
30001	Female	13	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	18/08/2020	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30002	Male	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	18/08/2020	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30003	Female	12	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	25/11/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30004	Male	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	05/07/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30005	Male	17	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	27/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30006	Female	12	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	02/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30007	Female	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	24/09/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30008	Female	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	24/09/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30009	Female	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	24/09/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30010	Male	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	13/08/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30011	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	12/08/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30012	Male	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	04/09/2020	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30013	Female	16	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	02/10/2020	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30014	Female	13	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	09/09/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30015	Female	16	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to Another Agency - Close	14/10/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30016	Male	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	16/10/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30017	Male	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Neglect	Safety Planning	27/10/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	Yes	Neglect
30018	Male	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to Another Agency - Close	15/07/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30019	Male	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	23/07/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	Yes	Neglect
30020	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	23/07/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30021	Male	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	23/07/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30022	Male	19	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	16/07/2020	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30023	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	18/11/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30024	Female	12	Black - any other Black background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	19/11/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	Yes	Emotional Abuse
30025	Female	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	28/01/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	Yes	Emotional Abuse
30026	Male	18	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	04/06/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	Yes	Emotional Abuse
30029	Male	16	Sexual Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Divert to PPFS - Close	23/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30031	Female	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	29/09/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30032	Female	10	Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	01/12/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30034	Male	15	Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	01/12/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30035	Male	17	Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	16/07/2020	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30037	Female	14	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	16/07/2020	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30038	Female	10	Not Stated	Emotional Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	15/03/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30039	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	06/10/2021	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30040	Male	16	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	10/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30044	Male	13	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	11/10/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30045	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	12/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30046	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to PPFS - Close	13/08/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30047	Male	18	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Physical Abuse	Divert to PPFS - Close	18/01/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30048	Female	12	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	09/02/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30049	Male	18	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	09/07/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30050	Female	12	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	09/07/2021	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30051	Male	18	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Physical Abuse	No Further Action (NFA) - Close, Assessment/Safe	29/04/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30052	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Sexual Abuse	Divert to PPFS - Close	24/10/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30053	Female	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Sexual Abuse	Alternative Care	24/10/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30054	Female	12	White Irish Traveller	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	21/12/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30055	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	21/12/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30056	Female	10	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Emotional Abuse	Alternative Care	21/12/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30057	Female	11	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	13/08/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30058	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	12/12/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30059	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	02/04/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30060	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	12/04/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30061	Female	16	White Irish	Neglect	Child Welfare Concern	Safety Planning	27/04/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30062	Male	16	Not Stated	Neglect	Alternative Care	Alternative Care	29/12/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30063	Male	14	Not Stated	Child Welfare Concern	Neglect	Alternative Care	19/04/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30064	Female	17	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	No Further Action (NFA) - Close	10/07/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30065	Female	14	White Irish	Neglect	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	13/08/2021	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30066	Male	14	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	16/11/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30067	Female	18	Any other White Background	Neglect	Child Welfare Concern	Divert to Another Agency - Close	25/11/2020	Yes	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30069	Female	12	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	09/07/2021	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30070	Female	11	Any other White Background	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Initial Assessment	04/06/2021	No	Low	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30071	Female	15	Any other White Background	Sexual Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Alternative Care	15/07/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30072	Male	15	White Irish	Sexual Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Alternative Care	15/07/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30073	Female	16	White Irish	Emotional Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Initial Assessment	30/07/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30074	Male	14	Neglect	Emotional Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Initial Assessment	05/08/2021	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30075	Female	17	White Irish	Sexual Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Initial Assessment	14/05/2021	No	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30076	Male	12	Neglect	Neglect	Neglect	Alternative Care	03/09/2011	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30077	Male	13	White Irish	Neglect	Neglect	Alternative Care	26/11/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30083	Male	12	White Irish	Neglect	Neglect	Alternative Care	03/09/2011	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30084	Female	14	White Irish	Neglect	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	21/09/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30093	Female	13	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	21/09/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30094	Female	15	White Irish	Child Welfare Concern	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	21/09/2020	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30103	Male	16	White Irish Traveller	Neglect	Neglect	Alternative Care	24/10/2007	Yes	Medium	Not on CPNS	No	n/a
30113	Female	14	White Irish	Physical Abuse	Child Welfare Concern	Alternative Care	26/04/2021	Yes	High	Not on CPNS	No	n/a

### APPENDIX 3: First stage analysis on Area X data

Variable	Numbe	Percentage
Presence of DV	43	49%
Parental Addiction	29	33%
Mental Health serv	13	15%
Parent Disability	1	1%
Child Disability	11	13%
Traveller	2	2%
Member of Minorit	9	10%
No other concerns	18	20%

Gender	Numbe	Percentage
Female	46	52%
Male	42	48%

Urban/Rural	Numbe	Percentage
Urban	0	0%
Rural	88	100%

Ethnicity	Numbe	Percentage
White Irish	60	68%
Any other White B	8	9%
White Irish Travell	2	2%
Black - any other I	2	2%
Irish	2	2%
Awaiting confirmat	14	16%

Age	Numbe	Percentage
10	10	11%
11	9	10%
12	13	15%
13	7	8%
14	15	17%
15	11	13%
16	9	10%
17	8	9%
18	5	6%
19	1	1%

APPENDIX 4: Second stage analysis on Area X data

Variable	Number	Percentage
Presence of DV	43	100%
Parental Addiction	16	37%
Mental Health service involvement	8	19%
Parent Disability	1	2%
Child Disability	2	5%
Traveller	0	0%
Member of Minority group	5	12%
No other concerns	0	0%

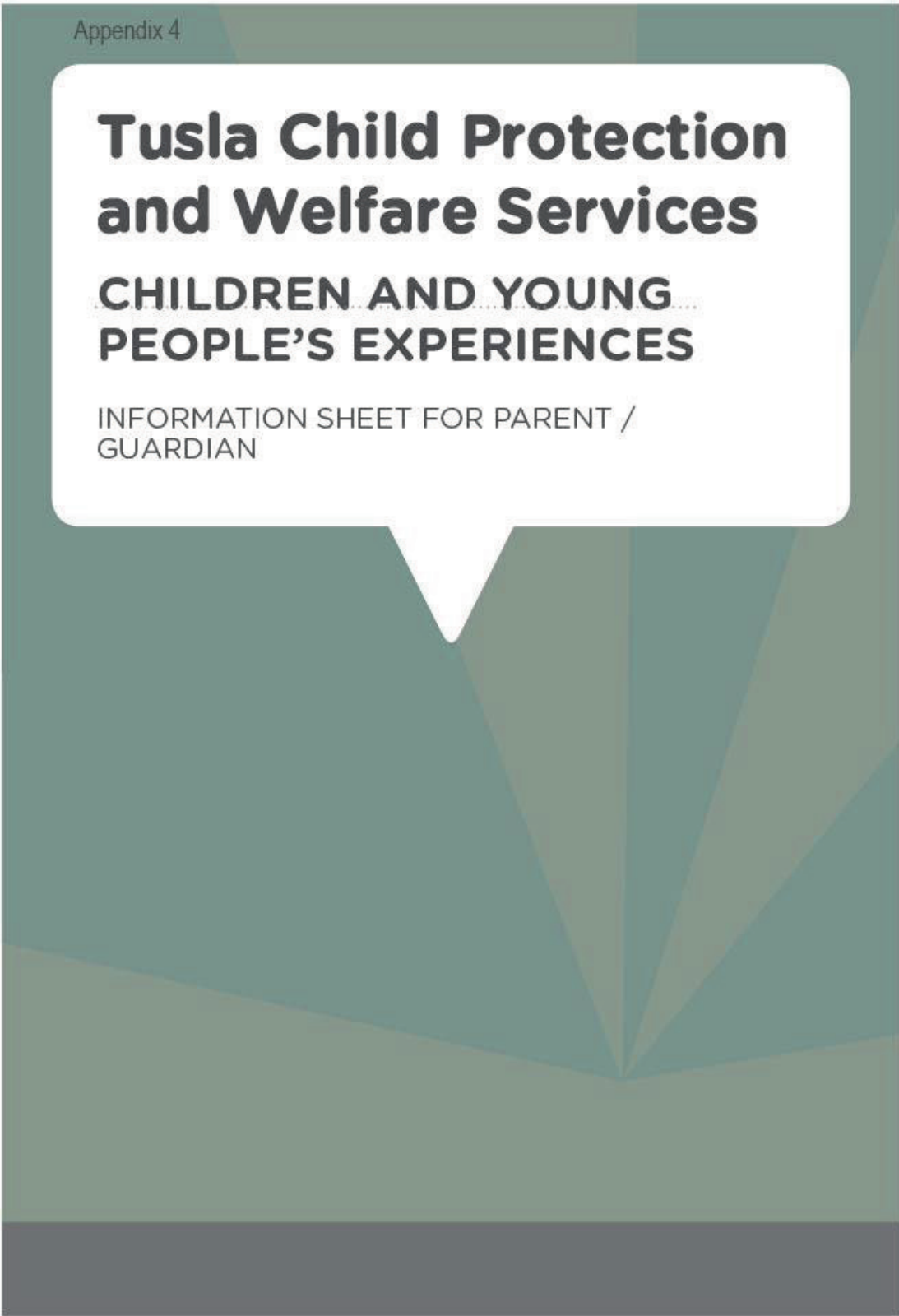
Gender	Number	Percentage
Female	21	49%
Male	22	51%

Urban/Rural	Number	Percentage
Urban	0	0%
Rural	43	100%

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
White Irish	28	65%
Any other White Background	5	12%
White Irish Traveller	0	0%
Black - any other Black background	2	5%
Irish	0	0%
Awaiting confirmation	8	19%

Age	Number	Percentage
10	5	12%
11	4	9%
12	8	19%
13	3	7%
14	8	19%
15	2	5%
16	5	12%
17	4	9%
18	3	7%
19	1	2%

APPENDIX 5: Information sheet for parent/guardian





## WHAT IS THE PROJECT ABOUT?

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with Tusla child protection and welfare services. Tusla are really interested in understanding how children and young people experience Tusla services and want to know from children and young people how these services can be improved. By taking part in this study, your views and experiences will help influence how services are delivered in the future and improve how children and young people experience those services.

As a parent/guardian I would like to ask for your permission for your child to take part in the study. I would like to hear from your child's point of view what it was like for them when Tusla were involved.

## WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

My name is Stephanie Holt. I am a researcher at Trinity College Dublin. My co-worker \_\_\_\_\_ will be helping me to carry out the research interviews.

## WHAT DOES TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Only when you have given your permission will a support worker talk to your child about the project. They will be given some time to think about taking part and both you and your child will have the opportunity to ask me questions about the project before the interview takes place. Once you and your child both agree to them taking part in the study we will organise a time for the interview to take place. But, you can both change your mind to taking part at any time and I will understand.

The interview will take no longer than an hour.

## PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY

I will ask for your child's permission to record the interview. This will allow me to give them my full attention during the interview and it also means that I won't forget anything they have said to me which is important.

What your child talks to me about during the interview is confidential, this means that I will not tell anybody else what they say unless they tell me something that means they or someone else is at risk of harm, in which case I must act in accordance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017).

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION GATHERED?

Your privacy is important to us. All information will be treated in the strictest confidence and all materials relating to this research will be processed only by myself and my co-researcher \_\_\_\_\_. An audio recording of the interview will be stored for up to two years and a written version with none of your child's identifying information will be stored for five years. These will be stored in a locked cabinet with the information stored in a secure encrypted hard drive and also in a password protected folder on my computer and that of my co-researcher \_\_\_\_\_. Both files will be destroyed by me after the storage period.

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for Tusla. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who they are and what they have said. The findings from the research may also be used in conference papers, articles, agency reports, briefing papers and other academic material.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS TO TAKING PART

Talking with me might bring back memories of a difficult time in your child's life and they might get upset or feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. They can stop at any time and do not have to answer anything that they are uncomfortable with. Other children who have talked about their experiences of professional services in research have benefited from the experience of feeling listened to and sharing their views on the subject.

By hearing from the children and young people themselves, I hope that this research will help us learn more about the experiences of children who have been in contact with child protection and welfare services.



'Tell us' - You always have the right to complain! Please tell us if you are not happy with the research experience and/or Tusla services. You can do this by writing a complaint to Trinity School of Social Work and Social Policy Ethics Chairperson so that we know how to improve the research experience for other young people. You or your child can make a complaint to Tusla directly through the 'Tell us' form: [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell\\_Us\\_Complaints\\_A5\\_6pg\\_LR\\_amend.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell_Us_Complaints_A5_6pg_LR_amend.pdf)

### FURTHER INFORMATION & CONTACTS

If you have any questions about the study or would like to arrange a time to discuss your child's participation in this project, you can contact me or my colleague by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

<b>Ruth Elliffe</b> (Researcher)	<b>Stephanie Holt</b> (Principal Investigator)
Phone: 086 406 4959	Phone: 01 896 3908
Email: <a href="mailto:relliffe@tcd.ie">relliffe@tcd.ie</a>	Email: <a href="mailto:sholt@tcd.ie">sholt@tcd.ie</a>

### SUPPORT

**Barnardos**  
Children's Charity: support for children and their families. Callsave: 1850 222 300  
[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

**Túsla**  
Child and Family Agency: support for children and their families. Phone: 01 771 8500.  
[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

### Appendix 5

## Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Service

### CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

### CONSENT FORM - PARENT / GUARDIAN (for child's participation)

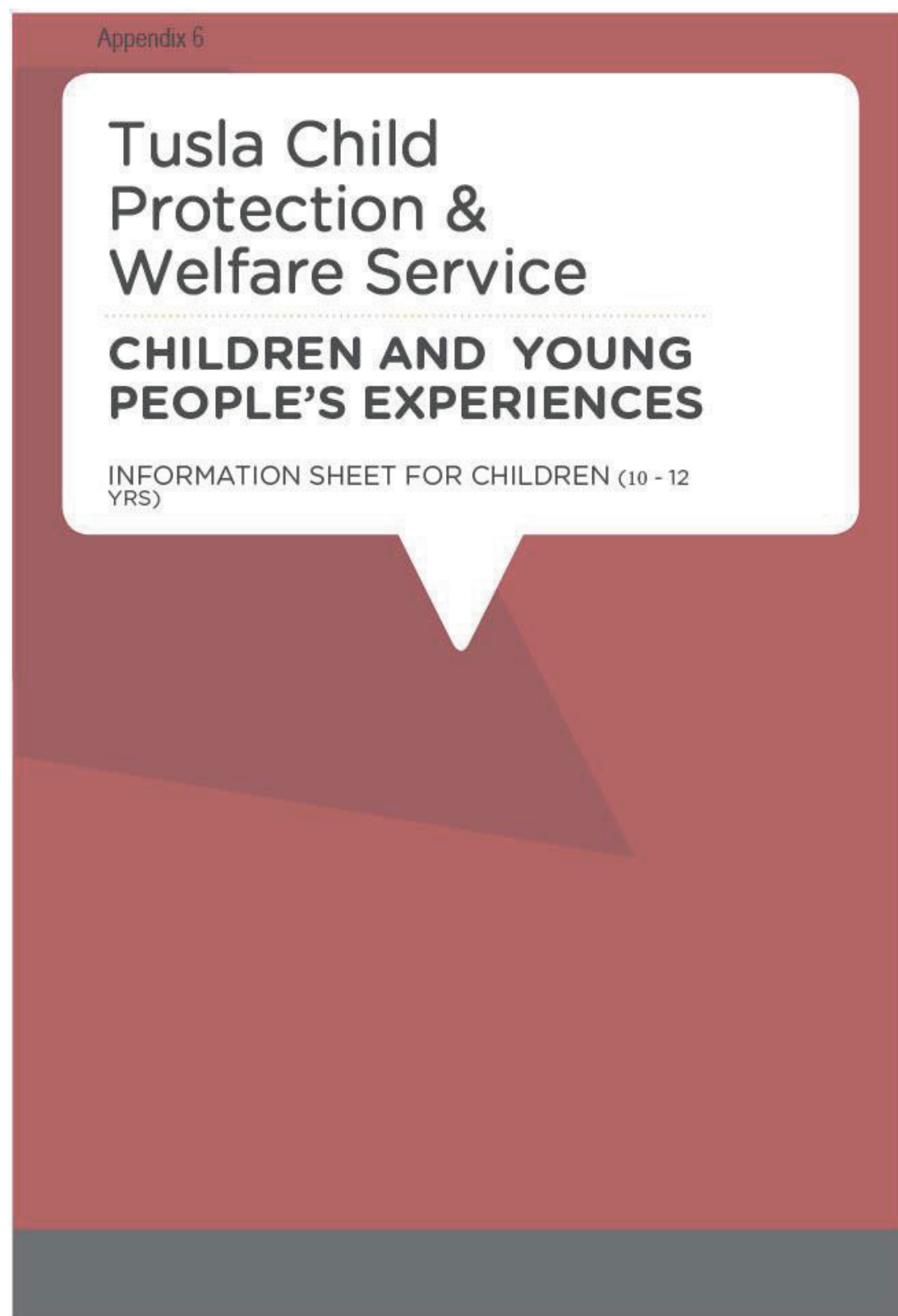
I .....  
agree that Stephanie Holt, Researcher, Trinity College Dublin may seek my child's permission to participate in this project.

- I have read the information sheet provided and consent form.
- I have had the opportunity to ask Stephanie questions about my child(ren)'s participation.
- I understand that everything my child(ren) talks to Stephanie about is confidential.
- If my child(ren) tells Stephanie something that indicates that he/she might be in danger, she may need to talk to somebody else about this. If this does happen, Stephanie will firstly:
  - ✓ Talk to my child(ren) and tell my child(ren) about her concern;
  - ✓ And where appropriate talk to me and let me know what the concern about my child(ren) is.
- I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017) will be adhered to in this study.
- I understand that my child(ren)'s names and any other identifying details will be changed in the final report and they will remain anonymous.
- I understand that the information Stephanie gathers may also be used for training seminars/presentations and other written material.
- I understand the interview will be recorded and safely stored for up to a period of five years and then destroyed by Stephanie.
- I have received a copy of this consent form.
- I can change my mind at any time about my child(ren)'s participation.

Signed (Parent / Guardian) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....









**WHAT IS THE PROJECT ALL ABOUT?**

This project is interested in learning more about what it's like for children and young people who have experienced Tusla Child Protection and Welfare services. Tusla are really interested in understanding how children and young people experience Tusla services and want to know from children and young people how these services can be improved. By taking part in this study, your views and experiences will help influence how services are delivered in the future and improve how children and young people experience those services.

**WHO WANTS TO KNOW?**

My name is Stephanie Holt. I am a researcher from Trinity College Dublin. My co-worker \_\_\_\_\_ will be helping me to carry out the research interviews.

**WHAT DOES TAKING PART MEAN?**

-  You will be asked some questions about what it's like to experience a Tusla child protection and welfare service. But, you don't have to answer any question you don't want to.
-  If it's okay with you we will record you talking on an audio tape. This is so that we can remember everything you say.
-  We won't talk for any longer than 45 minutes and we can take as many breaks as you like.
-  I will give you a STOP and GO card so that you can decide when and when not to talk.



## YOUR CHOICE!

Your parent/guardian has said that it's okay for you to talk to me but taking part is your choice! Have a think about it. You can talk to them or another grown up if you're unsure about anything on this information sheet. If you decide not to take part, this is absolutely fine as it's your choice to decide and nobody will mind.

### Other important stuff for you to know about taking part!

! Both your parent/guardian and you must give me permission for you to take part. You can both decide at any time to change your mind.

! I'll write about some of the important things we talk about, that other people will read but you can choose a different name so nobody will know what you have said.

! An audio recording of what we talk about will be stored safely by me for up to two years and a written version without your name will be stored for five years. Only myself and my co-researcher \_\_\_\_\_ will have access to these. Both will be destroyed by me after the storage period.

! I won't tell anybody else what we talk about unless you tell me something that makes me worry about you or someone else's safety, in which case I will have to act within Children First Guidelines and tell somebody else. If this happens I will talk to you first before I tell anybody else.

! Talking to me might bring back some memories that make you feel sad and you might feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If this happens you can choose for us to take break from talking or you might decide to stop completely and I will understand.

Your support worker will check in with you after we talk to make sure you are okay

A good thing about taking part could be that you can tell your story and this might help the grown-ups including social workers learn more about what it is like for children and young people who experience Tusla child protection and welfare services.

## HOW DO I SAY YES TO TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT?

Your parent/guardian has already said that it is okay for you to talk to me but taking part in the project is **your** choice! Take some time to think about it. If you say yes to taking part you can contact me directly and I can answer any questions you might have about the research and taking part. If you decide then not to take part that's okay and I will understand. If you are still happy to take part, we will sign some forms and arrange a time the following week to meet again for the interview. But remember, you can still change your mind about taking part at any time.

'Tell us' - You always have the right to complain! Please tell us if you are not happy with the research experience and/or Tusla services. You can do this by telling your support worker who can assist you in writing a complaint to us so that we know how to improve the research experience for other young people. You can make a complaint to Tusla directly through the 'Tell us' form: [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell\\_Us\\_Complaints\\_A5\\_6pg\\_LR\\_amend.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell_Us_Complaints_A5_6pg_LR_amend.pdf)

## HOW TO CONTACT ME

You can contact me or my colleague by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959 Email: [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

**Stephanie Holt** (Principal Investigator)  
Phone: 01 896 3908 Email: [sholt@tcd.ie](mailto:sholt@tcd.ie)

## SUPPORT

It might help to talk to someone, you can contact Childline and they will listen and believe whatever it is you have to say.

### Childline

Free phone 1800 66 66 66 open 24 hrs a day

### Childline Online

Open 10am - 4am everyday  
[www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie) and click on 'Chat to us'



# Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Services

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PERSON (13 - 17 YRS)

### WHAT IS THE PROJECT ALL ABOUT?

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with Tusla child protection and welfare services. Tusla are really interested in understanding how children and young people experience Tusla services and want to know from children and young people how these services can be improved. By taking part in this study, your views and experiences will help influence how services are delivered in the future and improve how children and young people experience those services.

### WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

My name is Stephanie Holt. I am a researcher at Trinity College Dublin. My co-worker \_\_\_\_\_ will be helping me to carry out the research interviews.

### WHAT HAPPENS IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

I would like to invite you to an interview to talk to you about your views and experiences of contact with Tusla child protection and welfare service.

The interview will take about one hour with breaks whenever you need one. If you feel at any point that you would prefer not to continue with the interview then that is okay. I won't mind and there will be no excuse necessary or negative impact for you by stopping. It really is **your** choice.

### IS WHAT I TELL YOU PRIVATE?

I will ask your permission to record the interview. This allows me to give you my full attention during the interview and it also means I won't forget anything you have said to me which is important. If you want me to stop recording at any time I will turn it off. What we talk about during the interview is confidential, this means that I won't tell anybody else what you say unless you tell me something that means you or someone else might get hurt, in which case I will have to act within Children First Guidelines and tell somebody else. But, if this does happen then we will discuss between us what will happen next and who else we will need to tell.



## WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY INFORMATION?

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for Tusla. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who you are and what you have said. The findings from the research may also be used for training seminars, presentations and other written material. An audio recording of what we talk about will be stored safely by me for up to two years and a written version with all of your identifying information will be stored for five years. Both will be destroyed by me after the storage period.

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS TO TAKING PART?

Talking with me might bring back some memories that make you feel sad and you might feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. This is okay and you do not have to share anything with me that you are not happy to. We can stop at any time and if you want to finish the interview we can do that too and I or anybody else won't mind. Your support worker will check in with you after the interview to make sure you are okay and if you need to talk further. A benefit to taking part could be that you have a chance to share your story. I hope that this research will help us learn more about the experiences of children and young people who have engaged with Tusla children and family services.

**DO I HAVE A CHOICE?** Your parent/guardian has already said that it's okay for you to talk to me but taking part is your choice! Take some time to think about what being involved might be like for you. You can decide at any time either before, during or after the interview if you are not comfortable and would rather not take part. This is absolutely fine. It's your choice to decide and nobody will mind.

### 'Tell us'

You always have the right to complain! Please tell us if you are not happy with the research experience and/or Tusla services. You can do this by telling your support worker who can assist you in writing a complaint to us so that we know how to improve the research experience for other young people. Tusla are also interested to hear from you about what they are doing well and also not so well so that they can learn from your experience. You can make a complaint to Tusla directly through the 'Tell us' form which is available to access online at [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell\\_Us\\_Complaints\\_A5\\_6pg\\_LR\\_amend.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell_Us_Complaints_A5_6pg_LR_amend.pdf). You can make a verbal complaint at any time by speaking to your support worker or a member of the research team.

## HOW DO I TAKE PART IN THE PROJECT?

Your parent/guardian has already said that it is okay for you to talk to me but taking part in the project is **your** choice! Take some time to think about it. If you say yes to taking part you can call me and ask me any questions you might have about the project. If you decide then not to take part that's okay and I will understand. If you are still happy to take part, we will sign some forms and arrange a time the following week to meet again for the interview. But remember, you can still change your mind to taking part at any time.

## HOW TO CONTACT ME

You can contact me or my colleague by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

**Stephanie Holt** (Principal Investigator)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: [sholt@tcd.ie](mailto:sholt@tcd.ie)

## SUPPORT

Below is a list of useful contacts for young people who might need some support:

### Childline

Free phone 1800 66 66 66 open 24 hrs a day

### Childline Online

Open 10am - 4am everyday  
[www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie) and click on 'Chat to us'  
on contact Teentext by texting 'Talk' to 50101

### Teenline Ireland

Open 7 nights a week: 8pm to 11pm  
Phone 1800 833 634 or text 'TEEN' to 50015

### Teen Between

Phone 1800 303 191

### Barnardos Teenhelp

[www.barnardos.ie/resources-advice/young-people/teen-help/domestic-abuse](http://www.barnardos.ie/resources-advice/young-people/teen-help/domestic-abuse)

### Jigsaw

[www.headstrong.ie](http://www.headstrong.ie)



# Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Services

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PERSON (18+YRS)

### WHAT IS THE PROJECT ALL ABOUT?

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with Tusla child protection and welfare services. Tusla are really interested in understanding how children and young people experience Tusla services and want to know from children and young people how these services can be improved. By taking part in this study, your views and experiences will help influence how services are delivered in the future and improve how children and young people experience those services.

### WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

My name is Stephanie Holt. I am a researcher at Trinity College Dublin. My co-worker \_\_\_\_\_ will be helping me to carry out the research interviews.

### WHAT HAPPENS IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

I would like to invite you to an interview to talk to you about your views and experiences of contact with Tusla child protection and welfare services. The interview will take about one hour with breaks whenever you need one. If you feel at any point that you would prefer not to continue with the interview then that is okay. I won't mind and there will be no excuse necessary or negative impact for you by stopping. It really is **your** choice!

### IS WHAT I TELL YOU PRIVATE?

I will ask your permission to record the interview. This allows me to give you my full attention during the interview and it also means I won't forget anything you have said to me which is important. If you want me to stop recording at any time I will turn it off. What we talk about during the interview is confidential, this means that I won't tell anybody else what you say unless you tell me something that means you or someone else might get hurt, in which case I will have to act within Children First Guidelines and tell somebody else. But, if this does happen then we will discuss between us what will happen next and who else we will need to tell.

Your privacy is important to us. All information will be treated in the strictest confidence and all materials will be processed only by myself and my co-researcher Ruth Elliffe. An audio recording of the interview will be stored for up to two years and a written version with none of your identifying information will be stored for five years. These will be stored in a locked cabinet with the information stored in a secure encrypted hard drive and also in a password protected folder on my computer and that of my co-researcher Ruth Elliffe. Both files will be destroyed by me after the storage period.



## WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY INFORMATION?

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for Tusla. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who they are and what they have said. The findings from the research may also be used in conference papers, articles, agency reports, briefing papers and other academic material.

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS TO TAKING PART?

Talking with me might bring back some memories that make you feel sad and you might feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. This is okay and you do not have to share anything with me that you are not happy to. We can stop at any time and if you want to finish the interview we can do that too and I or anybody else won't mind.

A benefit to taking part could be that you have a chance to share your story. I hope that this research will help us learn more about the experiences of children and young people who have come in contact with child and family social work services.

## DO I HAVE A CHOICE?

Taking part is your choice! Take some time to think about what being involved might be like for you. You can decide at any time either before, during or after the interview if you are not comfortable and would rather not take part. This is absolutely fine. It's your choice!

## 'Tell us'

You always have the right to complain! Please tell us if you are not happy with the research experience and/or Tusla services. You can do this by telling your support worker who can assist you in writing a complaint to us so that we know how to improve the research experience for other young people. Tusla are also interested to hear from you about what they are doing well and also not so well so that they can learn from your experience. You can make a complaint to Tusla directly through the 'Tell us' form which is available to access online at [https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell\\_Us\\_Complaints\\_A5\\_6pg\\_LR\\_amend.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Tell_Us_Complaints_A5_6pg_LR_amend.pdf). You can make a verbal complaint at any time by speaking to your support worker or a member of the research team.

## HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?

If you are interested in taking part in the project or have any questions then you can contact me or my colleague by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

**Stephanie Holt** (Principal Investigator)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: [sholt@tcd.ie](mailto:sholt@tcd.ie)

## SUPPORT

Below is a list of useful contacts for young people who might need some support;

**Jigsaw**  
[www.headstrong.ie](http://www.headstrong.ie)

**Spunout**  
[www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

**Samaritans**  
Free phone 116 123 (24 / 7)  
Email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
[www.samaritans.ie](http://www.samaritans.ie)





### ASSENT FORM - CHILD (age 10 - 12 years)

Stephanie and \_\_\_\_\_ are part of a team doing research. I know that they want to find out more about what it's like for children who have had contact with Tusla child protection and welfare services. ☐

My parent/guardian has given consent for me to take part and I am assenting to take part in the research. ☐

\_\_\_\_\_ will record what I say so that she doesn't forget anything. Recordings will be stored safely by Stephanie for two years and then she will destroy them. ☐

I can stop talking to \_\_\_\_\_ or take a break whenever I like and she won't mind. I do not have to answer questions on things I don't want to talk about. ☐

Other people will read about what I say but \_\_\_\_\_ said that I can use a different name so nobody will have to know what I said except her. ☐

If I tell \_\_\_\_\_ something that makes her worry about me or someone else then she will have to tell another grown up, and she will have to follow procedures under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017). ☐

I am happy to talk to \_\_\_\_\_ about myself and my experiences of child protection and welfare services. ☐

Signed (Child) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....



### ASSENT FORM - YOUNG PERSON (ages 13 - 17 years)

I .....  
agree to talk to \_\_\_\_\_ (Researcher, Trinity College Dublin) as part of the above named project. ☐

I have read the information sheet and I have had time to ask questions about the project. ☐

My parent/guardian has given consent for me to take part and I am assenting to take part in the research. ☐

I understand that everything I talk to \_\_\_\_\_ about is confidential ☐

I am happy for \_\_\_\_\_ to record what we talk about. Recordings will be stored safely by Stephanie Holt for two years and then she will destroy them. ☐

I understand that Stephanie and her team will write about some of the things that I say but that my name will be changed so nobody will be able to tell what I have said. ☐

I will only talk about what I want to talk about and I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to. ☐

If \_\_\_\_\_ is told something that indicates that a child might be in danger of harm, they may need to talk to somebody else about this. ☐

If this happens such information will be discussed with me before it is discussed with anybody else. ☐

I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017) will be adhered to in this study. ☐

I can choose to stop talking to \_\_\_\_\_ at any time and I know that they will not mind. ☐

Signed (Young Person) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....



**CONSENT FORM - YOUNG PERSON (18yrs)**

I .....

agree to talk to ..... (Researcher, Trinity College Dublin) as part of the above named project.

I have read the information sheet and I have had time to ask questions about the project. I understand that everything I talk to ..... about is confidential and will not be discussed with anybody else. I am happy for ..... to record what we talk about on an audio-tape. Recordings will be stored safely by Stephanie Holt for two years and then she will destroy them.

I understand that Stephanie and her team will write about some of the things that I say but that my name will be changed so nobody will be able to tell what I have said.

I will only talk about what I want to talk about and I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to. If ..... is told something that indicates that a child might be in danger of harm, she may need to talk to somebody else about this. If this happens such information will be discussed with me before it is discussed with anybody else.

I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017) will be adhered to in this study.

I can choose to stop talking to ..... at any time and I know that she will not mind.

Signed (Young Person) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....

APPENDIX 9: Interview schedule

PHASE ONE: INTRODUCTION

- 1. Welcome/informal chat about journey there/how summer is going – highlight of summer so far/weather/what they are looking forward to doing over the next few weeks before school resumes/class in school etc
- 2. Introduction to what research is about – children and young people’s experience of Tusla – about having a social worker or social care worker – about the way they worked with you, whether you found it helpful or not;
- 3. So up to now, X may have talked to you about the things that are working well in your family and also what could be working better in your family. Today I am really interested in finding out from you, what is working well with how Tusla work with children and young people and what could work better.
- 4. What this is not about - it is not about their home life or why they came to be involved with social work/social care/ Tusla – so I won’t ask about home life but you are free to talk about anything you want.
- 5. You are also free not to answer questions – I really won’t mind if you don’t want to answer a question.
- 6. If at any point you want a break or want to call in [support person], that is also fine.
- 7. Informed consent – you have to agree to take part – is there anything you don’t understand?
- 8. Recording device – explain purpose of it – to ensure I capture what you are saying exactly and I am not distracted scribbling notes.
- 9. Any questions you want to ask before we start?

PHASE TWO: INTRODUCTION TO TUSLA

- 1. Tell me how you started to get involved with Tusla start? Who told you? Did someone tell you the SW was coming or did they just arrive?



2. Can we go back to when you were first introduced to SW/SC - do you remember how he/she was introduced to you? How did he/she explain why they were meeting with you?
3. Did you understand why he/she was meeting with you? Who else was there? What was it like for you?
4. At the time did you think Tusla needed to be involved in your life?
5. Have you always had the same SW/SCW?

### PHASE THREE: ONGOING ENGAGEMENT WITH TUSLA

#### *Early-Stage Engagement*

1. When you first started meeting with X, what kinds of things did you do with them?
2. Did you enjoy it? If yes, what was good about it? If no, what didn't you like?
3. What would you have liked different?
4. Some children/YP draw pictures with their social worker. Did you do any drawings with your social worker? Maybe pictures of **three houses**<sup>22</sup>, or pictures describing what happened in your family? Or pictures with **Wizards or fairies? Words & pictures?**
  - What did you do?
  - Did you like doing the drawings? Why /why not?
  - Was it helpful? Why not?
  - Do you think the words and pictures stories was good in putting down on paper and in pictures how you were/are feeling?
  - If you were a social worker doing this with kids, is there anything you would do differently?

#### **DECISION MAKING**

5. Can you give me some examples of some things that have changed in your life since Tusla started working with you? Things that the SW/SCW has done to make these changes

6. Did you understand why these changes were happening?
7. Who decided on those changes? Was it easy to understand the reasons for those changes? Why? How were those changes explained to you? Did you have any chance to give your view on these things?
8. Do you think children/YP should be asked what they think about those decisions and whether or not they are happy with the decisions? Why/why not?
9. What kinds of things can adults do to make sure that children get to have a say about those decisions?
10. Does X listen to your feelings about decisions that adults are making? Should X listen? Why?
11. Ask you asked for your thoughts on what should happen in your life/in your family's life?
12. Did you feel you were listened to? Who listened to you? Do you think X listened to you? What does X do to let you know he/she is listening? Does she/he ask you/check in with you to make sure you understand what is going on?
13. Do you always understand what X is saying to you?
14. What do they do to help you understand?

#### **SPECIFIC TO Signs of Safety**

15. Has anyone spoken to you about ways of signalling or communicating to people outside the home that everything is not ok?
16. Some young people call it a **safety object**, for example something they might have in their window, like a picture or a teddy bear that they can move to let someone outside their home know that they if don't feel safe or are worried about something?
  - Tell me about this, how did it work for you?
  - Did you choose it? How did that make you feel?
  - Did you like using it? Why?
  - Do you think this is something that could help other children?

<sup>22</sup> house of worries, house of good things, house of dreams

17. Another way that SWs can help CYP to feel safe is to talk to them about making a safety plan. Did you make a **safety plan** with X? Can you tell me about this? Have you had to use your safety plan? Did it work ok for you?

18. IF CYP attended a meeting (CPC) with other professionals like Youth worker -

- Did you want to go to the conference?
- Why was it important to you to be there?
- Would you recommend other children/YP go to the conference? Why/why not?
- Did X help you prepare to go to the conference? What did they do? Was this helpful? Why?

19. IF CYP did not attend a meeting (CPC) with other professionals like Youth worker –

- Would they like to have attended?
- Why did they not attend?
- What were you told about the meeting – what it was about?
- Did X ask you what you would like the meeting to hear from you?

### PHASE THREE: REFLECTIONS

#### YOUR VIEW OF WHAT A SW DOES?

1. So now that you have had a SW for [X amount of time] what do you think a social worker does?
2. If a friend asked you what your social worker does, what would you tell them?
3. Who knows that you have a social worker?
4. Do your friends know? Teachers etc?
5. Do you mind who knows?
6. How do you feel about other people knowing about you having a SW/SCW, about Tusla being involved in your life?
7. What are the good things about have Tusla/SW/SCW in your life?
8. What are the not so good things?
9. Does it make you feel safer that other people know that you are involved with Tusla?
10. Would you prefer they didn't know?
11. Should social workers always do what children want them to do?

### PHASE FOUR: IMPACT/OUTCOMES

[Talk about some differences/if any that engaging with Tusla has made at school or at home, with friends etc.]

- Do you feel things are any different or the same compared with when they started trying to help you?
- Do you think anybody else has noticed a difference in you?
- Is there anything else you would like your SW to be helping you with?
- Are there some things you think your SW can't help you with?
- Is there anyone else who you think could help you with those things?
- Who else do you think could you talk to if you had to?

### PHASE FIVE: CONCLUDE

1. What were/are the best parts about having X as your SW/SCW?
2. What could have been better? What would you do differently if you were a social worker? What would you do the same?
3. So if you were worried or had a problem do you feel there somebody you could talk to? Would that be a Tusla worker? Someone in your family? School? Someone else?
4. If you were the boss of [name worker], what three things would you want [name worker] to change/keep the same?
5. What makes a good SW/SCW?
6. How would you feel if X stopped being your worker and you had to start working with someone else?
7. What advice would you give to another young person who was going to be talking to a SW/SCW? What do you think would help them?
8. One final question – from your point of view do you think Tusla still need to be involved in your life now?
9. Anything else you want to add?

## Distress and disclosure protocol

This protocol is for responding to a disclosure made by a participant during the course of the research process. Throughout the research process the researchers will act in accordance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children, 2017 (DCYA). The researcher is aware of obligations to report to the Child and Family Agency any concerns that a child is at significant risk of being abused or neglected or may have been in the past. The researchers will be guided by Children First (2017) for examples of how to recognise signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect.

### *During the interview*

Should a participant disclose to the researcher any thoughts of harming themselves or others, then the researcher will talk to them about their concerns and the possible need to inform a third party.

If the researcher gets a sense that the participant may be about to disclose abuse then the researcher will remind the person again of the limits to confidentiality and the reasons why the researcher may have to inform others.

If a disclosure of abuse is made the researcher will be guided by the National Guidance (2017) referred to above and will take the following steps;

- Allow the participant to speak without any interruption and listen empathically.<sup>23</sup>
- When the participant has finished talking, determine whether it is a first time disclosure or if anybody else is already aware of the abuse and who they are.
- In the case of retrospective disclosures by an adult, establish whether there are any children at risk and if the abuser has been named.
- Make notes of the disclosure verbatim and read back to the participant to check that the information gathered is correct.
- Discuss with the participant the need to inform their assigned support worker or the Designated Liaison Person within the agency of the abuse and the reasons why.

<sup>23</sup> As experienced children's researchers on domestic violence, Cater & Overlien suggest the researcher assumes a position of "closeness and distance", close enough to empathise with the child's situation and needs, whilst maintaining enough distance to make a professional call on what those needs are and who is best to meet them, this means not becoming the counsellor in the situation (2014: 75).

- The support worker and researcher will then be guided by the child protection protocol of the agency and will refer to the Designated Liaison Person of the agency in accordance with Children First Guidance, 2017 to determine what course of action to take and ensure the safety and best interests of the child.

### *Post interview*

The researcher will inform the PI if a disclosure was made without providing any detail that would mean breaking confidentiality. They will consult on any impact that this might have on the future of the study. Additionally, the researcher will practice good self-care techniques by accessing supports such as Trinity Student Counselling Service if needed.

### Dealing with possible distress

The researcher will acknowledge the emotive nature of the research topic and that the participant may become upset or feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. The participant will be assured that this is perfectly understandable and that they can refuse to answer any of the questions. The participant will be reminded that taking part is entirely their choice and that the interview can be stopped or ended at any time and that breaks can be taken. Given the sensitivity of the topic the researcher will remain alert throughout the research process to both verbal and non-verbal signs of distress from the participant. The researcher will be attentive to the needs of the participant as they talk about their own personal experiences and will suggest a break if they feel it is required. If the participant becomes obviously upset, such as crying, the researcher will acknowledge the participant's distress and stop the interview. The researcher will listen empathically and apply caring gestures (offering a drink of water, providing tissues, suggesting a break for some fresh air). The researcher will ask the participant how they feel about continuing to take part in the research, offering them the choice to continue with the interview, re-arrange to do it another time or end it completely. The participant will be made fully aware that they can end the interview at any time without reason and that there will be no negative repercussions for doing so. When the interview is finished the researcher will recognise that having talked about a personal experience some people might feel the need to continue to talk about it, therefore they will be reminded of the list of support services available to them.







## Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin

Stephanie Holt, Robbie Gilligan, Louise Caffrey,  
and Eavan Brady, School of Social Work & Social Policy,  
The University of Dublin, Trinity College.