

6th National Child Protection and Welfare Social Work Conference

University College Cork, 27th October 2017

Parallel Sessions 1-8 and Symposium

(please note your 1st, 2nd, 3rd choice of parallel sessions for the online registration.

Delegates can attend one session only)

Parallel Session 1

1. **“Learning with” LGBT youth: Promoting cultural competence through participatory approaches in research and practice** - Nerilee Ceatha, Tusla Child and Family Agency

Ireland has the 4th highest suicide rate among 15-19-year-old young people across 31 European countries, giving voice to young people's perspectives and priorities is of paramount importance. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has a commitment to child-centred and rights-based participation, underpinned by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the National Children's Strategy and Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. Some young people are seldom heard including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adolescents. This is of concern, given the broad, albeit contested, consensus that LGBT teenagers experience elevated risk of suicide, self-harm and psychological distress due to the stressors created by stigmatisation, marginalisation and discrimination. Practice wisdom suggests that a commitment to relationship building promotes participation, providing an on-going incentive for adolescents to engage fully in major decisions about their lives. While the assumption that LGBT youth are a universally vulnerable group is problematised, they may be reluctant to participate. Promoting participation demands culturally competent practice underpinned by values of social justice, equity and valuing diversity. Participatory research is essential in addressing the stark gaps in knowledge and understanding of the experiences that impact on LGBT young people. The importance of 'learning *with*' these often hard-to-reach young people is a core component of culturally competent practice. Participatory research recognises LGBT young people as stakeholders and prioritises their role and involvement in the research process. A six-stage conceptualisation of the research cycle anticipates that LGBT adolescents, when asked, will have many opinions on matters that affect them and will participate with interest, providing valuable insight into their lives. This creates an opportunity for practice wisdom to inform research which, in turn, underpins evidence informed social work decision-making and service delivery. This suggests that 'learning *with*' LGBT youth through participatory research processes is a key factor in supporting transformative social work.

2. **The relationship between the foster parent and child as a therapeutic intervention**
Nina Halbert, Tusla Child and Family Agency

Research suggests that success in therapeutic interventions is 70% related to the relationship between the therapist and client rather than any specific approach, theory or technique (Lambert,

1992). A number of therapeutic alternative care settings are designed on the premise that relationships are the primary healing process for children who have experienced early childhood trauma and display significant problems in attachment. It is in these relationships that the children learn to trust and feel safe, which allows them finally to heal. Internationally, these ideas have been expanded to training and supporting foster carers to provide the therapeutic attachment relationship for the children they care for (e.g. Jasper Mountain Treatment Foster Care, U.S.; Integrated Services Programme, U.K.).

In 2014, Tusla partnered with St. Patrick's College Carlow and St. Bernard's Children's Services to develop a Therapeutic Foster Care programme in Ireland. The programme includes a 16 week certificate course in therapeutic foster care which includes theory, practical application, and personal development. In addition, each foster family is allocated a Therapeutic Support Worker who meets with them on a weekly basis to help the family to make sense of the theory and see how it can fit in to their home environment. The Therapeutic Support Worker develops an individualised therapeutic plan with the carer, fostering link worker and child's social worker. A Therapeutic Consultant is charged with ensuring that all parts of the programme are consistently applying the therapeutic model, which is broadly psychodynamic attachment theory.

Feedback from foster carers:

Before we couldn't go to a restaurant, but now we can because of how we are handling it.

It hasn't stopped the behaviour, but it has stopped the battle.

3. **Adult Disclosures of Childhood Sexual Abuse and Section 3 of the Child Care Act 1991: Past Offences, Current Risk – Joseph Mooney, UNESCO**

In the Republic of Ireland Section 3(1) of the Child Care Act 1991 places an obligation and legal duty upon the State child protection services 'to promote the welfare of children in its area who are not receiving adequate care and protection'.

This paper focuses on a specific element of this duty; the social worker's responsibility to accept and assess retrospective reports of childhood sexual abuse. Retrospective disclosures of abuse are referrals made by adults of experiences they encountered in childhood. This paper argues that current social work practice in this area lacks clarity and cohesion and while new policy and practice approaches are emerging ultimately there is a sense of confusion for both social workers and those adults affected by childhood abuse.

This paper presents an examination of the key judgement of Justice Barr in *M.Q. v. Robert Gleeson and Ors* [1998] 4 IR 85 and subsequent, related, precedents and how they relate to current Irish social work policy in this area. Adult disclosures of childhood abuse have the potential to bring alleged abusers to justice and thereby protect current and future children from harm. This paper seeks to provide clarity to social workers and those working with adults affected by abuse, regarding the Irish legal framework relating to adult disclosures of abuse. The paper ultimately argues that further research and guidance is required.

4. **Developing a Social Work Response to Historical Abuse**

Geraldine O'Sullivan, Gretta Hartnett, Tim Noonan Tusla Child and Family Agency, and Dr. Fiachra O'Suilleabhain, University College Cork

Child Sexual Abuse remains an endemic issue in Irish Society (SAVI Report, 2002). In spite of numerous reports into institutional, familial and clerical abuse the state response to historic allegations of CSA remains vague and unfocussed. In this context Child Protection systems are expected to respond to historic allegations of child sexual abuse and provide safeguarding for current children where risk has been established. The state child protection services in Ireland are currently developing services to respond more adequately to these types of cases than has been done in the past.

In this paper the author and colleagues will set the current and historic context for this work and will outline the legal and constitutional challenges it poses.

We will engage directly with social work practitioners dedicated to this work through a semi-structured interview to explore the following research questions:

What is practitioners understanding of their role in these cases?

What is practitioners understanding of risk in the context of these cases?

What informs practitioners' assessment of risk?

It is hoped that the findings will inform the child protection system in Ireland on how best to continue development of this service and signpost any current initiatives or practices which contribute to quality work in this area.

Parallel Session 2

1. **Children from Conflict Zones of Syria and Iraq: The case for trauma informed practice**

Dr. Sharon Lambert & Dr. Orla Lynch, University College Cork

This paper is concerned with children returning to Europe having either been born or travelled to ISIS held territories in Syria/Iraq. It is also concerned with non-European children travelling from ISIS territory to Europe as a result of forced displacement. In conflict zones children are particularly vulnerable both due to the violence they witness/participate in, but also due to the fact that their normal social, moral, emotional and cognitive development is interrupted and corrupted by the experience of war. In addition in the aftermath of the conflict these children are at risk of exposure to additional trauma due to the experience of (forced) migration and the resettlement process. It has been well documented that exposure to multiple and repeat traumas represents a significant risk to children's development and overall functioning and increases risk of physical and mental disorders in the future. Trauma awareness must be a key skill imparted to all individuals working with returnee children in the form of trauma informed practice. The ability to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma is essential in correctly interpreting the behaviour of the children. The process of trauma informed care will be discussed.

2. **Assessing Contact for Children in Care – an attachment focused framework and tools**

Kim Wilson, Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency & Dr John Devaney, Queen's University Belfast

While the principle of contact between children in care and their families is enshrined in law, the precise form and frequency is at the discretion of social workers and the courts. Professionals must seek to balance the twin principles of children's need for protection from the psychological, emotional and physical harm that may arise from having contact with parents and other family members, with the need of family members and children to have their relationships and identity promoted.

In this presentation we explore a new approach developed in Northern Ireland to support the decision making of legal and social work professionals in relation to the frequency and form of contact for children in state care.

The approach is grounded in an attachment focused child centred assessment framework, in which birth family, foster carers and the child are all seen as having a valuable contribution to make in defining the purpose, format and content of contact. The role of social workers is to facilitate contact arrangements while systematically gathering and analysing a range of information about the benefit of contact for a child, using a set of discreet tools and interview schedules that are grounded in theories related to ecological child development and attachment.

The presentation will outline the framework and describe the tools as used, and the initial feedback from legal and social work professionals about their usefulness in supporting court decision making about child contact in public law proceedings.

3. **The emotional experience of child protection social workers in a climate of increasing change**

Nicola O'Sullivan Bessborough Centre & Tavistock and Portman Trust NHS and University of East London, Siobhán Bruen, HSE & Aoibhinn Dunne Tusla Child and Family Agency

Is the future direction of child protection social work moving away from the heart of relationship-based work with children and families? In a climate of on-going organisational and practice changes how will social workers be supported to think and feel about the work?

Little is known about the intimate emotional experiences of social workers as they engage with families. Although supervision is seen as coterminous to effective practice, there is a dearth of studies examining the impact of such a provision. The aim of this study was to provide a sustained reflective space (Work Discussion Group) to Irish child protection social workers in order to closely explore the reality of their practice experience. This space allowed for structured engagement with case material as a method of reflective practice, underpinned by systems psychodynamic theory. Data from the yearlong study was analysed using thematic and cross case analysis.

Findings suggest that work with families is undertaken in a climate that is concerned with efficiency, certainty and risk reduction. This climate provokes anxiety; causes workers to distance themselves from families, and reduces opportunities for reflective practice. Social workers habitually brought those cases that caused them deep emotional distress. Proximity to abuse, neglect, violence and deprivation, as well as being tasked with the making of crucial decisions in such cases are sources of significant anxiety. The task of separating parents from children induced

guilt and a combination of complex feelings caused the worker to doubt and resent themselves. A combination of task related anxiety and anxiety associated with making a mistake and being found out, left workers feeling frightened. In these instances, workers took up a position of *psychic retreat* (Steiner, 1993). This necessary defence enabled them to maintain distance from the guilt and despair associated with the work, but offered no real security.

4. Under 1's Therapeutic Team South Tipperary Social Work Department

Brid Kiely, Marian France, Jackie Brennan, Michele Noonan & Martina Wells Casey, Tusla

The Under 1's team works with families to provide a wraparound service for parents prior to birth of their child and at key points following baby's birth. The social worker will conduct a pre-birth assessment including pre-birth child protection conference where a clear plan is made for baby. Parents have the opportunity to work with an infant mental health programme, marte meo therapist and family support worker.

Rationale for team is to identify risk to unborn baby and research would demonstrate that children are most at risk in first year of life. It provides practitioners with opportunity to build good relationships with parents which helps them to have a more honest and trusting relationship with workers.

Where possible every effort is made to keep baby in their parents care, we utilise services such as befriending foster carers and supported lodgings placements. If baby comes into care at birth every effort is made to reunify baby within first 12 months of life. This ensures children don't 'drift' within the care system and we feel it is a collaborative and inclusive way of working with parents. Working with under 1's team provides parents with a sense of achievement and empowerment in regard to decision making in relation to their baby.

This is an alternative to care in the context of challenges of recruitment of foster carers which in turn impacts on the potential of long term placement for children. Early intervention is key to working with families and we begin our involvement from 12 weeks into pregnancy. The purpose of this is to help parents focus their minds on baby to help with attachment and bonding. The baby is always the focus on our intervention.

Our presentation will focus on an overview of a case currently being worked on the under 1's team.

Parallel Session 3

1. Exploring substantiation and intervention decisions: Initial findings from a prospective, longitudinal study of child protection and welfare assessments

Donna O'Leary, Tusla Child and Family Agency, Prof. Alastair Christie & Prof. Ivan Perry, University College Cork

The identification of abuse is challenging, and the pressure to be accurate is immense. Little information is available regarding the pathway of reports through the assessment and intervention process in Ireland; data that is published indicates that high thresholds exist (Buckley & Burns,

2015). Low and varied rates of intervention following Initial Assessment (IA) are cited as a basis for revising thresholds for entry to the system (CFA, 2015).

This paper presents findings of quantitative analysis of decision data in cases that completed IA in six social work departments in the CFA during the first quarter of 2016 (n=484). Abuse was confirmed in half the cases (n=224) of which 45% proceeded to further intervention (n=101). Children were perceived to be at future risk of significant harm in 33% of these cases (n=73). 45% of them (n=98) had been categorised as “welfare” prior to IA and 64% (n=144) were known to SW. Data on case outcomes at 12 months will be gathered over the coming months and presented.

A pilot study which analysed social workers’ IA records (n=46 cases, 8 Departments) reveals decisions for further intervention were associated with cases where efforts to achieve safety and resolve difficulties failed: they followed some intervention. Harm was evidenced in cases that did not proceed to further intervention.

IA involves subjective prediction of the likelihood of past abuse and the risk of future harm. I will argue that while it has long been maintained that substantiation data is an unreliable indicator of incidence of abuse (Drake, 1996), data relating to “action” decisions at the end of IA is similarly problematic. An argument is made for recording evidence on interventions taken to achieve safety for children and for routine publication of SW process data for *all* cases, not just those included in performance activity reports.

2. **The Power of Partnership: Applying the Signs of Safety framework in a complex child protection case**

Catherine Mullin, Resolutions Consultancy, Debbie O’Shea & Dorothy Saye, Tusla Child and Family Agency

Signs of Safety is currently being implemented throughout Tusla Child and Family Agency as the new framework for undertaking child protection work. This paper will explore how a team in Dublin North worked alongside consultants from Resolutions Consultancy pre-implementation to apply the Signs of Safety approach in working with a family with a long history of child protection concerns and ongoing protracted court proceedings.

The practitioners and consultant will outline how they embraced the challenge of working in partnership with this family to assess whether sufficient safety could be demonstrated by the parents and support network to consider reunification.

Learning from the case will be outlined using the three core principles of the Signs of Safety framework:

Working Relationships

Munro’s Maxim: thinking critically, fostering a stance of inquiry

Landing grand aspirations in everyday practice

The paper will conclude with key messages from the family’s perspective and the impact on the children of using this approach.

3. Preliminary Findings of the Meitheal model and Child and Family Support Networks on outcomes for children, young people and families.

Dr. Carmel Devaney, Dr. Leonor Rodriguez & Dr. Anne Cassidy, UNESCO Child and Family Research Unit, NUI Galway

The aim of this presentation is to report on the preliminary findings of a study on the impact of the Meitheal model and the Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) on outcomes for children, young people, their families and the broader Irish child protection and welfare system. The Meitheal and CFSN model is an early intervention and prevention approach aimed at supporting children, young people and their families to resolve their unmet welfare needs. This model has been developed within the framework of Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) programme. These preliminary findings will be taken from a longitudinal mixed methods study on the model's implementation process and its impact on outcomes for families, which is currently underway. Data is currently being collected from parents, children, young people, practitioners and managers. The findings will focus on the impact of Meitheal on outcomes for children, young people and families and more broadly on the CFSNs' influence on the system of help provision within the Irish child protection and welfare setting. This ground breaking research is the first nationwide study on prevention and early intervention within the statutory child protection and welfare system and will be a significant factor in determining the future direction of this area of children and families' service provision.

4. Mainstreaming of Prevention, Partnership and Family Support: The case for a Systems Approach

Dr Patrick Malone & Dr. John Canavan, UNESCO Child and Family Research Unit, NUI Galway

The mainstreaming programme of prevention, partnership and family support (PPFS) represents a significant transformation in child and family services in Ireland as it seeks to embed *prevention and early intervention* into the culture and operations of the Tusla Child and Family Agency. A primary consideration for this paper relates to assessing the extent to which the process/implementation of PPFS has delivered improved quality outcomes for children and families. As such, this involves exploring if the programme is being implemented as intended and the barriers and enablers to achieving the overarching goal and purpose of PPFS.

In evaluating the scale and complexity of this transformative change occurring in child welfare and protection services, this paper argues that *systems theory* provides a viable framework for analysing this process. A *system* is defined as a collection of parts that are organised around a common purpose or goal – which in turn solidifies and holds the system together. The *common purpose* is a significant component as it relates to how one identifies the structures, processes, functions and capacities needed to implement the overarching goal. In child welfare and protection systems, particular attention is also placed on coordinating complex relationships and the interaction of subsystems to ensure that the work of each system is feeding into the overall process. In applying this framework to Tusla, this paper will also explore the impact of organisational culture and climate and the external environment regarding the embedding of prevention and early intervention in practice. In addition, through the systems theory framework this paper delves into the processes surrounding system change, implementation, sustainability and outcomes in respect to PPFS.

Parallel Session 4

1. **Out with the old and in with the new: the implications of the Domestic Violence Bill 2017 for policy and practice** (Lightening Paper)

Dr. Stephanie Holt, Trinity College Dublin & Phillip McCormack Cosc, Dept of Justice Equality and Law Reform

Grounded in the international evidence base and learning across other jurisdictions, this presentation focuses selectively on specific aspects of the Domestic Violence Bill 2017, examining the implications of this new piece of legislation for child protection and welfare practice. The advent of new legislation brings with it a sense of renewed hope and optimism for better protection for victims and better support for practitioners. Responding to King and Piper's (1995) assertion that the law is a blunt instrument and using it to deal with social issues is reductionist and problematic in its approach, this seven minute lightening talk poses the question 'is child protection and welfare practice better supported by this new legislation or are there missed opportunities and may we run into further uncertainty as to the full value of what may be possible?'

2. **Responding to Forced Marriage – A Child Protection Perspective**

Nicole Byrne & Lavina Temple, Tusla Child and Family Agency

For the first time in Irish law, the Domestic Violence Bill 2017 recognises forced marriage as a form of domestic violence and as a criminal offence, while outlining the penalties applicable. Forced marriage is where one or both spouses do not consent to the marriage, or consent is extracted under duress.

While this is a positive development, there remains an absence of Irish policy and practice guidance for responding and intervening in cases of forced marriage, particularly from a Social Work and Social Care perspective. Forced marriage of anyone under the age of eighteen is a child protection issue and constitutes a form of child abuse.

This paper, which is informed by recent practice experience and a review of international practice guidance and literature, focuses on forced marriage as a child protection concern. It highlights prevalence, early warning signs for practitioners, and drivers of forced marriage. It explains how forced marriage is a child protection issue and provides guidance for social workers in responding to suspected or indicated cases of forced marriage.

The participants of the symposium will be guided through a case example from a Tusla Intake-Duty Social Work team to illustrate how practitioners responded to this complex issue in child protection and welfare practice. Learning will be shared regarding the challenges of applying international best practice principles within our existing child protection systems and practice frameworks.

In conclusion, this paper will pose recommendations for practitioners regarding establishing best practice approaches in responding to forced marriage concerns as an emerging issue in Irish Social Work practice. It is imperative that while structures and guidance are developed by our statutory agencies, children are not placed at further risk of harm due to a lack of practitioner awareness or confidence in responding to this complex issue.

3. **Hidden from Welfare? Hidden from History? The plight of children and young people who are sexually trafficked in Ireland**

Dr. Eileen Oak, University College Dublin

The Syrian refugee crisis has further highlighted the problem of child sex-trafficking across Europe and the limitations of Western welfare states to render a coordinated and preventative response. Though there is a plethora of research on international human and child sex-trafficking (Goodey, 2003; Brayley et. al 2011; Pearce, 2014) far less attention has been paid to the victims/survivors of domestic sex-trafficking (Brayley and Cockbain 2009) and so, this paper considers both. It examines the plight of children and young people whom are sex-trafficked externally (internationally) and internally (domestically), using small-scale research drawn from Ireland, the UK, and New Zealand. It considers social workers' awareness of the extent of the problem and the efficacy of the Irish state's response to such a vulnerable group. At a time when Tusla is facing both national and international challenges, it is pertinent to reflect upon current legislation and practice and their ability to secure the well-being and safety of children and young people exposed to this form of sexual abuse.

Key words: child sex-trafficking, child sexual exploitation, Tusla

4. **The Bigger Picture for Young People Exhibiting Problematic Sexual Behaviour**

Eimear Kilpatrick, Mentor Forensics Services Ltd.

Problematic sexual behaviour (PSB) is a term used to describe sexual behaviour which is deemed outside of the realm of typical age appropriate behaviour for young people. However, due to the various manifestations of the behaviour, it presents as a complex and multifaceted issue, particularly for the young person, their family and the professionals involved. This presentation will highlight the key points of growing concern and address the conceptualization of PSB, in order to provide professionals with a framework for identifying early alerts, whilst also providing the young person with a voice by including their words on the key issues.

5. **A TUSLA Service for Children and Young People who have exhibited Sexually Harmful Behaviour**

Judy McCarthy, Tusla Child and Family Agency

Tusla is in the process of developing a national service for children and young people who have exhibited sexually harmful behaviour. This paper will locate sexually harmful behaviour on a continuum from healthy to unhealthy sexual behaviour. It will explore when sexual behaviour should give rise to concern and how decisions are made about this. This paper will focus on the challenges of engaging these young people and families, the concerns of the young people and families and the issues for treatment/ intervention. This paper will draw from research and practice experience about what works. It will highlight the considerations and challenges for professionals who do this work. It will look at how this service fits the wider agenda and priorities of Child Protection and Welfare Services within Tusla and the tensions which can arise. It will focus on the need for multi-disciplinary and interagency working in these complex cases in order to provide safe and effective services.

Parallel Session 5 - The Why and How of Child Protection and Welfare Policy

Michele Clarke, Social Work and Child Care Specialist, Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Cormac Quinlan, Director of Transformation and Policy, Tusla

Marie Kennedy, Principal Officer of the Child Safety and Protection Policy Unit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs

This parallel session with policy makers in child protection and welfare in Ireland provides an opportunity to discuss how policy is developed, how individuals and bodies contribute to and seek to influence policy, and future directions in policy in child protection and welfare in Ireland. This parallel session is a must for anyone whose work involves implementing policy, for those seeking to contribute to national policy formation, and for those with an interest in how policy is translated into operational practice. Children First will be used as one indicative example of a policy formation, review and implementation process in Ireland.

Parallel Session 6

1. Why they stay: What can we learn about retention from social workers with 10-30+ years' experience in child protection practice?

Dr. Kenneth Burns, Dr. Siobhan O'Sullivan & Prof. Alastair Christie, University College Cork

The retention of child protection and welfare workers is a recurring issue in the social work and child welfare literature and concerns associated with high turnover/low retention have been well documented. However, there are fewer studies that examine 'stayers' and teams with high retention rates (Burns and Christie, 2013). This paper presents the findings from a new longitudinal study of social workers' retention in Ireland. 35 social workers in child protection were interviewed in 2005/6 and 19 of this original cohort who were still working in child protection were re-interviewed a decade later. In this paper we explore the unique perspectives of these workers who have 10-30 years+ experience of child protection practice. Two key cohort groups were present in the data. The first smaller group wanted to leave, but largely remained due to a lack of employment opportunities during a period of austerity. The second larger group still wished to continue working in child protection. While all participants felt the ongoing strain and pressures of this emotional labour and the high stress nature of child protection, the second larger stayers group have found strategies and practices that have aided their retention. These social workers' stories provide a counter-narrative to the traditional short 'shelf-life' theme in child protection. Three key themes arose which were significant for retention. Firstly, participants with a long career in child protection outlined the importance of their personal, social and professional 'embeddedness' (Holtom *et al.*, 2006) as a key retention factor. Secondly, the traditional theme of peer support continues to be highly meaningful. Thirdly, participants recognised and valued the growth of their professional confidence and expertise over the long length of their tenure in child protection. The paper concludes with reflections on the wider implications of the findings of this study for retention in child protection.

2. A Thematic analysis of social workers and social care leaders experience of a reflective practice group

Marian Durand, Tusla Child and Family Agency

This paper examines the experiences of two reflective practice groups in the fields of social work and social care. Both groups were established in 2012 and 2007 respectively. Qualitative research methods were employed. Evaluation of both groups took place annually and consisted of questionnaires and face to face interviews.

The focus on process over procedure and experiencing peer support were key findings. Reflecting particularly in a group setting helps 'to evaluate our practice in a safe way'. In the area of work and development, having a professional development space, developing practical knowledge, sharing resources and, increased motivation were noted. The usefulness of hearing colleagues' suggestions on how to proceed with cases was highly rated. This enabled practitioners not only to 'look differently at a case' but also the 'burden became less' by being able to present the particular case. With regard to professional status, the value of having a range of perspectives and hypotheses and, exploring the emotional impact of the work were noted. A prevalent theme was the role the group served in supporting gaps in practice. For some practitioners, the reflective practice group provided the only forum in which they could fully reflect on their cases. The explanation for this was linked to the experience of supervision for some, where the emphasis was sometimes on case management, closing and allocation of new cases rather than on meaningful reflection on cases.

The results clearly show that providing opportunities for reflective practice, practitioners clearly feel better equipped to deal with their caseloads. This paper concludes by considering the implications of the findings for developing reflective practice within child protection teams.

Key words: Social Work, Child Protection, Supervision, Reflective Practice

3. Supporting evidence informed service development through action learning

Kieran Campbell, Tusla Child and Family Agency & Dr. Fiachra O'Suilleabhain, University College Cork

Ireland has a long and complex social history regarding the development of child protection service delivery. A wide body of literature has been published internationally over the years researching and theorising on the best approaches for designing and implementing new methods of best practice to meet the needs of children and families. To date however, these strategies have been driven predominantly using a top-down service development approach. In this workshop, we will demonstrate how a particular cohort of young people with problematic sexualised behaviour were not getting a service and how a group of multidisciplinary professionals applied an Action-Learning approach to develop a local and responsive service for these young people This workshop will capture the dynamic and unfolding process of our service initiative using an Action Learning methodology. Such a methodology would best support and evaluate a practitioner-led process throughout the phases of change as identified by Pasmore (2011): 1) understanding the need for change; 2) framing the change; 3) understanding the change and; 4) sustaining the change. The workshop will interactively explore themes through which emic organisational action learning are based on; such as the core principles of: relationships, communication, participation and inclusion.

The format of our workshop will empower front-line practitioners to meet and develop services around their own identified gaps in service provision by employing a similar Action-Learning approach.

4. Future strategies for the management of unallocated Child Protection and Welfare cases

Olivia O'Connell, Tusla Child and Family Agency

Aim: This qualitative TUSLA study focuses on the experiences of frontline Child Protection and Welfare (CPW) social workers as they grapple with the decision-making challenges posed by unallocated/ unworked cases in order to develop strategies for improving their management. This study was mandated by the Area Manager of the Cork Services Area due to concern that the commencement of mandatory reporting would increase the number of referrals to CPW departments.

Findings: This research highlights bottlenecks in the allocation process and mechanisms employed by CPW teams, with varying degrees of success, to address them. Underlining the psychological impact on practitioners from managing the implicit risk of having unallocated cases and saturated workloads is unique to this study. The researcher proposes a theoretical model for rapidly identifying situations where statutory obligations are not being met. The study findings and the model evidence the importance of differentiating between allocated but unworked, unallocated but worked, and unallocated and unworked cases. Contrary to current TUSLA quality assurance mechanisms which primarily focus on the number of unallocated cases within the system, the researcher maintains that the main concern should be not whether a case is allocated, but whether the case is being worked.

Impacting future practice: Strategies for how practitioners managing waiting lists can best be assisted, and how policy initiatives around staff retention can be developed, are critically examined. Resources are an ongoing issue that will not be easily resolved; therefore it is important that within the ongoing reality of having waiting lists, it is crucial that practitioners receive better support and clearer guidance.

Parallel Session 7

1. Is the Front Door Open? Child Protection Reports Within a Changing Policy and Legislative Context

Sadhbh Whelan, Trinity College Dublin

Objectives

The child protection system in Ireland has been subject to recent legislative and policy reform which aspires to early intervention within the context of a streamlined service delivery model. Added to this, the rate of reporting of suspected child abuse has risen by over 100% in the past ten years. While a number of Irish studies have been conducted on the 'work world' of child protection and welfare services, reporting trends have not been interrogated in any depth. Yet, in the context of increasing pressure it is vital that new policies are informed by accurate information about the type, nature and source of reports received and the response made by the system to these reports. The provision of such data is the aim of this doctoral study.

Methods

The methods used in this doctoral research comprised quantitative and qualitative analysis of all Intake Record Forms (794 in total) created following reports received by one area of Tusla during a three month period in 2015. This data (which was anonymised by Tusla) was supplemented by individual interviews and a focus group carried out with eight frontline practitioners and managers from the area. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and the qualitative data was analysed using NVivo.

Results

This paper will present a selection of results from the study and will focus on the source of the reports received during the period under consideration, the difficulties reported for the children and families and the significant patterns identified between the source of the report and the difficulties reported.

Conclusion

Preliminary results from the study indicate certain patterns and trends in the reports made by different categories of reporters which will provide important information for policy makers in advance of the introduction of mandatory reporting in Ireland.

2. Variations in Outcomes for Children on CPNS across Three Counties

Michael Callan & Roisin Boyd, Tusla Child and Family Agency

INTRODUCTION:

Significant changes occurred with the merger of South Tipperary with Carlow/Kilkenny into one area and the appointment of an Area Manager in late 2012. SW teams were reorganised and integrated locally in the last year. The management of CP cases also changed in late 2012. The functions of CPCs were redefined and CPNS was introduced. CPNS went live in September 2015.

The 2016 Annual Report for CPNS included quantitative research on outcomes from CPNS activity since inception. Significant variances in outcomes for children on CPNS were revealed by this data. Whilst there may be significant differences across the three counties, in and of itself this could not explain the differences in the outcomes as revealed by data.

AIM OF RESEARCH:

As Chairs, we felt this data merited closer examination. The research is intended to engage frontline staff in a conversation re that data and its possible implications for interventions with vulnerable families.

The aim of the research is to examine the relationship between the structural changes, staff understanding of thresholds, the culture of offices and the impact of these on outcomes for children on CPNS.

The analysis of fieldwork will utilise the attached bibliography.

METHODOLOGY

It is proposed to carry out research by way of focus groups and semi structured interviews with staff.

The field research will focus on exploring with SW/CCL/SWTL/PSW their views on the following questions.

- 1) The introduction of new CPC model and CPNS structures in late 2012 on interventions with children at risk.
- 2) Differences in outcomes for children on CPNS across three counties
- 3) Does the culture, history and working practices of local office influence the interpretation of CP thresholds and CPC requests by SW/SWTL

The findings of this research will be submitted to Area Management in September.

3. Say Something Loving – Social Work Responses to Child to Parent Violence and Abuse

Dr. Declan Coogan, National University of Ireland, Galway

Child to parent violence and abuse (CPVA) involves parents/ carers who live in fear of their child (-18 years). Love becomes hidden; conflict characterizes child-parent relationships. This workshop uses case examples, research findings, and a small group discussion space to explore:

- Different forms of love in action in relationship-based practice with families where CPVA takes place;
- Social work practice that can empower parents to enhance safety and well-being for all family members
- Research findings from practitioners in Ireland who empowered parents, using Non-Violent-Resistance. Using this evidence based, systemic and brief model, practitioners empowered parents living with CPVA to take their place as parents in their families.

Future directions for child protection & welfare are addressed as facilitator and participants reflect on love in action, relationship based practice and family violence. With busy workloads involving multi-stressed families, this research demonstrates social workers continuing commitment to relationship based practice and empowering parents to enhance safety and well-being.

CPVA is an emergent issue for practice/policy/research in child protection and welfare and family violence. This workshop enables participants to explore an intervention model that is based on family & local resources to reject violence and enhance safety. Calling for enhanced supports for practitioners and families, this workshop proposes NVR as a model that supports relationship based social work practice and family safety.

4. Exploring Children and Young People's Experiences of Police Involvement in Domestic Violence: An Irish Case Study

Ruth Eliffe, Trinity College Dublin

Once largely invisible in the domestic violence literature, there is now a growing consensus that children and young people exposed to parental violence and abuse are victims in their own right.

The expanding recognition amongst scholars and service providers of the impact of exposure to domestic violence on children, has led to a focus on the response of professionals, in particular the police, who have been identified as the first professional response for many children and families experiencing domestic violence. With the introduction of mandatory reporting to Ireland there is a need to understand how front line professionals can respond effectively to support the social work role in safeguarding and protecting children. This paper will discuss early findings from a qualitative research study on children and young people's experiences of the response of An Garda Síochána to domestic violence. Drawing on multiple perspectives through interviews with health and social care professionals, mothers, children and Gardaí the research provides a rich account of this 'key moment' of professional response. The aim of the presentation is to examine how findings from the study can inform best practice in the future protection and welfare of children and young people experiencing domestic violence.

Parallel Session 8

1. Engaging Fathers for Children's Protection and Welfare – Where to From Here?

Dr. Elizabeth Kiely, UCC, Nicola O'Sullivan, Bessborough Centre, and Mary Tobin, UCC

The relevant literature in many contexts is replete with evidence of the failings of child welfare services to engage men and this is despite the fact that engaging with fathers is a little explored aspect of many services' practice (Coady, et. al., 2013; Panter-Brick et. al., 2014). There is also much written about the gender biases and cultural stereotypes which prevail, that see mothers rather than fathers as intrinsic to child protection, welfare and development and with it is argued, significant implications for policy and practice frameworks (Ewart-Boyle et. al., 2013; Maxwell et. al., 2012; Panter-Brick et. al., 2014; Pinker, 2009; Strega et. al., 2008).

This paper is based on an Irish Research Council funded study, which is focused on accessing the views and experiences of a small number of fathers who are engaged in an agency provided supervised access programme to develop or maintain a relationship with their children. It also accesses the views and experiences of key stakeholders (e.g. social care practitioners, social workers and father advocates) who are engaged with these fathers. The key purpose of the research is to both assess and promote father inclusive social care practice.

This paper takes as its starting point the growing expectation that family and child welfare and protection services be more inclusive of men and fathers and at the same time a recognition that such services struggle for different reasons, with the best ways to engage and support fathers. It will present preliminary findings from the interview data with fathers to take note of what they identified as positive and negative features of their engagement in child protection and welfare services. Implications for practice will be discussed with a view to improving the engagement of fathers in, and their experiences with, services into the future.

2. Lessons for Child Protection Reform from District Court Child Care Proceeding

Maria Corbett, NUI Galway

To vindicate a child's right to be protected from abuse and neglect, the State may be required to intervene in family life, including by placing a child in State care. This State power is enshrined in

the Constitution and the Child Care Act 1991 (as amended), and Ireland is bound by international human rights obligations in this area.

The majority of children in care are subject to a judicial order granted by the District Court, as provided for in the Child Care Act 1991. Over the past five years, there have been significant developments aimed at bringing greater transparency to District Court child care proceedings. The Court Service of Ireland has published 116 written judgments (spanning the years 2008 to 2017) and the Child Care Law Reporting Project (CCLRP) has published over 300 case reports and quantitative data on child care proceedings in the District Court. In addition, academics in University College Cork have conducted the first qualitative research on child care proceedings.

In line with the conference theme, 'Future directions for child protection and welfare: where to and why?' my paper will explore what, if any, lessons can be learned for child protection reform from an analysis of the District Court judgments and the work of the CCLRP. It is hoped that this analysis will provide information on the limitations of the Child Care Act 1991, gaps in policy, and observations on practice and service provision. These findings will be translated into recommendations for legal and policy reform in the area of child protection that promotes compliance with international human rights law.

3. Tusla's use of legal services: some insights from a socio-economic analysis

Dr. Carmel Halton, Dr. Gill Harold, Dr. Aileen Murphy and Dr. Edel Walsh, University College Cork

This paper is based on research funded by the Irish Research Council, constituting a social and economic analysis of the use of legal services by social work and educational welfare professionals working for Tusla. Acknowledging recent Irish research on the child welfare system (including O' Mahony et al, 2012; Coulter, 2015), our research set out specifically to ascertain the variables influencing decision-making practices of social workers and educational welfare officers (EWOs) around their use of legal services in court hearings. This research is particularly significant when considered alongside the changing role of social work, which sees practitioners increasingly encountering the Irish courts system.

Against a backdrop of recent austerity measures, public expenditure in Ireland has come under intense scrutiny. Tusla's social workers and EWOs work in a public service context where procurement requirements and systems of accountability must comply with regulatory controls set down by legislation and operated by financial controllers. While Tusla social workers are vested with responsibility to protect the welfare of children in their care, nonetheless, the work they carry out is significantly influenced, if not determined, by their organisation's approach to resource allocation. Examining economic, legal and social contexts, a central objective of the research is to establish the variables influencing Tusla staff decision-making regarding their use of legal services.

The researchers undertook an economic analysis of geographical and legal factors influencing variations in Tusla's legal spend, with some consideration given to determining the cost effectiveness of 'in house' legal services compared to third party contractors. The views of social workers on the variables influencing their decision-making around the use of legal services in Child Welfare Hearings, were also qualitatively ascertained. The paper will present the study's findings, focusing specifically on their possible impact on the construction and delivery of Tusla's social work services going forward.

4. Children's Experience of the Guardian ad Litem in Child Care Proceedings in the District Courts

Dr. Carmel Corrigan, Independent Researcher

Article 42(A) of the Irish Constitution now provides that the court shall hear the views of the child in child care proceedings. While there are a number of ways in which children's wishes may be represented to the court in such proceedings, the appointment of a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) is possibly one of the most commonly used mechanisms.

This paper is based on a completed PhD study on the voice of the child as heard through GALs in child care proceedings in the District Court. In addition to 22 GALs and nine District Court Judges, eight children to whom a GAL had been appointed were interviewed to investigate how they experienced having their views heard and reported to the court through this mechanism. The paper will present research findings on children's understanding of the role of the GAL, how their views were ascertained, and the consideration of their wishes and best interest and the value of having a GAL appointed to them. These will be compared to the views of the judges and the GALs in key areas and potential lessons for future practice and policy in the context of a changed legislative framework identified.

Symposium: Future Directions in Foster Care: The Trauma Perspective, A Seductive Proposition

Maria Lotty, University College Cork/Tusla

This researcher seeks to create debate and raise awareness of issues concerning taking a biopsychosocial approach, a new direction in social work practice in Ireland. Internationally the recent advances of neuroscience and trauma research have been incorporated into child protection and welfare practices. In the USA and Australia the trauma-informed approach is widely disseminated in practice.

Part 1

The researcher's study is the first formal piece of research, supported by TUSLA and in partnership with UCC that seeks to examine systematically this trauma-informed approach, a biopsychosocial approach to practice. The presentation will comprise of findings from phase one research of this current PhD study. Based on these findings, the researcher has developed an intervention framework that underpins the development of a trauma-informed foster care program in the Cork and Kerry Areas.

This involves four key areas: 1) extensive literature review, 2) the findings of a systematic review of biopsychosocial interventions targeted at foster carers, 3) findings of qualitative research which illuminate the views of multidisciplinary professionals and foster carers in TUSLA and the HSE and 4) the view of an expert multidisciplinary stakeholder group attached to the study. The synthesis of these key areas will be presented as a biopsychosocial framework for social work practice in Foster Care.

Part Two

Audience participation will be invited through a discussion on the biopsychosocial framework to practice. Questions such as:

- Is the current trend of “trauma speak” an agenda that seeks to shift attention away from the real sources of disadvantage?
- Can neuroscience and trauma research support social work practice in improving outcomes for children and families?

Part Three

Brief presentation summarizing phase two of this research project. The application of this framework to the development of a training program for foster carers, roll out and evaluation.