

# 'Like walking on eggshells': service user views and expectations of the child protection system

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of service users' views on Irish child protection services. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 67 service users, including young people between 13 and 23. The findings showed that despite refocusing and public service management reforms, service users still experience involvement with the services as intimidating and stressful and while they acknowledged opportunities to participate in the child protection process, they found the experience to be very difficult. Their definition of 'needs' was somewhat at odds with that suggested in official documentation, and they viewed the execution of a child protection plan more as a coercive requirement to comply with 'tasks' set by workers than a conjoint effort to enhance their children's welfare. As in previous studies, the data showed how the development of good relationships between workers and service users could compensate for the harsher aspects of involvement with child protection. In addition, this study demonstrated a high level of discernment on the part of service users, highlighting their expectation of quality standards in respect of courtesy, respect, accountability, transparency and practitioner expertise.

## INTRODUCTION

The Irish child protection system, in common with other Anglophone countries, has been evolving in two related directions over the past 15 years. Primarily it has attempted, in theory at least, to move from the increasingly criticized 'traditional' or 'investigative' approach towards what might be described as 'family centred child protection work' (Connolly 2005). Policy documents such as the 1999 editions of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Health & Children [Ireland] 1999) and *The Agenda for Children's Services* (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs 2007) outline the framework for practice which is aspired to, including a (re-)focus on the identification

of needs and provision of supports, with underpinning principles of child-centeredness, inclusiveness, partnership with families, evidence-based practice and multidisciplinary collaboration. Secondly, alongside these ideologically-based changes, the system has adopted some of the more ubiquitous public service managerialist strategies, nowadays describing work with children and families in terms of 'business processes' and 'operating procedures' to be completed within stipulated timelines and quantified in line with performance measures and quality standards. These combined changes reflect similar developments in other jurisdictions, many of which have been extensively discussed and critiqued in the research literature (Spratt 2001; Tilbury 2004; Parton 2008; Waldfoegel 2008; Lonne *et al.* 2009).

A further important element of contemporary public policy which synchronizes with all the above developments is the practice of service user consultation. Although critics of what has been termed as

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'enthusiasm for userism' have accused it of understating the ideological and power differentials that exist between professionals and service users in particular contexts (Forbes & Sashidharan 1997; Beresford and Holden 2000), there is support for the concept of public service consultation with their 'customers' or stakeholders and an assumption that the outcomes will inform the design and delivery of services (Department of the Taoiseach 2003).

In 2006, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) in Ireland conducted a public consultation as a means of reviewing the current national child protection guidelines. This process elicited only a small response from service users and consequently the OMCYA commissioned the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College to undertake a specific study ascertaining the views of children and families who had been involved in the child protection service. This paper reports on a selection of data from the study which was completed and published in 2008 (Buckley *et al.* 2008). The full report is available on <http://www.omcya.ie> and it will show that a considerable gap still exists between the reformative aspirations of the system and the day-to-day experiences of the children and families who use its services.

### Previous research on service user views

Earlier service user studies conducted in the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK and Ireland explored areas such as the impact of a child protection investigation and the extent of agreement achieved between social workers and families (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Buckley 2003; Dale 2004; Spratt & Callan 2004; Dumbrill 2006). In general, those studies found that engagement with the child protection system was a difficult, intimidating and often humiliating experience for families, including the Spratt and Callan research, which was conducted during the early days of the UK reforms that had followed *Messages from Research*. The varying degree to which participation in child protection conferences is actually meaningful to service users has been demonstrated (Cleaver & Freeman, 1995; Thoburn *et al.* 1995; Corby *et al.* 1996; Bell, 1999). The literature has also illustrated the discernment of service users in respect of the skills and competencies of practitioners (Winefield & Barlow 1995; Dore & Alexander 1996; Scholte *et al.* 1999; Leigh & Miller 2004; Trotter 2004; Ruch 2005). Finally, the importance of a quality 'helping alliance' between worker and service user has been established as a determinant of

outcome (Drake 1996; Lee & Ayon 2004; Yatchmenoff 2005; Maiter *et al.* 2006; De Boer & Coady 2007). The approach to the current research was shaped by these findings. While a lot has already been written on the topic, it was considered worth re-visiting to see if the ideologies behind more recent policy changes were bearing fruit and if services had, as a result, become more supportive, less intimidating and capable of producing better outcomes.

### Aims of the present study

The aims of the present study were quite broad and sought to determine service users' views on each phase of the typical child protection case career as well as on more abstract concepts such as participation, inclusiveness and collaboration. This paper draws on a selection of the data, and bearing in mind the current aims of the system, focuses on service users' experiences of the following:

- How the experience of engagement with the child protection system is generally perceived by service users
- Service users' experience of participation in the child protection process
- The degree to which service users felt that their own understanding of 'needs' was understood, respected and shared by child protection social workers
- Service users' perceptions of a quality service

## METHODOLOGY

### Study participants

Ethical approval for the study was granted by both Trinity College Dublin and the Health Service Executive, which is the body that delivers the statutory child protection service in Ireland. Consent forms and information leaflets were produced and purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study, as this method is acknowledged to be particularly suitable for exploratory research (Burton 2000).

The recruitment process initially involved contacting service providers by letter and telephone and requesting them to put us in touch with service users that met our criteria. The principal criterion for inclusion in the sample was that service users had been involved with the statutory child protection system at some point within the previous 4 years. Contact was mediated by service providers, whose involvement in the process varied from sending out information leaflets to actively setting up appointments.

Ultimately, 67 service users were interviewed for the study. The largest proportion of participants (31%) were linked with the researchers by five different family support services, 15% of those who took part were referred by statutory child protection and welfare service and the same proportion were referred by two different treatment services. Similar proportions were referred by three different public service redress bodies (13%) and by two support groups for women (12%). Other participants came from youth and community services (6%), two sheltered accommodation services (5%) and advocacy groups and organizations (3%).

Of the 67 interviewees, 13 were between the ages of 13 and 23 and were categorized together, for the purposes of the report, as young people. In eight cases a parent or parents of the young person was also interviewed. Where this occurred confidentiality was maintained, i.e. a young person's interview was not discussed with a parent or vice versa. In three instances, the young person, at their own request, was interviewed with a parent present. The remainder of the young people (10) were interviewed on their own. In all instances informed written consent was obtained from the young person; for those under the age of 18 (5), consent to interview the young person was also obtained from a parent or guardian.

The issues of an 'over-focus' on mothers and the resultant marginalization of fathers in child protection work have been clearly demonstrated in research (Farmer & Owen 1995; Daniel & Taylor 2001). A review of service user studies shows that these trends have been mirrored in research, with only a small number of fathers represented (Dale 2004; Palmer *et al.* 2006), an exception being Dumbrill (2006), whose sample of 18 included 11 men. Deliberate attempts were thus made to recruit fathers for the current study and ultimately 15 men were interviewed, representing just over one-quarter of the adults who participated.

Notwithstanding differences in age and gender, participants in this study could be loosely classified into two groups. The first (61%) comprised those whose contact with the child protection system had been initiated by a third-party report suggesting that their children are vulnerable or at risk; these could be considered 'involuntary' service users. The second group was comprised of the 'voluntary' service users. Contrary to previous studies, quite a large proportion (39%) of participants had initiated contact with the child protection

system, seeking a service for themselves and their children.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with all participants, based on topic guides (one for adults, one for young people) informed by the aims of the study, some points that emerged from the literature review and also from ideas offered by the project advisory group.

Data collection took place between January and April 2007 and was undertaken in 16 counties of Ireland. The interviews were carried out by the research team, all of whom were female. Participants were offered the choice of being interviewed in their own home, in the organization from which they were referred, in the researchers' offices or any other location that was convenient. One interview was conducted over the phone and two in hotels. In four instances, two people were interviewed together; otherwise, interviews were conducted individually. Participants were asked for their permission for their interview to be recorded and, with only two exceptions, were agreeable to this request. We were mindful of the fact that talking to us about their experiences could be upsetting for some of the participants and revive some painful memories. Most service providers who had mediated the original contacts agreed to provide post-interview support, the only exceptions being the redress bodies, as their contact with service users had already terminated.

The recorded interviews were fully transcribed and the data was processed using Nvivo Version 8 (QSR International, Doncaster, Victoria, Australia), a qualitative research analysis package which ensures that all data are visible for analysis, thus pre-empting selective interpretation. The findings were coded thematically using 'nodes' which were then subdivided into 'trees' or 'sibling nodes' and labelled accordingly. The initial coding was cross-checked between the three researchers and subsequently refined. Secondary analysis then took place and themes were developed out of which inferences were drawn.

### Limitations

Recruiting participants for a study on such a sensitive, confidential and personal topic is complex. Many users of child protection services may not feel comfortable in declaring their relationship with the services, nor do they always feel sufficiently empowered to speak about their experiences; therefore it could be argued that those who do come forward may not represent the norm. For example, Bell

(1999) has argued that those most marginalized and those viewed as 'problematic' are the least likely to be involved in a participative process. Likewise, there is the possibility that service users who are most willing to participate in research such as this are those who have had unsatisfactory experiences and feel a strong need to articulate them. Despite our efforts at minimizing bias and selecting participants purposively, we believe it is likely that all of these possibilities were present within the sampling, and our only option is to declare them as shortcomings.

## FINDINGS

### Service users' perceptions of the child protection system

Service users' views of the child protection system are inevitably shaped by their early experiences and also by their preconceived impressions of it. So strong was the negative opinion of the services demonstrated in earlier studies (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Farmer & Owen 1995) that it had provided the impetus for re-focusing of the services, not just in the UK but in a lot of the English-speaking world (Lonne *et al.* 2009). For example, Irish child protection guidelines in use at the time this study was conducted advised practitioners to bear in mind 'that the experience of being reported to the health board about the care of one's children can be both traumatic and intimidating for parents/carers; sensitivity must be used' (Department of Health & Children [Ireland] 1999, 8.11.1) Unfortunately, findings from the current study indicate that these exhortations have been insufficient to defuse the negative and inevitably intimidating image of child protection workers as hostile, powerful and to be avoided if possible. This stereotype seems to have stemmed from a combination of experience and neighbourhood lore, sometimes complicated by misperception of the authority of social workers, as the following quotes indicate:

I just have that fear of them . . . that they can come at any time, and they can do what they want to my family

And

when you say the words social workers, you get this very typical 'oh no . . . not social workers, they'll be doing this, they'll be taking the kids'

A young person who was interviewed offered an even more graphic view:

I thought, oh my god if I ever got a social worker I'd fucking kill meself . . .

Others spoke about the 'shame' and 'stigma' associated with involvement of child protection services which in their minds were associated with people 'on the margins of society' and 'down on their luck'. Some interviewees were careful to conceal their involvement with social workers to others, citing it as their 'big secret' and claiming that they would be embarrassed or 'mortified' if anyone outside their family knew.

### Service users' experience of participation in the child protection process

While there are a number of opportunities for service users to participate in child protection work, two of the obvious mechanisms are child protection meetings and child protection plans. The research specifically focused on both of these.

#### *Child protection meetings*

The principle of family participation in child protection meetings has been universally embedded into practice over the past two decades (Department of Health & Children [Ireland] 1999; Department for Education and Skills 2006; Connolly 2008) on the basis that family members are experts and can make a valuable contribution to the design and provision of services. However, while the intentions underpinning this policy cannot be faulted, the actual experience of family participants does not necessarily reflect the positive scenario implied. With a small number of exceptions, service users in this study, while unanimously supportive of their inclusion at the meetings, described a process that was in their words 'humiliating', 'nerve wracking', 'daunting', 'embarrassing', 'intimidating', 'annoying' and 'frightening'. Actively participating in the conference was not necessarily the satisfying experience anticipated; one woman used irony and described it as an opportunity 'to talk openly about my dirty washing', and as another pointed out, 'you are involved with the process but you have no control over the outcome'. These findings represent a depressing replication of earlier service user research focusing on family participation (Thoburn *et al.* 1995; Corby *et al.* 1996; Hall & Slembrouck 2001; Dale 2004), highlighting the fallacy of assuming that superficial compliance with the principle of parental attendance is effective while discounting the qualitative aspects of its emotional impact. Two factors appeared to lessen the stress for

service users; one was where their social workers spent time with them beforehand to prepare them and afterwards to go over what had transpired. The other was the familiarity with both the process and participants that evolved if they attended a number over time.

### *Child protection plans*

Terminology used nowadays to describe the development of a child protection plan generally implies clarity, agreement and commitment on the part of families (see e.g. Department for Education and Skills 2006) and uses expressions such as 'family-led decision making' (Connolly 2008), portraying a participative process with an implied meeting of minds as to the way forward and a mutual understanding of a range of optional outcomes. In fact, service users in this study, having sat through child protection conferences and agreed on strategies, were less familiar with the word 'plan' than they were with the concept of 'task'. The nature of the 'task' was not seen by them as a conjoint effort to enhance their children's safety and welfare. Rather, it was perceived as a procedure whereby child protection staff 'called the shots' and prescribed an action or set of actions with which they had to comply in order to avoid certain perceived and ominous consequences, namely, loss of their children. A service user described the process as: 'Like walking on eggshells', with a feeling that she had to do exactly as she was told.

While some service users openly acknowledged that their behaviour had needed to change for the benefit of their children, their compliance with the expected tasks was often given grudgingly and fearfully, believing that workers 'could call any time they felt they wanted to' and fearing that 'there'd be trouble if I didn't carry out what she wanted'. They used terms like 'duress' and 'threat' and described their fear of what might happen if they 'put a foot out of line'. Interaction was strategically managed by some service users who were careful not to 'volunteer' information and kept communication to the 'bare minimum'. As one woman expressed it: 'I tried to be nice and everything, but they were social workers . . . let's be real'

Essentially, the findings showed that successful negotiation of the child protection plan was usually not the type of once-off and mutually agreed process conjured up in guidance documents, but was perceived of more as a matter of prolonged persuasion and sometimes coercion. As later sections of this paper will show, the factor that was most likely to

neutralize service user negativity was the development of a quality relationship between families and workers.

### **Service users' perceptions of how their needs were met**

One of the objectives of the study was to examine the extent to which service users felt, after a period of engagement with the child protection service, that their needs had been met. We considered this a logical area to explore, given the current emphasis in child protection and welfare work on identification of needs (Department of Health [UK] 2000; Department for Education and Skills 2004; Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs 2007). However, in keeping with many other elements of the system, this process is based on the assumption of a shared understanding of the concept of 'need'. Research (Dale 2004; Wright 2004) has shown that service users' perceptions of child harm and risk differ considerably from the definitions and terms that tend to be used by professionals. The orthodox understanding of need, as presented in official frameworks for practice, focuses on children's physical, psychological, emotional and safety needs and the changes in parental behaviour required to address specific deficits in their development. Guidance such as the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need* (Department of Health [UK] 2000) is based on the assumption that parents are able to put aside other concerns to concur with workers as to the most desirable outcome for their children and the means of achieving it. What the framework fails to consider is the impact of anxiety, resentment and differing expectations on the attitudes of service users which are often very much at odds with professionals in determining what they and their children need. While the researchers were largely unaware of the specific aspirations of workers on behalf of the service users in this study, the needs of the latter group as articulated by themselves could be described as fairly short term, practical and not always altruistic, often motivated by the prospect of freedom from the gaze of the child protection service. For example, those whose parenting capacity had been compromised by factors such as domestic violence or drug or alcohol use acknowledged a requirement to change their behaviours or living arrangements as part of their greater need to satisfy workers sufficiently to prevent their children remaining in or being removed to care, and hopefully to terminate or reduce contact with the child protection system.

In cases where service users had initiated the contact, some expressed the need for very specific services such as supervised access, help in managing their children's behaviour, action against or assistance in dealing with a violent partner or evidence that their child had been harmed by someone else. For a small number, the primary expressed need was the refutation of an allegation which was claimed to be false or malicious. Overall, it seems that while the objectives of service users were not entirely in conflict with those proposed in official documentation, they differed in character to a point where the term 'need' in child protection and welfare cannot be assumed to have a universal connotation.

As might be expected, the degree to which service users considered their needs to have been met varied. Interventions that were rated highly included provision of support staff in the home, transport, advocacy, financial assistance and arranging access visits. Home visiting that included direct work with children and parenting advice was found helpful, but tinged with discomfort in some cases where parents were conscious of being 'under surveillance'. In some cases, service users considered that important practical needs were left unmet, particularly in relation to post-separation access between children and separated parents. This concern generally arose where domestic violence had been a problem and parents who were worried about their children's safety in the care of the formerly violent partner requested assistance with supervision, generally to no avail. Not surprisingly, waiting for services caused frustration; a mother pointed out that thresholds for service provision were so high that 'you would need a knife in your child's back in order to get attention'. A young person who had to wait 8 months for a sexual abuse assessment told us that she 'went down' in the interim, commenting that 'people end up dead because they can't cope with things like that'.

Notwithstanding the aggravation caused by the failure of services to meet specific and sometimes urgent needs, as the next section will show, the concrete nature of services appeared to hold slightly less significance for service users than the manner in which they were delivered.

### Service users' perceptions of a quality service

Quality was rated in terms of organizational norms, as well as the professional and personal attributes of individual workers. Positive or negative experiences in

these domains tended to shape the overall impression of the service.

### *Organizational factors considered important by service users*

Attempts to transform the delivery of public services include an increased emphasis on accountability. The study findings indicated that this benchmark was only partially realized in respect of child protection. For example, accountability was equated by some service users with accessibility to services. Families appreciated it when workers were 'there' for them, 'at the end of the phone'. Not surprisingly they found it disrespectful and annoying when workers were hard to reach or failed to return calls even when urgent messages were left. The frequency with which failure of social workers to respond to messages and requests was reported was not only strong evidence of its regular occurrence, but also suggestive of an organizational culture that placed a low priority on basic courtesy. Punctuality was also considered important by service users and several commented on how irritating they found it when appointments were broken:

They'd make an appointment, and you're waiting, and they wouldn't turn up, you know . . . like, 'I'll come on Tuesday at three o'clock' we're still waiting for her on Friday at three o'clock, you know . . . you're left hanging there

Frustration with the apparent indifference shown by workers was compounded by the perception of service users that they would not 'get away' with the same type of inconsistent and unreliable behaviour themselves.

For other service users, accountability also meant being able to complain if they were dissatisfied. Some interviewees in this study had already made official complaints and most had a fairly rudimentary idea of how to set the process in motion, but overall, their perceptions were dominated by pessimism about the potential outcome. Some who had made complaints had found it a rather pointless process, comparing it to a 'chain reaction . . . everyone pushing you to another' and others feared the potential negative impact of 'getting on the wrong side of the social workers' or 'rattling their cages'. Their views, similar to those expressed by participants in Dale's (2004) UK study, were somewhat at variance with the equity and fairness officially implied in the provision of this measure, possibly reflecting a generalized mistrust in the child protection organization.

Transparency, a goal of new public service management, was also an issue of importance to the service users in this study, the majority of whom expressed dissatisfaction with the level of access to written information that was granted them. Many of them had requested their files under Freedom of Information legislation, but this proved quite a cumbersome and unsatisfactory process. Some who had accessed their records found factual inaccuracies in reports and others were concerned that the full context of their situations, including the final outcome of investigations had not been comprehensively recorded. These incidents affirmed their view that records should be routinely shared and checked.

#### *Professional factors considered important*

The requirement for work to be evidence based is an essential element of public service reform and has been set in documents such as the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need* (Department of Health [UK] 2000) as well as the *Agenda for Children's Services* (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs 2007). The current study demonstrated the expectation held by service users of the knowledge and expertise of professionals involved with their families. For example, a parent who was concerned about the presence of a known paedophile in the area felt that her worker was naïve and unaware of the sort of grooming behaviours adopted by potential perpetrators and a 13-year-old girl was very critical of her social worker's lack of knowledge about methadone, which had been prescribed to the child's mother: 'she [the social worker] was asking what it was . . . and she didn't know nothing'. Another mother was critical of her worker's apparent lack of understanding about the risks involved in leaving her violent partner, and a father was surprised that his worker had never heard of 'parental alienation syndrome'.

Service users also showed discrimination in respect of the maturity of workers. A 15-year old boy objected to being assigned to a student on placement who, in his view, 'hadn't a clue', and this 17-year-old thought there was little age difference between her and her worker:

I had one of them and I swear to God there is no way she is passed eighteen years of age. She looked as young and she didn't have a clue what she was on about. I was like 'here love I kind of know the system better than you'. It is not fair like, they should have experience

As the previous section has demonstrated, service users felt an entitlement to respect from their workers

and many linked this with professionalism. It included 'being believed' when they reported concerns and for some young people particularly, it translated into regard for their need for privacy and having a confidential space where they could talk without others overhearing them.

#### *Personal worker qualities considered important*

Although many service users told us about their fears and anxieties about being involved in the child protection services, they also pointed out that demonstrations of warmth and friendliness on the part of workers could temper the insecurities they felt so that trust and a 'kind of' friendship can eventually develop. Good humour and the ability to 'have a laugh' were considered to be important qualities by young people, one of whom had found his social workers to be somewhat lacking in them:

Something about all the training and practising they do makes them cranky . . . they need to cheer up!

Likewise, being 'normal', 'easy to talk to' and reassuring were rated highly as opposed to being 'bossy', 'business like' and 'judgemental'. A parent who had gone through a very stressful time really valued the relaxed manner of her worker who would 'sit down, have a cup of tea . . . talk about the hurling . . . he was an everyday bloke'. A 14-year-old boy who had been sexually abused by a relative found the relaxed manner of his worker who 'didn't rush into things' to be very helpful.

There was a clear implication from these findings that the more negative aspects of the child protection process could be diluted to a significant extent if the quality standards identified by service users were met.

## DISCUSSION

It has to be acknowledged that this study was subject to the usual constraints associated with statutory service user consultation where there is a significant power differential between the key parties involved and where the capacity of service users to engage is compromised by internal conflicts and tensions within their own situations. Added to this, most service users enter the system with preconceived negative attitudes that have been fed by stereotypes and community lore about child protection social workers. The research findings have to be considered within that context, but also in light of various transformations in the past decade and a half which have

attempted to develop a needs-focused rather than forensically-driven service.

The findings of some earlier research (Cleaver & Freeman 1995; Spratt & Callan 2004; Dumbrill 2006) were replicated in the current study which demonstrated the enduring fear, shame and intimidation anticipated and initially experienced by service users who come into contact with the child protection system. In keeping with previous work (Corby *et al.* 1996; Bell 1999; Hall & Slembrouck 2001) the current study has demonstrated that even where efforts are made to include service users, for example at child protection conferences or in developing child protection plans, the process is experienced by them as coercive, albeit mitigated by the degree of support offered by workers.

Similar to the research by Leigh and Miller (2004) and by Dale (2004), the current study also indicated a lack of fit between the official construction of 'need' as reflected in recent policies and guidance i.e. centred on child development/parental capacity and the way it was understood by service users. As the findings showed, the principal expressed need of service users was for timely and practical assistance in very specific contexts and ultimate freedom from engagement with services. Such differing perspectives can result in resistance and mistrust, compromising the potential for supportive engagement.

On the positive side, and in keeping with Trotter's (2004) study, the current research indicated that in a number of cases, while congruence of views was not actually achieved, some compromise occurred between the perspectives of service users and child protection workers, depending on the quality of the relationship that developed between them. Good relationships were premised on several variables, however. Previous studies identified the principal elements of a helping alliance as empathy, helpfulness, openness and willingness to listen (Maiter *et al.* 2006; De Boer & Coady 2007). These factors are core to the profession of social work and were acknowledged as important in the current research. However in this study, additional ingredients were discerned including the sense of entitlement felt by young people and parents to a 'quality' service no matter what circumstances had led them into contact with it. The messages conveyed by new public service management, underpinned by principles of customer care and consumer rights, have undoubtedly altered the expectations of service users and enabled them to become more discriminating. As this study showed, they quite rightly anticipated that

their telephone calls and requests for assistance would elicit a prompt response or at the very least, the courtesy of an acknowledgement. They wanted transparency in their dealings with staff, access to what was written about them and a facility for registering dissatisfaction if required. As in Trotter's (2002) study, service users in the current research felt entitled to a sufficient level of experience and expertise on the part of workers to reassure them that their cases were being managed competently, but also asserted a requirement for workers to be substantively knowledgeable about contemporary issues such as addiction treatment and the dynamics of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Fulfilment of all these expectations to a satisfactory standard is now an essential to meaningful engagement.

The new rhetoric of child protection is allegedly based on consensus, transparency and service user engagement. Official documents depict a logical step-by-step process whose principal aims are mutually understood and agreed by workers and service users. As this study has shown, the reality is quite different. The majority of caregivers, no matter what their circumstances, see their relationship with and responsibilities to their children as central to their lives and therefore conceptualize an allegation of child abuse, or even the need to seek services themselves, as threatening to their self esteem and integrity as parents. It follows then, that the challenges involved in bringing a lighter touch and user-friendliness to child protection work should never be underestimated.

However, despite the evident challenges involved in reconfiguring the reputation of services and the inevitable power differentials between child protection staff and service users, a number of messages emerge from the current study which, if addressed, may make a difference. These have implications for policy-makers, service managers and frontline staff and all are in line with the principles underpinning the Irish *Agenda for Children's Services* but also have relevance for services in other jurisdictions.

At a policy level, efforts to reform services should continue and could usefully incorporate learning from some of the models that are currently evolving internationally (Friend *et al.* 2008; Waldfogel 2008; Lonne *et al.* 2009) which adopt differential, dual track or integrated approaches that are sensitive to a range of diverse situations and needs and focus strongly on family support. While it is difficult to change the negative image of child protection services, the lack of public information about it, par-



ticularly in Ireland, means that stereotypes are more likely to remain unchallenged. The development of websites and other media that provide unambiguous and user-friendly guidance about reporting and likely service responses, such as <http://www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au> and <http://www.cyf.vic.gov.au/every-child-every-chance>, will at least ensure that service users are better informed than at present.

At a management level, there is a need to support staff in keeping up to date with research and actively encourage them to inform their practices with accurate information and evidence. This may be achieved through training, seminars, access to journals and other knowledge transfer mechanisms such as webcasts and affiliations to research institutes (Buckley & Whelan 2009). Local guidelines on information and record sharing, parent/carer participation at conferences, complaints systems and other strategies to actively promote service user involvement need to be developed and their implementation monitored according to agreed standards.

Weaknesses in child protection practice are often construed as systemic deficits, but frontline practitioners also have to bear some responsibility for the quality of their work. There is a need for greater awareness of the impact of styles of communication on the process and outcome of investigation, assessment and intervention. Sensitive negotiation of interventions, particularly in respect of direct work with children and continuous mutual clarification of information, need to be embedded as core tasks. Importantly, basic standards of professional etiquette, such as prompt return of phone calls and reliability and punctuality around home visits and meetings, need to be maintained consistently. Emphasis on the latter may appear disproportionate in relation to other more urgent aspects of protective intervention, but failure to adhere to these standards can have detrimental effects on the confidence and attitudes of service users, which can in turn undermine the potential for positive outcomes.

The context in which this study was conducted reflected a number of innovations and practice changes introduced over the past couple of decades, and the outcomes of the study have highlighted some areas where further benefits from the reforms may be generated. However, the principal message emerging from the findings affirms earlier work which shows that the quality of the helping alliance between staff and service users remains the key transforming variable which can mitigate some of the less palatable aspects of being involved with the child protection

services. It is important that the current focus on standardizing services and meeting targets and performance goals does not downgrade the importance of quality relationships as conduits to better outcomes for children and families. A lot of energy and resources have been invested in trying to align the perspectives of service users and child protection staff. As the services promise more, the expectations of service users to a quality service rise accordingly. The challenge now is to build on what we know to work well and attempt to lessen the gap between principles and practice.

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