

Athlone Institute of Technology

A study of the experiences of police officers/Gardai when dealing with child protection referrals and the child protection system in Ireland

Darlington Mainala Akambadi

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation and the research involved in it are entirely the work of the author. This work, or part of it, has not been submitted for a qualification to any other institute or university.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

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ABSTRACT

The primary concern of the study was to explore the views of police officers/Gardai who work within the child protection system based on their work experiences as they deal with referrals of child abuse and neglect. The author engaged the Gardai to give their perceptions on the deficiencies, strengths and what they recommend for an effective and efficient child protection system.

The study targeted the Gardai because evidence showed that other child protection service providers and users had previously given their views on child protection. However, there was still more research to be undertaken to hear from the perspective of police officers on their experiences in dealing with children who are victims of child abuse and neglect.

Qualitative interviews were used as a method of gathering data. A convenience sample of three female and two male police officers was used in the interviews. All the five officers were chosen on the basis that they had some knowledge of child protection issues and practice under investigation. Data collection took place between 25th March, 2015 and 8th April, 2015 at one of the Garda Stations in Ireland. The grounded theory was adopted for data analysis to discover the findings.

The main findings showed that progress has been made so far in the adoption of Children First Guidance of 2011 (Department of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2011) with clear procedures, roles and responsibilities. The findings also indicated improved interaction among professionals in child protection and some degree of information sharing which have promoted better multi-agency working. The Gardai also reported to have received some training in child protection. The results further indicated proper records management and the need for allocation of more resources for key agencies like Child Protection and Family Welfare (TUSLA).

However, further evidence indicated the need for more information sharing, provision of services during out-of-work hours and more staff to reduce work-load on social workers in

TUSLA. A dedicated Garda child protection unit with specialised training was also deemed appropriate at Garda stations. The results revealed the need for improved accountability among professionals from different agencies during child protection conferences.

The findings implied that the positive outcomes have managed to set out and improve child protection practices among agencies who work with children and young people. However, the researcher also felt that the outlined deficiencies were areas which needed further action to be taken for them to be addressed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Most studies show that the escalating levels of child abuse and neglect are a result of inefficient child protection systems that are in place in terms of the laws, policy guidelines, institutional practices, human resource capacity, infrastructure, information management systems and accountability mechanisms (Horwath, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; McPartland, 2010; United Nations Children's Fund, 2010; Kilkelly, 2007 Horwath, 2005; Shannon, 2005). A study was, therefore, conducted to examine the current child protection system and practice in Ireland.

The review of literature in the following section outlines the aim of the study, its justification and the specific objectives for carrying out the study. Before offering the detailed description of the findings which emerged in the study, an insight of both the national and international context has been provided. The prevailing child protection system in Ireland and its genesis has been evaluated. The international context has included the general strengths, deficiencies and proposals for an improved child protection system. The following section reviews all such issues which emerged in the previous research. Section 3.0 describes the method chosen within which the study was conducted. Section 4.0 offers a description of the findings. The remaining sections provide a detailed discussion of the findings which resulted and further draw conclusions and recommendations based on the generated data.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The Irish Government introduced the revised *Children First Guidance of 2011* (Department of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2011) in the Irish child protection system. Previous studies have concentrated on exploring professionals' and service users' perceptions in the child protection system. Despite the evidence that both service providers and users have given their views, there is still more research to be undertaken to hear from the perspective of police officers as they directly or indirectly deal with children who are victims of child abuse and neglect and the procedures available to them in their work (Mehta, 2008). To date, little research has been carried out in relation to soliciting views of the Gardai on the adoption of the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) in relation to the Irish child protection system and practice. The current study was prompted to add to the discourse, perceptions of the Gardai in this area.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the views of the Gardai on their work experiences as they deal with children who are at risk or are victims of child abuse and neglect and the procedures available to them in their work. In order to achieve this aim, the Gardai were asked about their perceptions of the current child protection system and the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011). The study further sought to specifically explore the perceptions of the Gardai in terms of strengths in the child protection system. Thirdly, the study investigated on the Gardai's views in terms of deficiencies in the Irish child protection system. Finally, Gardai's recommendations on the improvements that could be made were examined.

Based on the aim of the current study and its specific objectives, this section will provide a review of the literature within the context of the current study. The section critically evaluates the studies, debates and inquiries in literature by specifically focussing on the historical context of Irish child protection system, the current international picture of the child protection systems, deficiencies observed in most jurisdictions and the way forward. Research questions for the current study have been outlined at the end of the section.

2.2 Historical context of the Irish child protection system

This sub-section outlines some of the historical developments that led to the revision and introduction of the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011). It also includes the findings of inquiries (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013) carried out which partly influenced the revision of *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011).

The Child Care Act 1991 gave the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) the statutory responsibility for the protection and welfare of children in Ireland (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Health Services Executive, 2010). The publication of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (1999)* and the *National Children’s Strategy 2000-2010* focused on ensuring that the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* principles that focus on child welfare were being put in place in an Irish context (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Children’s Rights Alliance, 2010; Health Service Executive, 2010).

The Social Work and Family Survey of 2008 revealed some deficits in the child protection system ranging from availability of resources, case-loads which were not assessed, high staff turn-over, child protection cases not allocated to social workers and differences in interventions addressing child abuse and neglect cases (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Health Services Executive, 2010). The Report of the *Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*, commonly known as the *Ryan Report* of 20th May 2009, made recommendations and developed a draft implementation plan to respond to the recommendations made (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Health Services Executive, 2010). The *Health Services Executive National Audit of the Irish Foster Care services* was conducted in October 2009 which revealed that there were indeed, areas where services were meeting the needs and those that needed improvement in service delivery (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Health Service Executive, 2010). In May 2010, the Health Services Executive further issued the national policies on the operation of staff, their roles and functions and guidance of child protection conferences (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Health Services Executive, 2011; Health Service Executive, 2010).

The *Strategic Review of the Delivery and Management of Child Protection Services* (Health Service Executive, 2010) informed on the ongoing change programme focusing on

management and governance, public accountability, inter-disciplinary and inter-agency relationships, supporting best practices, consistency with international best practice in relation to child protection assessment and intervention (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013).

All these developments have also happened along with the accumulation of the specific inquiries conducted on child abuse and neglect cases that took place in both Ireland and other countries over a period of more than fifteen years (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Gibbons, 2010; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Brosnan, 2009; Lord Laming, 2009; Bruton, 1998; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996; McGuinness, 1993). The Kilkenny private inquiry was commissioned by the Minister for Health to examine the intra-familial abuse which included sexual abuse and the report was published in 1993 (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; McGuinness, 1993). The Kilkenny report was considered as a game changer which identified a number of inadequacies in the existing child protection guidelines at that time (McGuinness, 1993). Recommendations were made regarding practice issues like norms in respect of information sharing, inter-agency cooperation, recording of information, training and supervision (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; McGuinness, 1993)

The Kilkenny inquiry was followed by another major private inquiry of Kerry Fitzgerald commissioned by the Western Health Board in 1996 to investigate the intra-familial abuse and neglect (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996). Some of the recommendations made included development of multi-disciplinary teams, standardisation of records, improving compliance with regulations, improving the quality of child case conferences and adequate office staff (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996).

A further inquiry was conducted in 1998 by the North Western Health Board on the intra-familial abuse which included sexual abuse (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Bruton, 1998). This West of Ireland Farmer report also recommended for exchange of information between agencies, clarification of roles and responsibilities, regular review of services, inter-agency training and improved linkages between services which further advocated for out-of-hours services in passing (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Bruton, 1998).

The Monageer case inquiry was commissioned by the Minister for Health in 2007 and completed in 2009 to investigate the case of familicide (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Brosnan, 2009). The Monageer report was unique since it strongly recommended for out-of-hours services, responses to children in unsafe situations and communications within the force and with other organisations like TUSLA and families during these out-of-work hours(Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Brosnan, 2009).

The Roscommon private inquiry report commissioned by the Health Service Executive on intra-familial abuse just came out in 2010 (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Gibbons, 2010). This report made its own observations and made practice recommendations on roles and responsibilities, management recommendations on human resource issues, quality checks, infrastructure, child protection protocols and development of services with respect to child sexual abuse assessment (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Gibbons, 2010).

Some trends of all the reports indicate that there were some flaws in inter-agency cooperation, standardised services for out-of-hours services, child protection conferences, assessment, plans, management, training, standards of record keeping and staff welfare (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Gibbons, 2010; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Brosnan, 2009) Other critical issues that emerged in the inquiries include; protocols for inter-agency collaboration and exchange of information and mangement, supervision, resource requirements, standardised policies and procedures on well clarified roles and responsibilities of different professionals in their agencies (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Gibbons, 2010; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Brosnan, 2009; Lord Laming, 2003; Bruton, 1998; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996; McGuinness, 1993).

Based on the findings of several studies and inquiries conducted, the reform programme has resulted into the publication of the *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2011* and the organisational structural changes in the current system called TUSLA (DMCYA, 2011). It is clear from this sub-section that previous inquiries identified issues which were lacking in the previous child protection system and practice in Ireland (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013). The inquiries have also raised some issues concerning the

key roles and responsibilities of the Gardai in child protection which need further inquiries through exploration of the Gardai's own perceptions (Buckley & O'Nolan, 2013). The following sub-section gives a synopsis of the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) to locate some of the revisions that have been introduced in the document that directly concern the Gardai's child protection service delivery as they work with other agencies like TUSLA.

2.2.1 Children First Guidance of 2011

Children First Guidance of 2011 (DMCYA, 2011) is a policy document which gives the guidance on how the TUSLA and An Garda Síochána are supposed to work together when they receive and handle child abuse and neglect referrals from service users and other agencies.

As TUSLA focuses on assessment of the child's welfare, An Garda Síochána deals with crime investigations. An Garda Síochána has powers under section 12 of the Child Care Act 1991 to remove a child to safety when they have reasonable grounds that there is an immediate risk of welfare or health of the child without waiting for the application of an Emergency Care Order under section 13 of the Child Care Act 1991 by TUSLA (DMCYA, 2011). Designated personnel from both sides have to conduct an assessment or investigation and management of each case up to completion (DMCYA, 2011).

TUSLA should make formal notifications to An Garda Síochána on cases of child physical and sexual abuse and child wilful neglect (DMCYA, 2011). On the other hand, An Garda Síochána should notify the HSE on all cases whether committed wilfully or unintentionally, of child victims of emotional, physical or sexual abuse or child neglect (DMCYA, 2011). Procedures are laid down on how to make the notification and what needs to be done during emergencies (DMCYA, 2011).

The *Children First Guidance of 2011* further stipulates that assessments or investigation of cases have to be coordinated (DMCYA, 2011). The issue of the extent of confidentiality has received some guidance and ongoing liaison where both agencies need to inform each other

and record everything (DMCYA, 2011). The Guidance further stresses the need for both agencies to conduct strategy meetings (DMCYA, 2011).

The two agencies also need to work together during child protection conferences as an essential feature of inter-agency cooperation (DMCYA, 2011; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996). This paragraph has also been added in the current Guidance. There are also special considerations for those concerns that come to TUSLA, but are of particular relevance to An Garda Síochána (DMCYA, 2011). Finally, the protocol tackles on the guidance for the arrangement of children at risk in other areas or jurisdictions and those who have migrated to Ireland from other jurisdictions (DMCYA, 2011).

The examination of the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) clearly shows the deficiencies identified in the Irish child protection system have been taken care of in this revised document. The sub-section, however, raises some questions on whether the Gardai are aware of their roles and responsibilities and the procedures put in place which needs to be followed. An inquiry also needs to be conducted on the gardai's experience in working with TUSLA and other agencies, their experiences in child protection case conferences, the issue of resources, the support needed, the existing strengths, the deficiencies in policy and practices and their recommendations on both the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) and the child protection practice in general. The sub-section that follows provides a review of other jurisdictions and their practice in terms of multi-agency working.

2.3 Current international picture of the child protection systems

This sub-section provides international overview picture of child protection systems. It specifically shows how the system embraces multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working and the role of police officers in the whole system.

2.3.1 General overview

Most jurisdictions have also carried out reform programmes and are in constant change due to enquiries conducted and emerging recommendations to have the child focused protection system (Buckley & O'Nolan, 2013; House of Commons Health Committee, 2003; Lord Laming,

2009: House of Commons Education Committee, 2012). This has enhanced the information sharing systems and child protection services focusing more broadly on child welfare at local level (Statham, 2011; DMCYA, 2011). The reform initiatives, programmes and policy frameworks have targeted early intervention and prevention provided across government departments (Statham, 2011). Most jurisdictions have emphasised on collective shared responsibility with inter-agency and cross-governmental collaboration aiming at improving and progressing the welfare and protection of children (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Statham, 2011). Local or regional structures for child protection and welfare services have been established (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Statham, 2011). Implementation plans, change management trainings, inter-agency guidance and workforce development strategies have been developed (Statham, 2011; Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Lord Laming 2009).

For example, New South Wales, Australia, has the reform programme called *Keep them safe: a shared approach to child well-being (2009-2014)* while Scotland has the *Getting It Right For Every Child 2006* programme, commonly known as GIRFEC (Statham, 2011). The Norwegian reform programme is called *Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Welfare for Children 2000* while Northern Ireland calls it *Children and Young People. Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People 2006* (Statham, 2011). England called it *Every Child Matters: Change for Children Programme 2004* while the one in Ontario, Canada has been termed *Realising Potential: Our Children, Our Youth, Our Future, Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services Strategic Framework 2008-2012* (Statham, 2011).

This sub-section shows a similar approach taken by other countries to strengthen the delivery of services. This means that the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (2011) in Ireland is in keeping with what other jurisdictions are also doing. A particular examination has been provided in the following section on how inter-agency working is conducted in some of these jurisdictions.

2.3.2 Multi-disciplinary and inter-agency working

Multi-disciplinary practice in cases of child maltreatment is highly valued in almost all jurisdictions (Buckley, 1997; Ferguson, 2011; Horwath, 2005). Each jurisdiction has inter-

agency structures for children services that operate at different levels and that bring agencies or individuals together for different purposes to make joint decisions on policies, plans or deliver services (Statham, 2011). Each jurisdiction has a different model of such structures which have been developed (Statham, 2011).

It is, therefore, important to generally examine how other jurisdictions operate their child protection systems (Statham, 2011). National or state level inter-agency structure examples are like *Children Trust* (England), *Children and Young People Partnership* (Wales), *Children and Young People Committees* (Northern Ireland), *Montgomery County Collaboration* (USA) and *Strengthening Families and the High and Complex Needs (HCN) Inter-agency Strategy* (New Zealand) (Statham, 2011). They are organised to achieve certain child focused outcome with a chairperson and a coordinator, operating mostly on voluntary basis sometimes without a mandate or pay (Statham, 2011).

The setting up of *Children Trusts* in England had improved outcomes which acted as a catalyst for more integrated approaches to the diagnosis and provision of services for child protection (Statham, 2011). In Northern Ireland, the support received by *Children and Young Peoples Committees* in terms of training to develop their expertise helped to improve things (Statham, 2011). They also showed shortfalls which included lack of trust and funding conflicts. In Wales, the *Children and Young People's Partnerships* provided a more coordinated approach to planning and development of services (Statham, 2011). The introduction of the Cymorth Fund further strengthened the partnership working between agencies involved in Child and Youth Protection Partnerships to support services for the disadvantaged children (Statham, 2011). The *Montgomery County Collaboration Council*, Maryland State, in the United States of America improved the sharing of information between agencies since they instituted clear data sharing protocols agreed by all relevant agencies (Statham, 2011). The same steps used by the *Wales Accord for Sharing Information* is a good evidence to improve information sharing among agencies dealing with child protection issues (Statham, 2011). Similarly, the framework for information sharing between agencies in Scotland through *Getting it Right for Every Child* provides a good lesson (Statham, 2011).

In Ireland, such structures are called *Children Service Committees*. They engage in planning and inter-agency collaboration on how to deliver children and young people services based on the 7 National Service Outcomes for Children in Ireland in the *Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook* (OMC, 2007) (see Statham, 2011). The Department of Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2011) offers a clear guidance in the *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. TUSLA has the responsibility to issue both statutory and non-statutory guidance to local authorities who produce their own guidelines to be followed by practitioners and professionals in that local area (DMCYA, 2011).

Such arrangements enable police officers working together in partnership with TUSLA and all other agencies and service users to provide response to child abuse and neglect (Frost, 2005). Whatever type of inter-agency approach is used, it has to achieve outcomes or changes to the service users, professionals, organisations as a result of interventions or services that are being provided. Outcomes include; awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills, opinions, motivation, behaviour, decision making, policies, social action (Taylor-Powell, 2011). Inter-agency working can lead to changes in inputs, processes, tools, management structures, routines, experiences and practices of practitioners and managers, outcomes for children and families, and institutional or systematic embedding of changes across organisations (Easton, Morris & Gee, 2010).

The question still remains on how the Gardai perceive these changes, the strengths and deficiencies on the current child protection practice and what they can recommend. The following sub-section provides an overview of the role and responsibilities of police officers who are supposed to work with other agencies in dealing with child abuse and neglect referrals. This will help locate the Gardai's position in child protection system and practice.

2.3.3 Police officers roles and responsibilities in child protection

Ferguson (2011) noted that stakeholders play different roles to care and protect the child. *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) states that An Garda Síochána has the

primary responsibility in the protection of the community and carrying out of any criminal child abuse and neglect investigations and forward the report to the Director of Public Prosecutions for possible prosecution. They also provide vetting services on behalf of organisations employing personnel to work with children.

Pence & Wilson (1992) add that generally the roles of the police are to prevent, receive, refer cases and offer victim support services. They also interview children, witnesses and perpetrators and give evidence in court on child related issues (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Plach, 2008). They further provide immediate response to calls of any child maltreatment and effect arrests of child maltreatment perpetrators (Pence and Wilson, 1992). They are a key member of the multi-agency team since they participate in child protection case conferences and case reviews (Statham, 2011; DMCYA, 2011; Lord Laming, 2009).

The Gardai know that they bear these roles and responsibilities. However, little is known on their perceptions about the clarity of their roles and responsibilities, the strengths and deficiencies in terms of procedures that exist as they perform their duties related to child protection practice. The following sub-section gives some specific details of deficiencies identified in most of the jurisdictions when dealing with child protection referrals. This will set the scene for areas that need improvement in the child protection practice.

2.4 Deficiencies in the child protection systems

Different agencies working in child protection have different perceptions that also vary from worker to worker within and across the child protection agencies (Horwath, 2013). The child protection process differs on types of cases to be reported and to which agency (Gibbons, 2010; Horwath, 2005). There are reported significant variations in service delivery structures and unclear roles and responsibilities (Horwath, 2005). Thresholds for intervention differ among different service providers (Horwath, 2005; House of Commons Health Committee, 2003). Contributions to multi-disciplinary assessment and appropriate interventions to meet the needs of children have also been a problem (Horwath, 2005; Kilkelly, 2007). This sub-section evaluates some of the existing deficiencies in literature as shown below. This will put

into context whether the Gardai bear similar sentiments or not since little is known about their perceptions as they work with children.

2.4.1 Deficiencies in working definitions

Horwath (2013) has observed that *'working definitions of neglect are vague, open to interpretation and heavily dependent on the use of professional judgement'* (p.121). Horwath (2013) further points out that this leads to an ambiguity as to who, when and how to intervene on cases of child neglect among the professionals. As a result, child maltreatment cases end up being managed in different ways from initial reporting to intervention and up to making a decision for a case closure (Horwath, 2013). It has been argued that the only way to resolve this multiplicity of perceptions on child abuse and neglect is partnership working by practitioners, parents/carers and children (Buckley, 1997; Ferguson, 2011; Horwath, 2005; Horwath, 2013; Kilkelly, 2007).

2.4.2 Deficiencies in thresholds and joint provision of services

Different agencies sometimes use different baselines and therefore do not share common language (Horwath, 2005). Sometimes, they focus on gathering information rather than making sense of it in light of theory, research and current practice developments (Gibbons, 2010; Horwath, 2005). Horwath (2005) concludes that the differences in levels of need and intervention have led to confusion and misunderstanding of thresholds and consequently, focus much on eligibility criteria for service provision than putting the primary concern on the child they need to care and protect.

Variations consequently come in on how agencies jointly provide child protection services, despite some agencies having inter-agency protocols to work together (Horwath, 2005) However, they lack pathways on common knowledge, expertise and practice for children in need of protection (Gibbons, 2010; Brosnan, 2009). Collaboration among agencies has shown to be mixed (Horwath, 2005). Depending on the existing relationships, others have found it difficult to engage with each other in the process, labelling other partner agencies as no-go-zones (Horwath, 2005). Findings in the Monageer inquiry revealed that other organisations have managed to provide services 24 hours, 7days a week (like police) who

provide services non-stop, while others like social workers are not accessible out-of-work time (Brosnan, 2009).

2.4.3 Deficiencies in training and experience of staff

Lack of understanding of key issues in child protection and how they contribute to overall practice development has been a major deficit (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Brosnan, 2009; Lord Laming, 2009; House of Commons Health Committee, 2003; Bruton, 1998; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996; McGuinness, 1993). For example some agencies have managed to conduct structured trainings based on their capacity gaps because they have resources while some have not been able (Gibbons, 2010; Lord Laming, 2009). Some managers have child protection knowledge gap because they joined the agency a long time ago and did not have the opportunity to be trained (Gibbons, 2010).

2.4.4 Deficiencies in staff turn-over and resources

Staffs in most agencies are over-stretched by the work-loads and fail to meet the demands (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Lord Laming, 2009; House of Commons Health Committee, 2003; McGuinness, 1993). Some agencies have a complex structure with unclear accountability, responsibility and decision making processes, hence, pragmatic to respond to specific roles, with no specialist practitioner (Horwath, 2005). Most agencies have tended to assign child protection duties to those who are untrained and non-designated staff (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Gibbons, 2010). This has tended to undermine workers confidence when they are assigned on duties to which they have little or no expertise (Horwath, 2005). They do not know how a child at risk of harm is assessed, how cases are referred and to which agency (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Horwath, 2005). This has, in effect, undermined collaboration as partner agencies do not know who to contact and work with on particular cases (Gibbons, 2010; Horwath, 2005; House of Commons Health Committee, 2003).

The leader role has shown to be significant where managers allocate designated officers who are supposed to assess particular cases because they have expertise in child protection work

(Gibbons, 2010; Horwath, 2005). Institutional infrastructure has mostly been a challenge for child protection work (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Horwath, 2005; Gibbons, 2010).

2.4.5 Deficiencies in accountability and confidentiality

There is lack of explicit commitment to and non-prioritising of inter-agency working by some managers on issues of child protection (Statham, 2011). This is sometimes due to differing agency policies, procedures, systems, data being collected, and professional, technical and ethical obstacles to information sharing (Statham, 2011). There are also contextual barriers like; political changes, financial uncertainty, constant organisational changes and even agency boundaries when they consider themselves as a no-go-zone (Statham, 2011).

Sometimes organizational services cannot be easily accessible either online or personally, or staff members are hard to reach, or do not respond to phone calls or are not punctual when appointments have been booked, where service users consequently find it disrespectful, annoying, irritating and frustrating (Buckley, Carr & Whelan, 2010). Buckley et al (2010) add that when booked appointments are broken by workers, it reflects the inconsistent and unreliable behaviour of that particular agency. Access to information has also featured highly where organisations deny access to written information, or once it is accessed, it has a lot of inaccuracies, or not comprehensive (Horwath, 2005). Some workers lack knowledge, expertise and confidentiality set out in child protection guidelines (Buckley et al., 2010). Service users also consider personal worker attributes since they have general fears of getting involved with child protection workers (Buckley et al., 2010).

There is need to the perceptions of the Gardai on the outlined deficiencies above. The following sub-section makes some proposals which have proved to address some of the deficiencies examined in this sub-section.

2.5 Way forward

The previous sub-section clearly shows that there are several deficiencies that have made the child protection service delivery to be poor in some jurisdictions. However, little is known on the side of police officers. This sub-section contains some of the proposed means

of improving the child protection systems across jurisdictions. These proposals include areas of multi-agency working, training of staff, resources and communication.

2.5.1 Common assessment framework, protocols and procedures

Several researchers, therefore, agree that there should be a common assessment framework, guidance and a national standard reporting form for referrals in line with child protection systems and practice (Gibbons, 2010; Buckley, 1997; Horwath, 2005; Horwarth, 2013; Kilkelly, 2007). Child protection teams should use protocols introduced in children protection guidelines on assessment and planning (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Brosnan, 2009; Bruton, 1998; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996; McGuinness, 1993).

Child protection case conference procedures and protocols should be used in all case conferences (Gibbons, 2010; Brosnan, 2009; Horwath, 2005). Areas of cooperation and boundaries should be identified to conduct joint investigations, conferences, visits to scenes of abuse and trainings (Buckley, 1997; Ferguson, 2011). There is need to increase understanding of each other’s professional roles and responsibilities and to be clear on the frequency of contact, and joint assessment of the impact of inter-disciplinary interventions (Buckley et al., 1997).

Mutual engagement involves joint procedures, inclusive planning and clear lines of accountability, support, supervision, effective leadership and role clarification (Murphy, 1995; Wenger, 1998). In addition, partnership working recognises and builds on diversity and differences in status and hierarchies (Murphy, 1995; Wenger, 1998). Professionals should, therefore, have enhanced knowledge and understanding of their own roles and responsibilities and those of other professionals (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013). They should also have knowledge and clear understanding of the procedures in the child protection system and capacity to apply them in practice (McGuinness, 1993). There should be less duplication of service provision at agency level (Statham, 2011).

2.5.2 Communication

In terms of joint enterprise, Wenger (1998) advises joined up agencies to have strategic objectives, core aims, shared targets and a clear communication structure with partner agencies which enhances communication and information sharing (Frost, 2005; Hochstald and Hawke, 1985; Hudson, 2002; Townsley, Abbot & Watson, 2004). This follows that interagency cooperation will explore means of facilitating good contact and communication, support, mutual respect and value for each other's work, personal relationships, information sharing, timely feedback of referrals and many areas of cooperation (Buckley & O'Nolan, 2013). There is evidence of good practice in terms of inter-agency working and information sharing where jurisdictions like Wales, Scotland Montgomery County and USA have information sharing protocols for their agencies which improves information sharing between agencies working with children (Statham, 2011).

2.5.3 Training, staffing and resources

Plach (2008) and Jefferies (2014) both agree that much energy should be spent on specialised knowledge and expertise needed both at agency and multi-agency levels in the area of investigations. On the investigative process and decision making, special considerations should dwell on more opportunities for personal special career development and skill acquisition in areas of interviewing children, special investigative techniques, and many others (Brosnan, 2009; Pence & Wilson, 1992). A similar proposal has been maintained by Lord Laming (2009) where it was recommended that police officers were supposed to receive specialist training over and above core police training which was to include that of how to talk and listen to children often in distress.

Staffing levels need to be reviewed with particular consideration of having designated staff to meet the overwhelming demand and to ensure they are well resourced to avoid children's safety is being compromised (Lord Laming, 2009; Horwath, 2005). Non- stop service provision is central to child protection (Brosnan, 2009). Relevant infrastructure like office space, technology, mobility, child friendly facilities for case management and in transit shelters need to be a priority (Buckley & O'Nolan, 2013; Lord Laming, 2009; Mc Guinness, 1993).

2.6 Research questions for the current study

Based on the context given in the reviewed literature in this section and the aim of study to explore the views of the Gardai on their work experiences as they deal with children who are at risk or are victims of child abuse and neglect and the procedures available to them in their work and its specific objectives, the current study sought to get specific views from the Gardai to answer the following research questions;

1. What are the police officers' perception of the current Irish child protection system and the *Children First Guidance of 2011*?
2. What do they believe are the strengths in the system?
3. What perceptions do police officers have in terms of deficiencies in the Irish child protection system?
4. What, if any, recommendations do they have on improvements that could be made?

The first research question was designed to have eight sub-questions in order to capture the perceptions of the Gardai generally and in some key areas which concerned inter-agency working. Research question 2, 3 and 4 appeared in that order at the end the interview schedule (see Appendix I) since it was deemed that the general picture that the interviewees could give in answering research question 1 would open them up to outline strengths, deficiencies and then make their recommendations for improvement of the system.

2.7 Summary of the section

The section has reviewed the literature on the historical development of the Irish child protection system where developments which shaped the reform programmed have been outlined. The details on the international context have been evaluated in order to examine and appreciate their child protection systems. Strengths and deficiencies have been identified both locally and internationally and suggestions made for improvement. The research questions to be answered in the current study in the context of the reviewed literature have been outlined. The following section will provide details on how the current study was conducted to get the findings based on the research questions raised.

3.0 METHOD

3.1 Introduction

In the previous section, detail was provided on the previous studies which explored the experiences of professionals and service users when dealing with child protection referrals and the child protection system both in Ireland other jurisdictions. This section will provide an account of how the study was conducted. The details of the research design are outlined. This means that the rationale for choosing this research design is explained. The other sub-sections discussed include materials used, participants to the study and the procedures used throughout the study.

3.2 Research design

Qualitative interviews were used as a method of data collection (Tracy, 2010). Grounded Theory was adopted for data analysis (Kilkenny, 2012; Weiss, Hawkins, & Despinos, 2010; Franklin & Ballan, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The study sought to solicit views of police officers on their daily work experiences of the child protection system present in Ireland using a qualitative method of study (Ferguson, 2011; Tracy, 2010). This method was useful in the study as it provided an insight into garda experiences of the child protection system including issues regarding their views on resources and gaps in service delivery.

This method was considered a relevant way to explore police officers perceptions in depth (Tracy, 2010; Clarke, 2010), as through this method, the interviewees were given the chance to express their experiences. Interviewees were also able to give their perspective around the issues of child protection system being investigated without limiting their responses (Hoffman, 2007). It helped the researcher to understand the data and nuances of the research topic like their feelings on working with other agencies and whether they needed more support (Clarke, 2010; Hoffman, 2007). It provided the researcher with more information about the interviewees' perceptions and experiences on the whole child protection system in Ireland (Clarke, 2010; Hoffman, 2007). The method gave research

participants an opportunity to have a voice through self-expression, give opinions in child protection issues, share events associated with their work, which further led to the useful and rewarding insights to focus on their work (Clarke, 2010). Quantitative method could have been used as well using questionnaires. However, this method could limit the interviewees' openness and the researcher's probing questions where clarity was needed. This method could limit the interviewees' self-expression of their opinions which was gained through probing questions or by asking their own questions (Clarke, 2010; Hoffman, 2007; Hammersly, 1992).

A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used to conduct the interviews (Hoffman, 2007). The method allowed the participants to expand on any questions or move to other topics which helped the researcher to increase the amount of the collected data which eventually enhanced the validity of the study (Hoffman, 2007). The method worked well such that useful data was collected during investigation which could have not been collected by using a questionnaire questions (Clarke, 2010; Hoffman, 2007). Another data collection method of focus groups could also be used to carry out the study. However, some interviewees could not feel comfortable to give their opinions or share their feelings in a group. The nature of the study required that the interviewees should be open enough to give their opinions on matters they could not do so in a group.

Grounded Theory was adopted for data analysis due the fact that it provided a systematic way of illuminating experiences and perspectives (Kilkenny, 2012; Weiss et al., 2010). The method was also chosen because it was able to provide useful insights in the field of child protection, as a social issue, which needed to get the depth of more unanswered questions (Kilkenny, 2012; Weiss et al., 2010; Sandelowiski & Barroso, 2002). The data analysed through this method have also proved to offer an enhanced understanding and meaningful guidance to actions that are supposed to be taken in child protection (Kilkenny, 2012; Weiss et al., 2010; Straus & Corbin, 1998). This method further enabled to discover themes from the views of people with similar circumstances (Weiss et al., 2010; Hutchinson & Wilson, 2001).

3.3 Materials

Information sheets were given to the interviewees 48 hours before the interviews were conducted (see Appendix I). Consent forms were read and signed by the interviewees (see Appendix III). Interviews schedules were used as tool for collecting data (see Appendix II). These interview schedules allowed the researcher to elicit police officers perceptions and experiences of the issues under investigation (Kilkenny, 2012; Tracy, 2010; Clarke, 2010; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). They followed a structured format with open-ended questions, in order to get depth and richness (Hoffman, 2007). The use of standard structured format to each participant also enabled the researcher to have the collection of comparable data (Hoffman, 2007). The schedules were composed of twelve groups of questions including demographic information (see Appendix II), which covered different aspects of child protection system in Ireland. The audio-tape was used to record all the interviews with the prior consent of the interviewees.

3.4 Participants

A convenience sample for the study of three female and two male police officers was used in the interviews (Clarke, 2010). All the five officers were chosen on the basis that they had some knowledge of child protection issues under investigation. Police officers with the specific knowledge and experience on the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) and the child protection system in Ireland participated in the interviews.

Four police officers were currently working with children and in other police duties. Participant 1 was a community policing officer with 22 years' service. Participant 2 was a child protection officer with 17 years' service. Participant 3 and Participant 4 were victim support services officers with 11 and 9 years' service, respectively. Participant 5 was a data base and mapping officer with 14 years' service, who worked as a community policing officer before.

3.5 Procedure

The research proposal was submitted to Athlone Institute of Technology Ethics Committee. The proposal went through the investigation process as required by Athlone Institute of

Technology Research Ethics Policy and Procedure. There were still some minor ethical requirements observed by the Committee which required to be worked on. After the researcher worked on the issues of confidentiality of the gate-keeper and storage of the data collected, permission was granted to conduct the study.

Some specific criteria were set up for the recruitment process (Clarke, 2010; Tracy, 2010). All interviewees were recruited based on the fact that they had already participated in other police duties with a long standing experience and knowledge of the child protection programme (Parlalis, 2011). This enabled the researcher to elicit information referring to the strengths of the whole programme, the deficiencies facing the system and improvements needed to enhance the system (Hoffman, 2007). The final criterion was that the interviewees had experience of working with other child protection agencies. The researcher was helped by the use of a gatekeeper at the Garda station where the study was conducted to identify the interviewees.

A formal letter was written to the Officer In-Charge of the Garda station where the interviews were conducted seeking permission to conduct personal interviews with the identified police officers. When permission was granted, consent forms were also administered to all the interviewees. The researcher indicated the assurance for the officers' anonymity and confidentiality during study process (see Information Sheet in Appendix I and Consent Form in Appendix III).

Data collection took place between 25th March, 2015 and 8th April, 2015. The researcher conducted the interviews at one of the Garda stations in Ireland. Prior to data collection, an agreement was sought between the interviewee and the interviewer on the most convenient date and time for the interviewee to participate in the interview. Each interviewee was given the interview schedule topics 48 hours prior to the interviews to look at the areas of focus (see Appendix II). Each interviewee had a scheduled time and they were told that the audio-tapes and consent forms were to be stored in a locked cabinet before being destroyed after the study was completed on 21st September, 2015. They were further informed that participation was voluntary and they could terminate the interview at any

stage. Information was provided on the confidential contact details of people and/or agencies that could help them when they felt affected personally by any issues that arose given the sensitive nature of such issues.

All the interviews were conducted at the Garda Station during normal working hours in private rooms with closed doors to ensure privacy of the interviewees and that there would be no interruption. The interviews were conducted by the researcher. All the interviews started once the interviewees had been assured about the confidentiality of the collected data and gave their consent for the recording of the interview. With prior permission from the interviewees, all interviews were audio-recorded. Notes were also taken during the interviews. Each of the interviews lasted for twenty to thirty minutes.

Participants reflected on their perceptions and experiences on the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011), the Irish child protection system, the strengths, deficiencies and improvements needed in both the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) and the children protection system. The transcribed interviews were labelled by numbers, stored in a locked cabinet and password protected on a computer. Signatures of the officers participating in the interviews were only kept on consent forms away from the data gathered

The researcher used a grounded theory approach for data analysis (Kilkenny, 2012; Weiss et al., 2010). This was due to the fact that the study also focussed on police officers perceptions and experiences of child protection system in Ireland with regard to the history of police working with other agencies (Weiss et al., 2010; Glaser, 1992).

Data analysis started with the transcription of the interviews (Weiss et al., 2010). This was followed by working on each individual interview separately (Parlalis, 2011). As a unit of analysis, each sentence was focused separately (Parlalis, 2011). This enabled the researcher to have every single piece of data coded which also provided the means to discover the findings (Kilkenny, 2012; Weiss et al., 2010; Sandelowiski & Barroso, 2002). The approach ensured the researcher to stay close to the data which made the findings reliable and valid.

Patterns of meanings, categories and similar themes relevant to the study emerged (Hedin, Hojer, & Brunnberg, 2011; Glaser, 1992). These categories were further analysed which led to broad themes (Parlalis, 2011).

Though the individual interviews were successfully conducted, there was still need to increase the sample size to explore even more views and make visits to several garda stations (Parlalis, 2011). However, time and resources were limited (Parlalis, 2011; Weiss et al., 2010). Other methods of data collection could have been used, for example, focus groups to get a triangular view understanding of professional accounts from other agencies. Further studies may consider using focus groups.

3.6 Summary of the section

The section has provided the rationale for choosing qualitative research method as opposed to quantitative method for data collection and grounded theory for data analysis. The sample of five police officers has been described. The semi-structured interview questions have been described and justified as opposed to focus group discussions or questionnaires. The procedure has included on how the ethics application was approved by the ethics committee, how data was collected with an indication of period of collection, issues of obtaining consent from the interviewees. The researcher has made references to the information sheets, interview schedule used and consent forms administered during the study which have been included in the appendices. The following section gives a detailed description of findings of the study.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

The previous section has described how the current study was conducted with specific reference to research design, sample, research tools and procedure used. This section explores briefly on the method of analysis of the data which led to the findings in the study. Description of the results based on each theme is also provided in detail. At the end of this section, an overall summary of the results has been outlined.

4.2 Method of analysis

The study explored views of Gardaí on their daily work experiences of the child protection system present in Ireland using the qualitative method of study. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used to conduct the interviews (see Appendix II). A grounded theory approach was adopted for data analysis due to the fact that it provided a systematic way of illuminating experiences and perspectives of the interviewees (Weiss et al., 2010). This method enabled the researcher to discover themes from the views of police officers engaged in child protection practice. The study also focussed on Gardaí perceptions and experiences of child protection system in Ireland with regard to the history of police working with other agencies.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim to analyse the data collected (Kilkenny, 2012; Weiss et al., 2010). Each individual interview was then scrutinised separately (Parlalis, 2011). A sentence was considered a unit of analysis which enabled the researcher to have every single piece of data coded in order to generate the recurrent themes (Parlalis, 2011; Weiss et al., 2010; Sandelowiski & Barroso, 2002). Patterns of meanings, categories and similar themes relevant to the study emerged (Kilkenny, 2012; Hedin, Hojer, & Brunnberg, 2011). These categories were further analysed which led to broad themes emerging.

4.3 Results

Through the coding process, the researcher identified five major themes relating to the four research questions of the current study. The themes are; (i) inter-agency working in child

protection, (ii) improved records management in child protection (iii) need for out-of-work hours service, (iv) training of staff required in child protection and (v) accountability at child protection meetings and case conferences.

The results reveal that inter-agency working was now better due to clear procedures and formal roles and responsibilities of staff in each agency. Information sharing in child protection showed mixed results between agencies working with children. The results also indicated that records management was one of the best child protection practices. The findings revealed the need for more improvement in out-of-work hours' services. The interviewees illustrated both the strengths and deficiencies in the child protection system in terms of training of staff and the need for more resources. There was a general feeling that professionals need to be more accountable during child protection case conferences. The following sub-sections describe detailed results of the study according to each theme.

(i) Inter-agency working in child protection

Inter-agency working manifested itself as one of the central themes through the roles and responsibilities introduced in the child protection policy in Ireland. The interviewees further indicated issues of information sharing as they relate to inter-agency working. The focus was on the coordination and cooperation between different agencies with different professional backgrounds working with children. The inter-agency working was generally good in terms of roles and responsibilities of staff in each agency. The issue of sharing child protection information showed mixed results between agencies working with children.

From the point of view of the interviewees, they reported that there were changes in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) in terms of inter-agency working through the professionals' roles and responsibilities and how the information was being shared between the agencies. The interviewees pointed out that the changes in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) brought in clear roles and responsibilities, clearer and formal procedures, better reporting system and even records keeping. They also perceived that those procedures led to improvements in the Irish child protection practice. Participant 1 said: *"I notice there is a creation of more certain procedures to ensure that events should be*

reported. It is ensuring that systems get improved to make sure that things don't fall within the cracks". Participant 4 perceived the procedures to be formal: "Procedures are more formal which ensures better trail of reports".

Interviewees added that they understood the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) which also allowed increased interaction through information sharing between the Gardaí, and other agencies like the social workers and health personnel. Participant 5 reported: "There is more interaction than before. Previously there was less information being exchanged between agencies.

As a result, interviewees observed that as they worked with other agencies everyone knew what they were supposed to do since each one of them had the core objective. The interviewees were emphatic on the clarity of the roles and responsibilities in relation to management of child protection referrals. Participant 3 was quoted saying: "Each case is managed better. There are clear responsibilities between workers". This was also echoed by Participant 2: "Very clear responsibilities of staff in agencies like the Gardaí and Gardaí management to the best interest of the child".

The interviewees emphasized on the strengths of the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) by saying that since the roles and responsibilities were now formal and clear, this made the job of each professional to be objective and more certain. They perceived a very strong relationship between the Gardaí and Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). Participant 1 indicated that such clarity and certainty of roles and responsibilities led to better inter-agency working. He said that: "The systems are in good shape and it makes everybody's job more accountable and certain. It means that things shouldn't be messed up whether discharged by Gardaí who is in-charge of a case, and also in-charge from the HSE (now TUSLA). That's the most important part".

Participant 2 perceived the relationship to be strong between the agencies because of the clear roles and responsibilities which also made it possible to have joint trainings as she said: "The relationship between the workers is strong. There are clear roles and joint trainings are

being conducted. Other interviewees emphasized on the better accountability between the Gardaí and TUSLA on case referrals as Participant 3 said: *“It creates more accountability between the Gardaí and HSE (now TUSLA) so each case is referred”.*

Findings also indicated that the relationship differed from working with other agencies like social workers, teachers, health personnel depending on personal relationships. The value of strengthening relationships between professionals was summarised by what Participant 1 said: *“In past times, I used to find that all agencies were very conscious and very strong to talk. And everybody was worried that they would be misquoted, but I have now found that once you get to meet somebody personally that you can communicate much better and you get to know people much better”.*

At the agency level, one interviewee raised the point that the degree of inter-agency working differs between agencies as Participant 3 observed: *“We do a lot of work with teachers, but much less work with social workers”.* One interviewee clarified that the preference to work with other agencies depended on the nature of interaction between agencies themselves as Participant 2 was quoted saying: *“Sometimes there are frictions. Teachers mostly go to social workers”.* One of the interviewees made a caution on the need for the Gardaí to have facts on what they say to some agencies who considered whatever the Gardaí as true. Participant 3 added: *“Teachers, schools, take everything Gardaí say as gospel ... be careful what advice you give”*

The interviewees observed that the child protection case conferences had made it possible for agencies to meet and work together than before when each agency was working all alone. Participant 1 clarified: *“I think they are very good because they bring together all the agencies. Years ago you must just have Gardaí trying to do something, and in education doing something... but it’s very good, almost everybody who needs to be there is there”.*

One of the interviewees recommended for more review meetings and conferences to enhance interaction among agency staff members so that they could find difficulties and identify solutions together. This was recommended by Participant 5: *“more interaction, more*

conferences on yearly basis, more understanding of difficulties to find problems and sorting them out, the trust issues between people”.

To sum up, many issues emerged in terms of inter-agency working. The most significant one was that procedures were now there and clear for agencies to effectively interact and work together. Interviewees indicated that roles and responsibilities were also clearer for agencies to guide agencies on what they were supposed to do. They pointed out that meetings of agencies through child protection case conferences were vital. They recommended for more review meetings.

(ii) Improved records management in child protection

Interviewees expressed their views on how they receive and keep information related to child protection. They felt that records management was one the best child protection practices.

Interviewees perceived significant changes in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) and the Irish child protection system in terms of record management. Participant 3 said that there were more child protection referrals being received and records were being kept better than before. She said: *“We now see better record keeping in meetings with social workers, a lot more phone calls, a lot more emails and a lot more communications”.*

Participants pointed out record management as one of the strengths in the current Irish child protection practice emphasizing that there was now a very good information technology system in place. As a result, every child abuse and neglect referral was now being recorded and reported to TUSLA who were able to assign a social worker. Participant 4 said: *“There is a great improvement in record keeping and accountability among agencies”.*

Almost all the interviewees expressed increased satisfaction with the way the records were being kept and managed in the current Irish child protection system.

(iii) Need for out-of-hours services

The need for out-of-hours services was another theme which emerged as part of the key results. It strongly focused on the accessibility for service provision using any source of media during out-of-work hours including week-ends and holidays. The sub-section illustrates the need for more improvement in this area.

Some interviewees expressed that they were able to refer child abuse and neglect cases to agencies during normal working hours which was considered strength as well. However, the interviewees further observed that other agencies do not work during week-ends, holidays or after working hours which created a communication gap. They repeatedly expressed their worry that it was only the Gardaí who work throughout the week in 24 hours per day. They expressed a concern that they always faced problems to refer cases of child abuse and neglect to other agencies like TUSLA after normal working hours, over the week-ends and during holidays. Participant 3 said: *“Out-of-work hours can be a problem with other agencies”*. Participant 3 added that the station did not have facilities to accommodate child abuse and neglect referrals after 5 o’clock where the Gardaí face problems on who to contact such that support was needed for other agencies to be available during this period.

One of the interviewees further recommended that other agencies should also be working after 5 o’clock, during week-ends and during holidays because they have better access to some significant resources than the Gardaí. Participant 3 said that: *“All agencies should work 24/7 and not only special for Gardaí since HSE have resources like foster families and residential homes”*.

To summarise, the need for other agencies to work during out-of-work hours has been justified by interviewees in order to also have access to resources which other key agencies have. Therefore participants strongly recommended for 24 hours child protection service provision for all the seven days in the week including holidays.

(iv) Training of staff and resources required in child protection

Training of staff required in child protection was the third major theme. These were the feelings of the Gardaí on knowledge and skills development of staff in the child protection career. It further included resources required to successfully achieve child protection goals. The interviewees illustrated both the strengths and deficiencies in the Irish child protection system in this area.

The interviewees indicated that both the Gardaí and other agencies were able to receive training of some kind in child protection and more especially in *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011). In addition, the interviewees felt that other professionals like teachers were better trained in child protection than others like the Gardaí. One of the interviewees mentioned that staffing in agencies is a big problem as indicated by participant 1 who said: *“Staffing is a very big problem in all agencies. When each guard has a case they don’t stay with the case to finish”*.

The interviewees felt that TUSLA staff was overstretched because of so many referrals they had to attend to. They observed that because of the limited resources like staff, child abuse and neglect referrals were not allocated enough time. Participant 1 said this: *“I think the HSE staff (now TUSLA) seems to be overstretched and I know that some people only want to do the minimum to get their case off the desk while if we had more time it would have been very much more interesting and actually we could do the job better”*.

Interviewees added that although other agencies had some resources they still needed further training. Participant 5 observed that the ongoing training was needed between the agencies in order to ensure that lines of communication between agencies are good as he said: *“Ongoing training is needed between the agencies to ensure that lines of communication between our parties are ok”*. Participant 2 held a similar view as Participant 5 that, support was there in terms of training where many Gardaí were trained, but added that training was to be an ongoing thing. She indicated that the Gardaí should always be refreshed through ongoing trainings. Participant 2 added: *“Yes, support has been there in*

terms of training where many Gardaí have been trained. Training is an ongoing thing. The Gardaí should always be refreshed through ongoing trainings”.

Participant 1 stressed that though other agencies were trained, others like the Gardaí were not adequately trained. He made this observation: *“I do think that some people like social services and psychologists and child specialists are obviously better skilled in that area. I think they know it’s their special area, while with me, it’s just one small part of my training. So I do think they are experts in this field. So we bring less information in this area than they might”.*

Participants strongly recommended for more specialised training to personnel and more training to Gardaí on laws and guidelines and more time to work on cases. Participant 4 added that trainings should be conducted on all the changes in policy and how to conduct interviews with children. *“We need more specialised training in interviewing children trainings on all the changes in policy”.* Others suggested training needs in different areas like drug abuse as indicated by Participant 2: *“We need specialisation on drugs”.* Participant 3 recommended for training in the new laws: *More specialised training to Gardaí on laws and guidelines”.*

Interviewees strongly recommended the need for having a more dedicated Gardaí unit to deal with child abuse referrals and joint investigation, training and all issues of child protection in the unit as it was being done with victim support services. Participant 1 said: *“We need a specific person for child protection in each district like it is with the victim liaison officer-as it is with a child protection coordinator at national headquarters”.* Participant 2 reported the need to: *“Provide dedicated child protection officers”.*

It was also clear from the interviewees that more resources were still needed including time. Participant 1 said: *“But I think the resources of the social services seem to be short. But I think they have more to do if they had time to do it. There is need for shelter, health facility”.*

To summarise, participants showed that there was need for more trained staff which would be dedicated to child protection duties. They felt that they received training but only needed

refresher courses, more training on any changes made and more specialised trainings as it was with other agency staff. Therefore, participants still observed the need for more resources.

(v) Accountability at child protection meetings and case conferences

Finally, accountability at child protection meetings and case conferences emerged as one of the major themes in the study. It involved the level of flexibility of professionals to make contributions on child protection issues during child protection case conferences. Interviewees expressed their feelings on the requirement of professionals to be more accountable during such meetings.

One of the interviewees admitted that there was more accountability between the Gardaí and TUSLA as Participant 5 put it: *“more accountability between the Gardaí and the HSE. Everyone knows what their role is”*. However, another interviewee cautioned that such accountability would depend on the condition that the person was known better by the professional, one was working with. Participant 1 observed: *‘But unfortunately, it still means that you must get to know a person before you feel comfortable with him....We would like to be better communicators with people, but each agency is still conscious of each other’*.

Participants expressed that this behaviour was largely manifested during child protection case conferences. Participant 1 felt that there was still some uncertainty about disclosing some pieces of information among agencies which would only be released to a person whom they trusted. Participant 1 added: *“There is a person called a minute taker who takes up all the notes. Because of this, it sometimes makes people not say things because they don’t want to be recorded they are saying it”*.

Participant 2 observed that though the Gardaí attended the meetings, but they could sometimes not contribute, particularly if things were non-criminal in nature. Participant 3 emphasized that everything that the Gardaí said was quoted and therefore, the Gardaí were more careful in everything they said. Participant 4 reiterated that some people were afraid to speak out in case of being quoted at a later stage.

One of the interviewees stated that agencies were not willing to share information. He observed that such type of practice did not help both the victim and the organisations in their delivery of services. He continued to say that there was need to find a way of dealing with this problem. Participant 1 said: *“Sharing of information between agencies where each is not willing. There is need for proper way of doing it. Sometimes it does not only fail to help the victim but even the organisation”*. Participant 5 made this recommendation: *“Accountability needs to be looked at between agencies. Everybody is pointing fingers on everyone. Nobody wants to take the blame”*.

Therefore, as strength, the results show that there is more accountability between the Gardaí and TUSLA staff. As a deficiency, the findings further indicate that during child protection case conferences or meetings some professionals do not feel comfortable to disclose some pieces of information. It has been reported that the presence of a minute taker can be a barrier for some agency staff to make contributions during child protection meetings and case conferences. It has, therefore, been recommended to find means on how staff from agencies can fruitfully contribute during child protection case conferences and meetings.

4.4 Overall summary of the results

The results showed inter-agency working and improved records management in child protection as some themes that emerged during the study. The findings further revealed the need for out-of-work hours’ service. There are mixed feelings on training of staff required in child protection. The results pointed out the need for more accountability at child protection meetings and case conferences.

Interviewees perceived that procedures for inter-agency working introduced in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) were very clear and enhanced agencies ability to work together. Participants added that inter-agency working was stronger than before. They further expressed that there was more interaction between agencies with more clear roles and responsibilities of staff working in different agencies than before. Interviewees,

however, observed that some agencies had preferences to work with some agencies and not others. They indicated that to this effect, information sharing was a problem among staff from some agencies and this required improvement. The results further showed better record management in the system of late. In terms of communication, some interviewees expressed that they were able to communicate on any referrals relevant to each agency during normal working hours which was a considered strength as well. They strongly felt that apart from the Gardai, there was need for other agency workers to be available during out-of-work hours which include week-ends and holidays to avoid creating a gap to service provision.

Training was considered as one of the strengths by the interviewees, but they further recommended for more specialised training to the Gardaí since they felt they were less trained than other agencies. The interviewees further expressed the need for more staff assigned to child protection work. They felt that this would help to deal with the problem of some agency staff being overstretched which has led to little time being allocated to deal with child abuse and neglect referrals. It was also clear from the interviewees that more resources were still needed. Some participants observed that other agencies are better resourced than the Gardaí. They further perceived that TUSLA have a lot more access to the resources than other agencies. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned their concern that they failed to contribute during case conferences because they feared of being misquoted. They recommended for the review of procedures of child protection conferences to strengthen participation of staff from agencies in order to improve accountability.

Generally, interviewee's perceptions revealed the strengths, deficiencies and recommendations which were made across different themes. Therefore, the findings indicated good inter-agency working, clear roles and responsibilities, good and formal record keeping, some training and some degree of communication between agencies as strengths regarding the child protection practice in Ireland. Generally, good records keeping emerged as strength throughout the interviews.

On the other hand, participants stressed much on the need for specialized training, access to services for the other agencies during week-ends and out-of-work hours. They indicated on the need for extra resources in order to make significant improvements. Hence, the respondents felt that there were still deficiencies in the areas of inter-agency working, accountability during case conferences, need for more training, need for more resources, and improved system of communication outside regular working hours. Interviewees finally made some recommendations to improve the child protection system in Ireland focusing on more inter-agency working, more training, more information sharing, more resources, and improved staffing levels.

5.0 DISCUSSION

This section gives a detailed discussion of the findings on the key themes of the research study. In the literature review, the key implications of some of the findings as they relate to policy and practice are discussed. An evaluation of the methodology used to generate the findings has been discussed. Suggestions for future research have been made followed by the summary of the section.

As a way of summarising, the findings indicate that interviewees perceived changes in procedures for inter-agency working being introduced in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011). Participants reported that these procedures are very clear and enhance the ability of agencies to work together. Results in the study identify inter-agency working to be stronger than in the past. The interviewees further expressed that they felt there is now more interaction between agencies enhanced by more definitions of roles and responsibilities of staff working in different agencies from these procedures.

In addition, according to the results, there is better information sharing with other agencies than others. Interviewees indicated that information sharing is an area which still requires improvement. The respondents appreciated the current child protection system which has better records management and information sharing than before. Access to social work services during out-of-work hours has still shown to be an issue. Some participants have reported that they are able to communicate on any referrals relevant to each agency during normal working hours which was a considered strength. The results show a strong recommendation that apart from the Gardaí, other agency workers should be available during out-of-work hours, particularly social workers, which normally include week-ends and holidays to avoid creating a service provision gap.

Training has also been considered as one of the strengths by the participants. However, findings strongly recommend for more specialised training to the Gardaí as they feel to be less trained than other agencies. The results have further identified the need for more staff to be allocated to the child protection unit.

The results have identified the over-stretching of some agency staff due to less number of social workers. Participants have reported that this has led to little time being allocated to social workers who deal with child abuse and neglect referrals. The interviewees expressed their concern that they failed to contribute during child protection case conferences because they feared of being misquoted. Findings, therefore, recommend for ways that should be identified to strengthen the procedures of accountability in place in order to let professionals fully participate in child protection case conferences without fear of being misquoted. With regard to resources, it has been clear from the interviewees that more resources were still needed. The following paragraphs discuss the key findings in detail to show their significance, implications and if they reflect or are in contrast with the previous studies and literature.

To give a more detailed discussion on the interpretation of the findings, one area of focus in this research was to find out from the interviewees on any changes they have experienced in their work to the adoption of *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011). There are now significant changes in the Irish child protection practice. As the results of the current study show, there are more clear procedures, roles and responsibilities now than before. The significant finding is that this study is in contrast to the previous research revealed by Horwath (2013) and Buckley et al. (1997). In fact, the issue of clarity of procedures previously indicated that service providers perceived them to be very open to interpretation and ambiguous in terms of who, when and how to intervene on child abuse and neglect referrals (Horwath, 2013). This implies that since the procedures for working are now clear to different agencies, child abuse and neglect referrals can be managed better now among agencies than before. As a result, this fulfils the vision of several studies which indicated that agencies can now be able to work in partnership on child abuse and neglect referrals that may arise than it was in the past (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Brosnan, 2009; Ferguson, 2011; Horwath, 2005; Horwath, 2013; Kilkelly, 2007).

According to the current findings, when the Gardaí were asked to give their views on the experiences of working with other agencies on child protection matters, they repeatedly said

that there was an increased understanding among agency staff due to very clear roles and responsibilities in agencies. They stated that this can enhance increased interaction where the Gardaí and other agencies since every professional have a core objective. The results show a very strong relationship more specifically between the Gardaí and TUSLA leading to better inter-agency working. The findings emphasize on the existing better accountability between the Gardaí and TUSLA on child abuse and neglect referrals. Previous research indicated that when different agencies used different baselines who consequently shared uncommon language and different interventions, it led to confusion and misunderstanding (Horwath, 2005). In line with Horwath (2005), the implication is that since there is a protocol between TUSLA and the Gardaí on how to share information, serious problems might not arise. This further explains why inter-agency collaboration between the Gardaí and TUSLA staff is reported to be stronger than before.

In contrast, it seems some staff still feels free to work with other agencies whether there are protocols between agencies or not. Apart from the inter-agency protocols, the results show that working with other agencies like social workers, teachers, and health personnel depend on individual workers relationship with each professional. Findings reveal that professionals value personal attributes of their fellow professionals in another agency. This implies that even when it comes to sharing information, some interviewees would feel free to work with other agency staff than others. For example, teachers seemed to prefer to work with social workers than the Gardaí. This finding supports the previous studies' observations that though some agencies have inter-agency protocols, they did not have common knowledge, expertise and practice (Horwath, 2005). The current study is, however, in keeping with other previous studies which encouraged positive personal relationships between staff from different agencies when working with children who need to be protected (Gibbons, 2010; Brosnan, 2009; Horwath, 2005; Buckley et al., 1997). Therefore, even if agencies have protocols for inter-agency working, good relationship between different professionals should be facilitated.

The Gardaí were asked to give their experiences of child protection case conferences they had attended. The results revealed that different professionals felt that professionals

attending these meetings are reluctant to share information. They commented that the scenario does not help the delivery of services to both the victim and the agencies. The findings are in line with the previous research which observed that there was lack of commitment to inter-agency working by some professionals on issues of child protection due to constant organisational changes or agency boundaries which have been the barriers (Statham, 2011). Previous studies further observed that staff does not actively participate where different agencies have different policies, procedures, systems, professional, technical and ethical obstacles to information sharing (Statham, 2011).

In contrast, procedures in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) are expected to create a common understanding on how agencies are supposed to work together. It also specifically implies that child protection case conference procedures and protocols should be used in all conferences as proposed in the previous studies (Gibbons, 2010; Brosnan, 2009; Horwath, 2005). In addition, procedures or protocols may have failed to identify areas of cooperation and boundaries among agencies that would enhance an increased understanding of each other's professional roles and responsibilities, the frequency of contact and joint assessment of the impact of inter-disciplinary interventions (Ferguson, 2011; Buckley et al., 1997).

Buckley et al. (2010) has further pointed out that some staff was also perceived to lack knowledge, expertise and confidentiality set out in child protection guidelines. To the contrary, the issue of having no knowledge of the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) does not arise as the current findings indicated that each agency is now able to understand the procedures clearly.

It is, therefore, implied that organisational norms and ethical obstacles to information sharing might be a very big barrier which stop professionals to open up during joint meetings like child protection conferences as Statham (2011) and Buckley et al. (2010) observed. It further implies that protocols are needed which can stipulate how members can feel protected once they share vital information during the conferences and the boundaries of which information to share and which one not to share and to who . This will be in keeping

with recommendations made by Lord Laming (2009) after the Baby P and Victoria Climbié inquiries in England (House of Commons Health Committee, 2003). Statham (2011) has also outlined some information sharing protocols used in Wales, Scotland, and Montgomery County in Maryland State, USA as models that have enhanced information between agencies working with children.

In brief, the findings clearly indicate the change that has taken place to introduce child protection conferences among agency members as strength to the adoption of Children First Guidance of 2011. However, the fear of being quoted during such meetings has been a very big deficiency for the productivity of such meetings. The findings suggest that the role of a minute-taker during child protection conferences has to be reviewed if such meetings are to be productive.

The findings identified records management as one of the significant changes in the Children First Guidance of 2011 (DMCYA, 2011) and the Irish child protection system. The results indicate records management as one of the strengths in the current Irish child protection practice with very good information technology system in place which has enhanced a great improvement in recording and keeping records among agencies than before. The previous research indicated that access to information was a problem by service users where organisations would deny access to written information, or once it was accessed, it had a lot of inaccuracies, or not comprehensive (Horwath, 2005). This implies that there may be a great improvement in keeping the records of child protection information received. With the improved relationship between agencies, it, therefore, should be easier to access accurate and comprehensive information than before.

Findings in the current study also indicate that though there is a formal way of information sharing, it is further being impeded by other agencies where they do not work during weekends, holidays or after working hours. Workers from different agencies have resources to communicate and share vital information of serious child abuse cases, particularly social workers. They, however, fail to do so because other agencies are not available during out-of-work hours. Almost all the interviewees strongly recommended that other agencies

should also be working after 5 o'clock in the afternoon, during week-ends and during holidays. Participants indicated that if this problem would be solved, the Gardaí shall be able to access some significant resources like accommodation for children who have been abused or neglected.

This is in keeping with the findings of the Monageer inquiry (Brosnan, 2009). The inquiry team reported that this was a fundamental problem where state agencies failed to provide out-of-work hours social work services which could ensure a response to serious child protection and welfare services (Brosnan, 2009). The team made similar strong recommendations that the non-stop service provision is central to child protection (Brosnan, 2009). This implies that even if resources can be adequate, service users will have problems to access services at some point due to unavailability of key staff members. It follows that inter-agency cooperation which the previous research recommended needs to be explored as a means of facilitating good contact and communication, support and timely feedback of referrals in many areas of cooperation including out-of-office hours (Buckley & O'Nolan).

Though the Monageer inquiry (Brosnan, 2009) made an observation of non-provision of child protection services during out-of-work hours by some agencies, current study has shown that there has not been a change. The findings of the current study repeat the strong recommendation made by the Monageer inquiry (2009) for provision of non-stop child protection services by all agencies.

In the area of training of staff on child protection, the interviewees reported that they had received training in child protection and more especially in *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011), According to the respondents, agencies and the government have made all the efforts to train different agency staff in the field of child protection, but they still needed more training. Previous inquiries conducted in both Ireland and England equally support the findings of the current study on the need for more training (Buckley & O'Nolan, 2013; Statham, 2011; Lord Laming, 2009). The literature indicated that there was lack of understanding of key issues in child protection and how they contribute to the overall

practice development (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009; Brosnan, 2009; Lord Laming, 2009; Bruton, 1998; Joint Committee on the Family, 1996; McGuinness, 1993). The previous research implied that there was great need for standardised training in the field of child protection. Therefore, results show that the current child protection system has its own strengths and deficiencies in the areas of training and staffing. This was also reflected in this studies conducted by Buckley & O’Nolan (2013) and Statham (2011) and recommendations made by Lord Laming (2009).

Some interviewees indicated that they were not being adequately equipped in terms of knowledge and expertise regarding child protection. They felt that they could not compare themselves with other professionals like teachers who were more knowledgeable on matters of child protection. They felt that teachers were better trained in child protection than others like the Gardaí. The previous research also supported that though some agencies managed to conduct structured training based on professionals’ capacity gaps, others failed to do so due to lack of resources (Gibbons, 2010). The problem with this is that professionals may then lack confidence when they are delivering services. As a result, they become less committed to do their work. The finding is, therefore, significant since it has revealed the deficit which, if addressed in time, child protection service delivery will be greatly improved in relation to the Gardaí in particular.

Participants further felt that the Gardaí need to be receiving in-service ongoing training which incorporate emerging issues. The researcher find this as another significant finding considering that there are so many reforms that have taken place and continue to do so. In this way, the Gardaí will be able to acquire knowledge and relevant skills which will improve their service delivery. In the previous research, it was also observed that some workers and managers had child protection knowledge gap because they joined the agency a long time ago where they could not have the opportunity to be trained (Horwath, 2005; Brosnan, 2009; Gibbons, 2010).

The findings further indicate the strong recommendation for more specialised training to the Gardaí new laws and guidelines and in different areas like how to conduct interviews with

children and issues of drug abuse and neglect. It was further hinted that more members of staff should be trained since there were more referrals now. Plach (2008) and Jefferies (2014) both agreed on the need for specialised knowledge and expertise at both agency and multi-agency levels in the area of investigations. Previous studies stressed that special consideration should focus on career development and skill acquisition in areas of interviewing children, special investigative techniques, and many others (Brosnan, 2009; Pence & Wilson, 1992).

Lord Laming (2009) made a range of recommendations to address the deficiency of basic training, ongoing training and even specialised training. Examples of trainings suggested by Lord Laming (2009) included the understanding of normal child development, recognising potential signs of abuse and neglect and how to best talk and listen to children who are often in distress. The training packages were recommended for the United Kingdom, but are also relevant to the suggestions that have been made as part of the findings for the Irish child protection system (House of Commons Health Committee, 2003).

The results further reveal the deficiency in staffing levels with a recommendation to increase staff working on child protection referrals. In addition, interviewees pointed out that even when the Gardaí are allocated with a child protection case to deal with. One case may be handled by different Gardaí at different times. The implication of this is that a particular child abuse and neglect referral cannot have the same focus since each Gardaí may have their specific expertise and understanding of the same case. As a result, a referral may not be handled to the full satisfaction of the service users.

The findings further reveal that TUSLA staff is over-stretched since they have so many referrals to attend to. In such a scenario, it has been observed that social workers may have limited time to handle child abuse and neglect referrals. Interviewees recommended that each case should be given enough time. A similar observation was made in the previous studies that professionals in most agencies are over-stretched by the case-loads and fail to meet the demands (Lord Laming, 2009; House of Commons Health Committee, 2003; Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; McGuinness, 1993). In this case, it may be important to recruit

more social workers who need to be given a specific number of child abuses and neglect cases which can be allocated more time and be handled adequately.

In addition interviewees felt that Garda stations require more dedicated Garda unit to deal with child abuse and neglect referrals. This unit, according to the Gardaí participating in the research interviews, is supposed to have officers who are more competent to deal with all issues of child protection as it is being done with victim support services unit. The findings reveal that such a unit already exists at the national level with a specific child protection coordinator. It would, therefore, just be decentralised to the Garda stations. Horwath (2005) also indicated that staff levels need to be reviewed with particular consideration on having designated staff to meet the overwhelming demand of referrals.

The literature further observed that most agencies have tended to assign child protection duties to staff who are untrained and non-designated staff (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Gibbons, 2010). It has been strongly pointed out in literature that this trend has tended to undermine workers confidence when they are assigned on duties to which they have little or no expertise (Horwath, 2005). As a result, collaboration among partner agencies do not work since newly assigned workers do not know who to contact and work with on particular cases (Gibbons, 2010; Horwath, 2005).

In relation to resources, it was clear from the findings that more resources are still needed specifically for social work department. The results indicate that since there are several referrals now, there is need for shelter, health facilities and other resources. Even the previous research has shown that institutional infrastructure has mostly been a challenge for child protection work (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Horwath, 2005; Gibbons, 2010). The previous studies have particularly indicated that relevant infrastructure like office space, technology, mobility, child friendly facilities for case management and in-transit shelters were needed (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013; Horwath, 2005; House of Commons Health Committee, 2003; McGuinness, 1993). The implication is that each station will have the unit with specialised child protection officers, headed by the station child protection coordinator

and specialised equipment to suit the environment of children who have been abused or neglected.

In relation to the evaluation of method, the researcher was successful in obtaining rich qualitative data from the five participants. This was possible because it was not difficult to access the research participants when appointments were made. However, access of the research participants required flexibility in organising dates and time to conduct the interviews due to different shifts when they could be available for work. This, however, did not bring any negative effects to the quality of data collected. The space of time between each interview further helped in data analysis and also increased the researcher's familiarity with the data.

The research process was also not affected by any environmental issues since all the research interviews were conducted in quiet, locked up and acceptable rooms without any disturbances. The study was initially planned to interview five research participants who were all accessed. The researcher further made it possible to build rapport with the participants when undertaking these interviews which emerged as a very successful aspect of the study. Many of the participants reported that they enjoyed taking part in the study and expected to see the results.

The researcher's background in the field of child and youth care and police work in general was viewed as a benefit to the study. Participants were encouraged to speak freely after they learnt about the background of the researcher. This also enabled the researcher to understand the concepts and issues that emerged during the research interviews. This also made the researcher to be consciously aware of the importance of being unbiased or to be seen not to take sides with the interviewees throughout the research process. The voluntary nature of the study and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality further enabled the research participants to talk freely and provide information since they were told that the findings of the study would only be used for the research purposes as stipulated in the information sheets given to them (see Appendix I).

The semi-structured interview questions helped the participants to be open enough to expand on certain issues which could hardly be achieved using other data collection tools. For example, after data was collected using the semi-structured open-ended questions, the analysis was done in a multi-faceted process. Firstly, each transcribed interview was coded to generate the themes. The generated coded themes were compared several times across each interview on question by question basis. Most of the themes ran across all interview questions which were designed to generate findings for the four research questions. The data revealed the general perceptions of changes introduced, participants understanding of the procedures, and strengths of the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) procedures in child protection practice. Generally, support needed to staff, strengths observed in inter-agency working, deficiencies and recommendations made by interviewees emerged as part of the findings in inter-agency working.

The reliability of the findings in scientific methods of study, according to Hammersly (1992) includes the generalisation of the results as well as minimisation of bias. Miles & Huberman (1994) proposed the criteria assessing reliability in qualitative research which included clarity of research question, the importance of detailing the role and status of the researcher and collating of data according to the procedure set down in the research question. Franklin & Ballan (2001) specifically included examining participants' responses using standard probe questions or sub-questions to the research questions.

In the current study, the reliability of the research instrument which included the formulation and preparation of the interview schedule was also shown by the consistency of the responses given by the interviewees in most of the questions (Kilkenny, 2012; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). This was achieved through the use of standard probes to explore issues further and ensuring that research participants understood the questions (Kilkenny, 2012; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). The proper and efficient procedure for data collection which was followed by keeping of detailed records for each recorded interview, including transcripts which were in form of verbatim added the reliability of the findings (Kilkenny, 2012; Franklin & Ballan, 2001). The use of verbatim transcripts to accurately capture data from

participants' views and the use of relevant quotes from the research participants to support the findings both assisted in increasing validity of the results [Kilkenny, 2012].

Good records management emerged generally as strength in all the research questions, with none of the interviews citing it as a deficiency. However, questionnaires or viewing of the actual data could further capture details of the actual information recorded to see the quality of data recorded. Future research can, therefore, take care of this, since it was not the focus of the current study.

Another limitation of this study involved generalisation of the results. The study was conducted using a sample of five police officers which was also drawn from one Garda station. The interviews were also conducted within a particular time frame. Therefore the findings reflect a limited sample, at one Garda station within a limited amount of time which would be difficult to draw some generalisations. For example, due to high levels of case-loads and the problem of staffing, the answers to the questions repeatedly indicated the need for more staff that would need more training and specialised training for the existing staff. Increased sample could further highlight more areas where specialised training was needed. However, probing questions helped the researcher to get areas where there were more training needs.

Further research should, therefore, target the issue of expanding and engaging a bigger sample than the current study and involving a number of Garda stations across the country. The reliability of the interview schedule and the sample was, however, evident since all responses given reflected the general perceptions of the Gardaí on their experiences in child protection, the strengths and deficiencies in the system. The procedure used in data collection add to the reliability of the results, where interviews were conducted separately and in a locked interview room, but still produced consistent results. This shows that the procedure used managed to minimize the bias of their responses.

Specifically, both the previous and current studies identified some strengths and deficiencies in inter-agency working in terms of information sharing. Future research could look at

whether service users perceive improved access to child protection services and speed of response by the Gardaí. For the Gardaí, research could also focus on whether they feel that they have better understanding of children's needs. Researchers could also inquire on the issues of duplication of services in Ireland, increased work-load and increased demand for services.

Another interesting area could be to explore the Gardaí's views on the other factors that are likely to facilitate inter-agency working apart from clarity of roles and responsibilities, strong personal relationships and trust between partners. In the area of child protection conferences, there is a strong need to inquire from the Gardaí, not only on the more barriers to their participation, but also factors that can facilitate active participation. This could extend to conducting an inquiry on professional education at advanced levels like colleges/universities. There is also a strong need for conducting research specifically to seek the Gardaí's views on their experiences with other agencies like the courts and their interaction with staff in child protection court proceedings.

To summarise, the section has outlined the summary of findings based on themes of inter-agency working, records management, confidentiality and accountability during child protection conferences, training of staff in child protection and resources, and access to services during out-of-work hours. The discussion of findings have also been included based on the key themes that emerged in the results showing a variety of strengths, deficiencies and recommendations made in different themes. Each of the findings has shown to be in line with the related to the previous research. The key implications of some of the results to policy and practice have been discussed. An evaluation of the methodologies has shown both the strengths, weaknesses and limitations experienced in generating the findings in terms of the sample and procedure used in the study. Suggestions for the future research have been made focussing on getting perceptions of the Gardaí in the areas of inquiry to improve inter-agency working and capacity building for the Gardaí. The following sub-section gives the overall summary, conclusion and recommendations made based on the current study.

6.0 OVERALL SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Overall summary and conclusion

The findings show progress has been made so far in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* (DMCYA, 2011) in terms of the introduction of clear procedures, roles and responsibilities and some degree of information sharing which have promoted multi-agency working. The Gardaí have also received some training in child protection. The results have further indicated proper records management and allocation of some resources to key agencies.

However, the evidence is mixed in that there is need for more information sharing, provision of services during out-of-work hours and more staff to reduce over-stretching of social work services. A Garda child protection unit and specialised training was suggested.

The results of this study supported the previous study findings and recommendations made for improvement. All these positive outcomes show that they have managed to set out and improve child protection practices among agencies who work with children and young people. However, the researcher also feels that the outlined deficiencies have not had the priority they deserve and need to be addressed.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researcher makes some recommendation. The government should consider strengthening the existing information sharing protocols during the child protection case conference in the *Children First Guidance of 2011* to ensure that agency members who attend such meetings should feel free to make significant contributions. The government should ensure that the national out-of-work hours child protection service be put in place so that there is an appropriate response among all agencies to all child protection and welfare matters. This shall help the Gardaí to place all children who are at risk of being abused or have been abused and neglected to an appropriate safe place. Such places can be approved foster homes with foster parents.

The government should consider taking an action on increasing the number of social workers to ensure they are not over-stretched with large case-loads of child protection referrals. The government should develop guidelines that set out the maximum number of case-loads of child protection referrals to be allocated to child protection workers. The guidelines should also reflect on the complexity of cases which will ultimately dictate the number of cases to be allocated to a social worker.

The Gardaí should consider establishing a designated child protection Garda unit with an allocation of dedicated staff who are well trained in dealing with children who have been or face the harm of being abused and neglected. The Gardai should also consider providing more initial training to new staff allocated to child protection work, regular in-service for all the ongoing changes taking place in the field of child protection and specialised training to staff who already work on child protection issues.

The agencies should also consider working with higher education institutions to develop specialised tailor made programmes in order to train agency staff based on the educational needs of such agencies. The education institutions should also consider sending their students to the agencies on statutory child protection work placements at a certain level of their training.

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8.0 APPENDICES

I. Information Sheet



A study of the experiences of police officers/Gardaí when dealing with child protection referrals and the child protection system in Ireland

My name is Darlington Akambadi, a Masters of Arts in Child and Youth Care student at Athlone Institute of Technology.

I would like to ask you some questions in your child protection work experience, the areas of improvement that need to be considered and any other comments on your daily work as Garda in relation to the child protection system in Ireland. I intend to use the information to write a dissertation which is in partial fulfilment of my studies at Athlone Institute of Technology.

I will ask about your perceptions on the current Irish child protection system with reference to *Children First Guidance of 2011*. The deficiencies and strengths in the Irish child protection system will be explored and as well any recommendations you might make in terms of improving the system for children, families and professionals.

The interview will last for 45 minutes and will take place here at the station. I will only ask you about your work experiences and child protection. Your name, names of the other police officers and the station will not be in the study. If you would like to take part, please read the consent form below and sign your name.

You should also take note of the following telephone numbers in case of any difficult personal professional experiences: 1800666666 (Child Line), 1800477477, 0871506099 and

018550022 (National Counselling Helpline Service) and 1800666111 (Garda Confidential Telephone Number) and Employee Assistance Officer, Mobile No. 086-8282547.

Thank you.

II. Interview Schedule

A study of the experiences of police officers/Gardaí when dealing with child protection referrals and the child protection system in Ireland

1. Opening

- A. My name is Darlington Akambadi
- B. **Purpose:** I would like to ask you some questions dealing with child abuse referrals and the child protection system in Ireland. I intend to use the information to write a dissertation which in partial fulfilment of my studies at Athlone Institute of Technology.
- C. **Timeline:** This interview is scheduled to take about 45 minutes. If you are ready to be interviewed, we can start now.
- D. **Your Personal Details:** Name, Rank, Years of Service, Field of Service

2. Interviews questions

- (i) From your point of view, what, if any, are there changes you have experienced in your work to the adoption of *Children First Guidance of 2011*?
- (ii) Do you feel the *Children First Guidance of 2011* gives you a clear understanding of procedures on child protection?
- (iii) What are the strengths of the Children First Guidance procedures in terms of child protection practice in your opinion?
- (iv) What is your experience of working with other agencies (social workers, teachers, health personnel etc.) regarding protecting children?
- (v) Do you feel other agencies (social workers, teachers, health personnel etc) are adequately resourced around child protection concerns?
- (vi) What have been your experiences of child protection case conferences that you have attended?
- (vii) Do you feel that you are adequately equipped to work with other agencies on child protection matters?

(viii) What type of support is useful to be provided to staff working in child protection?

(ix) What do you believe are the strengths in the Irish child protection system?

(x) In your opinion, what deficiencies are there in the Irish child protection system?

(xi) What, if any, recommendations do you have on improvements that could be to the Irish child protection system?

3. **Closing**

I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Thank you.

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III. Consent Form



A study of the experiences of police officers/Gardaí when dealing with child protection referrals and the child protection system in Ireland

My name is Darlington Akambadi. I am studying Master of Arts in Child and Youth Care at Athlone Institute of Technology. My thesis is on the experiences of police officers/Gardaí when dealing with child protection referrals and the child protection system in Ireland. I write to seek for your consent to take part in the interviews for the study. If you take part you will not be named in the report and your agency will also not be named. You can change your mind and terminate your involvement of the study if you want to.

Do you consent to take part in the interviews?

YES: NO:

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Do you further consent to be audio taped as long as the tapes will be destroyed after the study by 21st September, 2015?

YES: NO:

Signed: _____ Date: _____