



MUNRO, TURNELL & MURPHY  
Child Protection Consulting



# TUSLA Parent Survey Overview Report

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TUSLA

An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

## Foreword

As part of the Agency's on-going Transformation Programme, where the delivery and implementation of Signs of Safety as the National Approach to Practice, provides a key driver for change, it is with great pleasure that the first Tusla Parent Survey Overview Report has been published.

The implementation of the Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022 is underway. The strategy sets out to transform Ireland's child protection and welfare services. The Signs of Safety model is being implemented as our national approach to practice. The Signs of Safety reflects our best practice principles, which are fundamentally underpinned by the principles of 'Children First'. Children and families will be at the centre of assessment and decision making and the approach will be strengths-based, evidence-based and outcome-focused.

Seeking feedback, and acting on that feedback, is a key corporate objective for the Agency. We have invested significantly in the development of a number of programmes, strategies and initiatives that facilitate the voice of service users to inform our policies and practices. As part of the PPFS Programme, for example, we have invested in a Parental Participation Programme that provides for a range of collaborative initiatives to involve parents in partnerships, programmes and family support. This Programme's work continues to be embedded into the operations of the Agency and further investment in a Service User Feedback team in our QA Directorate continues to demonstrate the Agency's values in this regard.

In our Child Protection and Welfare operational environment, we also endeavor to hear the voice of parents and guardians, as well as children and young people, in our work. This parent survey is the first time the Agency has taken a formalised research approach to ascertain the views of parents and guardians in receipt of child protection and welfare services. The survey considers the relationships between parents and social workers and invites parents to comment on what they would like to change about working with social workers. This survey is one component of an action research project, led by Tusla's National Research Office in support of hearing from children, parents and staff about the implementation of the Child Protection and Welfare Strategy and the Signs of Safety National Practice approach.

While the numbers of parents and guardians who responded to the survey are small, I am grateful to those participants who responded, as their feedback is invaluable as we continue to embed the Child Protection and Welfare Strategy. There are many findings from the study to consider, and I am encouraged to see that our social work staff are considered to be a positive resource in the lives of parents and children who need our services but that there are also issues to consider to strengthen trust and relationship-based practices with parents and guardians.

This report will be considered across the Agency, and the key messages will be disseminated across our workforce.

I would like to thank our social work staff for assisting in the administration of this survey and to all other staff who conducted the survey over the phone. I would also like to thank Professor Eileen Munro for providing her expertise in preparing for this survey and for producing this report.

Mr Jim Gibson, Chief Operations Officer, Tusla

## Executive Summary

The aim of this survey of parents currently receiving a service from Tusla child protection social work is to understand more about their experiences of the relationship with their worker. In particular, to find out whether they are experiencing the kind of working relationship that is the goal in Signs of Safety practice.

The survey was run in November 2018 – January 2019. To ensure parents can give free and informed consent, they are first given details of the survey by their social worker during a specified period and subsequently phoned by an independent person who administers the survey if the parent(s) consent. From 187 names received from social workers, 111 parents gave their consent and completed the survey. This response rate of 59% can be considered acceptable to produce representative findings though the sample might be biased if social workers handed the survey to a non-random minority of their families they saw in the specified time frame and not to all as they were requested to do.

The comments that parents made in answer to the two final open-ended questions amplify the experiences behind these results. The questions were ‘If you could change one thing about how your worker is working with you, what would it be?’ and ‘Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about how your worker worked with your family?’ In terms of what parents would like to change, the biggest group of responses (45) were ‘nothing’, with 22 parents choosing to add a complimentary remark such as *‘My worker she was so brilliant one of the best people I ever met in my life. She was so calm she knows her job’*. The compliments generally illustrated how much parents notice and appreciate workers’ commitment to helping them solve problems. Difficulties in contacting their worker and wanting more information and involvement featured in many critical responses. A small but worrying number complained that their worker was dishonest. 70% of parents felt they were involved in making plans, but it would be desirable to improve this percentage. The reliability of Tusla social workers was very good with 80.1% of parents agreeing. Work with children also came out as very good, 87.3% of parents agreeing that their worker spends time with their child/ren and listens to them, and 77.3% feeling that the worker made sure the child/ren understood what was happening.

## 1. Survey design

As part of Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare Strategy, 2017-2022, Signs of Safety has been adopted as a national practice model for all social work services.

The survey asks questions relating to factors in the working alliance that have been identified as contributing to successful helping relationships (Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Wampold & Imel, 2015). These are embedded in the principles and disciplines of Signs of Safety but are widely aspired to in social work generally and so it seemed reasonable to find out whether or not parents were experiencing these factors. Key factors are: how well they understand professionals' concern, whether they feel listened to, whether they feel their social workers sees the positives in their family, whether they agree with the aims of the work, and whether children have been involved well.

The survey is administered to a random sample of families receiving a service from Tusla and is comprised of an attitude questionnaire with parents asked to respond to statements about their experience of their social worker on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There are also two open-ended questions designed to gather more qualitative feedback about their experiences:

- Q1. If you could change one thing about how your worker is working with you, what would it be?
- Q2. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about how your worker worked with your family?

An explanation of the survey was given to parents with a copy of the survey so that they understood its rationale and could give or withhold informed consent. Key messages conveyed to the parents were that they may refuse to complete the survey at any point, that the information they give will be confidential, and their social worker will not see their responses. The responses were entered in Survey Monkey in anonymised form and given to Munro, Turnell & Murphy for analysis.

Social workers working in child protection duty/intake teams across the country were asked to handout the survey and the explanatory letter during a specified period. An independent person who works for Tusla but is not part of social work services then phoned the parents and asked if they were willing to complete the survey.

A total of 187 parents consented to be contacted by telephone and their names were passed to the independent person who made the phone calls. Of those, 76 could not be contacted after three attempts; the remaining 111 gave consent and completed the survey. This gives a reasonably good response rate of 59% for the findings to be considered representative though with the caution that social workers may have distributed the survey to a biased sample.

Fuller details of the survey administration and questions are available in Appendices A and B.

## 2. Survey results

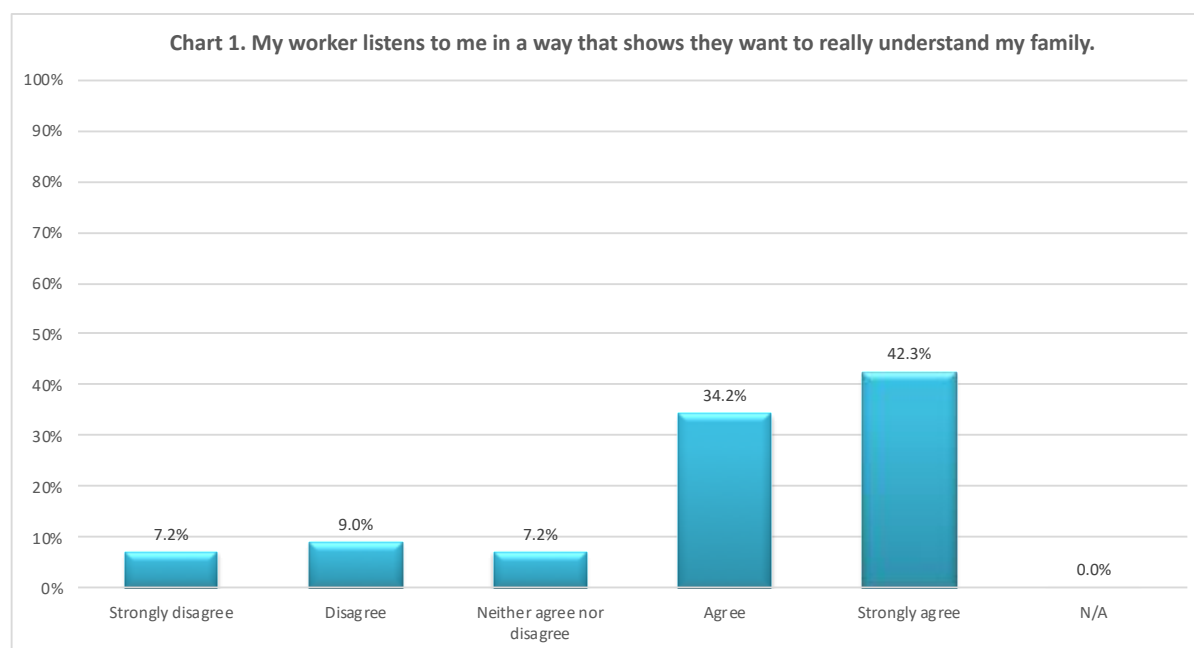
Respondents were given a series of statements about their experience of working with their social worker and asked to rate on a 5-point scale how much they agreed with each statement. In the discussion of the results 'agree' and 'strongly agree' are combined as a positive result and 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' are combined as a negative result.

In line with good research practice, the survey asked questions in a random order but in order to discuss them here, they are re-organised into their underlying themes. Constructive working relationships between professionals and family members are a core principle of Signs of Safety and most of the questions (1-7) relate to aspects of these: whether parents feel listened to, whether they agree with the social worker about concerns, whether they understand what the social worker is saying and find him/her reliable and whether they feel the social worker wants them to succeed. Questions 8 and 9 relate to how much the children are involved both in terms of whether the social worker listens to them and explains what is happening to them.

In reporting the findings, no details are included that might identify the parent, the worker or the office location. In reporting the quantitative data, responses of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' were combined and are reported as 'positive' answers. Similarly, 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' were combined as 'negative' answers. Some positive and negative comments from parents to the final open-ended questions are added to illustrate the kind of experiences or views that lead to the responses in the table.

### 1. My worker listens to me in a way that shows they want to really understand my family.

The first question relates to the complaint found in many studies that parents feel the social worker does not listen to what they say, that they arrive with their minds already made up (e.g. Maiter, Palmer, & Manji, 2006; Stanley, Miller, & Richardson Foster, 2012). In this survey 76.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their social worker listens to them, while 16.2% disagreed.



<b>Chart 1</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	8	7.2
Disagree	10	9.0
Neither agree nor disagree	8	7.2
Agree	38	34.2
Strongly agree	47	42.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>99.9<sup>1</sup></b>

In the open ended questions asked at the end of the survey, 11 comments from parents specifically mentioned the importance of feeling understood. Six of the comments were positive and 5 were negative. Examples of both are:

**Positive comments:**

*She just sat down and asked me questions about what was going on and I was able to talk to her and able to say what I needed to say, and she understood me 100% and was able to work with me.*

*He's sound. He listens and 'understands'.*

*I wouldn't change anything, she's real nice and always listens and strongly understands everything we have talked about*

**Negative comments from parents who did not feel understood:**

*That she would have listened and taken on board what the children and I were saying.*

*The worker could have listened to me more at the meetings. People are nervous at meetings. There should be someone independent to support parent in meetings.*

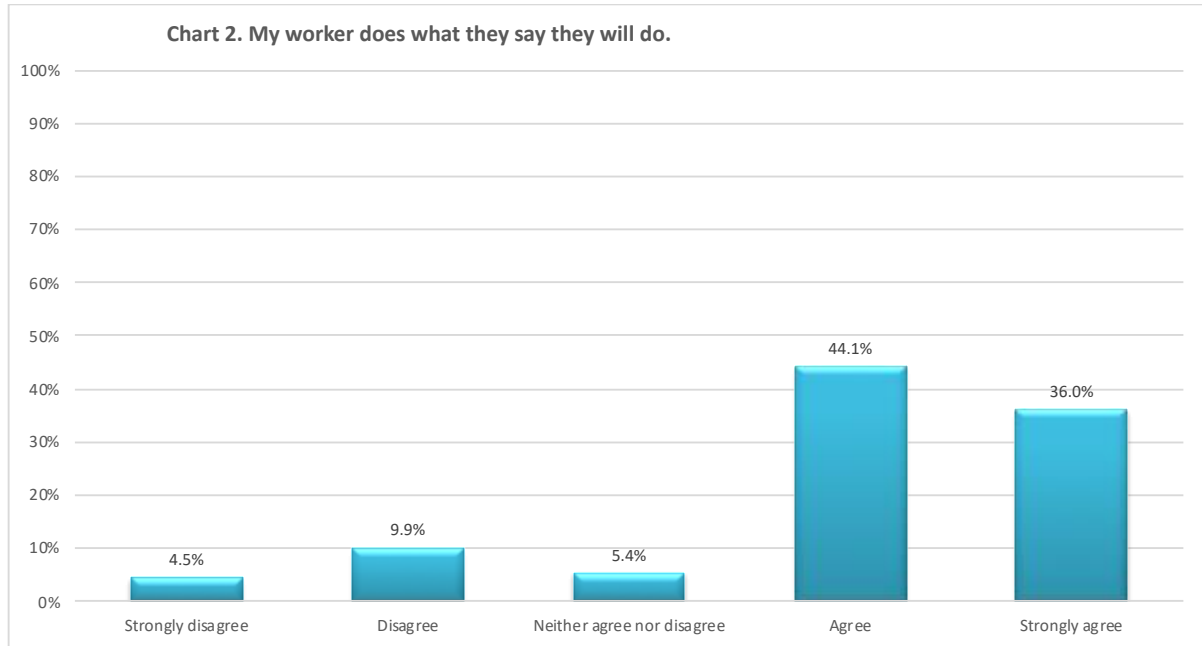
*I feel they should listen a little more instead of sometimes painting their own picture or making assumptions. Sometimes too quick to judge*

**2. My worker does what they say they will do.**

The unreliability of social workers is a common complaint in the literature (e.g. Roskill, Featherstone, Ashley, & Haresnape, 2008; Trotter, 2002) but responses to the statement in question 2 show that the majority of respondents in this survey find their social worker reliable with 80.1% agreeing and 14.4% disagreeing.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that percentages are rounded up or down throughout the report.



<b>Chart 2</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	5	4.5
Disagree	11	9.9
Neither agree nor disagree	6	5.4
Agree	49	44.1
Strongly agree	40	36
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>99.9</b>

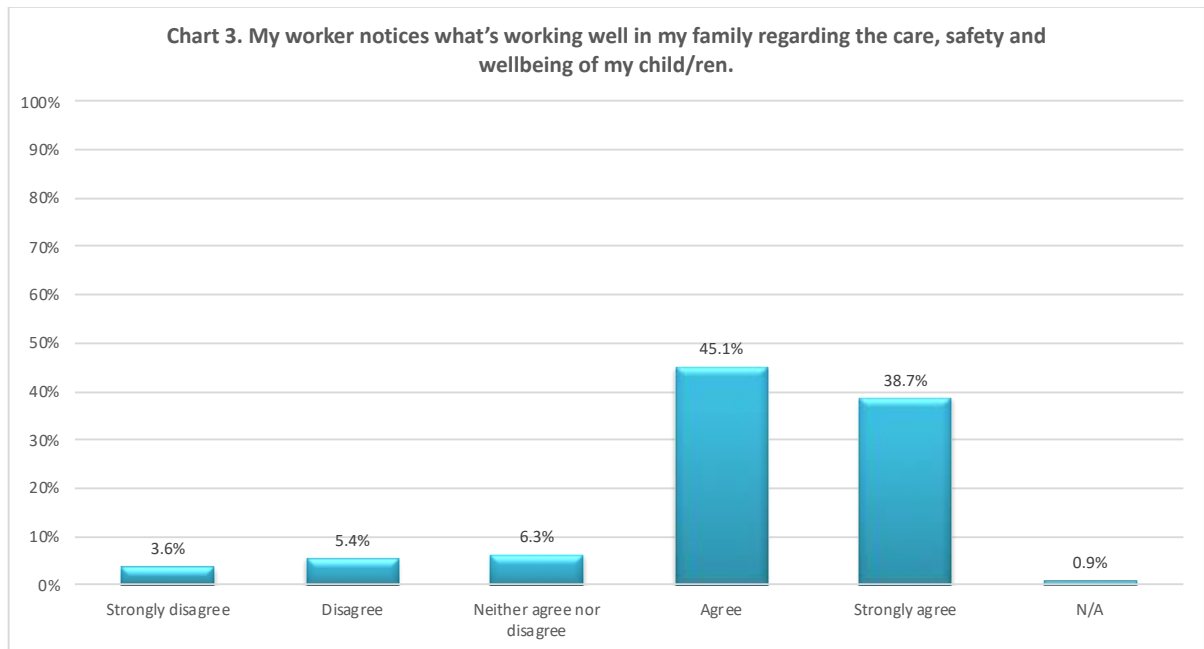
One example of unreliability was offered:

*More help, my social worker does not call back when I call her, she does not care for my child and me.*

One parent had a different take on this: *They should do what I want them to do*

### **3. My worker notices what's working well in my family regarding the care, safety and wellbeing of my child/ren.**

The third question reflects a key principle of Signs of Safety (and of social work in general) that assessments should be balanced, paying attention to what is working well as well as what is worrying. To this question, 83.8% of respondents gave a positive response and 9% were negative.

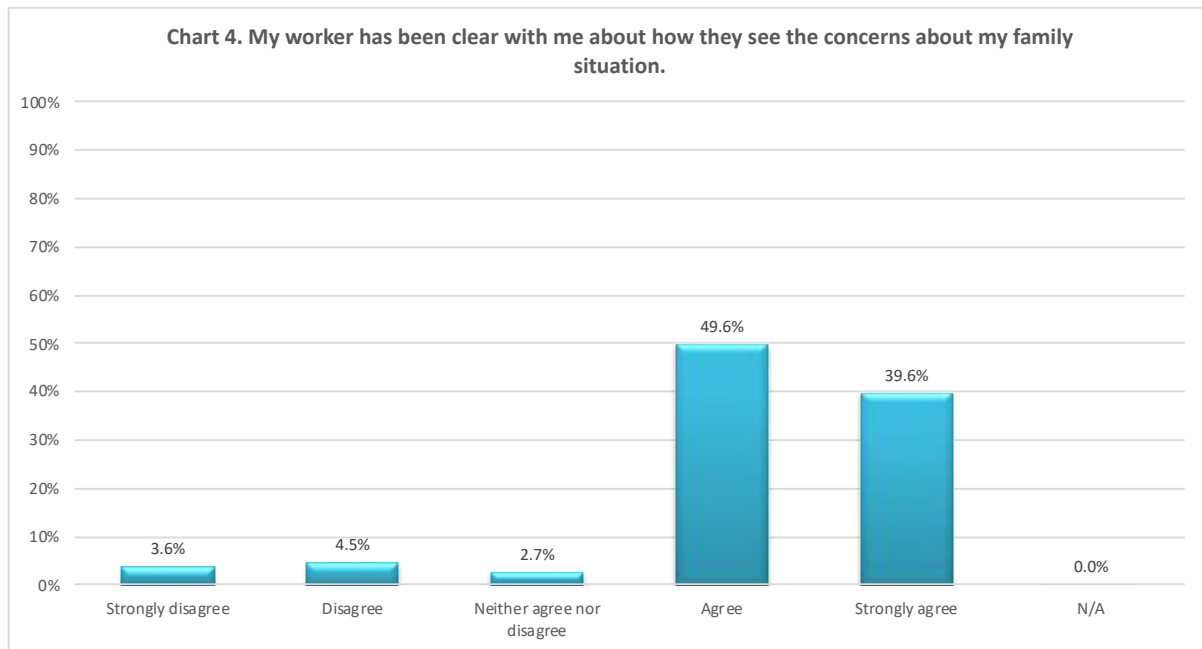


<b>Chart 3</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	4	3.6
Disagree	6	5.4
Neither agree nor disagree	7	6.3
Agree	50	45.1
Strongly agree	43	38.7
Not applicable	1	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100</b>

**4. My worker has been clear with me about how they see the concerns about my family situation.**

This question relates to how clearly the social worker is communicating with the parents and, again, this captures a key discipline of Signs of Safety. This statement received high levels of positive responses - 89.2%- and only 8.1% negative.



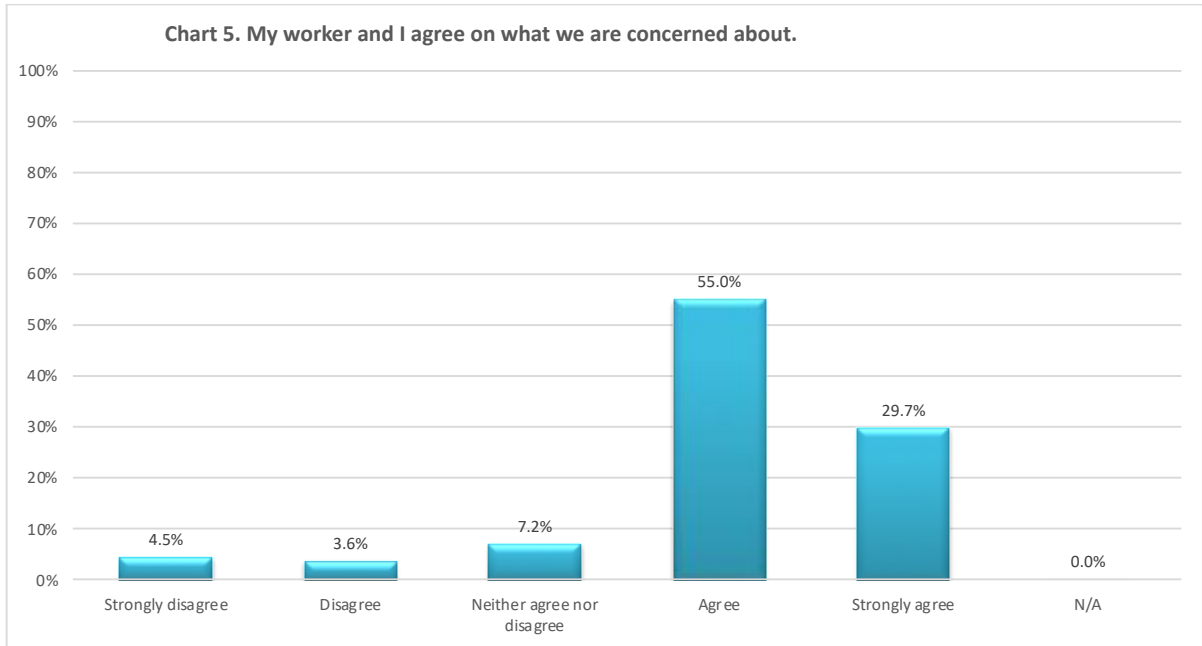


<b>Chart 4</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	4	3.6
Disagree	5	4.5
Neither agree nor disagree	3	2.7
Agree	55	49.6
Strongly agree	44	39.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100</b>

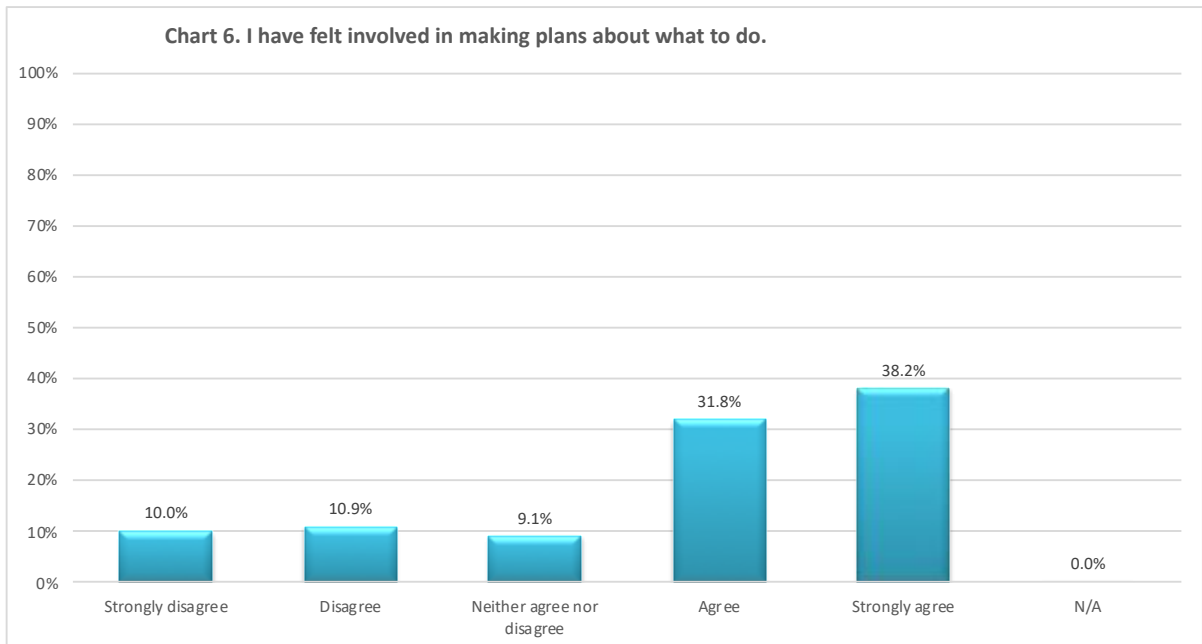
**5. My worker and I agree on what we are concerned about.**

**6. I have felt involved in making plans about what to do.**

Questions 5 and 6 capture the extent to which parents are involved in planning and agree with social workers on what they are concerned about. Research evidence suggests that agreement is a key factor in effective practice (e.g. Featherstone, Fraser, Ashley, & Ledward, 2011; Thoburn, Lewis, & Shemmings, 1995). 84.7% of respondents said they agreed with their social worker’s concerns; and 70% felt they were involved in making plans. This latter figure is cause for concern and is an area where improvement should be a target.



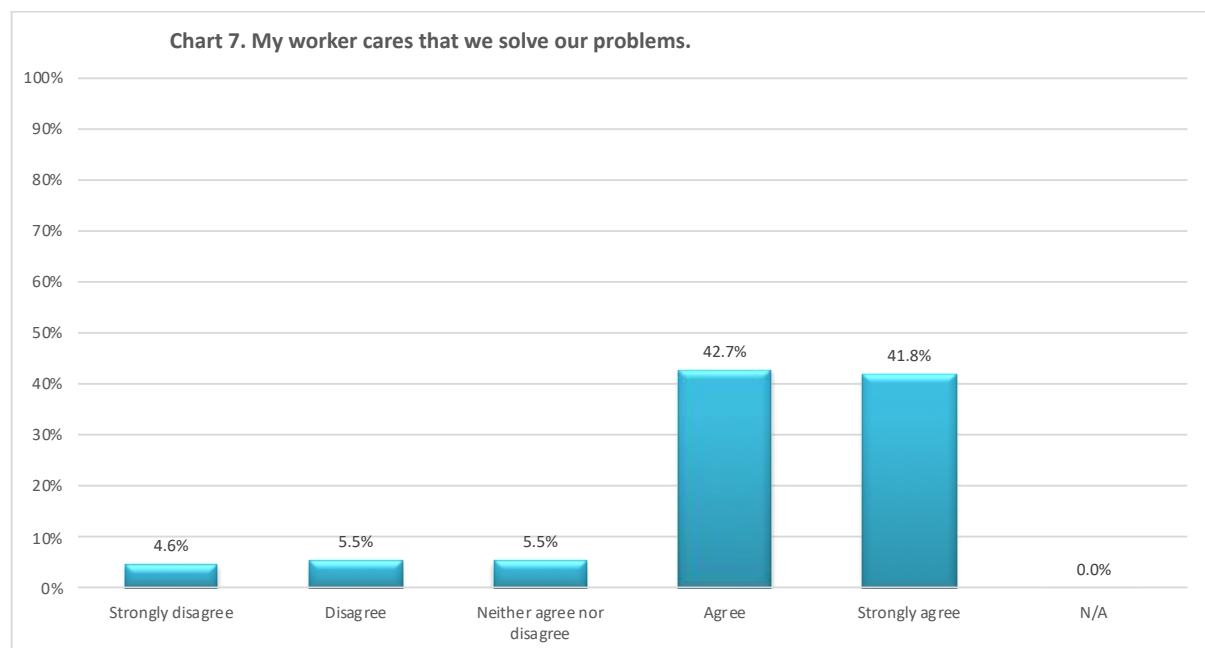
<b>Chart 5</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	5	4.5
Disagree	4	3.6
Neither agree nor disagree	8	7.2
Agree	61	55
Strongly agree	33	29.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100</b>



<b>Chart 6</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	11	10
Disagree	12	10.9
Neither agree nor disagree	10	9.1
Agree	35	31.8
Strongly agree	42	38.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100</b>

### 7. My worker cares that we solve our problems.

Another factor that contributes to effective work is that parents feel an emotional dimension to their relationship, with the social worker wanting them to do well (Crits-Christoph, Gibbons, & Mukherjee, 2013). The responses to question 7 achieved agreement from 84.5% of respondents and disagreement from only 10.1%.



<b>Chart 7</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	5	4.6
Disagree	6	5.5
Neither agree nor disagree	6	5.5
Agree	47	42.7
Strongly agree	46	41.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.1</b>

*We were blessed with both workers, they had genuine concern and passion for what they were doing.*

*She was a young girl, not long doing the job, as a young person who has not had kids herself, she really knew her job, went the extra distance to help, showed she was genuinely concerned to get the right outcome. She showed great enthusiasm for her job.*

Although only 10.1% gave negative answers to the survey question, negative comments were more common than positive in the open-ended questions suggesting that feeling that your worker does *not* care is something parents notice.

*The first social worker had no children of her own and had no compassion.*

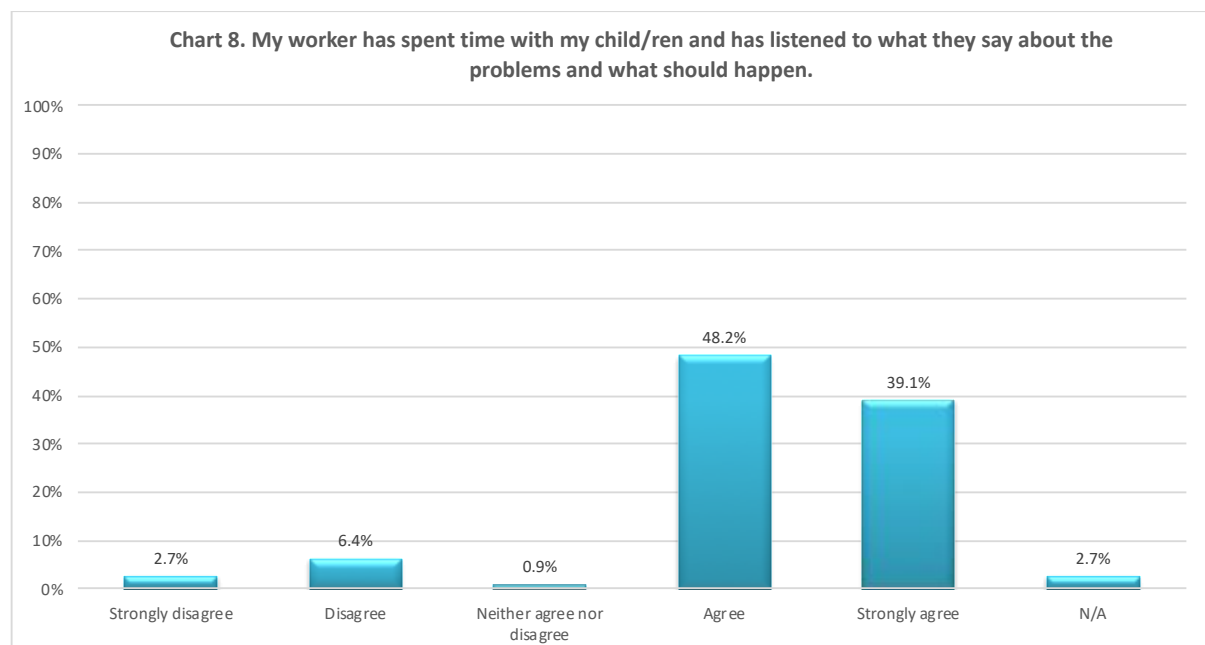
*More help, my social worker does not call back when I call her, she does not care for my child and me.*

*They do not like me much, I had conflict with 2 workers. I knew this because of their body language.*

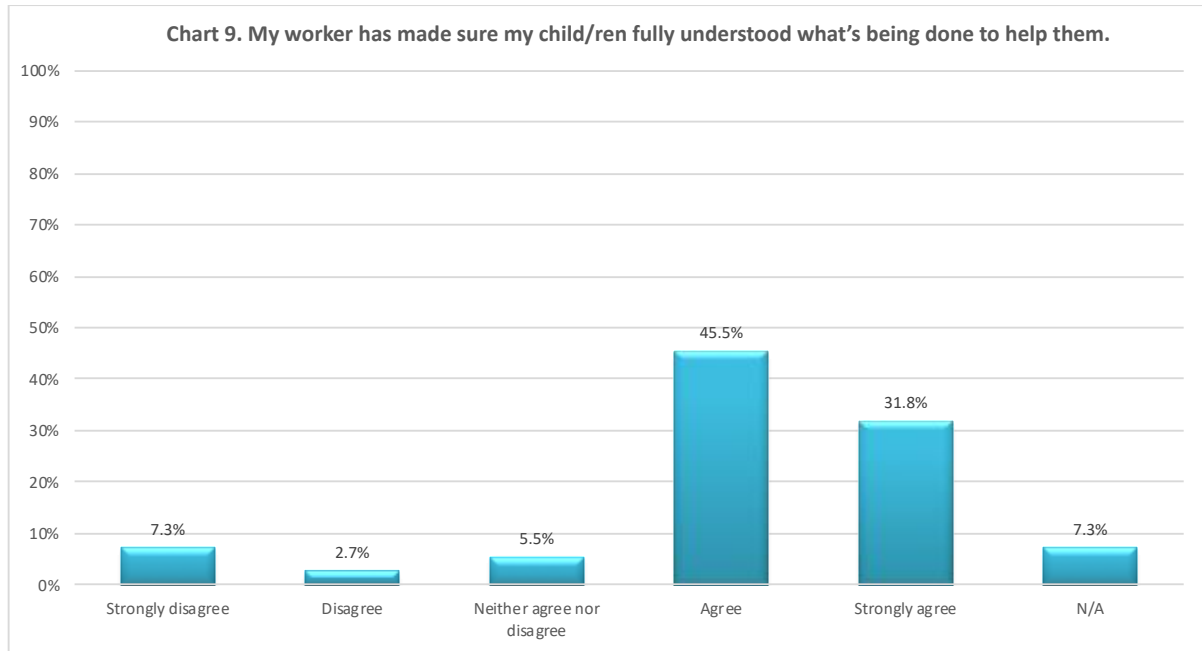
### **8. My worker has spent time with my child/ren and has listened to what they say about the problems and what should happen.**

### **9. My worker has made sure my child/ren fully understood what's being done to help them.**

The final two questions concern the involvement of children both in terms of listening to their point of view and in helping them understand what is happening. A 'not applicable' option is included in the response to these questions to reflect cases where parents indicated that the child was too young (or unable) to talk or understand. These questions received positive responses to Q8 from 87.3% of parents agreeing that their worker spends time with their child/ren and listens to them, and 77.3% to Q9 feeling that the worker made sure the child/ren understood what was happening.



<b>Chart 8</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	3	2.7
Disagree	7	6.4
Neither agree nor disagree	1	0.9
Agree	53	48.2
Strongly agree	43	39.1
Not Applicable	3	2.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100</b>



<b>Chart 9</b>	<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly disagree	8	7.3
Disagree	3	2.7
Neither agree nor disagree	6	5.5
Agree	50	45.5
Strongly agree	35	31.8
Not Applicable	8	7.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.1</b>

*I felt my social worker completely listened and more importantly when she spoke to my child she listened and understood. My child felt very happy with the support*

*The social worker I have now I can't complain, she does listen and puts the needs of the child first. She is the voice of the child, she is such an amazing social worker. I have social workers in the past, and I would have said that they didn't do their job right, social worker now is absolutely amazing.*

*I think every SW should be old school, basically they don't go in there thinking about what is best for them or involve themselves, they put the child first in every way. I believe old*

*school social work is the way forward as it is a child's life that is at risk, a parent will do or not do it.*

One negative comment was made, though another 3 were indirectly negative by commenting disapprovingly on social workers who did not have children themselves.

*I would like to see more interaction with one of my children in particular the younger one.*

### 3. Qualitative feedback

At the end of the survey, two open-ended questions gave respondents the opportunity to comment freely on their experience with their social worker.

Q1. If you could change one thing about how your worker is working with you, what would it be? Responses: 108

Q2. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about how your worker worked with your family? Responses: 94

The two sets of answers were analysed together because they covered similar themes. An inductive approach was taken, developing key themes from the patterns revealed in the data. There is no 'right' analysis and another analyst with different background knowledge and interests might see other patterns in the data. When numbers are quoted in the form 'X number of parents said ...', then this captures the number of different people answering. Other numbers are compiled from both sets of answers and so may include two comments from the same parent. Some of the comments have already been reported when illustrating the survey questions but a sample of others is given below, organised according to the themes that were identified: compliments, more time, communication and involvement, honesty, comparing social workers, changes of social workers, other criticisms of social workers and criticisms of the agency.

It is worth remembering that parents are given no guidance on what to comment on so their choice of topics give some idea of what matters most to them in both good and bad ways. The answers reveal predominantly positive views of their social workers but, in reporting the results, a disproportionate number of negative comments are included because parents expressed more diverse negative views, a variation on Tolstoy's comment: "happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way".

#### 1. Nothing + compliment

In answer to the first question, 45 (41%) parents gave positive answers. 23 respondents just said they would change nothing but another 22 said this and then added something complimentary about their worker. Further examples of compliments are also included in the later thematic sections.

*We were blessed with both workers, they had genuine concern and passion for what they were doing.*

*Very able to see through the bullshit and able to get to the core issues recognising and dealing with those issues. They move very swiftly in terms of support. Established trust at the start and maintained it with [agency name]. I welcome their involvement.*

*Nothing. She is the best Social Worker I have had. She has bent over backwards to help in any way she can.*

*When I look back at things when things were very bad, I was difficult to deal with especially my language at times. However, they (social workers) stuck with me, they knew I was in a bad place at the time and I really appreciate that. My kids now know that the social workers & Garda are there to help and do their job and keep children safe.*

*Worker is perfect, good, helpful and supportive. Honestly very happy with my worker, blends his professional and personal very well.*

*I would change absolutely nothing. She has been great.*

*Don't think there is anything for this social worker. She is really good, reliable and does what she says. Her communication is good.*

*She did a wonderful job. She is very direct which is really positive and is the way I like to work with people. No hidden agenda, everything is out in the open.*

*I don't think I would, she's up front and honest, she does what she says she will do.*

*I feel relaxed around her and she doesn't make me feel uncomfortable like other people have done. She's not judgemental.*

## **2. More time**

Wanting more time with their social worker featured in 5 comments:

*If she could contact me more often and get me help*

*Closed off too quickly by the social work department*

*More communication. I always have to be the one who calls. Not enough time spent with children to really get to know them.*

*If they say they are going to do something do it in a good time not take for ever and also give the fathers equal attention and more help.*

*To have more contact with the worker. More contact might help to nip more issues in the bud.*

## **3. Communication and involvement.**

29 answers related to the quality of communication and the parent's feeling of being involved in what was being done by professionals. The comments on lack of involvement illustrate the finding that only 70% felt involved in making plans.

Four respondents made positive comments about communication, for example:

*She is really good, reliable and does what she says. Her communication is good.*

*She treats us all like family, she makes us feel comfortable, so I can speak to her about concerns.*

The other 25 comments, however, were critical. Some complained of the practical difficulties of communicating with their worker:

*It would be helpful to have access to mobile phone numbers for social workers as it is difficult to get through to offices and I am embarrassed talking to the receptionist at times.*

*Communication and Contact – That's the biggest thing, it is very hard to get in touch, messages left, and I don't hear back for two or three weeks, it is similar for the foster carers*

*I would like to be able to email direct with my social worker and also receive a reply from my social worker in email form to have something in writing. The only time I get something in writing from my social worker is in relation to appointments everything else is through telephone contact.*

Some wanted more communication and involvement:

*More communication.*

*That they communicated a bit better. I get quite a few calls from [agency name]. Better internal communication.*

*Liaise more frequently. give a bit more information about the end goals from their point of view.*

*I feel that they could have been a bit more proactive about getting in touch. They said they were looking at a possible placement break down but then left me to it. I felt they haven't talked to me about the problems I've been having.*

*I think communication. I can't always get hold of her because she's sick or in court. She forgets to ring me back and I get that she's busy and there's a lot going on, but I'm focussed on my situation. Maybe she needs to be more organised.*

*To have more communication with me about the situation. More involvement in what is going on, feel like I have been pushed away.*

*A little bit more communication, sometimes we hadn't heard from her for a long period of time, confused about what's happening next, more house visits.*

*More communication. I always have to be the one who calls.*

*Keep me informed a bit more too.*

#### **4. Honesty**

Six comments related to the honesty of the worker, two positive and four negative.

*She did a wonderful job. She is very direct which is really positive and is the way I like to work with people. No hidden agenda, everything is out in the open.*

*Nothing - My social worker is helpful and honest*

Critical comments were:



*That the social worker could be more honest. My social worker lied to other professionals about my situation. She also lies to me and my partner.*

*The worker worked alright with us but said things to try split up my partner and me. They said things to me and didn't say them to my partner, when I brought up in front my partner they lied, but I had it recorded on my phone. They shouldn't try to determine people's relationships, they aren't there for that.*

*The fact that she lied and caused us severe heartache and pain and damage has been done that cannot be undone even though apologies have been given.*

## **5. Comparing social workers**

Five parents compared their current social worker favourably with previous ones:

*She should be recognised for the work she does she is doing a great job, far better experience than social workers I have had before. I would like her to be recognised and get this information to her.*

*The social worker I have now I can't complain, she does listen and puts the needs of the child first. She is the voice of the child, she is such an amazing social worker. I have social workers in the past, and I would have said that they didn't do their job right, social worker now is absolutely amazing.*

*My current social worker is very good. before social workers did not listen. we have had so many social workers involved in our lives that it has been difficult in terms of getting use difficult approaches and personalities.*

*The first SW, the way they did it, I disagree with a few things. The second social worker, she was great support, helped me get supports, wasn't full on, worked around it and explained the Safety Plan a bit better.*

## **6. Changes of social worker**

Frequent changes of social worker were not liked:

*Every month or two you get a new worker, you just get to know one and then you get another one, I am on my 3rd or 4th one.*

*I had an awful lot of different SWs, just got to know them and they are gone, had experiences with a couple of SWs that they were disastrous to work with, were not willing to compromise, held a sword over my head, struggled to get to access and was late twice and they changed the access to fortnightly.*

(At the end of a comment) *Staff changes have set things back also.*

## **7. Other criticisms of social workers**

Several negative comments do not fit into the main themes and are included in full here.

Others were:

*I feel they should listen a little more instead of sometimes painting their own picture or making assumptions. Sometimes too quick to judge*

*Sometimes, when I am waiting in the waiting room when I am waiting for my child to attend play therapy and there are other people walking up and down, she will pop her head around the door and start talking about things in public, I don't want this.*

*I think at the start I felt very pressurised in regards, I was away with family, they knew I was away, they could have eased off a little bit, I found them far forward*

*I wasn't happy at all. I felt pushed in to doing things I didn't want to do. I was threatened on two occasions that my children would be taken off me if I didn't do certain things*

*I think, sometimes they can come across intimidating. They could have worded things a bit differently, it came across like I murdered somebody. I felt a bit swamped and I stormed out, they need to take a step back and approach it in a different way.*

*I actually rang (the Agency) about the first SW because I was unhappy, felt she sided with the child's dad, was not aware of what is going on as I should have been as her mother. Also, this made the child unhappy and uncomfortable because I was not aware of what was going on and the child knew more than I knew.*

*To be honest I want them to go! Since the new social worker came on, only seen her twice in the last 2 to 3 months, that's perfect for me, there was a time they were coming night and day. I'm giving answers about 3 different social workers and the first one was fabulous, she listened and done everything with me.*

*If I had stood my ground more. It was her way or no way. My children were hard done by. My children ended up in worse places than what they were taken from. The worker could have listened to me more at the meetings. People are nervous at meetings. There should be someone independent to support parent in meetings.*

*If the worker could listen to both sides of the situation, sometimes they look to one direction and don't see the other secondary situation. I know their job is to protect the child but there is times where they need to listen to the other situation.*

*Probably change of social worker as I feel he doesn't work as well with me. He works more for my ex-partner. Always sees his point of view.*

*I feel that she has taken the parenting authority away from me and my partner*

## **8. Criticisms of the agency**

Some were critical of the agency but clearly not criticizing their own worker

*I wouldn't change the way me and my worker on the ground worked with me, she worked in the best interests of the children, felt that she was handcuffed by her superiors, by being told they were not meeting thresholds*

*It's impossible to fault her. She is curtailed by her workload. More time with her would be great. It is not a criticism of her but of the system.*

*[want to change] meeting thresholds, knew that my children were in a lot of danger, her superiors were not allowing her to do anything, that was the biggest breakdown with the system in (the Agency).*

*If I could change one thing it would be that when someone makes an allegation and it is cleared, then the person who brought it that there should be some follow up about the need to have some accountability on the other side.*

*I think things could have moved an awful lot quicker, I have been working with [agency name] for a number of years, my children are struggling at times. Since there was a history and diagnosis of mental illness, I would have expected it to move quicker. What I have been told and what has been documented at court are different. Staff changes have set things back also.*

## Discussion

The findings of the parent survey tell a positive story and should increase the confidence of Tusla management and the bodies to whom the agency is accountable that the work of Tusla's social work staff is valued by many parents. The strength of positive feeling in many of the answers to the final open-ended questions illustrates what an important and valued part social workers can play in the lives of families.

### The quality of the working relationship

The survey explores parent's experience of the child protection relationship so it is important to outline the type of relationship that the Signs of Safety approach is seeking to foster between professionals and parents. We know that a good relationship is central in fostering change in any helping relationship. Since much of social work thinking tends to focus on voluntary, therapeutic type relationships and since child protection involves statutory authority where it is almost always the professional that begins the relationship and who defines what is required to conclude the relationship it is important to understand what a good working relationship looks like in a statutory context. The parent survey offers a crucial feedback mechanism for Tusla and its staff to deepen their thinking about what effective child protection relationship looks like through the experience of those on the receiving end.

The development of the Signs of Safety approach has always been strongly influenced by the extensive body of research with service recipients. Child protection work is not therapy and the issue of the power differential must be explicitly acknowledged and thought through. This is why the Signs of Safety approach talks about 'skillful use of authority' and emphasises practices such as always using plain language with families. The Signs of Safety approach aspires to building a working partnership or working alliance with parents where at a minimum:

- The parents and other people naturally connected to the children understand the professional concerns even if they don't agree
- The parents understand what the professionals need to see to be satisfied the children are safe
- The parents and their support people are active and fully involved in creating and enacting the plans to demonstrate the children are safe

Questions 4, 5, and 6 in the survey provide answers to these questions and show a very high achievement rate even in agreeing on concerns. The response rate for being involved in

making plans is good but It would be desirable to see an even higher rate for this core feature of Signs of Safety practice.

In addition, the Signs of Safety analytic framework gives equal importance to seeing the strengths and protective factors, as well as the concerns, in a family and the answers to question 3 show parents think this is being achieved in most cases.

The involvement of children is also a key feature, both in being listened to and kept informed of what is being done to help them. Here, the results on both questions are very good though there is room to improve so that there are more responses saying 'strongly agree'.

Other features of a good working alliance are captured in questions 1 (on feeling the worker wants to understand), 2 (on the worker doing what they say they will do), 7 (on feeling the worker cares that they solve their problems) where again very good scores are attained.

The answers to the open-ended questions illustrate what lies behind some of the responses. The large number of compliments show how much parents appreciate help from social workers and this is reinforced by comments expressing the wish for more continuity of worker and to see more of them. The criticisms of workers for being inaccessible and not responding to phonecalls may in part be due to heavy workloads or unreasonable demands. However, it is worth considering whether it conveys a message of disrespect or low status to parents who, in many instances, already feel they lack power in the social hierarchy.

## Comparison with similar research

Where do these findings fit in the context of other studies of parents' views of their social worker in child welfare and child protection services? Studies are few in number, based on qualitative interviews and generally have small samples so do not provide precise numbers of parents expressing any view. The size of sample limits their generalizability and may explain the variations in the positive and negative opinions reported. It also limits the confidence with which we can say whether the results of Tusla's survey are better or worse than average though, overall, the Tusla results seem to fit in the more positive end of the spectrum. Most of the issues raised in these studies are also covered in the Tusla survey in either the quantitative or qualitative sections. The study by Buckley et al (2011) is of Irish parents. The others I cite were conducted in England so some caution is needed in considering their relevance to Tusla's results.

Buckley et al's (2011) study had the most negative results. They interviewed 54 parents in Ireland (only 8 of whom were receiving a child protection service) and found generally negative views of social workers. For example, they were asked specifically about their experience of child protection plans and found most saw them as created by social workers not in partnership. In contrast, in Tusla's survey, 70% of parents said they agreed or strongly agreed that they have felt involved in making plans.

The accessibility of the social worker was cited as important in Buckley et al. (2011) and, as in the Tusla survey, inaccessibility was a cause for complaint.

Two studies show that the timing at which parents are asked for their opinions is significant. Cleaver & Freeman's 1995 (1995) study of 30 families in England followed them up over 2 years and found initial hostility tended to become more benign. Farmer & Owen's (1995) study of 44 families included a second interview 18 months later with parents (with a 90% follow up rate for the second interview) which again found the initial reaction changing. A third of parents thought the social work involvement had been negative or

neutral. A quarter saw it as being positive and all of these had formed a good alliance with the worker.

Generally more positive results were found in Spratt & Callan (2004) and Ghaffar et al. (2011). Spratt & Callan interviewed 12 parents in Northern Ireland who had been referred to child social work services for the first time. They concluded '*The findings indicate that while parents feel apprehension with regard to contact with social workers, in the majority of cases successful relationships are formed*'. They also praised the skill social workers showed in monitoring potential risks whilst engaging well with families – skills that are needed in Signs of Safety practice.

Ghaffar et al. (2011) interviewed 42 families in England who were in receipt of a child protection intervention. Most of those whose problems included substance misuse had positive experiences of help while those experiencing domestic abuse or allegations of child sexual abuse were less positive. 75% of the families could identify some positive qualities in their work. The parental and professional views tended to converge over time. Parents were critical of assessments using a deficit model.

Several of the studies report very negative views on attending child protection conferences, parents finding them intimidating, embarrassing, or 'like a fish in a bowl' Dale (2004). However, no parent in the Tusla survey volunteered any comment on case meetings.

Another area where the Tusla results differ is that they contain no mention of the shame, stigma, feeling humiliated or intimidated that are reported in Cleaver & Freeman (1995), Buckley et al. (2011) and Dale (2004).

## Conclusion

The Signs of Safety practice framework provides a range of principles, methods and tools so that child protection professionals can involve parents, children and their naturally connected network throughout the life of the casework and so that they better understand the mechanics of how to build a working partnership with parents, children and support people. Often experienced workers will say of the Signs of Safety that its value to them is not so much that it brings something new but rather brings together what they know works and provides them with a framework to articulate effective child protection practice as they know it. Within the limitations of the sampling, the survey results suggest that Tusla social workers are doing a good job of navigating the complexities of the statutory child protection role. The area that we would most hope to see future improvement in would be in more parents strongly agreeing they were involved in planning and that their children were kept informed. When comparing these results with those in other jurisdictions, one can very tentatively conclude that Tusla's results are on the more positive end of the spectrum and that the compliments and the complaints made are typical of this area of work.

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## Appendix A Design and Administration of the Survey

### Administering the survey

A specific period was chosen of two weeks in which to administer the survey. This was extended due to an insufficient number of families being informed. The aim is to limit the size of sample without introducing bias – all families should have an equal chance of being included unless social workers ignore the guidance and select which families to inform about the survey.

A hard copy of the survey, along with an explanation of its purpose (see Appendix 2), is handed to parents by their social worker to all families they see during the prescribed period. The social worker informs the parent/s that someone independent of them or their team will telephone them to ask for their consent and, if they agree, to carry out the survey with them over the phone. The social worker then passes on the contact details of each family to the interviewing staff. This is all the social worker does; they do not ask for consent nor carry out the surveys with the parents. There are briefing notes for the social worker on this process.

The telephone interviews are carried out by staff in Tusla from outside of the frontline teams. The survey is uploaded on to Survey Monkey an online survey software tool. The interviewer/s then read out the questions and input the responses directly into the software during the call to parents. There is an introductory script for the interviewer to follow as the first page of the survey. This gives details of where they are calling from, the purpose of the survey, a request for consent and a reassurance of confidentiality. Any identifying personal details about the respondents are kept separate from the survey itself and not entered into the online survey.

Referred parents are called at least three times to attempt contact and answerphone messages left on unanswered calls.

### The rationale for the guidance

This guidance on how to administer the survey addresses three fundamental requirements. It should be conducted in a way that is ethical, legal, and likely to achieve a representative sample so that generalisations can be drawn. Meeting the first two requirements puts limits on the third, restricting options in how to carry out the study.

### Ethics

The survey was administered in line with the Research Ethics Policy of the London School of Economics (available from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/researchAndDevelopment/researchDivision/policyAndEthics/ethicsGuidanceAndForms.aspx>).

In addition, it was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Tusla.

The key ethical issues to consider are obtaining free, informed consent and confidentiality.

Free and informed consent is a fundamental ethical requirement (see LSE guidance: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/LSEServices/policies/pdfs/school/infCon.pdf>). Ensuring that parents do not feel coerced into responding is a particular concern in the context of child protection services where parents may feel under pressure to please the worker. This is why the task has been separated into two components: the family's worker give them a

copy of the survey, explaining its purpose and giving them time to understand what they were being asked to consent to so that they are in a position to give an informed response; someone independent phones them later to ask if they consent, assuring them that their social worker will not know what their decision is.

The other major ethical concern is confidentiality. Parents are assured of confidentiality both by their worker and by the person who phones them. In this instance, the concern is not only that their answers should be identifiable to a wider audience but also that they would not be fed back to the worker. If the latter were a significant risk, many parents would feel inhibited and possibly alter their responses and so compromise the results of the survey. Consequently, this survey cannot be used for identifying weak individual practitioners, but provides a general view of practice.

Parents were also informed that they had recourse to Tusla's Feedback and Complaints Policy and Procedure 'Tell Us'.

## Law

The information that a family is known to a child protection service is personal and sensitive and so there are legal restrictions on sharing this without consent. However, it has been deemed legal to share the information within Tusla and so the method we have settled on both addresses this legal requirement and offers the parents a confidential space where they can discuss their experience without fearing repercussions from the social worker.

The law also spells out the importance of keeping personal data secure. No personal identifiers are included when recording data. Survey Monkey, the software used, is certified under the US-EU Safe Harbor Framework in relation to data privacy.

## Obtaining a representative sample

The ideal outcome is to have a randomly selected sample that is sufficiently large to give confidence that the results can be generalized. The real world offers a number of obstacles to achieving this.

The need to obtain free, informed consent limits the size and the randomness of the sample. If a large number refused to take part, there might be significant differences between those who agree and those who refuse so that answers are not representative of the whole set. Bias in the sample might also creep in if practitioners choose which families to approach. They might avoid those families with whom they have the most problematic relationship. To avoid this, we have recommended distributing the survey to *all* who are seen in a particular timeframe. However, it has to be recognized that there may be cases where the practitioner considers it inadvisable due to the sensitivities of the case at that point. Therefore, this risk of bias can be reduced but not totally eliminated.



## Appendix B Survey and Parent Information Sheet

### The survey questions

		<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
1.	My worker listens to me in a way that shows they want to really understand my family.					
2.	My worker does what they say they will do.					
3.	My worker notices what's working well in my family regarding the care, safety and wellbeing of my child/ren.					
4.	My worker has been clear with me about how they see the concerns about my family situation.					
5.	My worker and I agree on what we are concerned about.					
6.	I have felt involved in making plans about what to do.					
7.	My worker has spent time with my child/ren and has listened to what they say about the problems and what should happen.					
8.	My worker has made sure my child/ren fully understood what's being done to help them.					
9.	My worker cares that we solve our problems.					

**10. If you could change one thing about how your worker is working with you, what would it be?**

**11. Finally, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about how your worker worked with your family?**

## Information sheet for parents

### **Tusla Parent Survey**

Tusla is carrying out this survey to help improve our services to you. Someone who works for Tusla but is independent from your social worker will phone you shortly and will ask you for your consent to go through the questions with them over the phone to complete the survey. **(You can say No if you wish.)** This will give us the opportunity to hear from you about how you and your family experience your social worker. The survey is very short and the phone call should only last about 5 minutes.

**The information you give is strictly confidential**, we do not need to know any personal details from you, and the completed survey will not be linked back to you.

### **How the survey will be completed:**

**The person who phones you will read out the statements in the survey one at a time asking you your reaction to it: whether you strongly agree/disagree/neither agree nor disagree/agree/strongly agree with the statement. At the end you will be asked if you could change one thing about how your social worker is working with you what would it be? Finally, you'll have the opportunity to tell us anything else about how your social worker worked with your family.**