

**A study into children and young people's  
participation in their Child in Care Reviews**

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**This thesis is submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Social Work  
School of Social Sciences**

**March 2018**

## Contents

List of Figures and Tables.....	7
Acknowledgments.....	8
Abstract.....	9
Abbreviations Used.....	10
<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>11</b>
1.1 A brief background to Child in Care reviews.....	11
1.2 Motivation and rationale for the study.....	12
1.3 My assumptions.....	13
1.4 Thesis structure.....	14
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review.....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	16
2.2 An explanation of care in England and Wales.....	17
2.3 The child protection system in England and Wales.....	18
2.4 Managerialism, Modernisation and New Public Management	20
2.5 Participation by children and young people.....	27
2.5.1 <i>Theoretical background</i> .....	28-
2.5.2 <i>Ladder of participation</i> .....	29
2.5.3 <i>Participation as a right</i> .....	31
2.5.4 <i>Participation as a need</i> .....	31
2.6 Participation in children's social care services.....	32
2.7 Child in Care reviews and participation.....	32
2.8 Participation in decision-making forums.....	35
2.9 Summary.....	42
2.10 Research Questions.....	43
<b>Chapter Three: Methodology.....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1 Introduction.....	44
3.2 Research design.....	44

3.2.1 <i>Ontological and epistemological underpinnings</i> .....	44
3.2.2 <i>Methodological approach</i> .....	46
3.3 Techniques of data production.....	47
3.3.1 <i>Children as participants</i> .....	47
3.3.2 <i>The choice of interviews</i> .....	49
3.4 Research site and sampling.....	52
3.5 Ethical considerations.....	54
3.5.1 <i>Harm vs Benefit</i> .....	55
3.5.2 <i>Consent</i> .....	55
3.5.3 <i>Anonymity and confidentiality</i> .....	56
3.5.4 <i>Participant expectation</i> .....	58
3.5.5 <i>The familiarity problem</i> .....	58
3.6 The interview process.....	61
3.7 The importance of reflection.....	62
3.8 Data analysis.....	63
3.9 Writing-up the findings.....	67
3.10 Summary.....	67
<b>Chapter Four: Children and Young People’s Views of Reviews</b> .....	69
4.1 Introduction.....	69
4.2 Number of SWs/IROs and the ensuing impact on relationship / engagement.....	71
4.3 Young people’s views of IROs.....	74
4.4 Young people’s views of SWs.....	76
4.5 Young people’s perceptions of the review meetings.....	81
4.6 Summary.....	88
<b>Chapter Five: Independent Reviewing Officers’ and Social Workers’ Views of CiC Reviews</b> .....	90
5.1 Introduction.....	90
5.2. Barriers to effective participation.....	91
5.2.1 <i>High caseloads and time pressures on both SWs and IROs</i> .....	91
5.2.2 <i>High turnover and inexperienced SWs</i> .....	97
5.2.3 <i>Lack of understanding and training of professionals in ‘participation’</i> .....	100

5.2.4 <i>Children and young people's negative experiences in reviews and ensuring reticence about attending.....</i>	102
5.2.5 <i>Structure and focus of the review not being child centred.....</i>	107
5.3 Factors which assist participation in review meetings.....	110
5.3.1 <i>Quality of the relationship between the child and professionals.....</i>	110
5.3.2 <i>The child/young person chairing their own review meeting.....</i>	113
5.4 Summary.....	115
<b>Chapter Six: Senior Managers' Views of CiC</b> .....	117
6.1 Introduction.....	117
6.2 Organisational culture and the disconnect between SMs, frontline staff and children and young people.....	118
6.2.1 <i>Impact of high caseloads and importance of relationships between SWs, IROs and children and young people.....</i>	118
6.2.2 <i>SMs knowledge and oversight of the review process.....</i>	124
6.2.3 <i>SMs understanding of participation.....</i>	130
6.3 The concept of good social work practice and the evidence base.....	133
6.4 Summary.....	135
<b>Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Key Messages</b> .....	136
7.1 Introduction.....	136
7.2 Summary of Key Research Findings.....	136
7.2.1 <i>How does the current CiC review process encourage meaningful participation of children and young people.....</i>	137
7.2.2 <i>To what degree do children and young people understand the purpose of reviews?.....</i>	138
7.2.3 <i>To what degree do children and young people believe that their views are taken into consideration during and following reviews?.....</i>	139
7.2.4 <i>To what degree do SWs, IROs and SMs believe that children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews?.....</i>	142
7.2.5 <i>What are the barriers to meaningful participation?.....</i>	141
7.2.6 <i>What can be done to improve children and young people's participation in reviews?.....</i>	143

7.3 Substantive insights.....	144
7.4 Limitations.....	146
7.5 Key Messages and areas for future research.....	148
7.5.1 <i>Key Messages</i> .....	148
7.5.2 <i>Areas for future research</i> .....	152
7.6 Final Conclusions.....	154
References.....	156
Appendix One – Letter to child / young person.....	172
Appendix Two – Detailed letter to child / young person.....	173
Appendix Three – Consent form for children and young people.....	175
Appendix Four – Letter to professionals.....	177
Appendix Five – Consent form for professionals.....	179
Appendix Six – Questions for semi-structured interview with children and young people.....	181
Appendix Seven – Young participants demographics.....	182

## **List of Figures and Tables**

### **Figures**

*Page Number*

1. Hart's Ladder of Participation

26

### **Tables**

*Description*

*Page Number*

1. Breakdown of Interview Date

67

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank both my supervisors for all their support through this research project. Both Dr Alyson Rees and Dr Dawn Mannay have been patient, supportive and have challenged me in a positive way to reflect on this research and ensure that I make the most of this opportunity. Both Alyson and Dawn have been very generous in terms of giving me plenty of their time and their comments and advice have helped me so much during this period. Dr Teresa De Villiers has also been a great help throughout the Professional Doctorate and I am very grateful for her support. Adriano Neri Fernandes da Silva has also been very supportive over the last six years and he has helped ensure I do what I needed to keep focused in my studies. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Nigel Thomas for his insightful feedback. I would also like to thank Mark Chesterman for his encouragement to get on with this research and Dr Donna Neil for her advice during this time.

I am indebted to the young people, social workers, independent reviewing officers and senior managers who gave me their valuable time as part of this research project.

I received contributions towards my study fees from Bath and North East Somerset Council and Gloucestershire County Council and I would like to acknowledge those organisations for helping me in this way.

I would like to recognise my friend Tricia Aylward for her advice and support during this research project and Lucie Boase and Hannah Thompson for their feedback. I would also like to thank Robin Gordon Brown for his help over the last 15 years, there is no way I would have ever written this without him and I am eternally grateful.

Finally, I would like to show my appreciation to my family for their support and love during this time. My mother has given me helpful feedback and has always been willing to help with looking after Emilio. My father gave me some helpful advice along the way. My partner Hayley is the best and cleverest academic I have ever met and I am very lucky to have had her alongside me during this time. Lastly I would like to thank my son Emilio Diaz for bringing so much joy to my life.

## **Abstract**

The concept of service user participation in the delivery of services that affect them has gained momentum over the last thirty years. Children are no exception to this and those in care are subject to greater scrutiny of their lives than their peers. This study considered a key meeting for children in care – the Child in Care Review – and examined the extent to which children and young people are able to participate in these meetings and retain a level of control over their lives. The research, undertaken in one large local authority in England, explored the perspectives of children and young people, Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and Senior Managers in individual qualitative interviews. The interview data was analysed thematically. The study found that young participants who reported a poor relationship with their Social Worker were more likely to feel negatively about their review and most young participants said that they found the review frustrating and stressful. The young participants were very aware of the workload pressures that Social Workers faced and how bureaucratic processes often seemed to translate in to them not receiving a good service. The Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers highlighted the importance of children's participation, but in practice their commitment to the concept seemed minimal. Data would suggest some significant disconnection between Senior Managers' views and all other participants' perspectives on the challenges faced by social workers in terms of caseloads and workload pressures. Senior Managers reflected that little seemed to have changed in relation to children's participation in their reviews over the last twenty-five years. The thesis concludes that as a vehicle for participation the Child in Care Review is still not working well, however the development of children chairing their own reviews offers some hope for the future. This practice could be built upon to ensure that children and young people leave Local Authority care with the best possible chance of becoming confident, stable and empowered adults.



## **Abbreviations Used**

ADCS – Association of Directors of Children’s Services

BAAF – British Association of Adoption and Fostering

BASW – British Association of Social Workers

CiC – Child in Care

DfCSF – Department for Children, Schools and Families

DfE – Department for Education

DfES – Department for Education and Skills

DoH –Department of Health

HCPC – Health and Care Professions Council

IRO – Independent Reviewing Officer

LA – Local Authority

NAIRO – National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers

NHS – National Health Service

NSPCC – National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

PEP – Personal Education Plan

SCIE – Social Care Institute for Excellence

SM – Senior Manager

SW – Social Worker

UNCRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

## **Chapter One:** **Introduction**

### **1.1 A brief background to Child in Care reviews**

A small percentage of the population of children (0.62 per cent in England) are in the care of a Local Authority (LA), yet these young people consistently have some of the worst outcomes of all children (DfE 2016). Almost one third of children in care leave school with no qualifications (The Who Cares Trust 2013). A quarter of young women leaving care are pregnant or already mothers and a high proportion of those babies born to mothers who are or who have been in care are removed into care themselves (Roberts et al. 2017). Children in care are five times more likely to suffer from mental illness than children nationally (The Centre for Social Justice 2007), and 40 per cent of prisoners under 21 years of age have been in care.

Children who come into care are likely to have been maltreated at home (Wade et al. 2011). They subsequently face further discrimination as a result of being in care, and eventually having left care (Barnes 2012). While being placed in care will not be able to undo the past mistreatment, one expectation on LAs should be that children who leave care are better equipped for adulthood than they otherwise would have been. Forrester's (2008) research suggests that children's welfare does improve while they are in care. Similarly, Ofsted comment in their Annual Report that 'care can be good for children' and see their life chances improved from where they otherwise would have been if they had remained at home (Ofsted 2016a). Care should provide children and young people with an increase in confidence and resilience through providing them with stability (Hannon et al. 2010), and by involving children and young people in care in discussions about their care and ensuring that their wishes are listened to, professionals can work to empower them (Thomas 2015).

The Child in Care (CiC) review is the key meeting that considers the care plan for the child or young person, and it has the potential to involve them in the decisions that affect them. CiC reviews are held one month after a child comes into care or changes placement, at three months and then at six monthly intervals. In the past, reviews were chaired by a Team Manager; however, since 2002 the role of Independent Reviewing Officer has been introduced to chair this meeting and provide independent oversight and scrutiny of the LA care plan.

The benefits of service user involvement in delivery of services has dominated the agenda in recent years. There is a growing recognition that because of their direct experiences of using services, service users have a unique insight into what works (Offender Health Collaborative 2015; Beresford 2014); reflected in an array of policy and legislation (UNCRC; DfE 2015). Core social work values - such as empowerment and self-determination - also puts the importance of participation by service users at the forefront (HCPC 2016). If professionals enable children and young people to effectively participate in their review process and care plan it may have a positive impact on their self-esteem and confidence. In turn, this may help increase resilience (Gilligan 2004) to help mitigate some of the adversity these children and young people have experienced and improve life chances and outcomes as they transition into adulthood.

## **1.2 Motivation and rationale for the study**

The research took place whilst I was the Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) at the study LA. When I started interviewing participants I had been the PCFSW for 12 months. The LA is a large authority in England covering both rural and urban areas with a mixture of poverty and wealth. At the time of the study there was over 100,000 children living in the area; in the region of 2000 were being provided services as children in need, approximately some 500 were subject to child protection plans and over 500 were children in care.

This subject area has been of interest to me since I attended my first CiC review as a student social worker in 2005, and this initial interest continued to develop during my early years as a social work practitioner. Since becoming an Independent Reviewing Officer in 2010 and an Independent Reviewing Officer manager in 2012, my interest in the effectiveness of review meetings, and in encouraging children's meaningful participation, grew still further, particularly as I became responsible for providing advice and oversight to other professionals in this field.

My interest also stems from my involvement in a previous research study (Pert et al. 2014), which looked at service user perspectives of CiC reviews. This small study, which involved interviewing 25 children and 17 corresponding foster carers, raised a number of issues in relation to reviews and children's participation which echoed the findings of earlier studies (Munro 2001; Thomas and O'Kane 1999). Following this, I

decided that I wanted to carry out a wider study which considered Social Workers' and Independent Reviewing Officers' perspectives in addition to those of children and young people. I was also interested to ascertain Senior Managers' views of reviews and children and young people's participation.

Prior to this, there have been no studies which have considered in detail Social Workers', Independent Reviewing Officers' and Senior Managers' views of reviews and participation in England and Wales and as such there seemed to be a lacuna. One of the main objectives for this study was to consider some of the barriers to children participating in their reviews, as well as considering examples of good practice. In addition, I hoped to be able to suggest some practical ways in which review meetings could become more child focused, which would in turn improve children's participation in their reviews.

A recent, ongoing, large-scale mixed-methods study (Selwyn and Riley 2015), has been exploring the extent to which children in care feel that they are included in social work decision making. There have been numerous other studies that have outlined the degree to which children feel 'shut out' of this process (Pert et al. 2014; Munro 2001; Thomas and O'Kane 1999). My research therefore offers a timely and potentially important contribution to understanding how we might improve practice in this vital area.

### **1.3 My assumptions**

As Delamont (1992) outlined, preconceptions and bias are not necessarily a bad thing in and of themselves. Indeed, from my interpretivist ontological position, bias and assumptions are acknowledged as an issue that researchers have to carefully consider. In my view it is impossible to be devoid of bias; the key however is to be aware of your biases and to try to minimise the impact of these on the research findings.

My involvement in previous studies into children's participation and children in care reviews (Pert et al. 2014) and parents' and children's participation and child protection conferences (Muench et al. 2017), as well as my practice experience as a Social Worker, Independent Reviewing Officer, Independent Reviewing Officer Manager and more recently as a Principal Social Worker, means that I already hold some views on how the current child protection system works in the UK. I also have opinions about

the effectiveness of reviews in ensuring children have the opportunity to meaningfully participate. In the methodology chapter, I will discuss the familiarity problem, as it is essential that I try to make 'the familiar strange' (Delamont 2002) and ensure as far as is possible that my views do not influence the analysis of participants' accounts.

#### **1.4 Thesis structure**

In Chapter Two, Literature Review, I explore the background of the care and child protection systems in England and Wales. Drawing on a range of published academic papers and reports, I will consider what participation means, exploring theoretical concepts, legislation and policy and how these are applied in practice. This is followed by an examination of the research that has already been completed in this area. The review of the literature informed the central aims of the study and guided the research questions. The central research question is;

**How does the current Children in Care review process encourage meaningful participation by children and young people?**

The presentation of the research questions lead on to the Chapter Three, Methodology, where I provide a detailed examination of methods of research that are available to the social researcher, set out my chosen research approach and discuss why other methods were discounted. I then move on to set out the techniques employed for sampling and contacting participants. I consider the ethical issues that arose in relation to this type of research and discuss how I conducted the interviews and analysed the transcripts. The chapter concludes with my reflections on the process of data production and some discussion of the study's limitations.

The presentation of the findings from my research is divided across three chapters. Chapter Four, examines children's and young people's views of their reviews, focusing on the number of Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers the young participants had; their relationship with their Social Worker; their relationship with their Independent Reviewing Officer; and their perception of the review meeting itself. The extent to which the young participants were aware of the impact of bureaucracy and high caseloads on the service they receive, coupled with the impact of the high turnover of Social Workers was also emphasised. These factors impacted on how much the children and young people participated in their reviews.

In Chapter Five, Social Workers' and Independent Reviewing Officers' views are presented. Pressures on professionals were a recurrent concern. It was also noted that Social Workers' understanding of the concept of participation was poorly defined and the examples provided illustrated that children's and young people's participation was largely tokenistic.

The final findings chapter, Chapter Six, considers the views of the Senior Managers. These are presented alongside a discussion of the rise in managerialism in social work. There was a contrast between the views of the Senior Managers and the perspectives of the other participants interviewed for this study particularly in relation to workload challenges that SWs and IROs faced.

In the last chapter, Chapter Seven, I provide my conclusions, bringing together my responses to the research questions as well as a summary of the key research findings. The limitations of my study are then explored and areas for further research are identified and discussed. Key messages as well as recommendations for policy and practice are also outlined.

## **Chapter Two:** **Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

To define the central research questions for this study an exploration of existing literature was essential. Searches were carried out on the following databases: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts; Sociological Abstracts; and the Cardiff University Library. Additional searches were conducted using the Open University Catalogue and Google to identify relevant internet based published reports, as well as book chapters, thesis and articles. The reference lists for all articles were reviewed to check for further studies that may have been relevant. The search terms used were 'participation' and its variants including 'voice' and 'decision making'. These were combined with the terms 'children' and 'young people' alongside the following key words: 'looked after', 'child protection', 'social work' and 'in care'. Literature pre-2000 was excluded unless it held particular relevance to the study area. Searches clarified the scarcity of post-2000 literature on the topic of professional and service user perspectives of Child in Care Reviews in England and Wales. There has, however, been some research carried out in relation to the participation of children in decision-making forums within social work practice. This chapter discusses this research critically, alongside legislative and policy guidance.

A decision was taken to exclude advocacy from the search criteria as the mechanism and ethos behind this service could potentially have muddled my exploration into the statutory process of the CiC review. I also decided to exclude child development theories although I remained mindful that children of different ages are likely to have different experiences of review meetings. I decided to focus the study on children aged eight and over and indeed all the children I interviewed were teenagers apart from one. Child development theory is something which I had considered in previous research (Muench et al. 2016; Pert et al. 2014) and for this study I wanted to pursue a different focus. Bearing in mind time constraints I only had time to interview ten young people which limited the opportunity to consider how children of different ages participate in reviews.

This chapter begins by providing an overview of the care and child protection systems in England and Wales. It will then explore the impact of managerialism, New Public Management (NPM) and modernisation on LA Children's Services. This will be followed by an examination of theories of participation, and I will discuss the current

research and policy with regard to children and young people's participation in Children's Services. The chapter will conclude by outlining the rationale for my study and the aims and central research questions

## **.2.2 An explanation of Care in England and Wales**

A child is 'looked after' by a Local Authority (LA) if s/he is in their care by reason of:

- (i) a Care Order or
  - (ii) is being provided with accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 for more than 24 hours with the agreement of the parents or the child's own agreement if s/he is aged 16 or over
- (DfE 2015).

There were 72,670 children in care in England as of March 2017 and 5,954 children in care in Wales. The numbers are steadily rising: this was a three per cent increase for England and a five per cent increase for Wales compared to March 2016 and an eight per cent increase for England compared to 2012 and a four per cent increase for Wales. There are variations between the nations: in England children are in care at a rate of 62 per 10,000 of the population under 18. In Wales the figure is 95 per 10,000 of the population under 18. The majority of these children (74 per cent) reside in foster care (DfE 2017). These total figures include children who were placed for adoption, those in secure units, residential schools or in placements with parents.

The life chances for children in care in England and Wales are poor in comparison to their peers (Mannay et al. 2017a), culminating in pronounced difficulties in the transition to adult life (Bessell and Gal 2009). Almost one third of children in care leave school with no qualifications (The Who Cares Trust 2013). Children in care or leaving care consistently underperform in areas such as health, education and employment and are less likely to have stable relationships. A quarter of young women leaving care are pregnant or already mothers, and nearly half become mothers by the age of 24 (Hannon et al. 2010). Furthermore, a high proportion of those babies born to mothers who are or who have been in care are removed into care themselves (Roberts et al. 2017). These difficult and often traumatic childhood experiences have the further result of children in care being five times more likely to suffer from mental illness than children nationally (The Centre for Social Justice 2007). It is difficult to disentangle whether it is due to care system failings, the effect of abuse, or multiple returns to an abusive home (Forrester et al. 2009) or a combination of all three.



Recent research (Wade et al. 2011) suggests that pre-care adversities are particularly influential and are likely to impact on children's outcomes and life chances.

However it is also important to note that a number of care experienced people do go onto become successful adults. Moreover, the outcomes for children in care are better overall than those of children who are open to LA Children's Services on a long term basis as children in need and never entered the care system (Sebba et al. 2015, Berridge et al.2015). Wade et al. (2011) found that contrary to common beliefs, long term care can be a positive option for maltreated children. Similarly, a large scale study by Selwyn et al. (2018) concluded that 83% of children in care said that coming into care had improved their well-being. In summary, care can be a very positive experience for many young people and indeed, it is usually necessary for those who do enter care to keep them safe.

### **2.3 The child protection system in England and Wales**

The current child protection system in England and Wales is under a great deal of pressure. Since 2008 there has been a 70 per cent increase in numbers of children subject to child protection plans and a 145 per cent increase in care proceedings (DfE 2016). During the same period, LAs have faced cuts in funding of between 35 and 40 per cent. This has led to social work caseloads increasing and the average Social Worker (SW) leaving frontline child protection practice two years after qualifying (Bowyer and Roe 2015). This means that many LAs have a very inexperienced workforce, and it is not uncommon for half of the SWs in a LA frontline team to have less than two years post-qualifying experience. This contributes to a very challenging climate for SWs to work alongside vulnerable families, and is compounded by newly qualified SWs feeling that they have to cut their teeth by doing child protection work (Munro 2016).

There is a great deal of inconsistency in the caseloads for SWs. Average caseloads in Kensington and Chelsea (one of only two LAs that have achieved an Outstanding grade under the current Ofsted inspection framework) are in the region of eight children. A report in 2011 found that SWs in five LAs were managing an average of between 30 and 40 cases (Higgs 2011) and in 2016 Ofsted identified fourteen LAs as having persistently high caseloads (Ofsted 2016a). Ofsted adopted a new inspection framework in early 2014 and so far, 75 per cent of LA Children's Services inspected

under this framework have been deemed Inadequate or Requiring Improvement, only 25 per cent have been found to be Good and only two Outstanding (ADCS 2015). This is concerning, and suggests that the majority of vulnerable children and families in England do not receive a good enough provision from their LA.

It is, however, important to be aware of the shortcomings of the Ofsted inspection regime, its evidence base, and how well their findings link to outcomes for children and families. As La Valle et al. (2016, p6) concluded:

*Analysis of the relationship between outcome data for children in need collated nationally by the Department of Education and Ofsted ratings of Children Services found very little association. There did not seem to be any pattern in terms of the local authorities that were in the top or bottom percentiles for child outcomes. Only one child outcome variable and one workforce variable had a statistically significant relationship with the Ofsted ratings.*

Furthermore, Forrester (2016, p12) states that having observed practice in several local authorities where Ofsted have carried out inspections, there seems to be:

*very little relationship between the Ofsted ratings achieved and the actual quality of practice families are receiving. The Ofsted decision on authorities seems to be based on the quality of the computer records, policies and procedures and management efficiency rather than the quality of the practice or outcomes for children.*

Munro (2014) has also suggested that Ofsted reports do not always seem to be based on evidence and they tend to be couched in over simplistic and generalised terminology. Hood et al. (2016) also assert that despite the Munro review (2012), LAs are still largely focused on compliance and performance management and that this is in part due to the impact of the Ofsted inspections. They conclude that 'the paucity of outcome measures but also of evidence based process measures have reinforced a dependence on procedural compliance backed up by a centralised inspectorate' (Hood et al. 2016, p18).

Furthermore, statistics illustrate that there are substantial variations between LAs and the ways that they manage childcare work. Figures from the Department for Education (2014) show that one child in 500 in Wokingham or Richmond upon Thames were 'looked after' whereas one child in 65 in Blackpool or one child in 75 in Wolverhampton

is 'looked after'. Regional differences are also startling in that over 80 children per 10,000 are 'looked after' in the North East and 90 children per 10,000 of the population in Wales. In comparison, only around 50 children per 10,000 are 'looked after' in London, the south east and the south west (Featherstone et al. 2014). It would appear that there are differences in the way that child protection cases are managed in different areas of the country and by different LAs, although some of the difference can no doubt be attributed to regional disparities in wealth (Bywaters and Brady 2017). This raises public policy questions as to how local and national government works to ensure that professionals perform their duties in a fair way with families where there are concerns (Tickle 2018; Diaz and Drewery 2016).

Despite the Munro review (2012), in many LAs the impact of managerialism has meant that the task of understanding what a child's life is like and then working alongside parents and children to deliver appropriate and effective support, is increasingly difficult (Diaz and Drewery 2016). This is largely attributable to the constraints that the bureaucratic system places on SWs (Burgess et al. 2013). There remain concerns that SWs are under pressure from Senior Managers (SMs) to reach targets based largely on timescales and not on the quality of the work (Diaz and Drewery 2016). Accordingly, management can be overly concerned with 'doing things in the right way rather than doing the right thing' (Munro 2011, p.6).

#### **2.4 The impact of managerialism, New Public Management (NPM) and modernisation on social work**

It is now important to consider the impact the reform and modernisation agenda has had on the public sector in general and on social work in particular. Modernisation has been defined as achieving 'traditional objectives by modern means' (Powell 2008, p.3). Blair and Shroeder (1999, p.29) suggested that 'constraints on 'tax and spend' forced radical modernisation of the public sector and reform of public services to achieve better value for money and a new programme of changed realities'. Finlayson (2003, p.66) states that if there is a 'single word that might capture the essence of New Labour's social and political project it is modernisation'.

There is a close link between modernisation and managerialism (or New Public Management as it is sometimes called); this is associated with importing a market orientation and business practices into the public sector as a means of maximising the organisation's performance 'through cost-cutting, increased regulation,

privatisation of services, reengineering and evidence based management' (Cunliffe 2009, p.18).

The impact of New Public Management and privatisation on public sector workers, including SWs, cannot be underestimated. The OECD (2009) argued that this has included a 'transfer of assets to the private sector rather than a transfer of activities'. When one considers the extent to which privatisation has occurred since 1979, this stance is difficult to argue with. A very large number of public sector organisations, many of which were thriving at the time, have now been privatised; these include British Aerospace, British Airways and British Telecom. The public service reforms that were initiated by the Thatcher government in 1979 were continued by New Labour between 1997 and 2010 and by the Coalition and Conservative governments since then. The 1983 Conservative manifesto spelt out the changes that they intended to take place:

*To release more money for looking after patients, we will reduce the costs of administering the Health Service. We are asking health authorities to make the maximum possible savings by putting services like laundry, catering and hospital cleaning out to competitive tender. We are tightening up, too, on management costs, and getting much firmer control of staff numbers.*

The significant initiative of the Conservative government of the early 1980s was to introduce a new set of providers for public services by 'contracting out' what were at the time seen as being non-essential services. These included, for example, cleaning in the National Health Service; instead, private providers were brought in to carry out such functions (Greener 2008).

This theme of marketisation and NPM continued under New Labour and has gained further strength under the present Conservative government, which in 2010 stated that it would, amongst other things:

*...promote independent provision in key public services (including from private sector companies)... and attract external investment and expertise into the public sector to deliver better and more efficient services.*

(HM Treasury/Cabinet Office 2010, p.2).

From the beginning New Labour wanted to create a gap between themselves and Old Labour, and a key part of this agenda was to draw attention to the modernisation of

public services. One example of policy where this was particularly acute was in relation to the health service. As Tony Blair's Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, pursued policies which were neo-liberal in nature and this had a significant impact on the level and extent of outsourcing in the health service.

The advent of neo liberalism and its:

*emphasis on contracting out service delivery from the public sector to the private and voluntary sectors; ...applying ideas to public services that are drawn from private business management and that focus on securing more economic, efficient and effective services; and... the privileging of managers, rather than professionals..., with a high degree of prominence placed upon the achievement of targets has had a significant impact on all public services in the UK.*

(Harris and White 2009, p.3).

Currently in the UK, it is clear that there is a 'blurring of public and private provision' (Greener 2008, p.97). When one considers social care in particular, public funds are often supplemented with private services. This leads to further blurring of the boundaries between the public and private sector, including by whom public services are provided. New Labour introduced policies and legislation which have resulted in public provision relying to a large extent on private providers. This has been continued by subsequent governments. As such, private providers are now an inextricable part of the structures of social care. Culturally however, 'these structures rely on ideas that are less clear, relying on individual users (or their proxies) choosing between alternative providers in essential private situations where information is often scarce' (Greener 2008, p.97).

The impact of privatisation and NPM has been very apparent in recent years on local government, and privatisation's primary goal has been cost cutting and reducing expenditure (Bel and Warner 2008, p.107). Public choice theory argues that competition reduces the chances of excessive supply of public services, which in turn reduces the cost of delivery of services. However, in many sectors, including social care, there is limited real competition for projects, and when services are commissioned out, it is often the case that contracts are re-commissioned to the same service (Bel and Warner 2008). One of the challenges of local privatisation has been addressing its 'failure to provide lower cost service delivery. Inadequate understanding and management of local government service delivery markets has

been partly to blame. Lack of competition is common' (Bel and Warner 2008, p.107). Arguably 'managerialism' and NPM has had a negative impact on social work and the ability of SWs to carry out effective work with families. Clarke et al. (2000) suggest that the discretion and independence that are such key attributes of any profession have been eroded in the case of social work. The implication for social work is that more of the tasks that SWs carry out are prescribed and subject to increased scrutiny by targets and management control. This reduces the independence of SWs and impacts on their ability to work effectively and creatively with families (Munro 2012).

Similarly, Unwin (2009) argues that like many other public sector services, social work in the UK has become increasingly subject to scrutiny by managers, and that the modernisation and NPM agenda has had a negative impact on SWs ability to act independently and support service users facing increasing challenges following years of austerity. For Howe (2006), the decline in the status of social work has coincided with an increase in external controls from managers, LAs (who employ most SWs) and central government. As SWs are increasingly more likely to be under the control of bureaucrats and managers, arguably this will lead to their professional knowledge being devalued (Fabricant and Burghardt 1992). Targets and quantitative data thus become the priority, rather than undertaking high quality work to improve the life opportunities of children and their families (Diaz and Drewery 2016). Munro (2012) contends that as a result of reforms and the modernisation agenda, SWs have become overly focused on completing assessments within arbitrary timescales.

The impact of neo-liberal reforms on social work is multi-faceted. Neo-liberalism posits that the individual should have choice and freedom, and it supports the market against any type of interference by the State or those working on its behalf, including SWs. It has been argued that 'new service boundaries and forms of resource allocation and an increased emphasis on assessment, together with the means to regulate and review, are increasingly key elements of social work' (Parton 1994, p.23). For Parton (1994), it is the role of social work now to assess risk and allocate scarce resources and services in an 'individualised way'.

Social work would appear to occupy a role between the respectable (i.e. the middle classes) and those members of society who are seen as being deviant or dangerous (Shoesmith 2016). SWs therefore play some kind of mediating role between those who are actually or potentially excluded, and the mainstream of society (Parton 1994). The role of SWs in terms of this mediation role, as well as the very identity of social work itself, has become more complex and confused over the last three decades.

It has been argued that those involved in the social professions, including SWs:

*...are engaged in forms of ethical practice on a day to day basis. This highlights the continually contested value domain within which they operate... without the use of judgment and discretion the work of public servants would be impossible.*

(Hoggett et al. 2006, p.761)

Furthermore, Hoggett et al. argued that:

*Public sector work is 'value saturated' work in which workers are caught between the competing claims of a range of private and public goods which include their own interests, the interests of their organisation, their profession, individual service users, the community and the general public. Workers confront this dynamic and shifting field of competing claims with their own values and identities.*

(Hoggett et al. 2006, p.759)

However, the role of SWs is made all the more challenging, because as public servants, they are supposed to accept and respect the legitimacy of political structures and the processes of democratic governments (Pratchett and Wingfield 1996). Robert Armstrong, when head of the civil service, went further and argued that civil servants should carry out their duties with 'precisely the same energy and goodwill whether they agree with it or not' (cited in Ridley 1985, p.31). This is particularly challenging for SWs as they also have a set of core social work values to which they must adhere. The implication for SWs is that there can be a disconnect between their core social work values and the government's policies and procedures. This has become particularly pronounced in the current context of austerity (Jordan and Drakeford 2012).

SWs are not the only ones who have been impacted by public sector reforms. Goodson and Lindblad (2010) found that teachers have had lower levels of autonomy since public sector reforms have taken effect, while Lloyd and Payne (2012) concluded that a consequence for the further education field is that teachers are less qualified, have less autonomy and are subject to high levels of managerial control. Greene (2006) found that public sector professionals in the UK experienced substantial loss of autonomy and discretion during the 1990s. The rationale for this

was the role of new public management and the loss of trade union power (Jordan and Drakeford 2012).

There has also been another political agenda which has impacted upon this state of affairs, and this is the effect of some high profile child protection cases where things have gone badly wrong. For example, in 1973 seven-year-old Maria Colwell was tragically beaten to death by her stepfather; the case caught the public imagination and media spotlight in a similar way to how that of Peter Connelly has done more recently (Jones 2017). In the Colwell case, social work was effectively put on trial and the right-wing press blamed SWs for the tragedy. The then Home Secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, gave a speech shortly afterwards, reflecting on the moral and spiritual state of Britain:

*A high and rising proportion of children are being born to mothers least fitted to bring children into the world.... Some are of low intelligence, most of low educational attainment. They are unlikely to be able to give children the stable emotional background, the consistent combination of love and firmness.... They are producing problem children.... The balance of our human stock, is threatened....*

(quoted by Watt 2010).

Sir Joseph went as far as advocating compulsory sterilisation for such families (Watt 2010).

A stark contrast is evident between the findings of the inquiry into the Maria Colwell case and those of the Victoria Climbié case some 25 years later. In the case of Maria Colwell, numerous professionals visited on a regular basis but did not speak to each other, and there was almost a competitive element between agencies as to who was offering the support to the family (Colwell Inquiry 1974). In the Climbié case however, it was found that there was an attitude of 'how fast can we make it someone else's responsibility?', with agencies and professionals all trying to pass responsibility for the family to another professional as soon as possible (Laming 2003).

Following the Climbié case inquiry, any public trust in child protection services and SWs dissipated still further and Ofsted brought in a new and much tougher inspection and regulatory regime. The previous inspection regimes were seen as being too 'soft' and Ofsted helped to foster 'an audit culture' that was based on ensuring that targets were met, since this was seen as the way in which confidence and accountability



could be reinstated in child protection services (Featherstone et al. 2014). This has led to a key question arising, which asks: 'do compliance mechanisms provide better outcomes for children?' To date, there has been no clear answer to this question.

The Munro Review of Child Protection (2012) argued that SWs need to assert their professional standing and develop their expertise in working with families. It ventured that this would subsequently lead to a move away from the compliance and blame culture within child protection services, and towards a learning culture in which professional judgment and effective relationships with service users enable the improvement of services to vulnerable children and families. One of the key recommendations in Munro's (2012) final report was that LAs should 'designate a Principal Child and Family Social Worker, who is a senior manager with lead responsibility for practice in the local authority and who is still actively involved in frontline practice and who can report the views and experiences of the front line to all levels of management.' This was my role within the LA in which this research was carried out. Stanley and Russell (2014, p 6) suggest the PCFSW has 5 key aspects:

- Being the authentic voice for frontline staff;
- To remain in practice - learn firsthand about what helps, what hinders;
- To work alongside senior management to raise practice debates and be a 'critical friend' at all levels of the organisation;
- Bring forward ideas and debates in raising practice standards at every level of the organisation; and
- Link to the national practice agenda and help to raise the profile of social work.

As we will see later on in this thesis, it appears I was unsuccessful in this role, particularly in relation to points 1, 3 and 4 outlined above. It appears that any attempts I had made to bridge the gap between SMs and frontline staff had not come to fruition as there appeared to be a disconnect between their views. The challenge set by Munro still has a long way to go before it is met by leaders and practitioners in the childcare social work field; moreover, the cuts and austerity agenda put in place by the current government have made this objective all the more difficult. Richard Watts, Chair of the Local Government Children's Board, recently commented: 'The reality is that services for the care and protection of vulnerable children are now, in many areas, being pushed to breaking point' (cited by Weale 2017).

## **2.5 Participation by children and young people**

In considering the importance of participation for children in care, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is a useful starting point. All countries except the United States and Somalia have ratified this treaty. Children's rights include their right to association with both parents; human identity; basic needs for physical protection and food; universal state-paid education; health care; criminal laws appropriate for the age and development of the child; equal protection of the child's civil rights; and freedom from discrimination on the basis of the child's race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, religion, disability, color, ethnicity, or other characteristics (UNCRC 1989). Social work values also provide a useful grounding. SWs in England are bound by a code of ethics (BASW 2015) emphasising the importance of anti-oppressive practice. In Wales, a similar Code of Professional Practice for Social Care Workers is followed. These codes require SWs to respect service user autonomy and promote self-determination. Furthermore, social work training and continued post qualifying development should continue to assess SWs' ability to encourage and facilitate participation (Social Care Wales 2017; The College of Social Work 2013). This is recognised as most pertinent for children in care who face greater disadvantage and for whom the ability to communicate needs, wishes and feelings are particularly important (Thomas and O'Kane 1999).

In recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on service user involvement within services (Cowden 2012). Following the Victoria Climbié Inquiry, one of Lord Laming's recommendations was that a Children's Commissioner should be appointed. The Children's Commissioner for England was established in 2005. The role of Children's Commissioner had already been established in Wales in 2001. The Commissioner's remit includes understanding what children and young people think about issues that affect them and encouraging decision makers to always take their best interests into account. The Children and Families Act 2014 further strengthened the remit, powers and independence of the Commissioner and gave them special responsibility for the rights of children who are in or leaving care, living away from home or receiving social care services.

In 2013, the Department for Education made a policy commitment to improving outcomes for young people. A significant part of this is ensuring that young people have opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them (DfE 2013). Decisions about children in care and changes to their care plan are made at CiC reviews -

therefore the importance of a child's participation in this process is paramount. The aim of the review is to ensure the child's welfare is promoted for the period that they are in care (DfE 2015).

Although there have been positive steps forward in young people's involvement:

*The key issue is not participation or no participation, but whether adults are genuinely attentive and responsive to young people's perspectives, and aware of the plurality and polyphony of their voices.*

(Hartas and Lindsay 2011, p.131)

The extent to which a child or young person's views are taken into consideration is the result of a wide range of factors. In the following sub-sections, a discussion of theories of participation will explore these issues further.

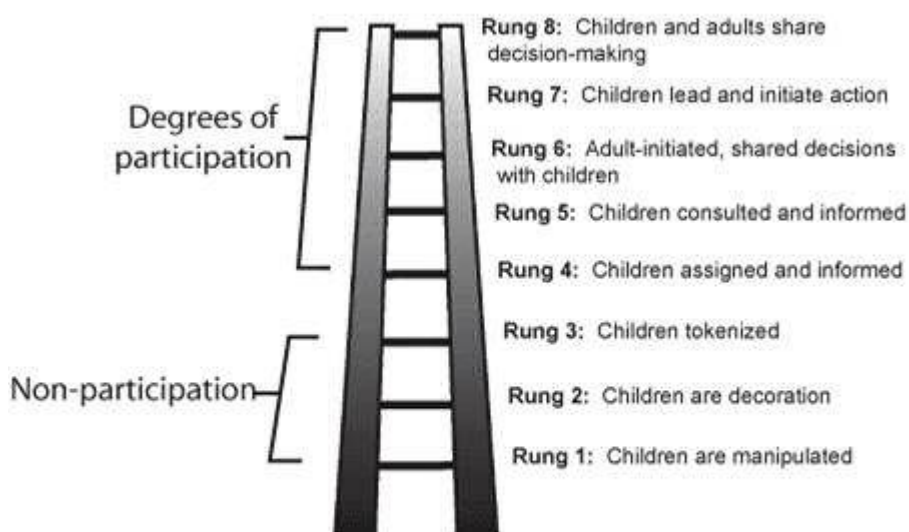
### **2.5.1 Theoretical background**

International legislative frameworks demonstrate a shift from viewing children as objects of concern to being citizens with human rights (Cashmore 2002). The legal stance for participation also reflects a moral one. Participation is not designed as an end in itself; rather it is a process which, if effective, can be beneficial to the recipient (Malone and Hartung 2010). Conversely, mismanagement of the process could prove distressing or even harmful (Cossar et al. 2011). If we are to ensure that children authentically participate in decision-making, it is essential that we are clear as to how this can be achieved.

Dickens et al. (2015) highlighted five perspectives which consider the rationale for children's participation. The first being that the purpose of participation is to promote development and self-confidence. The second is to improve the decisions being made and the practice of the agency. The third perspective is that participation allows a child's voice to be heard and therefore contributes to safeguarding them from what is happening in their lives. The fourth considers children as active social beings who should be able to take part in decision-making. The final perspective is that involvement is key to children's rights.

### 2.5.2 Ladder of participation

The most common model in framing discussions about child participation is Hart's (1992) ladder of participation (see Figure 1). Commonly used as a tool to evaluate participatory processes, the ladder provides a description of various 'levels' of participation, ranging from manipulation to partnership working. The ladder makes the distinction between tokenism or non-participation and 'partnership' in which children have an equal voice to adults (Bessell and Gal 2009). This pertains to the empowering effect of participation for children and the link between participation, self-esteem and confidence (Cashmore 2002).



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Figure 1: Hart's Ladder of Participation

The ladder itself is a re-modelled version of Arnstein's (1969) community participation model, which was designed for use with adults (Malone and Hartung 2010). Therefore, questions must be raised as to whether it is appropriate to use this model when considering children's participation. Hart (1992) acknowledges that the level of participation will differ depending upon the context and child involved, and this is reflected in empirical research with social work professionals. For example, Shemmings (2000) asked 88 professionals working in family and child protection services (42 SWs and 46 non-SWs) to complete a questionnaire aimed at finding out their views about (i) the age at which children should make certain decisions and (ii) whether children should be involved in child protection conferences. This was followed up with qualitative data whereby detailed notes were made when twenty-five of the SWs discussed their views during a training day exercise. The study concluded

that the professionals valued the desire to 'protect' children from harm, including from what could be deemed as 'adult' decisions, more than the desire to uphold children's right to participate.

Furthermore, children and young people may make choices not to participate, either as a genuine choice or as a means to abdicate responsibility; although where this fits into the ladder is unclear (Cashmore 2002). Vis et al. (2010) undertook a study in Norway with 53 child protection case managers and 33 social work students. Participants completed a questionnaire in which they were asked to agree or disagree with 20 statements about child participation. Statistical factor analysis was used to identify underlying factors in the dataset. The research concluded that the views of professionals were a key barrier to the participation of children in childcare social work. While the relevance of this study to the UK system is somewhat limited as it was completed in Norway, and Norwegian social work professionals will have been trained in a different manner to those in the UK, the study does support the theory that professionals' understanding of participation is indicative of a system in which 'adults within or associated with the system tend to act as gatekeepers, determining when, if and how children's views might be treated seriously' (Bessell and Gal 2009, p.287).

Macleod (2006) carried out qualitative interviews with SWs and young people in care to explore the effectiveness of communication between them. SWs indicated that they had made extensive efforts to listen to children and promote participation. However, young people reported that they felt their views had not been heard or taken into account when decisions were made. This disparity raises questions regarding how best to support children and young people to engage in meaningful participation, rather than what could be viewed as tokenistic and having little impact on decisions made.

I have focused on Hart's model of participation, however it is important to note that there are other models. For example, Shier (2001) provided an alternative framework and identifies five levels of children's participation, which may be useful to consider in terms of involving children in decisions about their lives. Shier identifies these as:

*Children are listened to;*

*Children are supported in expressing their views;*

*Children's views are taken into account;*

*Children are involved in decision making processes; and*

*Children share power in and responsibility for decision making.*

Shier (2001) describes openings, opportunities and obligations for organisations in promoting these stages to facilitate children's participation in decisions being made about their lives.

### ***2.5.3 Participation as a right***

Theories drawn from a 'rights' basis refer more broadly to the participation of children within society. Within a child's rights approach to participation, care and protection from harm is re-characterised as entitlement, rather than an act of adult benevolence (Bessell and Gal 2009). This has consequences for the nature of participation with children, who are depicted as 'citizens' irrespective of age and capacity, with rights, as a member of society. This approach lends itself to viewing children as resources with something to offer society (Bessell and Gal 2009); essentially as 'experts' on childhood (Hale 2006). However, this perspective is not without limitations. The suggestion is that a rights rhetoric can lend itself to viewing those who do require protection and social provision as dependents who lack competency (Minow 1990). This highlights the tension between legislation and theory in the context of child protection social work (Lansdown 2010). Children must be heard (legally and in guidance) but must also be protected from adult issues - raising questions of how possible 'partnership' is and what level of participation can and should be realistically aimed for in the child protection context.

### ***2.5.4 Participation as a need***

An alternative stance for understanding and justifying child participation is supported by theories of child development (Bessell and Gal 2009), in which participation in decision-making is characterised as a basic need akin to health and autonomy. In their discussion of participation as a need, Bessell and Gal (2009) draw on a number of studies with children and young people to justify this stance. However, links appear, at times, tenuous between the aims of the studies they draw upon and their view of a basic need, which is never actually defined. Nonetheless, the discussion of children's needs in the context of participation is useful, particularly in terms of the positive effect of participation and the moral argument for involving children in decisions about their care put forward by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

## **2.6 Participation in children's social care services**

The last two decades has seen an acknowledgement of the rights of children, young people and parents to participate in developing services both for them individually and also for the wider community. LA and partner agencies have begun to acknowledge that, when listened to, children, young people and parents can play an essential role in the planning and delivery of services (DfE 2015; SCIE 2012; Miller and McNicholl 2003).

As a result of the changes outlined above, participation has become a key 'target' in many voluntary and statutory organisations that work with vulnerable children and families. At times, this can lead to the 'participation box' being ticked by organisations because they can demonstrate that they have involved children and young people in a specific activity, rather than because they can provide evidence of change or improvement as a result of their participation' (SCIE 2012).

Wilkins (2013) suggests that all work with children and families should involve service users in planning and review, and that professionals should put themselves into the shoes of the service user and implement the core social work values of choice, independence and personal welfare to work alongside families to improve their life opportunities. It is therefore important to consider how effectively SWs and other professionals work in partnership with children and parents when there are concerns that the children are at risk of abuse or neglect, and specifically when children come into care. One of the key principles of the Children Act 1989 is the importance of working in partnership with parents. Between 50-70 per cent of children who come into care end up returning to live with their parents (Farmer 2014). Therefore, it is essential that SWs have meaningful, and as far as possible, positive working relationships with both parents and children.

## **2.7 Child in Care reviews and participation**

One result of the blame culture that is endemic in childcare social work, particularly since the Peter Connelly case in 2009, is an increase in the numbers of children in care as practitioners and managers have become more risk averse (Shoesmith 2016; Featherstone et al. 2014). This has meant that both SWs and IROs are under

increasing pressure, and this could lead to the CiC review being an even more important mechanism to ensure that children are provided with the best possible care by the State. The aim of the review is to ensure that the State consistently meets the child's needs until they reach adulthood. Tasked with overseeing this process is the IRO; and a key role of the IRO is to ensure that the child plays a meaningful role in the meeting and in any decisions or recommendations made at the review (DfES 2010).

The IRO should meet with the child or young person prior to the review and ensure their voice is heard during the process (DfES 2010). Following a review, the child or young person must be informed of the decisions made in the event that they have not attended. This must be achieved in an age appropriate manner and an individual approach adopted (DfES 2010). Overall, the participation of children in decision-making in the United Kingdom has seen a dramatic shift in the last two decades (Lansdown 2010), and it is now recognised as essential to involve children in decisions made about their lives. This is particularly pertinent for children in care, who are part of many more decisions and decision-making forums than their non-looked after peers (Thomas and O'Kane 1999).

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) most clearly sets out the right of children to participate in decisions which are about or affect them (Cashmore 2002). The UK, as a signatory, is therefore expected to uphold the child's right to express their views and have them taken into account. Notably, this does not necessitate the right to make decisions or be part of the decision-making process (Schofield and Thoburn 1996). Rather, the focus is upon being listened to, with the views of the child respected and given due consideration (Cashmore 2002).

Decision-making powers are provided by the Children Act 1989. Section 22 of this Act requires that LAs consider the wishes and feelings of children in care when reviewing their care plans (Schofield and Thoburn 1996). Additional legislation to support the care and participation of children in care is provided by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced the role of the IRO. Until 2002, the Children Act 1989 required LAs to review childcare plans and that the views of the child be sought (section 26). Following a House of Lords judgement (Mole 2002), it was recognised that an independent review of care plans for children in care was necessary. A key concern was that the wishes and feelings of the child were not adequately considered (Ofsted 2013). This legislative change required LAs to ensure that every child in care had an appointed individual IRO.



Amid concerns over the independence and efficacy of the IRO role, the 2008 amendment to the Children Act 1989 extended their responsibilities with regard to care planning and performance monitoring. This was strengthened further by the 2010 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (DCSF 2010), which came into force in England and Wales alongside statutory guidance for IROs with the introduction of the IRO Handbook (DfES 2010). These provide clear guidance of how IROs should undertake their role. Specifications of regularity of reviews, monitoring, and recording are detailed, alongside direction of appropriate channels through which to challenge poor practice. Consultation and participation are highlighted as a requirement in recognition that the IRO role and the review process should encourage meaningful participation for children in care and their parents (DfES 2010). The Care Planning regulations do not specify that a child must attend their review, however, the IRO is required to speak to them about the content of the review prior to the meeting and attendance is to be encouraged.

The reality of children's participation in their reviews in practice raises a number of complex issues which require consideration. Guidance on how participation should be reported by IROs provided by the Department for Education and Skills (2010), advises that 'nodding' in answer to a question may be categorised as participation in decision-making. This illuminates the difficulties in defining what is, and what is not, 'meaningful' participation.

Arguments for the importance of participation of children in care focus upon the very nature of being 'in care'. Children who have been accommodated by the LA have often been removed from their parents' care in distressing circumstances, and may have experienced neglectful parenting and instability of care arrangements (Wade et al. 2011). They are thrust into a world in which the number and type of decisions made are very different to those children who are not in the care system, and they have a disproportionate level of contact with professionals. For children in care, there are regular and numerous decisions to be made in relation to their education, health and well-being. There are a variety of different people who will play a role in this decision-making, including SWs and foster carers. At times, decisions are made in relation to children in care by professionals who have never even met the young person (Thomas and O'Kane 1999). Empowering children in care to participate in these decisions is particularly important in ensuring that the child's needs are properly understood and met.

Inextricably linked to this are the by-products of participation and feeling heard, which are building confidence and self-esteem; these are invaluable when preparing children and young people for independence (Bostock 2005). Cashmore (2002) reviewed the research literature from the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand in relation to the perceptions of children and young people in care about the extent to which they have been able to participate in decisions that affect them. Involvement in the decision-making process was shown to result in a greater sense of satisfaction with the outcome of any decision made, whether desired or not (Cashmore 2002).

Despite changes to guidance within the care system (Thoburn 2010), children and young people in care have reported that they feel they have limited opportunities to engage in decisions about their lives (Pert et al. 2014; Cashmore 2002; Munro 2001; Thomas and O’Kane 1999). The views of children in care have been gained in a variety of guises over the last decade; through involvement in decision-making processes (Murray and Hallett 2000), the efficacy of children’s advocates (Barnes 2012), the role of IROs (Pert et al. 2014; Dickens et al. 2015; Ofsted 2013), care planning and the courts (Timms and Thoburn 2006) and more broadly, experiences of the care system (Ofsted 2011a; Ofsted 2011b). Overall, these studies suggest that children and young people tend to have an ineffective voice and limited power in review meetings, and that they are not actively involved in the decision-making processes. Sadly, these findings remain apparent nearly 30 years after the right for children to participate in decisions made about them was enshrined in the Children Act 1989, raising concern regarding professionals’ ability to properly ensure that young people participate in decision-making which affects them. Indeed, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child itself has commented that the UK in its implementation of Article 12 ‘seemed to suggest that consulting the child on his or her view was a matter of discretion rather than a right’ (cited in Murray and Hallett 2000, p.15).

## **2.8 Participation in decision-making forums**

In the context of child-care social work, two of the formal mechanisms in which decisions about children are made are child protection conferences and CiC reviews. A child protection conference is a multi-agency meeting that aims to ensure children’s safety, promote children’s health and development, and identify when a child is at continuing risk of significant harm. In the region of 20 per cent of children who are made subject to a child protection plan end up coming into care (DfE 2015). In a

similar way to CiC reviews, law and policies in the UK highlight the importance of children and parents being involved in child protection conferences and their wishes and feelings being heard by professionals (DfE 2015).

A recent study carried out on behalf of the Children's Commissioner for England has considered children's views of child protection conferences (Cossar et al. 2011). This research was conducted in collaboration with one LA in London. As this study was carried out in just one LA, it is important to recognise that it cannot claim external validity. Children and young people aged between five and eighteen who had been subject to a child protection plan in the previous 12 months and who were not currently in public care were identified. 18 families agreed to take part, providing a sample of 26 children in total. Children and young people were involved throughout the research process. Young people on the research advisory group provided insights at the design, data collection and analysis stages of the research and helped to write a young person's version of the report. Findings indicated that only a small minority of children were aware of different ways in which their views could be provided at the meeting. Most of the children who attended conferences found them difficult and few felt even partly listened to. The authors highlighted the potential harm caused from participation where children are not adequately prepared or offered choice in how to participate.

A similar conclusion was also drawn by Van Bijleveld et al. (2013). In this study, the authors carried out a comprehensive review of the literature available on child participation within child welfare and child protection. They used keyword searches to identify relevant papers and augmented the search with literature included in article reference lists. They identified 21 studies of relevance dating from 1995 – 2012. They consistently found that children would say that they should always participate, whereas SWs outlined many situations where, in their view, children's participation is inappropriate. Muench et al. (2017) interviewed 23 children and 26 corresponding parents, all of whom were going through the child protection process. This study was carried out in just one local authority so it cannot claim external validity but can provide us with useful insights into service users' views. The study suggested that children and young people felt inadequately involved throughout the child protection process and were not in a position to make informed choices.

Whilst there has been some recent research into the views of children within the child protection arena (Muench et al 2017; Cossar et al. 2011), with regard to children in care reviews, both historical and recent empirical research aimed at gaining the views

of children is sparse (Thomas 2011). The largest study to consider the participation of children in care in their review meetings was by Thomas and O’Kane (1999), and although the methodology used was robust, there have been limited studies since the introduction of the IRO role which considered children’s participation in reviews in England. Thomas and O’Kane (1999) carried out a quantitative survey of 225 children aged eight to 12 years in seven LA areas. They followed this up with a qualitative study of 47 cases where they interviewed the children, their SWs, carers and some of the parents. They also held focus groups with young people and observed a small number of meetings. The authors concluded that only half of the children interviewed attended their review meetings, and those who did largely found them ‘boring’ or ‘scary’. Furthermore, over a third reported having very little influence within the meeting. However, it should be noted that the participants were identified by SWs rather than the researcher, potentially affecting the validity of the findings.

The participation of children in their reviews (based on understanding the purpose and content of them) has been questioned (Munro 2001); and exploration of preparation and choice in how and when reviews are held has also been highlighted as limited (Sinclair 1998). Unsurprisingly then, conclusions have been drawn that young people feel disillusioned with the review process and that their views are not listened to (Thomas 2011). A common theme in the research is that ‘most [children] report that the purpose of the meeting is to talk about, rather than to, them’ (Munro 2001, p. 9). Indeed, both Munro (2001) and Sinclair (1999) called for reconsideration as to whether the review meeting itself was an appropriate vehicle to promote participation. Other research has identified that consulting children and young people was not enough to ensure their views had an impact on the decisions which were made at their review meetings (Vis et al. 2010). This raises questions regarding how meaningful participation is achieved by practitioners.

The Department for Education (2016) has published national statistics regarding the attendance of children in their reviews and the means by which they participated. The statistics relate to children aged four or over who had been looked after by the LA for four weeks or more. The data evidences that in 2007, 48 per cent of children physically attended their reviews and spoke for themselves, this dropped to 46 per cent in 2009, and 43 per cent in 2011, however, increased to 44 per cent in 2014. The percentage of children who did not attend but who conveyed their views by a facilitated medium was 11 per cent in 2007, increasing to 12 per cent in 2010 and 14 per cent in 2014 (DfE 2016). These figures indicate that despite the increasing profile of the importance of participation, participation rates have not significantly increased.

It is also somewhat surprising that despite the myriad of different forms of technology available, the number of children who conveyed their views by a facilitated medium has remained stubbornly low.

Polkki et al.'s (2012) Finnish based study comprised of semi-structured interviews with eight children aged seven to 17 in foster care and four interviews with SWs. As this study took place in another jurisdiction its transferability to the UK needs to be carefully considered. The researchers reported that children residing in foster care did not always wish to attend meetings, however, hoped that their SWs would express their views on their behalf. SWs interviewed as part of this study highlighted lack of time as the most significant obstacle to preparatory work with children in care. This research indicates that there are other methods of ensuring children are active participants in their reviews, however, SWs need to be supported practically and emotionally, so they are equipped to gain these views, take them on board and share them at meetings.

It is also important to note that a number of variables may impact on a child or young person's ability to meaningfully participate in the CiC review process (Thomas 2015). These may include age, race, culture, level of ability and previous experiences of participation in meetings. Franklin and Sloper (2009) looked at the participation of disabled children in decisions regarding their care. Firstly, by a survey of all social services departments in England to identify the range and nature of disabled children's participation. Secondly, case studies of six areas to explore the processes and outcomes of participation activity within social care from the points of view of professionals, parents/carers and disabled children. Seventy-six professionals, 24 parents/carers and 21 disabled children aged five to 18 were interviewed. The majority of children interviewed had a learning difficulty ranging from mild to severe and six children had a communication impairment. The majority of children interviewed took part in a verbal face-to-face interview. Photographs were used to stimulate discussion and memory and verbal questioning was supplemented with a visual tool. Children could choose from a series of responses on separate cards which could be stuck on the questions card (Franklin and Sloper 2009, p.6). This study highlighted the need for workers to have a flexible view of what participation is and suggested an individualised approach to participation is required.

Schofield and Thoburn (1996) also explored children's participation in child protection processes and reported the importance of a trusting relationship with a dependable professional as key to supporting participation. Continuity of relationships for children

in care is also considered vital and it is therefore concerning that frequent changes in SWs are common (Cashmore 2002). Recent research regarding children and young people's participation in CiC reviews is limited and does not consider in depth children's and professionals' views of participation. The views of children and young people regarding their IROs have been gained only recently, possibly in response to recent judgments highlighting ineffective IRO practice through (among other things) failing to gain, understand and take into account the child's views (*R v Rochdale* [2008]; *A and S v Lancs CC* [2012]).

In 2011 a series of national web-based surveys were carried out by the Children's Rights Director (Ofsted 2011a). The surveys were completed by fifty children between the age of eight and 17 in twenty-four different LA areas, and they explored children's views of corporate parenting and IROs. This study concluded that young people had little understanding of the role of the IRO, particularly in their responsibility to ensure the child's wishes and feelings are taken into account. Unsurprisingly then, almost 20 per cent of respondents said that no significant decisions were made about their lives in CiC reviews and just 17 per cent felt their IRO listened to them. However, due to the use of quantitative methods, the data collected provides no exploration as to why children and young people held those views.

Similarly, Ofsted (2013) have recently explored the efficacy of the IRO role through reviewing 111 cases in a thematic manner following inspections in ten LAs. Their report draws on evidence from discussions with children in care and with parents, as well as interviews with SMs, a group of IROs, a group of SWs, a group of foster carers and a representative from Cafcass<sup>1</sup>. Findings indicated a general dissatisfaction with reviews amongst children and the feeling that IROs were not meeting the specifications of their role in terms of participation. The sample size was quite small and children were interviewed in groups rather than individually, which may have impeded individual voices being heard. Age ranges were not clarified and LAs were tasked with selecting about half of those children to be interviewed (the rest were randomly selected), a practice which risks validity. The concerns raised in the study are supported in work from Jellicic et al. (2013) who conducted a national survey of IROs. Findings suggested that IROs do not feel they have made a contribution to service improvement in terms of ameliorating outcomes for children and young people, and that IRO consultation with children was, generally, poor. Jellicic et al. (2014) also carried out a study which considered in more depth the IRO role, this was

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<sup>1</sup> Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service

a large study covering four LAs but it did not explicitly consider children's participation in reviews. This study did, however, provide some interesting and insightful data in relation to the importance of reviews being child-centred. It also highlighted children's views of IROs and gave an overview of IRO practice in engaging children. Overall, the study suggested that children's experiences of IROs varied greatly; some had a very positive experience and some a more negative one. The study concluded that the individual IRO was 'fundamental to a child's understanding of their role. If the IROs listened to them without judging, meaningfully involved children in care planning, made sure their voice was heard above all the powerful voices of the professionals, and, above all, made things happen, then children knew IROs were there to make a concrete and positive difference to their lives' (Jelicic et al. 2014, p.39).

The focus upon the efficacy of the IRO role in recent research indicates a need to establish if SWs' and IROs' views of reviews have changed since the IRO role was introduced in 2002, particularly as conclusions drawn in the studies carried out by Munro (2001), Thomas and O'Kane (1999) and Sinclair (1998) may no longer be relevant. In response, a study undertaken by Pert et al. (2014), involved interviewing 25 young people and 17 foster carers to obtain their views of CiC reviews, IROs and participation. However, again, external validity cannot be claimed as the research took place in just one LA. The authors found that few children were offered a genuine opportunity to influence any aspect of their meeting. The reviews were generalised and lacked individuality. Some children did not know who all the attendees were and most reported that they would have preferred fewer people to be present. The authors commented:

*The strength of feeling from the participants in this study confirms that children and young people do not enjoy being part of adult centric decision-making forums. Reviews were enjoyed when they were more child friendly, where they had choice in how they were run and in which they did not feel embarrassed or overwhelmed.*

(Pert et al. 2014, p.8)

These findings were similar to Thomas and O'Kane's (1999) study, highlighting a lack of positive change in this area.

Pert et al.'s (2014) interviews with foster carers revealed that reviews were not a suitable forum for promoting children's participation. However, foster carers did suggest that reviews were a good way of ensuring actions got followed up and

completed by the SW and other professionals on the young person's behalf. While this study only interviewed participants in one small English LA and it did not involve interviewing any SWs or IROs, it does highlight, that even with the introduction of the IRO role (which did not exist at the time of Thomas and O'Kane's study in 1999) children still do not feel engaged or involved in the review process. This calls into question the whole purpose of the CiC review and it is important to consider what other participants in the meetings (SWs and IROs) think of reviews in terms of children's participation.

There was a related action research study carried out by Roesch-Marsh et al. (2016) into children's participation and CiC reviews in Scotland. This involved surveys with SWs, Reviewing Officers and young people after 69 review meetings. Follow-up qualitative interviews were then completed with ten young people and a focus group held with the five participating Reviewing Officers. The Scottish system is quite different to the English one and there is not an IRO Handbook for Scotland; this means that there may be less consistency in relation to how the role of the IRO is carried out in different areas (Roesch-Marsh et al. 2016). The study highlighted how young people had mixed feelings about their reviews, and the importance of young people being involved and engaged throughout the review process, including preparation for the review, deciding where and when the review was going to take place, and who was going to be invited (Roesch-Marsh et al. 2016). It is important to be mindful that as the Scottish system is different to the English and Welsh one this may impact on this study's transferability.

A further study undertaken by Dickens et al. (2015), looked at care planning and the role of the IRO in four LAs, considering 122 case files of children in care. IROs were given questionnaires as part of the study; these found that 61 per cent cited heavy workloads and time constraints as contributing to them not having the opportunity to visit children to gain their views as much as they would have liked. The case file analysis of the recorded minutes for the most recent review showed that in only six per cent of cases IROs had met with the child between reviews. In 42 per cent of cases the IRO had spoken to the child just prior to the review, but given that this was on the same day as the meeting itself, it is questionable how meaningful this would be in terms of participation. It was evident that children had engaged in some form of consultation (for example, through discussions with their SW) in 72 per cent of cases, and overall the views of children were recorded within review minutes in 87 per cent of cases.



Dickens et al.'s (2015) study was more robust and included a larger number of participants and LAs than the Pert et al. (2014) study, but its focus was not on children's participation. Therefore, considering the current literature base, more research is required to obtain a holistic insight into young people's, SWs', IROs' and SMS' views of participation by young people in reviews. In particular, there is a need to consider in greater depth what the barriers are to children participating meaningfully in their reviews, and whether there are more creative ways of engaging young people within the review process. In some LAs, over the last ten years, older children have been encouraged to chair their own CiC review. It is therefore important to consider how widespread this practice is and whether this leads to improved participation by children in care in their review meetings.

## **2.9 Summary**

The participation of children is a requirement outlined in legislation and practice guidance, and is therefore not optional (DfES 2010). It is recognised that children have rights, including the right to participate in decisions made about them. For care experienced children and young people this right is more complex and cogent; and research has indicated that children and young people in care wish to be involved in decisions about their lives (Cashmore 2002; Ofsted 2011b). Current government guidance suggests that the review process is designed to encourage participation by young people in their review meetings, and the role of the IRO is to ensure that young people participate meaningfully in these meetings (DfES 2010). However, the recent, albeit limited research examined in this chapter, suggests that children and young people do not feel that they meaningfully participate in their reviews.

Whilst legislation, policy and practice have developed, there is still limited research and knowledge about the participation of children with regard to CiC reviews (Thomas 2011). LAs have a duty to empower children who are 'looked after' in particular, as they have already experienced adversity (DfES 2010). The importance of giving children in care a sense of control and involvement in decisions regarding their future must not be underestimated in terms of the impact this may have on improving their outcomes. As discussed above, children in care are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues, are less likely to develop stable relationships, are more likely to engage in offending behaviour and have poorer educational outcomes.

## **2.10 Research Questions**

Drawing on the literature reviewed in this chapter, I devised the following central research question:

1. How does the current CIC review process encourage meaningful participation of children and young people?

The following subsidiary questions were designed to facilitate a deeper exploration of the research topic:

2. To what degree do children and young people understand the purpose of reviews?
3. To what degree do children and young people believe that their views are taken into consideration during and following reviews?
4. To what degree do Social Workers (SWs), Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Senior Managers (SMs) believe that children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews?
5. What are the barriers to meaningful participation?
6. What can be done to improve children and young people's participation in reviews?

The methodology adopted to attend to these central research questions will be outlined in the following chapter.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology applied to examine how successfully the Child in Care (CiC) reviews are at engaging children and young people in the review process. The research methodology was specifically designed to address the research questions introduced in the previous chapter (Section 2.10). The chapter begins by outlining the research design, the process of contacting and sampling participants and the method of data production. I then provide the framework of analysis before considering certain ethical issues that arose during the research process. The chapter concludes with my reflections on the process of data production and some discussion of the study's limitations.

### 3.2 Research design

Hakim (2000) has referred to research design as being the point at which research questions become and are turned into research projects. White (2009) states that this includes a process by which the researcher begins to consider how a research question can be answered and then decides which methods they will use to gain the evidence. This section begins by presenting a range of philosophical approaches deployed by social researchers before outlining my chosen method.

#### ***3.2.1 Ontological and epistemological underpinnings***

There is on-going debate and discussion in relation to the 'proper approach to social research', and what is the most appropriate methodology to consider and investigate social phenomena (Sayer 1992, p.119). Researchers do not come to the field bereft of past experiences, assumptions or value judgments. These shape how they see the world, what they want to research, and how they go about researching it. It is important therefore to recognise, own and address these factors. As D'Cruz and Jones note:

*The selection of design, methodology, data generation and analysis does not consist of random or ad hoc decisions (or neutral methods or techniques) but in assumptions about reality (ontology) and how this may be known or understood (epistemology).*

(D'Cruz and Jones 2004, p.57)

If ontology is 'what's out there to know' then in contrast, epistemology is 'what and how can we know about it' (Grix 2002, p.179). Positivist research searches for measurable evidence to try to uncover and explain what has caused phenomena. Positivist social research studies aspects of society with the aim of being able to explain why something is happening - the causes of a problem (Denzin 1992). This is often undertaken via statistical analysis and the measurement of different variables which in turn can identify important or significant factors. Bryman describes this as the 'application of methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality' (Bryman 2012, p.28).

In contrast, interpretivism focuses on the 'subjective meanings of social action' (Bryman 2012, p.20). An interpretivist epistemology is not trying to answer why something happened but is more interested in exploring how something happens (Bryman 2012). Corben and Strauss (2008) suggest that interpretivist research attempts to gather and analyse rich, contextualised data. My ontological position is interpretivist. I was interested in children and young people's views of their reviews. Consequently, the information produced was based on their subjective experiences, perspectives and interpretations. I was interested in how the process of reviews happened and how it made children and young people feel. Similarly, with regard to the professionals, I wanted to gain an understanding of their subjective views and whether their perspectives differed from those of the young participants.

However, I was also mindful and not dismissive of a positivist approach. As I had previously been both an IRO and an IRO manager and had chaired a high number of CiC reviews. I came to the research with the assumption and awareness that there is a problem in relation to meaningful participation for children in CiC reviews. I was interested in finding out more about the 'causes of this problem' (Denzin 1992, p.26).

Bourdieu (1977) argues that when choosing an ontological approach for a research project it is important to choose a strategy and methodology that are most able to answer and explore the specific research question. Consequently, the research

methods have been determined by working out the best way to examine the object of the study. The aim of the research was to explore the following main question:

How does the current CiC review process encourage meaningful participation of children and young people?

In summary, this research question fits with my ontological and epistemological approach. I wanted to explore the perspectives of both professionals and children and young people about their experiences of reviews. The epistemology is principally interpretivist as these perspectives are subjective and the reality mediated through how the participants construct their social worlds (Bryman 2012).

### ***3.2.2 Methodological approach***

By choosing a qualitative approach I was able to explore children's, young people's and professionals' experiences of attending reviews and how they felt about these meetings and the potential barriers that existed in terms of maximising children's participation. Qualitative research is widely used in social work research and it has been described as a methodological approach that 'fits' with social work practice (Shaw and Gould 2001; Gilgun 1994). For Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.3), qualitative research is 'a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative material practices that make the world visible', which aligns qualitative research with social work practice. It was therefore essential that I gained the perspectives of both the service user (children and young people) and the professionals who were either directly delivering or overseeing service delivery (SWs, IROs and SMs).

All participants were recruited from the same Local Authority (LA), to enable direct comparisons between service users' perceptions and professionals' perspectives within a common geographical and organisational framework.

Deciding which type of data production would best suit the service user group required careful consideration. I was interested in gaining the opinions of children and professionals with no assumed or predicted outcomes. Arguably, the world cannot be explored and understood in an exclusively scientific way (Becker et al. 2012); as experiences are subjective and will not always fit neatly into boxes. Accordingly, pure scientific data limits the information elicited and does not capture any of the nuances of experience. Therefore, I required a method that suited exploratory research, and

would successfully engage those children, young people and professionals involved in CiC reviews.

A further reason for selecting qualitative methods was that these would facilitate a more in-depth understanding of the topic (Thomas 2003) as well as a more nuanced understanding of participants' accounts and views on how effective the meetings are at engaging children and young people. Whilst a quantitative approach would have enabled me to generate numerical data – relating to whether reviews took place on time, for example, my primary goal was to develop a holistic account of service users' experiences of the review process. It was important to work from a children's rights, participant-led perspective and to ensure in particular that the children participating in the study would feel comfortable and engaged with the techniques deployed. Since children in care are a particularly vulnerable social group, providing them with an opportunity to tell their story and use their own voice was an important aspect of this research. Furthermore, recognising that children and young people are 'experts' of their own experiences implies that seeking their views must be a central part of the study (Kirby 2004). Therefore, given the research questions and the epistemological stance adopted, a qualitative methodology was selected for this study.

I was also interested in exploring the views of professionals regarding the importance of child participation in CiC reviews, and subsequently how they sought (assuming that was one of their objectives of the meeting) to ensure that children participated meaningfully in their reviews. For example, assuming they thought children's participation was important, I was interested to know whether IROs and SWs gave children the opportunity to decide when and where the meeting was held and who was invited.

### **3.3 Techniques of data production**

#### ***3.3.1 Children as participants***

Prior to the late 1980s, the prevalent view in social research was that children were unreliable research participants (Docherty and Sandelowski 1999). During the 1990s this view shifted as researchers began to focus attention not only on children's views, but also on the best methods to access their views (Fargas-Malet et al. 2015). Since

then, there has been much debate on this question (Kirk 2007; Punch 2002). Structured and creative activities – and drawing in particular – were increasingly considered to be valuable research materials (Mauthner 1997). This idea was premised on the notion that communicating with children is more challenging than with adults, so special techniques are required to develop a deeper understanding of their views (Harden et al. 2000). However, this approach has been criticised, since it could risk undermining the position of children as independent actors capable of constructing and commenting on their own realities without aids and adaptations (Punch 2002; Hill 1997).

Regarding its practical application, Coyne (1998) found that some children simply do not like to draw, viewing it as a kind of test or school exercise. Some young people also find drawing activities too ‘childish’ (Johnson et al. 2012). However, other research cites many examples of drawings being used successfully to obtain young people’s views (Mannay 2016; Pert et al. 2014; Mannay 2013; Mannay 2010; Hemming 2008). For example, Pert et al.’s (2014) study used drawing as a key method to obtain young people’s views of children in care reviews. The authors used feelings cards, pictorial depictions of CiC reviews and free drawing to assist discussion. Within that study the authors noted that younger children (12 years and below) preferred to use these methods while adolescents did not (Pert et al. 2014).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has played an important role in pre-empting the development of more participatory research with children (Mannay 2016). As Payne (2009) outlines the Convention sets out the rights for all children ‘to express views in all decisions that affect them’. In that sense the CiC review is clearly an example of a meeting that should encourage children to play a leading role in any decisions that are taken at this forum. Likewise the Convention clearly supports the view that it is essential that research is carried out ‘with’ rather than ‘about’ children (MacNaughton et al. 2007).

Empirical research into young people’s views of research methods has found that children and young people prefer interviews to any other research method (Hill 2006). More recent research has concluded that using a mixture of creative techniques such as drawings and media alongside direct interviews encourages better and more meaningful participation, affording children and young people the time, choice and control over what they say (Fargas-Malet et al. 2015). Based on these findings, I determined that interviews would be the best way of conducting my research, with

pictures and drawing materials made available for those children and young people who wished to make use of them.

### **3.3.2 The choice of interviews**

There are three distinct interview types discernable in the literature: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Formal, structured interviews are deemed most appropriate when specific information needs to be gathered in order to compare results and to test a particular hypothesis (Bryman 2012). This approach would therefore have been inappropriate for this study, given its exploratory aims discussed in section 3.3.1. Furthermore, the use of structured interviews poses the danger that the interviewer significantly guides responses through the manner in which questions are framed (Bryman 2012). Conversely, a completely unstructured interview format would also have been inappropriate, as the interviews could risk drifting too far from the core research questions. Moreover, to be in a position to give meaningful consent, participants must be aware of what general areas would be discussed.

Group interviews and focus groups were also considered, as prior research has shown that these methods can generate several perspectives and spark discussion that enables both shared understandings and differences in opinions and experience (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). Babbie (2004, p.303) notes that 'group dynamics frequently bring out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals'. Generating insight into new, previously unconsidered themes would meaningfully benefit the CiC review process; group interviews and focus groups could potentially offer a valuable platform. Researchers undertaking participatory research with young people have also found that young people are less keen on research methods that involve "just sitting and talking to an adult" (Bagnoli and Clark 2010, p.111). Facilitating successful group interviews, however, presents the researcher with a number of challenges:

*Controlling the dynamic within the group is a major challenge. Letting one interviewee dominate the focus group interview reduces the likelihood that the other subjects will participate and express themselves. This can generate the problem of group conformity or "groupthink".*

(Babbie 2004, p.303)

The risk, therefore, is that participants might be inhibited from saying what they really think as individuals. I was also conscious of confidentiality issues arising from the use



of group interviews, particularly given that all participants would be selected from the same LA area. For these reasons, whilst useful in some settings, I deemed focus groups to be an inappropriate research method for this study.

Consequently, I determined semi-structured interviews with individual service-users and professionals to be the most appropriate research method. Semi-structured interviews use predetermined questions but also allow the researcher to digress and seek clarity with the subject if anything is unclear (Hemming 2008). According to Al-Saggaf and Williamson (2014 p.16), semi-structured interviews 'rely on the social interaction between interviewer and informant to elicit information'. When adopting this approach it is essential to build rapport with participants and to access their views and beliefs using open-ended questions. Rapport, as Spradley (1979, p.130) notes, 'refers to the development of mutual trust that allows for the free flow of information'. Another useful interview technique is probing, defined as 'encouraging the respondent to give an answer, or to clarify or amplify an answer' (Hoinville et al. 1978, p.129). This serves to increase the likelihood that the data is a genuine reflection of the interviewee's views (Babbie 2004).

Another advantage of semi-structured interviews is that although they use some predetermined questions, they allow the researcher to remain flexible. The ability to adapt allows the researcher to quality control the information being generated and to check that the participant is clear what message they are seeking to convey (Thomas 2003). This helps to increase the validity of the data and ensure that it is a genuine reflection of participants' views and perspectives (Babbie 2004).

Specific to children and young people, it has been found that formal techniques are less successful than more relaxed, spontaneous approaches that more closely resemble their everyday communication (Holland et al. 2010). Hill (2006) found that children and young people like to have some choice regarding how the research is conducted. This could relate to practical matters such as location or timing, or to more substantive issues like the content and direction of discussion. Fargas-Malet et al. (2015) highlight the importance of creative design and interviewer flexibility when interviewing participants, particularly for children and young people. In this study, I ensured within certain limitations that the children and young people chose where and when the interviews took place. I offered the young people to meet me at their homes, in schools, in my office or a local café. All the young people chose to be interviewed at home. In terms of timings for the interviews they again chose to meet me after school or college. Although good practice would have given them as much control as

possible over the content and direction of the discussion, as I had to try to answer my research questions the ability to provide them with this opportunity was limited. However, I tried to foster flexibility in other ways such as offering them creative methods to outline who attended their reviews.

Existing research has documented certain drawbacks to semi-structured interviews. May (2001, p.144) notes that 'interviews rely on people's account of their actions as representing something beyond the interview situation'. The difficulty here is that the interviewee may present an inaccurate account or, when their account is genuine, it will always be from their perspective and 'there might be circumstances or events which surrounded these of which the person was not aware' (May 2001, p.144). While there does not appear to be an interview technique that can be deployed to counter this issue, it is not particularly relevant to my study given my interest in obtaining children and young people's views and in exploring their *own perspectives* of the process.

I did contemplate supplementing my use of interviews with another method, so that data could be triangulated. Consideration was given to observing a number of CiC reviews as a non-participant observer. The advantage of non-participant observation is that it allows the researcher to fully immerse themselves in the world of those they are researching, providing genuine insight into the participant's day-to-day life (Fielding and Thomas 2008). One issue with non-participant observation however, is the subjective nature of observation; the researcher only documents what they feel is important, which can undermine the accuracy of the information being generated (Babbie 2004). I was particularly concerned about this issue given my prior personal experience and beliefs regarding the participation of children and young people in CiC reviews.

Another disadvantage of non-participant observation is that the presence of a researcher can affect the behaviour of participants (Fielding and Thomas 2008). It has been suggested, however, that observing groups as opposed to individuals can help to mitigate against this (Wilson and Streatfield 1977). There is evidence though that observing groups means data is obtained that is based on fewer interactions with participants than individual interviewing often affords (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). I finally discounted this method after I discussed the option of observing a number of CiC reviews with my supervisors and the head of service in the LA for the reviewing service, we agreed that it might risk impacting on the way that the meetings were conducted, particularly since at the time I was a senior officer within the council and

the IRO and SW would have been aware of this. As such, it did not seem ethical or appropriate to conduct such observations.

Alongside the semi-structured interviews, the young participants would also have the option of using creative methods that could help them engage and prompt discussion. These included visual representations of CiC reviews, pictorial representations of professionals as well as materials which children and young people could use for their own drawings. I created a list of questions that I might ask the children and young people and a list of questions that I would use as a prompt when interviewing the professionals (see Appendix Four). Each participant was able to discuss the topics that mattered most to them within the confines of the study's remit. This gave them the option of excluding issues that might have been too sensitive for them, such as personal information or details of personal experiences. I was very clear with the young people that I was not trying to find out why they had come into care or their pre-care experience - this was with the express aim of trying to reduce any potential harm that the interviews could have caused.

### **3.4 Research site and sampling**

The research was conducted across numerous sites within one English LA area. This is a large, rural authority characterised by a broad spectrum of deprivation and wealth. This has produced large pockets of social work intervention and numerous social work teams and offices operating over a geographically large area. To generate rich data, I wanted to access a broad range of professionals, which meant accessing young people who might have received different services from a range of different teams.

Before recruiting participants, I wrote an application to the Local Authority Safeguarding Children Board, which included an ethical approval application. The application for senior leaders stated that my research study would be conducted professionally and that the result would be beneficial to participants as well as the LA and its own service improvement processes. This approval was granted, as was approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University.

A key challenge that many researchers face is gaining access to service users and professionals to interview or observe. This was not a challenge that I faced, however, mainly because I was already a senior officer within the organisation when I carried

out the research. In retrospect, I would like to have also observed a number of CiC reviews, but as I discussed above this would have raised certain ethical issues.

Research participants were selected via purposive sampling. There are certain known ethical issues relating to the fairness of purposive sampling, since only some children and professionals are given the opportunity to express their views (Hill 2006). However, it would have been unrealistic to interview all children in care in the local area, as well as all of their SWs and IROs.

Munro (2001) conducted research into children's views of CiC reviews, but her sample was based purely on young people who SWs and the LA had chosen to put forward. The risk here is that the LA could have been more likely to choose young people who would talk positively about their experiences with the LA. One of the strengths of my study is that I was able to obtain consent from the relevant LA to contact any child or young person between the ages of eight and 17, as well as any SW or IRO. This ensured that my study was not restricted by the exclusion of participants who the LA deemed inappropriate.

It was imperative that the children and young people interviewed had each attended at least one CiC review. I chose the age range of eight to 17 to capture the views of children and young people at different stages of the care system. The sampling was conducted by seeking a roughly equal sample of genders, ethnicities and groups of siblings, to ensure that the sample was as representative of the local area as possible. The only exclusion criteria were children under the age of eight years. Reflecting on the ethics of research with participants under the age of eight, particularly relating to gaining informed consent, I found that best practice suggested that this was prohibitively challenging (Holland et al. 2010; DoH 2001).

I used the agency database to identify 50 young people at random who could potentially participate. This represented around ten per cent of the care population in the area. I checked with the 50 young people's SWs that they were not in crisis and that it would be appropriate to interview them for this study. I then sent an information leaflet to potential participants, which provided details of the research, time commitment, rationale and information pertaining to confidentiality issues (see Appendices One, Two and Four). The leaflet included an option for the potential participant to immediately opt out by email, telephone or letter, so that I would know not to contact them again. Those who did not opt out were then contacted by telephone to discuss whether they wished to participate. Those who agreed were then

sent a consent form to complete, which was written in clear and unambiguous language (see Appendices Three and Five).

None of the children or young people immediately opted out. In follow-up telephone conversations twelve children and young people agreed to participate. Once the twelve young people agreed to participate I did not contact the other young people as I knew I only had time within this study to interview a maximum of twelve young people. Two subsequently cancelled, leaving ten children and young people to be interviewed in total. A summary of the young participants' demographics can be found at Appendix Seven.

I contacted eight IROs of whom eight took part; eleven SWs of whom eleven took part; and seven SMs of whom all seven also took part. The IROs, SWs and SMs are referred to throughout by the professional acronym and a corresponding number.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

While planning and conducting this research I was mindful of numerous ethical guidelines. Firstly, I am a registered social worker and so drew upon the Code of Ethics governing all trainee and qualified SWs (BASW 2015). Additionally, I planned the study in line with the professional standards required of me by the professional regulator, the Health and Care Professions Council (2016). Both draw attention to standards of ethical practice, with the former focusing in particular on ethical research practice.

Consent to complete this study was granted by Cardiff University's Social Research Ethics Committee as well as the Local Authority's Safeguarding Children's Board in the area where the study took place. Reflecting on the ethical issues that directly relate to the study, I identified the following five key issues, which I explore in greater detail below:

1. Minimising harm and maximising benefit
2. Informed consent
3. Anonymity and confidentiality
4. Participant expectation
5. Interviewer bias (the familiarity problem)

### **3.5.1 Harm vs Benefit**

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2017) states that 'researchers should aim to maximise the benefit of the research and minimise the potential risk of harm to participants and researchers. All potential risk and harm should be mitigated by robust precautions'. De Vaus (2001, p.145) notes that 'in experimental designs in which there is an active intervention there is an ethical requirement that this intervention does not expose participants to harm'. Similarly, Creswell (2003, p.63) claims that: 'a core idea of action/participatory research is that the inquirer will not further marginalise or disempower the study participants'. As well as considering the risk of harm, I hoped that this would be an empowering experience for participants, since my aim was to seek out their views and validate their experiences. Furthermore, the goal of my research was to positively impact on the way that reviews take place, as young people's participation would hopefully improve and become more meaningful throughout the research and feedback sessions.

To minimise any potential harm or distress I decided not to ask the children or young people any questions relating to the circumstances of their care by the LA, nor would I probe their views of their birth parents. However, I was conscious that reviews can be distressing for children, and that their reflections could lead them to think about stressful experiences relating to the reviews or wider, difficult life experiences (Schofield and Thoburn 1996).

Therefore, I was clear with all the participants, professionals as well as children and young people, at the start of the interview, that they could stop at any time. With the children and young people, I asked if they had anyone they could speak to if anything was raised by the interview that upset them in anyway and they all said they could speak to their foster carers. All the foster carers were aware that the interviews were taking place and were on hand to support the young people if necessary directly afterwards. All the children's SWs were also aware that the interviews were taking place. With regard to the professionals I reassured them that the information provided would be anonymised and advised them of who they could speak to with regard to any issues arising.

### **3.5.2 Consent**

Gaining consent is particularly important when interviewing children who might be vulnerable (Renold et al. 2008). This vulnerability relates not only to age and

competency, but also to the potential 'institutionalisation' of this particular group (Holland 2009). I was aware that consent to participate might be given as a matter of course, thus compromising the value base upon which the research is founded (Holland et al. 2010). There is some concern regarding how free children feel to refuse to take part in studies (McCrum and Bernal 1994). It was therefore necessary to continually assess throughout the interview whether the children were comfortable and genuinely willing to participate (Mahon et al. 1996). This issue of feeling free to refuse to participate was also a potential issue in relation to the professional participants, particularly given my role and status within the LA. Therefore I emphasised that participation was voluntary.

I was aware that some children and young people could be wary of speaking to another 'worker'. I decided that at the start of each interview I would run through the consent and confidentiality protocols again, and advise young people that they could withdraw at any point. All young people were provided with post-interview information, which included details of who to contact should they feel upset. Formal support networks were identified as well as the participant's allocated SW and their IRO. Contact details of other local support services were also provided.

It was essential that the information provided was appropriate for the target audience, so a different format was used for children and professionals to ensure that all participants would be able to give their informed consent (see Appendices Three and Five). Participants needed to know why the research was being carried out, how it would be carried out and what the information would be used for. Creswell (2003, p.63) notes that 'deception occurs when participants understand one purpose for a study but the researcher has a different purpose in mind'. Therefore, it was important that I was transparent with potential participants regarding the motivations for my research, how it would be funded and what the results would be used for. I made sure that potential participants understood the interview process and knew their right to terminate the interview or refuse to answer any question. I decided that the best place to address these issues would be in the introductory letter (see Appendices Two and Four) and, as noted above, I reiterated the key points again at the start of each interview.

### ***3.5.3 Anonymity and confidentiality***

Participant anonymity and confidentiality were further issues to consider when planning the study. Specifically, it was crucial to establish how service user

confidentiality could be protected. Anonymity can be guaranteed when 'the researcher – not just the people who read the research – cannot identify a given response with a given respondent' (Babbie 2004, p.65). On the basis of this definition my research would be unable to provide anonymity, since as the interviewer I would know the identity of participants. I could guarantee confidentiality, however, understood in the following terms: 'a research project guarantees confidentiality when the researcher can identify a given person's responses but chooses not to do so publicly' (Babbie 2004, p.66). Confidentiality is generally seen as a good thing, since a person's privacy should not be compromised (De Vaus 2001, p.146). There are limits to confidentiality, however, and I needed to be transparent about these with potential participants. If a participant highlighted child protection concerns, for example, I would be obliged to inform a relevant professional. I addressed these and similar issues on the consent form (see Appendices Three and Five).

A further important aspect of confidentiality relates to the secure storage of research data. As De Vaus (2001, p.146) notes, the researcher needs to be able to identify who said what, but this must be done in such a way that 'no unauthorised person can match this identifying information with other responses'. I followed Cardiff University's guidance and procedures in this regard. Participant consent forms were kept separate from corresponding data and any hard copies of non-anonymised data were stored in a locked filing cabinet. Non-anonymised electronic data was saved in a password-protected folder on the LA's network, accessible only by myself. Audio files were stored on a password-protected device. All non-anonymised data will be kept for two years post-publication of the research, in line with Cardiff University's policies and procedures.

Another important consideration when carrying out the interviews was to ensure that my approach to recording and analysing the data was designed to protect individuals. Accurate analysis and interpretation of data is essential and requires protecting the identities of participants, while ensuring that their views are documented (Morrow and Richards 1996). I aimed to ensure that participants' views as a cohort were accurately represented and that no individual participants were easily identifiable. As such, pseudonyms were used for each participant, along with their age, to ensure reliable data analysis and accurate quotation.

Given that I was employed by the LA where the research was being carried out I ensured that none of the children or young people were known to me. With regard to



the professionals, we were all employed by the same LA and some of these colleagues were previously known to me. I did have concerns that due to my senior role within the LA some SWs would not be entirely honest with me about the challenges they faced. I was also concerned that SMs might be reluctant to 'open up' to a colleague about their genuine views on children's participation.

#### ***3.5.4 Participant expectation***

An additional matter that required forethought was participants' expectations, making sure that each participant had realistic expectations of the outcomes of the research and the impact that it may or may not have. Regarding the children and young people in particular, I did not want them to think that offering their views would result in an immediate change in services (Hill 2006). I actively sought to manage the expectations of all participants and plan to report the research findings back to SMs in the LA in the form of a report to the Local Safeguarding Children Board. I will also prepare a special report on the findings in child-friendly language to share with children in care in the local area and I will provide workshops for children in care and care leavers across the LA area. I also intend to present my findings to the children in care council. Lastly, I will host a number of workshops for staff in the local area during 2018 and hopefully across the region, to relay the findings of the research and encourage debate regarding how to improve practice in relation to children's participation in reviews. I also have good links with the national IRO group and intend to present my research at their annual conference.

Children and young people in care have often had to tell their background story to different professionals over and over again. I wanted to make this experience different for them – an opportunity for them to critique and analyse the service they are offered. It would be their personal experience but at the interface between their personal life and the professional service that they receive.

#### ***3.5.5 The familiarity problem***

The problem of over-familiarity is a central one in qualitative research (Delamont 1992, p.40). It is an issue that all qualitative researchers should be aware of and have strategies in place to minimise its potential impact. The familiarity issue is not a new concept; Geer (1964) acknowledged the difficulties of studying everyday familiar settings and the implicit risk that the researcher may not notice anything exceptional or strange if they are familiar with the setting they are researching. The problem can

equally arise when the researcher is conducting research in a school, hospital or social welfare situation. Becker (1971, p.10) argues that it takes a great deal of imagination and willpower by the researcher to ensure that they are not just seeing things that are 'conventionally there to be seen'.

It is unfortunate that there is a distinct lack of discussion relating to the familiarity issue in social work research. Most of the literature that deals with this problem relates only to research in educational settings. One of the few papers which does outline the issue of the familiarity problem and social work (Morris et al. 2015) highlights the potential risks of researching a subject matter that you are very familiar with alongside the possible issues of almost colluding with your participants as you share a common language. It was important that I was aware of this potential issue particularly when interviewing SWs, IROs and SMs.

Eisner (1991, p.22) argued that qualitative research 'slows down the perception, and invites exploration, and releases us from the stupor of the familiar, thus contributing to a state of wide awakesness'. This highlights the importance of reflection, to enable the familiar to become strange again. Having worked for many years as a childcare SW, it becomes easy to see exceptional situations such as child abuse as the 'norm'.

When conducting qualitative research, over-familiarity with an issue is often seen as a problem, at least when one is in the early stages of a research project. Indeed, the task of preventing 'over-familiarity has often been seen as part of the longer process of enlightenment' (Coffey 1999, p.20). Coffey goes on to suggest that:

*The ethnographer as hero surrenders love, family and familiarity in order to confront an unknown culture. The field worker therefore intentionally divests him/herself of knowledge and personhood in order to achieve eventual understanding.*

(Coffey 1999, p.21)

This is a powerful message; as an experienced SW it was essential that I tried to make the subject of my research 'strange' even though it was, in fact, extremely familiar. Had I not been able to achieve this, I would have been less able to critically reflect on the practice setting where my research took place, undermining the validity of my findings. Shaw and Gould (2001) argue that, when carrying out qualitative research, the researcher is the main 'instrument of the study'; it is therefore essential that the researcher is reflective and aware of the impact of the 'self' when conducting

fieldwork. If they are overly familiar with the subject matter they are researching and perceive themselves to be an expert, they are less likely to be able to reflect on their subject matter, and therefore less able to carry out meaningful research.

Atkinson et al. highlight different issues relating to the familiarity problem and suggest that:

*The problem is that for the naïve observer there is nothing special to see. Everyone knows what to expect in many settings, and so the inexperienced can find nothing reassuring to report if what they see conforms to what theory would normally expect of general cultural knowledge. The lessons that have to be learned, therefore, include an intellectual process of de-familiarisation.*

(Atkinson et al. 2003, p.26)

In relation to social work research, the familiarity problem is particularly acute when the researcher tries to represent service users' voices. If one considers oneself to be knowledgeable in relation to service user perspectives, it could make the research more biased and less robust (Mayer and Timms 1970).

The familiarity problem, in relation to my own research and professional experience, was an issue that I needed to be particularly conscious of. I worked as an IRO for a LA for many years, after which I worked for a period as an IRO manager. It was during this time that I started to become particularly interested in carrying out research into children's participation and CiC reviews. I was concerned from my experience as both an IRO and IRO manager that it had become normal for children to participate inadequately in their meetings, and that they were routinely not consulted in relation to the time, place or agenda of their reviews. Consequently, it was important that I remained aware of the familiarity problem and that I sought to overcome various sources of bias. Effective and reflective discussion with my supervisors was essential to reduce the risk of bias creeping into the study (Wonnacott 2012).

It was also important to be mindful of my role as Principal Social Worker within the LA. As highlighted in the literature review the role of the PSW includes: being the authentic voice for frontline staff, working alongside senior management to raise practice debates and being a 'critical friend' at all levels of the organisation (Russell and Stanley 2014). As such I hoped this research would help me do all of these things;

unfortunately, in many ways the findings from this study highlighted the limited impact of my role as PSW.

### **3.6 The interview process**

I am a qualified SW and have worked predominantly in child protection over the last 13 years, but I also have experience in the adult mental health field. As such I have carried out a large number of interviews with service users. More recently, as a manager, I have gained experience of interviewing SWs and other professionals as part of investigations into complaints. Given this professional experience, I felt confident in my ability to carry out interviews.

While conducting this study, however, I gained an improved understanding of the difficulties and challenges involved in conducting qualitative research. Padgett (1998) argues that social work practice and research are very different, and practice and research relationships particularly so. Conversely, Rubin (1981) claims that there are a number of similarities between social work interviews and research interviews, and clinical social work training is a useful preparation for conducting research interviews. As Shaw and Gould (2001, p.43) point out, however, training 'social workers in qualitative interviewing can be difficult because they assume they know all about interviewing'.

As an experienced SW who has carried out countless interviews, I initially fell into this trap by imagining that this would be an easy process. In fact, I found it very tough. Despite my experience of carrying out emotionally challenging interviews (when trying to ascertain if a parent has physically assaulted their child, for example) – fieldwork interviews are still both stressful and emotionally charged (Lofland and Lofland 1995).

There are key differences between the social work interview and qualitative research. Fortune (1994) states that research and social work are fundamentally different and while social work practice is 'action focused', qualitative research is primarily intended to describe a situation. When reviewing the notes from my interviews and following discussions with my supervisors, it became clear that my interviews were quite rigid, since I did not always take the opportunity to ask follow-up questions when participants gave interesting answers. This is unfortunate but I have to accept that I am still learning as a researcher and I will make mistakes during that learning process. When I carry out future research, I will share my initial interview notes at an earlier stage with my supervisors or co-researchers as that will help me learn from my

mistakes. In this case, by the time I had shared my interview notes with my supervisors I had already completed all my interviews so it was too late to adjust my style.

Although I had questions prepared in advance, with hindsight I was not as well prepared for the interviews as I should have been. I had planned to interview the participants for an hour but found that I ran out of questions before the end of the planned session. Semi-structured interviews use pre-determined questions but it is essential to be able to digress and use probing when necessary (Bryman 2012). On reflection my use of probing and follow up questions was not as proficient as I would have liked it to be. Furthermore, the opportunity to modify questions during an interview allows the interviewer to assess the quality of the responses and to seek clarity on any issues that are not clear (Thomas 2003). This should ensure that the data is valid while at the same time generating an accurate account of the participant's views (Babbie 2004).

I was keen to use visual aids for this study, one of my supervisors has published a great deal of research on this area and I thought it would help encourage young people in particular to open up during the interviews (Mannay et al. 2017b; Mannay 2016). I offered children and young people a choice of methods by which to participate including the use of pictures, drawing and feelings cards but each of the young people stated that they did not want to draw anything or use the pen or paper - this could in part been due to them being over ten years of age - it may have been that younger children would have been more willing/keen to do drawings during the interviews (Pert et al. 2014). In hindsight it would have been beneficial for me to trial some of the materials with other children, such as friends or relatives. This would have given me more confidence in encouraging the use of the materials and I could have drawn on any feedback I received and had a clearer understanding of what seemed to work well. Although the young people chose not to use the visual methods I felt overall the young people were relatively open with me about their experiences of CiC reviews and how well or not they felt supported by their SWs and IROs.

### **3.7 The importance of reflection**

Just as it is in social work practice, it is essential for researchers to reflect on their work. The notion of reflective practice derives from the work of Schon (1983), who articulates how this helps professionals to recognise if there is a gap between what

they say they do and what they actually do. I concur that critical reflection is key to learning, as it provides opportunities for deep investigation and questioning relating to one's own practice and research, to catalyse change and enable self-development. In the findings and final chapters I shall reflect in more depth how the interviews with the professionals went. As a SW I have extensive experience of supervision which when carried out effectively gives the supervisee the opportunity to reflect on their practice (Wonacott 2012). My academic supervision sessions for this research gave me an opportunity to reflect on my interview technique - for example in one supervision session my supervisors outlined how I had been too rigid in my interviewing technique and I should have allowed participants to talk more freely. This is valuable learning which I shall use when carrying future research.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

Despite the limitations explored in this chapter relating to familiarity and interview style, the fieldwork generated an expansive data set; over 55 hours of interview discussion and 162,126 transcribed words, as set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Breakdown of interview data

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Interview Length</b>	<b>Transcribed Word Count</b>
Katy	27mins28secs	4499
George	26mins12secs	4870
Charmaine	32mins58secs	5338
Josh	26mins51secs	4798
Emma	20mins08secs	4320
Jordan	26mins43secs	4626
Mason	29mins03secs	5133
Tyronne	22mins41secs	4520

Kiera	21mins25secs	3852
Chloe	37mins52secs	5987
SW 1	23mins40secs	3042
SW 2	31mins16secs	4231
SW 3	22mins38secs	3256
SW 4	33mins48secs	5133
SW 5	23mins17secs	2987
SW 6	30mins10secs	4310
SW 7	27mins22secs	3792
SW 8	32mins48secs	4138
SW 9	29mins34secs	4511
SW 10	36mins29secs	4899
SW 11	28mins38secs	3844
IRO 1	32mins13secs	4266
IRO 2	35mins34secs	4191
IRO 3	30mins16secs	5346
IRO 4	37mins16secs	4728
IRO 5	41mins07secs	6339
IRO 6	33mins42secs	4058
IRO 7	44mins14sec	6952
IRO 8	38mins16secs	6113
SM 1	24mins14secs	3062
SM 2	29mins24secs	5238
SM 3	22mins12secs	2986
SM 4	23mins48secs	2832
SM 5	31mins54secs	5022

SM 6	27mins57secs	4578
SM 7	27mins38secs	4329

Thematic analysis was used to derive a ‘big picture’ (De Vaus 2001) from the primary data. Thematic analysis ‘is the search for patterns in data and for ideas which help explain why those patterns are there in the first place’ (Bernard 2006, p.62). As such I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stages of analysis:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed so I was able to listen and read them several times when analysing the data. This approach enabled me to read and compare numerous interviews at the same time when searching for themes. I was also able to re-listen to interviews to refine my findings, listening for inflection and changes in tone or breathing, which helped to identify topics that were emotionally charged for the interviewee.

While listening to an interview I noted down themes as they emerged, assessing whether they reoccurred in any of the other interviews. Once I had listened to all the interviews I repeated the process to see if any further links could be made. As part of this method I drew on grounded theory, understood as ‘an inductive approach to research... in which theories are generated solely from an examination of data rather than being derived deductively’ (Babbie 2004, p.372).

When analysing the data I also drew on the constant-comparative method, which comprises two stages. First, it is used to test the evolving inductive theory: ‘the comparative method means that the qualitative researcher should always attempt to find another case through which to test out a provisional hypothesis’ (Silverman 2005, p.213). Second, it involves observing differences between the data. As such, each interview had to be considered within its own context. As Blaxter et al. (2001, p.210)



note: 'the data is not cold. It has been collected within a certain interactive context, or a variety of different ones'.

There would of course be some data that did not fit my evolving hypotheses. Silverman (2005, p.215) asserts that such data must be actively sought out and addressed. The deviant case can actually strengthen the validity of the research and again, the emphasis is on understanding participants' responses within their own context. The 'key is understanding' what participants have to say about their world (Thomas 2003, p.75). This is why individual accounts of reality have been presented in the findings, rather than one version that should be interpreted as conclusive. It is also my hope that the research has produced 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer 1954) that provide a general sense of reference and guidance when approaching this topic. First and foremost, the research seeks to incite reflection from children and the LA professionals involved in reviews.

I categorised this information into 'codes', which identified patterns across all transcribed interviews (Fielding and Thomas 2008). I carried out this task manually, which gave me the opportunity to familiarise myself further with the data and to critically reflect on the themes I encountered. One issue with this approach is the potential for researcher bias and an overly subjective interpretation of the interview transcriptions (Babbie 2004). This also raises an ethical issue, given the risk that participants' views become distorted, misinterpreted, or misreported (Morrow and Richards 1996). I worked persistently to overcome this while conducting my analysis. Questioning my interpretations of underlying meanings and subtexts helped to mitigate against the risk of misreporting. I also tried to transcribe jokes and side comments, as well as some physical movements and pauses, to help establish the participant's mood with greater clarity. Since reviewing my notes, however, I am aware that I was not hugely successful at transcribing physical movements and pauses, as such this is a skill that I need to develop in future. Conscious of this during interviews, I tried to seek further clarification, although this was another area that I could improve upon.

Through the data analysis, four broad themes were identified:

1. Children's voice, including their feelings and their understanding of the reviews.
2. Organisational culture and bureaucratic approaches to CiC reviews by professionals, and the impact of these on children's participation in reviews.

3. Resource issues, caseloads and the process driven culture and how these factors impact on SWs' and IROs' abilities to ensure meaningful participation by children in the reviews.
4. Preparation, planning and agenda setting for reviews.

### **3.9 Writing-up the findings**

A few key points need emphasising in relation to writing-up the research findings. It is essential that researchers commit to ensuring that their research is genuine and not falsified. As Neuman notes:

*Other ethical issues in writing the research will involve the potential of suppressing, falsifying, or inventing findings to meet a researcher's or an audience's needs. These fraudulent practices are not accepted in professional research communities, and they constitute scientific misconduct.*

(Neuman 2000, p.67)

Another important point relates to the use of language in the write-up. I have already noted the importance of carrying out interviews in a sensitive manner that ensures the participant feels valued. It is equally important that my thesis (and the accompanying reports) were written in a sensitive manner. Creswell (2003, p.67) recommends that researchers should 'not use language or words that are biased against persons because of gender, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic group, disability or age'. He goes on to note the importance of 'acknowledging participants in a study' (Creswell 2003, p.67). When writing up the research it was important to distinguish between displeasing someone because the findings go against their held beliefs, and causing offence through the use of offensive or derogatory language.

### **3. 10 Summary**

This chapter has set out the approach that best suited my research goals. I examined relevant epistemological and ontological concerns, outlined my research design and discussed my methodological choices. The use of semi-structured interviews was advantageous in terms of obtaining participants' views, narratives and stories, and it made it clear to me how we struggle in children's services to give children a

meaningful voice. I am aware how my own biases and the familiarity problem could undermine the validity of this research, but I am confident that as a result of robust and challenging guidance by my supervisors I did not fall victim to verificationism (Brown et al. 2012) or confirmation bias. The following chapters present the findings derived from my research interviews. I provide descriptive detail and subsequent analysis, citing quotations from interview transcripts framed by the four key themes identified above.

## **Chapter Four:** **Children's and Young People's Views of Reviews**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Participation can be seen as a protective factor for vulnerable children and young people leading to increased levels of confidence, self-efficiency and self-worth (Dickens et al. 2015). As Schofield and Thoburn (1996) note:

*Participation by children matters, not only because it an acknowledgment of their civil rights but because without listening to children and understanding how they experience their world, how can we begin to determine what will ensure their protection and enable them to grow into healthy adults?*

(Schofield and Thoburn 1996, p.1)

The importance of the relationship between the Social Worker (SW) and the child has been highlighted in previous research as a significant factor in promoting participation, with children being found to be reliant on professionals providing this opportunity (Pert et al. 2014; Cossar et al. 2011). In this chapter, I will consider the perspectives offered by the ten children and young people, aged 11 - 19 years, in this study. Pseudonyms have been used for the young participants throughout. The chapter focuses on their interviews regarding the extent to which they felt engaged in the review process.

Previous research (Roesch-Marsh et al. 2016; Pert et al. 2014; Jelcic et al. 2014) into young people's views of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and reviews concluded that an important variable for the meaningful engagement by young people in their reviews was the quality of their relationship with their SW and, to an extent, their IRO. I was interested to ascertain the extent to which the relationship between young people and professionals can impact on their engagement with the process. One potential barrier to young people building up and maintaining positive working relationships with their SWs is the high turnover of SWs in many LA children's services departments.

As noted within the Munro Review (2012) and more recently by Research in Practice, the high turnover in SWs, and particularly in childcare social work teams, is widely

accepted to be a significant issue (Bowyer and Roe 2015). The average childcare SW leaves frontline practice after one to three years in practice (Bowyer and Roe 2015). This is striking when compared with the average period that individuals stay in social work, which is eight years. By way of context, the same figure for teachers is 15 years; nurses 16 years, and doctors 25 years (Bowyer and Roe 2015). Furthermore, research by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS 2016) has suggested that the turnover of SWs in children's services has significantly increased in recent years, meaning that young people, particularly those 'in care' who experience social work services for a number of years, will have a higher number of case workers.

This issue is compounded by organisational structures within LAs which mean that children moving through the care system are dealt with by different teams during particular phases of their period in care (for example, child protection and court teams, looked after children teams, leaving care teams). It is reasonable to expect that these changes could impact upon the quality of the relationships between young people and their SWs. A recent Ofsted inspection which was carried out in the LA where I conducted my fieldwork highlighted that – in common with many other LAs in England this authority had a very high turnover of SWs and nearly half of the SWs in the frontline teams had less than two years post qualifying experience (Ofsted 2017 – details anonymised to protect confidentiality of fieldwork site).

Accordingly, I was interested in finding out how many SWs each of the participants had, and how this may have impacted on their relationship with their current SW. I then sought to explore how these factors impacted on children's and young people's engagement with the review process. It is accepted that turnover of IROs is low, thus offering greater stability to those young people to whom they offer support (Dickens et al. 2015). This can mean that the IRO is the only consistent figure in many children's and young people's lives; it was important to ascertain whether this was the case for the participants in this study. Additionally, the central research questions, which can be found at Section 2.10, guided the analysis of the data and these will be reflected on across this chapter, chapters five and six.

The thematic analysis of children's and young people's accounts generated four key themes pertinent to this chapter:

- a) number of SWs/IROs each young person had;
- b) young people's views of IROs;

- c) young people's views of SWs; and
- d) young people's perceptions of the review meetings (including who decided on the agenda, who was invited and when and where the review took place).

The following sections represent each of these themes to frame the discussion around children's and young people's views of reviews.

#### **4.2 Number of SWs/IROs and the ensuing impact on relationship/engagement**

All the participants had experienced several changes of SW, both prior to coming into care and then also when they were in care. Having so many different SWs had impacted on their trust in SWs and in turn opportunities to form meaningful relationships with SWs. This difficulty was illustrated in the exchange below;

Clive: So in two years you've had one IRO. Can I ask how many SWs you've had?

Charmaine: Erm... had three since I've been in care. In my whole life probably about 20.

As highlighted in previous studies (Muench et al. 2017; Pert et al. 2014), it was concerning that some participants could not remember the number of SWs they had had, for example, one stated:

Josh: Loads, I can't remember them all.

The participants had many more SWs than IROs; on average they said they had three or four SWs per year. Yet, apart from one young person who had two IROs, all of the other participants had only one IRO the whole time they were in care. In line with the recent research (Dickens et al. 2015), participants expressed that consistency in their relationship with their IROs was important. Eight of the participants noted the importance of their relationship with their IRO, for example, Katy reflected on her experience stating;

Katy: One thing I will say is an IRO is the one person who was consistently there from day one. I had her from day one of coming into care on my very first review, all the way through.

The IRO Handbook (DfES 2010) states that a key part of the SW's role is to prepare young people for their reviews. If a young person experiences regular changes of SW, it is reasonable to assume that this will impact upon how well the SW prepares them for the review. Troublingly, in some cases, the young people reported only meeting with their SW once ever before the review meeting. This concurs with the views offered by some of the SWs interviewed for this study who also lamented that on occasion they had hardly met with the young person prior to the review. When young people had a positive relationship with their IRO, or/and SW (although it was more common that they had positive relationships with their IROs), they were more engaged in the review process and found them to be more meaningful. This finding is in line with previous conclusions from studies by Pert et al. (2014), Jelcic et al. (2014) and Roesch-Marsch et al. (2016).

Furthermore, a theme which came through in all of the interviews was that the consistency that IROs provided was very different to that of the SWs. For example, Katy had five SWs between the ages of 12 and 17, but retained the same IRO throughout this time. Another young person (Tyrone) highlighted the positive relationship that he had with his IRO, which was contrasted to the relationship he had with his SWs – due in no small part to the high turnover of SWs that he had experienced:

Tyrone: I didn't have a good relationship with any of my SWs up to that point. The SWs always kept changing so I never really got to know them. So, the only person I could really speak to at that point was my IRO or my foster carer. So whenever we saw the IRO we would put everything on her to sort out.

The notion of *'putting everything'* on an IRO suggests that Tyrone had some faith in the IRO's ability to try to resolve his issues. Many participants positioned the IRO as a consistent 'voice of reason' in their lives, and Chloe described them as a 'saviour'. Three young people, Katy, Mason and Chloe, reported that their IRO had helped change things for them in a positive way. However, it is noteworthy that this tended to be through fairly basic actions such as ensuring dental or medical appointments took place. The same three young people highlighted that the IRO seemed ineffective

or unable to resolve more complex issues such as contact with their family. This will be discussed further in section 4.5 of this chapter.

In contrast, Kiera reported that she had such a poor relationship with one of her SWs that she would refuse to meet her or go out or stay in her room when this SW visited. It is reasonable to conclude that, since part of the SW's role is to prepare a young person for their review, such a poor relationship between young person and SW will impact on how the young person engages in the review meeting. However, despite numerous changes of SWs, there were seven young people who had formed a bond with one SW in particular at some point in their care journey, and this helped them to trust their SW, as illustrated in the account of Jordan:

Jordan:            There was one social worker from before when I was young when my dad said he wanted to punch her so for ages I got confused and thought social workers were for punching and bad but I don't think that now. I like my social worker now- she talks to me normally; she comes in her car which is a treat. She is friendly, she creates a good atmosphere, she is always cheerful and happy.

Katy also describes forming a bond with one particular SW:

Clive:            Have you had any good social workers?

Katy:            Um, one.

Clive:            Okay.

Katy:            At the time I think I said I hated her...but now that I'm older I realise that I didn't actually. She kind of got me on a boundary level.

This suggests that although the number of SWs is clearly important to young people, the personal attributes that the individual SW has plays a very important role in a young person's ability to trust them. This interview, alongside many of the others, suggests that even if a young person has a number of SWs over a period of time, if a SW treats them with respect, is 'human', listens to them and is friendly, they can still build up a positive working relationship with the young person. It is important to acknowledge that these are very basic requirements that one would expect from all SWs – so it is worrying to hear that at times the young people did not feel they had



been treated in this manner. The relationship between the young people and their IROs and their SWs is explored further in the next two sections below.

### **4.3 Young people's views of IROs**

Eight participants reported that they had a good working relationship with their IRO; for example, Emma described building up a positive rapport with her IRO:

Clive: Do you feel like you built up a bit of a relationship with the IRO or not really?

Emma: A little bit. There was a time when like after the review – because my foster carers were telling her how I do drama and stuff like that, and there was another thing that she told her – and she was like “Oh can I come to your room and have a look?” So we did and we just sat there and chatted for a bit and it was nice but like informal and stuff like that. Yeah, so I'd say a little bit, a little bit of a relationship, yeah, 'cos she was bonkers and I liked that!

This reference to being “bonkers” emphasises that balance and adaptability that IROs and SWs require in their toolbox of skills – they must be able to get alongside children and young people – relating as human to human rather than solely as professional to client.

One potential barrier which existed in the relationship between the young people and the IRO was that all the young participants stated that they only saw their IRO at the review meeting or for a brief catch up before the meeting. This meant that unless they moved placement and required an extra review they would only see their IRO twice a year. The IRO Handbook (DfES 2010) states that there are now two clear and separate aspects to the function of the IRO:

- i. chairing the child's review; and*
  - ii. monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.'*
- (DfES 2010, p.11)

It is questionable how effective the monitoring of a child's case on an ongoing basis can be without going to see them between reviews. Under Regulation 36 the IRO is

required to speak to the child in private before each review. The IRO Handbook states that part of this pre-meeting is for the IRO to 'work with the child to discuss how s/he is likely to be able to make the most meaningful contribution' (DfES 2010, p.20). To make the meeting between the young person and the IRO meaningful it would need to take place at least a week prior to the review meeting. It is noted in the Handbook that a formal pre-meeting may not always be necessary and in such cases the IRO could 'simply make phone contact' to establish the child's wishes about the upcoming review (DfES 2010, p.20). The implication is that this would be the exception rather than the rule. However, the interviews with the IROs in this study showed that in practice they only met children and young people between reviews in rare circumstances - rather than it being the other way round. The IROs viewed this as a barrier to children's and young people's meaningful participation (see Chapter 5) This lack of regular contact was also clearly evidenced during the interviews with young people. All ten young people reported that they never met their IRO between review meetings. This interaction with Mason, for example, was a typical response in relation to meeting their IRO between the meetings:

Clive: Did you ever meet the IRO between reviews?

Mason: What do you mean between?

Clive: Did you ever meet them in between reviews, apart from that 10 or 15 minutes before?

Mason: No.

I also asked Emma about her views of her IRO and whether she saw her between review meetings:

Emma: No. She was really nice. She was a lovely woman. It's just a shame that though because it says something because I would have liked to see her outside my reviews and stuff to have a catch up or a chat because she was really down to earth, but I never had a proper like meet with her before the review.

Clive: Did you get the impression that that was because she was busy or she had lots on?

Emma: Maybe. I didn't really think about it. It was more of a kind of like – I saw that was her job and I genuinely thought that was the only reason she was there is to be in the meeting.

This is a particularly interesting interaction as it shows that Emma thought her IRO was a 'lovely woman', and she would have liked to have met her between reviews and built up more of a relationship with her. However, her experiences meant that she believed that the role of the IRO is focused solely upon chairing meetings. The notion of the IRO providing oversight of the case and helping her to provide her views on the care plan (as set out in the DfES 2010) was clearly not her experience. However, despite this she did still have a positive view of her IRO. This accords with previous research carried out by Pert et al. (2014) in which young people had a positive view of their IROs but they thought the IRO role was solely focused on chairing their review meetings.

Numerous studies (Jelicic et al. 2014; Pert et al. 2014; Barnes 2012; McLeod 2006; Bell 2002; Munro 2001) have concluded that a positive relationship between the young person and the SW and/or the IRO will play a key role in improving young people's participation in decision making meetings. As Jelicic et al. (2014, p.39) found 'a good relationship with the IROs was crucial in children's understanding of their role in the care planning process, and this was mostly explained in terms of attitudes and ability to ensure the child's views are taken into consideration'. Similarly, for Roesch-Marsh et al. (2016, p. 907) 'relationships were found to be important at every stage of the review cycle including: preparation for the review, the review meeting itself, debriefing from the review and implementing plans'. Given that the high turnover of SWs in LAs is showing no signs of abating, and while IRO positions remain comparatively stable, there would be a clear argument for IROs to build on the support and consistency that they can provide to children and young people. For example the IRO could visit children and young people between reviews.

#### **4.4 Young people's views of SWs**

It is important to note that it is not just the number of SWs or IROs that a child or young person works with over a period of time, but also their personal attributes – such as listening skills – which will play a key role in whether a meaningful relationship can be developed (McLeod 2006). Similarly, Pert et al. found that:

*Some children reported having a positive relationship with their social workers. Where children felt that they got to know their social worker as a 'real person' and not just a professional, they felt much more positive about them and the social work team generally... those children who reported having positive relationships with their social worker also reported less negative feelings about their review process.*

(Pert et al. 2014, p. 5)

The study by Pert et al. (2014) considered young people's perceptions of reviews, while a similar study conducted by Muench et al. (2017) explored young people's participation and engagement in child protection conferences. The findings of these two studies were similar, with the authors noting that where young people had a better relationship with their SW, they tended to be more positive about the meetings and LA input. Most of the young people I interviewed had at least one positive relationship with a SW during the time that they were in care. For example, Katy acknowledged that she was very challenging towards her SWs and she struggled to build relationships with many of them, but that there was one who 'went the extra mile' and with whom she built up a very positive working relationship.

Katy: I gave her so much abuse but she'd just sit there and tap her fingers on the table or desk or anything. She wouldn't show... she wouldn't flinch, she wouldn't do anything. Does that make sense?...She was a bit... she was like so hard as a stone. I could never get through to her. But, do you know what, I ended up sticking to the routine of being in by four every day. I ended up getting into a routine and having boundaries. And I've learned from it now that actually her standing there doing nothing, not reacting, actually helped. I could be standing there frothing at the mouth going mad and she just didn't care... But the point is she cared enough not to react, if that makes sense... And because of that I do ... I did quite like B; we got on after a while... I ended up sending her some flowers when I realised how nice she was [laughs].

Katy was clear that she had not trusted any of her previous SWs; in fact she had struggled to trust anyone. However, by 'caring enough not to react' and by being calm and giving Katy space to express herself, this SW gained Katy's trust. This very powerful interaction shows the significant impact that a 'good' SW can have on young people and how important it is that SWs have time to build up a meaningful

relationship with young people. As Katy reports, because of her positive relationship with this SW she ended up 'getting into a routine and having boundaries', which was clearly a very significant positive change for her and had a long term beneficial impact. Notably, Katy's experience with this SW happened over a period of time: Katy tested the relationship and then saw that the response was consistent. This illustrates how it takes time to build meaningful relationships and the importance of a consistent approach.

However, some participants held more negative attitudes towards SWs as a result of their experiences. For example, Josh said:

Josh: I don't like social workers, they really annoy me, coz they... um... ask the same questions all the time, 'do you feel happier', 'do you like school', all the time.

Charmaine also had very strong views on SWs, as evidenced below:

Charmaine: I didn't like my first one. I hated her. She was terrible. She didn't get anything done at all. For the whole six weeks holidays in the summer I wanted obviously to stay at my friend's house and be like a normal person and be able to do that. I asked her to get my friend's house police checked and everything so I could stay there and six weeks later she still hadn't done it. She'd always be late.

This feeling that at least some of their SWs were incompetent or did not get anything done was common among the respondents; indeed, all ten participants had SWs at some point that they found unhelpful or that did not do what they said they were going to do.

A key finding in this study was that when young people reported having a poor relationship with their SW, they also felt more negatively about the CiC review meeting itself.

Kiera: [At the end of the meeting] I kind of felt, I won't say relieved, I don't know, it's kind of like a burden was lifted because it was tense. When I was in the meeting it was like tensed up and stuff like that because obviously I didn't build a relationship with my social worker. He was

really bad like he didn't do anything. He was so laid back that he didn't get anything done.

And that he'd say all this stuff and he barely ever saw me as well. That's the main reason why I didn't really get to build a relationship. And then when he did see me he tried being like a buddy and it's just kind of like whoa – you never see me so you don't have the right to come and you haven't seen me like after God knows how many months and then act all pally, pally with me. Yeah so it was awkward... in the review because it was as if he knew me and I was like "well you don't", and with the IRO, it would not be a relationship outside the review and my foster carers were the only people in the room that I had a relationship with, but they weren't there to discuss my future and stuff ... and my foster carers would give their view and their opinions and stuff like that but when the meeting ended it was like "well thank God for that" kind of thing, so yeah, I just wanted to get on with my night.

If you have a good relationship with your social worker it works a little bit more because it's less of a meeting and more of a chat and it's more of a like – it's an actual discussion instead of point to point things.

Clive: You said less of a meeting more of a chat did you say?

Kiera: Yes, if you have a relationship 'cos it's – if your social worker doesn't build a relationship with you it's just another person in the room and that is – it's uncomfortable and it's awkward.

This interaction highlights the link between the relationship between Kiera and the SW and how Kiera engages in the review meeting. The notion of it being a relief, for example, Kiera saying "thank god for that" when it ended and that she wanted to 'get on with her night' – showed that the meetings can be perceived to be a chore for young people. This quote also demonstrates the difference which can be observed if a young person has a positive relationship with the SW, as then it is more of a 'chat' instead of it being more of a bureaucratic 'point to point things'. This quote raises important issues around social work retention and rapport building with young people, and how these are essential foundations for participation and engagement. If, as some participants in this study reported, the SW never sees the young person and

does not build a relationship with them, then they are 'just another person in the room'. Kiera noted that her foster carer had, until recently, been the only person known to her at the review meetings. This is inevitably going to impact on the ways in which young people engage in their review. This highlights again the importance of the quality of the relationship between the IRO, SW and young person and their engagement in the review process.

However, some young participants reported positive relationships with at least one of their SWs and this again clearly improved the engagement in the review process. The interview with Charmaine evidences this clearly:

Clive: What about your good SW?

Charmaine: Yeah, the one I had before now, I loved her to bits. She was just on it all the time and just on the ball. I didn't have to get on her case or anything. She just had everything done and...

Clive: What sort of things?

Charmaine: Even when she didn't agree with what I wanted she'd still do it anyway even if she didn't agree with it. So my first foster placement, it broke down just after I was 16 and I said to her I really didn't wanna go to another foster placement, I wanted to go to supported housing or something like that and she was like, 'No, no. I don't want you to do it.' She still took it to her manager anyway. She still fought my case as much as she could. But obviously they said no because I'd literally just turned 16. But she managed to get me part-time in a training flat. So that was really good of her 'cos even though she was really against it herself she still done everything she could. 'Cos a lot of social workers would have just not even bothered and then said, 'Oh no, they said no.'

This interaction with Charmaine shows that young people will form a judgment of their SW at least in part on how competent they appear and whether they do what they say they are going to do. There was a clear link throughout these interviews: if a young person had a positive relationship with their SW and had trust and faith in them to 'get things done' they would be much more likely to engage with the review process. This suggests that it is the quality of the relationship between the SW and young person and particularly the SW's ability to carry out their role effectively and 'get things done'

that impacts on the young person's engagement with the review. Therefore from the participants' perspectives it is not the review that is the issue in terms of ensuring effective engagement; rather, it is down to the skills and ability of the individual SW in question. However, even when professionals have built up good relationships with young people the review process itself can still be problematic, as explored in the next section.

#### **4.5 Young people's perceptions of the review meetings**

There is limited research into children's and young people's views of reviews. As discussed in Chapter Two, Thomas and O'Kane (1999) some 20 years ago interviewed young people about their views of reviews and they concluded that they found the meetings 'scary' and 'boring'. This study was carried out before the introduction of the IRO role. More recently, Pert et al. (2014) carried out a qualitative study to gain young people's experience of reviews, and generally the young people in this study held negative views of review meetings.

As a means of ascertaining the extent to which children and young people played a key role in their review meetings, I asked all of the participants whether they chose when and where the meeting was going to take place, what was on the agenda and who was going to be invited. It was important to ensure the interviews covered these four essential components of the meeting as I could then compare participants' answers to similar questions regarding these four points to the answers that the IROs and SWs provided. Apart from the three participants who chaired their own reviews, the other seven participants all said that they played no role in choosing where their review was going to take place, who was going to be invited, when the review was going to occur or what was going to be on the agenda. This echoes what SWs and IROs said in their interviews (see Chapter 5). As participants had little or no involvement in such key parts of the meeting, this suggests that their participation was extremely limited. If we consider Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation and the eight levels, it would appear on the basis of this evidence that young people's participation in their reviews was tokenistic.

Linked to engagement, of the ten young people interviewed for this study, eight reported that they found their reviews both frustrating and also stressful. For example, Kiera gave the following account:



Kiera: A little bit frustrating because there were certain things in my case that couldn't be helped. Like I would want more contact with my brother and sister, but obviously they were going through adoption and fostering and everything else, and they obviously didn't think it was appropriate. Obviously that made me very upset. So my reviews were a bit of a whirlwind, if that makes sense....Like there would be meltdown moments, but it would be because of certain things, but most of it would get sorted. Does that make sense? ....Like all my health checks would be sorted, all my... like the day to day schooling would be sorted, all of that stuff, but when it came to contact if... like the IRO would help me try and get it but it's obviously not her decision, that's up to the social worker.

As well as showing how stressful reviews can be, this interaction also suggests that reviews may be effective at resolving fairly straightforward matters such as ensuring young people are seeing a dentist regularly. However, they are less effective at resolving more complex matters, such as contact with siblings that have been placed for adoption.

A minority of the young people interviewed had had very negative experiences of reviews. For example, Katy raised concerns about how many people were invited to the meeting (many who she did not know), the way she experienced the meeting and how she felt after the meeting, which in this case was negative on every level.

Katy: Because most kids haven't got a clue what's going and then they sit there and it's not like they haven't tried to tell them. Does that make sense?... I feel like they tried to tell me in the early days but I just didn't want to listen to them because I hated everybody. If someone had sat me down, fed me some pizza and said like.....if they'd have sat me down and fed me some pizza, chilled for a bit and then started talking about some serious stuff I might have accepted it. Make sense?

Clive: Yeah.

Katy: It was the fact that it was just thrown on top of me, "hey, here's a meeting", for the first one, "go talk about all your problems" basically is what it felt to me, and then you feel judged by everyone around you. Does that make sense?... Because the first meeting you might have

police there or you might have ... because I did. I had police for the very first meeting, I had loads of people, and I didn't know who half of them were... But that meeting I had no choice to attend. I was kind of picked up by the social worker and dragged there and then returned to the foster home...So, yeah [laughs].

Clive: You were literally dragged to the meeting?

Katy: Pretty much [laughs].

Clive: Okay. How did you feel generally at the end of the meetings?

Katy: Sometimes emotionally and physically drained. If something had been agreed that was going to go forward that was good, like letterbox contact or something, then I could be ecstatic. But I would say a good six out of ten times I would come away from it crying my eyes out.

This very powerful interaction raises a number of important points. Firstly, young people should always have the choice not to attend review meetings; that is their decision to make and the notion that Katy was 'dragged' to her review is concerning. Furthermore, the point Katy makes about there being various people at the meeting that she did not know is clearly a significant barrier to her engaging and feeling heard in the review meeting. It could be construed as oppressive practice. Eight participants reported that they would have preferred if less people had attended their reviews and in line with other recent research (Pert et al. 2014) the number of professionals attending reviews appeared to be a barrier to participants engaging. Likewise, the point that Katy makes in relation to the first meeting being particularly challenging resonates with findings in earlier research (Roesch-Marsh et al. 2016).

Six of the ten participants had mixed feelings or slightly negative views of their review meetings. There were four young people who had positive views of their review meetings, and of these, three had chaired their own meetings. In terms of the six who had negative/ambivalent views of their reviews, George's experience neatly summarises some aspects of their experiences:

Clive: So how did you find the meetings generally?

George: I don't know. I was a quiet kid so I just sat there and like, nodded along and it felt like because I did that they didn't really engage with me properly and they were talking around me instead of to me. So they basically had like, a mind set of "Well he's not engaging so we shouldn't engage with him" kind of thing.

Clive: And how did that make you feel?

George: A little bit peeved, like just – I was a bit annoyed most of the time but I got to a point where I was just like "Okay, so this is like the norm" so I just didn't really care by that point.

Arguably, the process has made George even more vulnerable; he has so little control over his review meeting and the decisions that are being made about his life. For children and young people this sense of ambivalence, resignation or hopelessness in relation to their ability to have any control over their review, has been reported in earlier studies (Roesch-Marsh et al. 2016; Pert et al. 2014; Munro 2001; Thomas and O'Kane 1999).

During the course of the interviews the young participants gave various suggestions about what could have been done to help them participate more meaningfully. The essence of these suggestions came down to the child or young person feeling comfortable and relaxed during the review meeting. If this occurred then the child or young person would be more likely to engage. The manner in which this would be achieved would be slightly different for each young person. So, for example, Kiera suggested that bringing a friend to the first review would have helped her:

Clive: Would you like your friends there?

Kiera: At one point I think I would have. When I first went into care if I knew I had the option to I probably would have brought in my best friend who I had known for a while to be there with me, because he'd known and still does know everything like that's going on. So if I'd known that was an option I probably would have dragged him along at the start. It would have made me feel a little bit more comfortable.

Kiera: I didn't realise you could have your friends there until a couple of weeks ago actually. You get to choose whoever's there like anyone

you want to make you obviously feel like more at ease because it's your review.

Bringing a friend or close family member would be particularly pertinent for a young person who does not have an established or positive relationship with any of the professional team. Another way of feeling comfortable and relaxed is through feeling in control. This in part explains the success of children and young people chairing their own reviews, as discussed further below. This also links to the role the young people who chaired their own review meetings played in setting the agenda for their review.

The importance of young people being actively involved throughout the review process including in agenda setting has been identified by Roesch-Marsh et al. (2016). The seven participants who did not chair their review's had no role in agenda setting for their review, or indeed the process of deciding who attended the meeting, when it took place or where it took place, which would suggest that their participation was merely tokenistic (Hart 1992). However, during the interview with Katy (who did chair her own meeting) agenda setting was raised in respect of items that she wanted to discuss and other points that professionals 'needed' to discuss. Below, Katy outlines this by saying that there were certain agenda items that 'were on the list' - that is points that had to be covered:

Clive: So there were certain things that had to be discussed?

Katy: Yeah, obviously. Those were the things that were on the list.....So, like those things we discussed normally at the end. The things I didn't like would be discussed at the end. So, we discussed about all the good things, like school, home, contact with my dad, all of those type of things. And then it would come to the bad things like substance misuse and... do you know what I mean? Like sex exploitation and all those type of things. So like... yeah, things I didn't want to talk about but had no choice in it [laughs].

Clive: Okay.

Katy: We've all got no choice [laughs].

Clive: Do you feel like you didn't have any choice?

Katy: Well, no, it's the fact that they'd kind of talk about it if I wasn't there anyway. Does that make sense?

Katy: So, I would rather be there and be like "I can sit here and fight my battle" than walk away and be called guilty for something I haven't done.

This point that Katy makes of certain agenda items such as child sexual exploitation and substance misuse having to be discussed outlines that there are certain topics that young people feel uncomfortable discussing but the professionals are clear need to be covered. It is noteworthy that Katy still wanted to be there for that part of the meeting so that she could 'fight [her] battle'. A potential concern would be that less confident young people would not feel able to chair the meeting or add their own agenda items, and may further disengage from the meeting when items that the professionals 'had' to discuss were covered.

It is also important to note how combative Katy comes across in this quote – particularly the point she makes about being there to 'fight [her] battle'. So although Katy was involved in the review process and according to Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation engaged, this engagement was qualified and fuelled by, in part, a desire to not be misunderstood or blamed. This point will be discussed further in the following chapter which discusses professionals' views of review meetings.

In contrast to the previous literature, there were some participants that had a much more positive view of their review meetings and this appeared to be because they chaired their own reviews. As noted above, only three of the ten participants chaired their own meetings but they were all positive about the meetings and the review process more generally. Charmaine was one of those:

Charmaine: Yeah they're alright. I chair them.

Clive: So tell me about the last review you had, or one of the last reviews you had. How did it work?

Charmaine: I go there, then me and [the IRO] go in the room first and we talk. Then everyone else gets invited into the room, then we just talk about everything we talk about.

Clive: So do you agree the agenda, what you're gonna talk about, with [the IRO] ?

Charmaine: Yes.

Another young person who chaired their own reviews was Emma, and she was very positive about her experience of chairing the meetings.

Emma: I don't understand why people wouldn't want to chair it, in my perspective, because it's a bunch of people in a room talking about you.

This point is interesting in the sense that it seems that Emma decided to chair the meeting in part to try to regain some level of control over the meeting. She clearly understood that it was a meeting about her and that therefore it was essential that she played a central role in that meeting, including by chairing it. Emma appeared to be assertive and confident and had clear views about what she wanted from her reviews. A potential concern would be that for young people who are less confident (such as George), this may mean that even if they were offered the opportunity to chair the meeting, they would not as they would not have the confidence to do so.

Chloe was also positive about chairing her own review.

Clive: Has that been a positive experience?

Chloe: Yeah. For the first time I did it we sort of like did it together and then now I just do it on my own.

There has not been any research that looks specifically at young people chairing their own reviews and analyses the impact this has on a young people's ability to participate meaningfully in the review. My research however suggests that this could be a positive way of giving children the opportunity to participate in their meetings in a more meaningful way. In the LA that this research was carried out, around 100 children at any given time chair their own reviews and Chapter 5 looks in more depth at professionals' views of this. In terms of Hart's ladder of participation it could be argued that children chairing their own reviews is at least rung 6, adult initiated and shared decisions with children and potentially rung 8 children and adults share

decision making. This would appear to be in contrast to reviews considered in this study where young people did not chair their meetings which were more likely to be on rung 3, children tokenized. It is however important to be aware of the limitations to Hart's (1992) ladder, as Thomas (2000, p.174) argues a 'ladder' is too 'linear to encompass the multidimensional character of children's participation about their lives.' Thomas (2000) goes on to argue that participation in a review meeting is more complex than that and we need to consider not just how much a child says in a meeting but also how much notice is taken of what they say by other participants and how well the young person understands the issues that are being discussed. The next chapter will consider the professionals' perspectives on the extent to which they take notice of what young people say and the extent to which they act upon it.

In Chapter 2 (Methodology), I highlighted the ethical concerns that I had about me observing some reviews, particularly as I was the Principal SW in the LA where the field work was being carried out. However, it would be very interesting to carry out further research into young people chairing their own reviews (including non-participant observation) to gain a more in-depth understanding of young people's experiences of review meetings when they chair their reviews.

#### **4.6 Summary**

This chapter raised a number of points which will be considered further in the next chapters which discuss professionals' views of review meetings. A significant finding is that although all the participants had experienced numerous different SWs, there had been at least one SW with whom they had built up a positive working relationship. The findings, in terms of what young people wanted from their SWs and what aided their engagement, was largely in line with research from Pert et al. (2014) and McLeod (2006); that is they wanted a SW who listened to them, was reliable, strong and did what they said they were going to do. A further finding demonstrated by this study was that although most young people had a positive relationship with their IRO, they did not see them between reviews and most were not even aware that this was a possibility - let alone actively promoted by the IRO Handbook (DfES 2010).

The final finding is that those young people who chaired their own reviews had more meaningful engagement in the review process and had the opportunity to have a say or voice in respect of essential parts of the meeting, such as when it took place, where it took place, who was invited and what was on the agenda. The concept of children and young people chairing their own reviews is fairly new and it is positive that this research, although with a small sample size, is indicating that it works well in practice and aids meaningful participation for children and young people.

The following chapter will draw out the points raised by the young participants in relation to professionals' accounts. It will explore SWs and IROs views on participation, relationship building and why IROs are not meeting children and young people between reviews. It will also examine their thoughts on children and young people chairing their own reviews and the level of control over the agenda and decision making that they feel could or should be provided to children and young people.



## **Chapter Five:**

### **Independent Reviewing Officers' and Social Workers' Views of CiC Reviews**

#### **5. 1 Introduction**

The previous chapter, explored children's and young people's views of CiC reviews and discussed the barriers that they felt affected their participation, and what children and young people felt could help them to participate more meaningfully in their review meetings. This chapter builds on that foundational base by considering data drawn from the eight interviews with Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and the eleven interviews with Social Workers (SWs) regarding young peoples' participation in reviews. It will examine whether similar themes emerge from the IROs' and SWs' perceptions or whether their views differ from the children's and young people's perspectives.

This is the first research study that has been conducted specifically in relation to children's participation in reviews, drawing on interviews with children, young people, IROs, senior managers and SWs in England. As in Chapter Four, when analysing the data the key research questions were reflected on to guide the process of data exploration. These research questions can be found in Chapter Three, section 3.2.

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify the active role that the researcher plays in analysing the data - highlighting themes and patterns - rather than this just occurring in a passive manner. During the process, I identified a number of themes and, when the data was further refined, I identified a number of sub-themes. Sub-themes 'can be useful for giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme, and also for demonstrating the hierarchy of meaning within the data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.22). The themes and sub-themes identified were as follows:

- 1) Barriers to effective participation:
  - a) SWs and IROs' high caseloads and ensuing time pressures;
  - b) The high turnover of SWs and inexperienced staff;
  - c) Lack of understanding and training of professionals in 'participation';
  - d) Children's and young people's negative experiences in reviews and ensuing reticence about attending;
  - e) Balancing parents' rights and child's needs;

- f) Structure and focus of the review not being child-centred.
- 2) Factors which assist participation:
- a) Quality of the relationship between the child and the professionals
  - b) The child/young person chairing their own review meeting.

These key themes and sub-themes will be explored in relation to the interview data and its correspondence with previous research findings in the following sections.

## **5.2 Barriers to effective participation**

A common theme that emerged during the interviews with the IROs and SWs – and to an extent with the young participants – was the feeling that IROs and SWs were under a great deal of pressure and that they were struggling to carry out their role as they intended to, or indeed as statutory guidance such as the IRO Handbook (DfES 2010) determines that they should. Barriers to effective participation covered a range of different aspects in the working life and practices of IROs and SWs. These will be presented under individual subsections.

### ***5.2.1 High caseloads and time pressures on both SWs and IROs***

SWs and IROs indicated that they were under a great deal of pressure and struggling to fulfil the requirements of their role as stipulated in statutory guidance. High caseloads were a particular challenge highlighted by all of the IROs and SWs. The following interaction illustrates the challenge posed to participation of children in CiC review meetings when IRO caseloads are high.

IRO 3: We've got so many kids coming into care, they're trying to manage going out and seeing children in between reviews – it's really difficult. So it tends to be maybe picking them up half an hour beforehand and if you've got a complex case or a complex child it needs that additional support, trying to do something in half an hour is a bit more difficult. It's not impossible once you've built a relationship up – then, half an hour is fine... I don't want to sound like it's not that they don't go well - but for me, any Child in Care Review, you wing it and if you don't wing it – I know that's awful to say – but you manage what you get delivered. That's what social work is about. You know, you deal with crises don't

you... But for me that's what social work is about and because my background has always been front line, for me as long as I get to the end of the meeting and I get things covered then I've done my job. Whether I've been sworn at a bit in the process, so be it. [laughs]

This suggests that even the review process – which should be carefully planned - has instead become another crisis meeting. A plethora of research has evidenced that frontline duty work can be very challenging as it is difficult to plan for every eventuality (Shoesmith 2016; Bowyer and Roe 2015; Munro 2012). However, IRO 3 suggests that IROs are routinely unprepared for review meetings and see the meetings as 'crises' and something they need to 'deal with'. IRO 3's description of 'winging it' was fairly consistent to the way other IROs and SWs described the meetings. This 'crisis' culture would certainly present a challenge to how far children and young people can actively engage in the review process.

All SWs and IROs went on to link high caseloads with a detrimental impact on their ability to ensure that the child or young person was able to participate in their review in a meaningful manner. This is a point that many of the young people also raised. The implication is that children and young people feel, at times, that their allocated professionals do not have time for them.

Most IROs commented that they needed to spend time in reviews challenging poor practice by SWs, and that this could detract from their ability to ensure that children participated meaningfully in their meetings. This need to challenge the SW – in front of the child or young person – may also have an impact on how the child subsequently engages with the review process. The child or young person may feel let down that the SW is not doing their job properly and there could be an ensuing impact on how or whether they choose to engage.

This commonly-accepted reality of having too much work relates closely to the culture of the profession (Muench et al. 2017; Leigh 2017; Shoesmith 2016). This issue was clearly articulated by IRO 3:

Clive: Do you think SWs have time and resources to prepare people for the meetings?

IRO 3: No. But I think they could make time and find time to some degree. I think that stat visits<sup>2</sup> aren't often done, so if they were doing their stat visits more regularly those... could be part of preparing children. It's about making use of the time they do have. They're so busy... they're so, so, busy, and I don't mean just on the ground but in their heads. They've got so many things they're carrying, so many pressures... they're not able to think ahead or plan ahead because everything is on the ground.

This notion of being busy resonates with research carried out by Ruch (2012) which identifies the problem of SWs being busy and having no time to think, plan or feel. Forrester (2016) calls this 'zombie social work'; and reflecting on the challenges of modern day child protection social work he contends:

*In research we frequently observe SWs doing a visit because they are meant to do one within a certain timescale (the "stat visit"). Their computer is literally flashing at them, they do the visit, fill in the form and the computer stops flashing. But the visit itself is often characterised by a purposelessness that leaves worker and family confused about what is happening..... To me this is symptomatic of a system which has developed an obsession with effective management, without sufficient attention to the wider values and aims of the service. It is like a zombie social work - moving and busy (very, very busy!) without any sense of being truly alive.*

(Forrester 2016, p.12)

Forrester's comments accord well with the view of social work depicted in my research: an inexperienced, transient workforce that is busy filling out forms with little consideration for how children or their parents are involved in review meetings or their practice generally; teachers and foster carers using review meetings as means of criticising young people; and tokenistic (at best) participation by young people where they play no role in making key decisions surrounding their review meetings.

Overall, these research findings suggest that the Munro Review (2012) had very little impact on the way the child protection system works. This is unfortunate. It appears we still have a system premised upon 'doing things right rather than doing the right

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<sup>2</sup> There are Government requirements as to how often CIC are visited, hence the term "statutory visit". Individual LAs also have their own guidelines that they expect SWs to adhere to.

thing' (Munro 2012). The following quote from (Cooper 2009) about a social worker who had moved to England from abroad to work in a child protection team in 2009 is still very relevant today and is borne out in my research:

*I am working in a factory... We produce initial and core assessments in our factory. Our management counts the assessments completed on a weekly basis and informs the workers of the results in teams meetings and by emails. The workers don't seem to care about these numbers but they preoccupy the management. There have been many changes in our factory in the past five years. The management has been replaced, the teams were reconstructed, the machinery (workers, forms, IT systems) also saw great changes.*

*The management measures (in percentages) the reports of initial and core assessments completed on time, and compare these to other teams. When the team manager reports these statistics in team meetings, I can recognise how my body becomes tense and my heart rate increases, and I get very angry. (...)I have voiced my resentment to this ritual, but it was ignored by managers and other colleagues.*

(Cooper 2009, p.89)

Useful parallels can be drawn between this quote, Forrester's observations about so-called 'zombie SWs' and the comments made by participants in my study. The IROs acknowledged that reviews took place without young people attending as the meeting had to happen within a certain timeframe. This meant that the young people did not always actually attend the review as it did not fit with the IRO's or SW's diary. The interview with IRO 3 illustrates how this can happen:

Clive: If you could change anything about Children in Care Reviews to increase participation, what would it be?

IRO 3: Demand... I think it's ultimately about time. If there were more time to prepare then IROs would insist on children being present, because you'd have the time to help prepare for that and to meet those around, and SWs would have the time to prepare... and plan for it.

Clive: Do reviews ever take place where children just wouldn't be able to attend because of your diary and the social worker's diary, and there's no way they could attend?

IRO 3: Yeah. Sadly, yes.....Because they're in school and you can't fit it in anywhere else; because you can't get everybody together. Although, we do have the option of two-part reviews. They're not the nicest reviews to hold as an IRO because they become complicated... you miss information and you repeat information so they get a bit muddly, so we try and avoid them.

In their interviews, both IROs and SWs documented numerous incidents of meetings taking place to meet arbitrary timescales - a practice which Munro (2012) is rightly critical of. It appears common in this LA that review meetings take place without children and young people even being aware that they are happening, because professionals are under pressure to ensure they occur within a certain set timeframe. Review meetings are required to take place within 30 days of a change of placement, at three months and every six months thereafter. One IRO raised the example of a review meeting (to which the young person was invited) taking place on the child's birthday so as to meet the statutory timescale. Arguably, this is symptomatic of a system that, due to its narrow focus on meeting targets and timescales, has forgotten that young people are at the heart of everything we should be doing – 'zombie social work' (Forrester 2016) in practice. Applying Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation, this practice could be placed into the category of the bottom rung - manipulation.

As a time saving measure, a number of SWs reported that they would combine CiC reviews with Personal Educational Plan (PEP) meetings at the school. SW 1 recalled having back-to-back meetings comprising a PEP meeting at the school with just the professionals, which was then followed by the CiC review meeting involving the child.

Clive: Did that seem to work well?

SW 1: Quite well. I suppose, as long as there's not the repetition of it. It just means they can end up being quite long meetings and a child might be more comfortable if it is in their home instead of being dragged out of class, sit round with how ever many professionals looking at them and then leave again. But I think it depends ... I have one boy that very

much just thought it was a process and he'd sit there like "great, I've just got to do this."

The idea of the young person being 'dragged out of class [to] sit round with numerous professionals looking at them and then leave again' is similar to the point made by a young person (Katy) in Chapter Four, in which she describes being 'dragged' to her review. SW 1 is clearly not carrying out high quality child focused practice by holding the CiC review and the PEP meeting at the same time. It is patently a time-saving measure, and one can see from the sarcastic response from the young person that SW 1 refers to that it is likely to hinder their participation in the meeting. This would appear to be further evidence of a beleaguered workforce who are under a great deal of pressure and do not have the time or knowledge to carry out basic social work practice (Tickle 2018). Mannay et al. (2017a) also found that on occasion children in care are taken out of education by SWs and this could potentially impact on their educational attainment.

All IROs asserted that it was up to the SW to prepare the young person for the review and then it was the responsibility of the IRO to check at the meeting that this had been done properly. IRO's also felt that preparation for the review, in part, involved filling out the consultation form with the child, and that though this bureaucratic process was important, the child's participation was effectively minimal. Both the young people interviewed in this study and the young people in the study conducted by Pert et al. (2014) were very critical of consultation forms. However, the importance of the forms to the IROs is outlined in the following interaction with IRO 4:

IRO 4: The social worker definitely needs to talk with them and ensure that the consultation paper is filled out at least and talk about how the review's going to work for them... That often doesn't happen though – their foster carer or residential worker and ideally the parents too if they are having good regular contact might have a chat too.

Clive: Do you think SWs and IROs have the time and resources to prepare young people properly for the meetings?

IRO 4: Not always, no. As a part-time IRO I think my caseload was fifty-something so it's impossible to do that –

Clive: Is that three days a week?

IRO 4: Yes, it's impossible on every single case to do so you had to choose those cases you were most worried about and make sure that you dedicate time to those, and the same with SWs. But the problem is those stable long-term placements, those children get a rough deal 'cos they're the ones that the social worker and the IRO often don't... have the time to go out and visit before – I mean the guidance is clear that ideally we should be going out, but you couldn't do that... I always aspired to that as an IRO, that it wouldn't just be about I'd see them ten, fifteen minutes before reviews, I really wanted to have got to a point where I visited young people in-between reviews but I only ever managed to get to that when I was in dispute with the local authority.

This quote raises the point that the IRO only fills out her statutory duty (i.e. visiting children between reviews, as stipulated by the IRO Handbook 2010) if she is in dispute with the LA. It is very rare in this LA - as with most others - that this would occur, which means that a very small proportion of children are visited between reviews. IRO 4 also raises the point that it is potentially up to the parent to play a role in preparing young people for review meetings, but whether parents understand the review process, and whether it is appropriate to expect a parent to prepare a young person for a review meeting, is questionable.

While one would expect that parents may not understand the review process, more worrying was the suggestion by some IROs that in their view SWs sometimes struggled to prepare children and young people for reviews as they were so inexperienced and did not understand the review process themselves sufficiently. The focus on filling out forms and the imbalance between direct work and administrative tasks has been highlighted in previous studies (BASW 2018; Holmes and McDermid 2013) and again this appears to be an issue highlighted in my research. This impact of inexperienced professionals being a barrier to meaningful participation is explored further below along with the impact of a high turnover of staff.

### ***5.2.2 High turnover and inexperienced SWs***

Almost all SWs and IROs raised the high turnover of SWs as a potential barrier to participation by young people. The interview extract below illustrates how the issue of a high turnover of staff and an inexperienced workforce in this LA was impacting on the way that children and young people were prepared for reviews. This was



presented as partly due to the SWs themselves not understanding the purpose of the review.

Clive: Whose responsibility do you think it is to prepare children and young people for reviews?

IRO 3: Social Workers... Part of my role, I believe, is to help support that.... I think the challenge is though, a lot of social workers don't really know what to expect from a Child in Care Review. Not all, but obviously you've got a lot of newly qualified social workers coming through and we have a lot of turnover of staff in terms of training. So often the social worker comes to a review and they might not know what to expect so aren't really able to prepare the child, which makes it very difficult then.

Clive: Because the social worker doesn't know themselves what it means now?

IRO 3: Potentially, yeah. And also we all practice slightly differently so I think there's an issue about IROs being consistent because we're independent and not really managed by anybody, although we have a Team Manager. They're there to guide us rather than manage us, so we kind of march to our own drums to a degree and then we have very clear legislation to back us up. We all do things slightly differently.

This quote raises two issues: inconsistencies within the IRO team regarding the way different IROs manage the meeting, and the possibility that inexperienced SWs do not understand the purpose of reviews themselves. This was also evidenced in my interview with IRO 7:

IRO 7 They [SW's] should be talking with them and asking questions like, 'what's the best venue for you?' 'These were the things that we talked about last time; what's been going well? What are some of the things you might want to talk about?' That, in my experience, often doesn't happen and so I've been at reviews, sadly, where young people don't know what the plan's going to be, let alone think about things that we need to talk about, so that can make it really, really difficult to have an honest and open discussion.

The point IRO 7 is making is that, since the SW has not explained to the young person the plan, and in some cases may not even be clear what the plan is, there automatically exists a significant barrier to the meeting fulfilling one of its core roles - to review the care plan (DfES 2010). This will clearly impact on the opportunity for the young person to engage in the review meeting, as - like IRO 7 and many other IROs reported - the review turns into a meeting to outline what the care plan is, when this task should have been carried out prior to the review with the young person, parents and foster carers. This raises the point that IRO 3 highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, of the meeting not being properly planned. Indeed, the basic function of the meeting is not to make the plan but to review the care plan (Dickens et al. 2015; DfES 2010). If there is no plan in place and it has not been agreed with the child and parents, it is very difficult for the review meeting to review the plan and carry out its core function.

This importance of this in terms of working effectively alongside families was also emphasised by IRO 7:

IRO 7: I've been at many a review where I've had to explain what twin-tracking<sup>3</sup> is and we've got a plan for twin-track, and that's not the purpose of the review, you know; that should have happened way before but –

Clive: They don't know the plans (the parents)?

IRO 7: No, nine times out of ten, you spend time at the end with the parents, thinking with them about what twin-tracking is... If you've got a care plan it often hasn't been shared beforehand with parents... I can probably think of quite a few reviews where I've asked the social worker to explain what the plan is in terms of twin-tracking and they've sort of said, can you do it?

Clive: Why?

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<sup>3</sup> Twin-tracking, which is also known as Parallel Planning, is a term used when a contingency plan for a CiC is being explored at the same time as the primary plan for the child. As part of Permanence Planning for CiC, Parallel Plans must be drawn up to ensure that alternative plans have been explored and are available without delay if the preferred permanent outcome proves unachievable.

IRO 7: Because I don't think they quite know – there's confusion around what we mean by twin-tracking still I think in the Local Authority.

Clive: Is that because of lack of experience from the social work team?

IRO 7: Yeah, yeah, maybe.

This point was also raised by a Senior Manager (SM) who stated in her interview that SWs were not completing plans or discussing plans at review meetings. This raises wider issues than participation and suggests that SWs are not confident in explaining plans to parents or children/young people, and that on occasion they are inappropriately leaving it up to the IRO to explain the care plan at the review meeting. This is not the IROs role, and nor is it the role of the meeting. Arguably, then, this divergence from the core purpose of the meeting can be attributed to an inexperienced workforce which lacks confidence in its own decision making. This issue of inexperience and a lack of understanding will be examined in more detail in the following section, specifically in relation to the meaning of participation.

### ***5.2.3 Lack of understanding and training of professionals in 'participation'***

Although IROs, like SWs, recognised how important participation is, most IROs were more aware than SWs of how the current system did not ensure meaningful participation with children and young people. This could be because the IROs were more experienced social care professionals. It may also be because a central tenet of the IRO role is to ensure that all views are heard and considered.

Only one of the IROs had received any training on participation and many reported that the training generally for IROs is very poor. For example, IRO 5 reported the following:

IRO 5: I went on some BAAF<sup>4</sup> IRO training a few years ago in Manchester which covered stuff like that [participation]... the training for IROs is atrocious, I have to say. ....we used to look as a team for training and find bits and pieces from BAAF or whoever and we'd go on it and we'd think, actually - not being arrogant, but we knew that.

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<sup>4</sup> British Association of Adoption and Fostering

This quote reflects the wider experience of the IROs interviewed, of poor provision of IRO training generally and specifically, a dearth of guidance on participation. Within this study of twenty-three professionals, only two had ever attended training on participation; one social worker and one senior manager.

All of the SWs interviewed agreed that it was very important that children participate in their review meetings. However, there was confusion about what participation meant. SW 8 offered a definition of participation which was fairly typical of those given by other SWs in the study:

SW 8:            Participation to me just means a group of people all working together for the same goal or an achievement.

Arguably, this definition more accurately describes inter-agency working and does not appear to relate to legal or theoretical definitions of children's participation. As outlined in the literature review, the most common model for considering child participation is Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation. The ladder outlines the various different types of participation from 'tokenism' to 'partnership', the latter describing when children and the adults who are working with them have an equal amount of influence and power over decisions made about the children's futures (Bessell and Gal 2009).

Hart (1992) acknowledges that the level of participation will differ depending upon the situation and the particular child. Nonetheless, for participation to be successful it is imperative that organisations are committed to genuine, rather than tokenistic, participation. When considering the interview data produced with IROs, children and young people and SWs, in relation to Hart's Ladder of Participation, children's and young people's participation in reviews was most often presented as tokenistic at best, and often as manipulative.

One potential reason for SWs having such a poor understanding of what participation means is that – as discussed above – very few of them had ever attended training on participation. This suggests that in this LA, training on participation was not a priority. This appeared to have impacted on SWs and IROs having a basic understanding of what participation means and furthermore it is likely to impact upon their ability to practice in a manner which ensures children have an opportunity to participate in decisions that are made about their lives. This is in contravention to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 and the core social work values in relation to empowerment of service users (BASW 2017).

There was also disconnect between how important SWs felt participation was and the extent to which they actually tried to ensure that children participated in their meetings. All eleven SWs said that children's participation in review meetings was very important, however all said that either they or the IRO made the key decisions regarding the practicalities of the meeting. This disconnect appears to align with the findings of Argyris and Schon (1974) that people have aspirations and ideas that are developed through mental maps which comprise of theories of action. Argyris and Schon develop a distinction between 'espoused theory' (what people say) and 'theory in use' (what people actually do). 'Espoused theory' is defined as being:

*...when someone is asked how he would behave in certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory in action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance and which, upon request, he communicates to others.*

By contrast, 'theory in use' is defined as:

*...the theory which actually governs his actions is his theory in use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory; furthermore, the individual may or may not be aware of this incompatibility.*  
(Argyris and Schon 1974, p. 7)

When applying these concepts to this research, it was noted that the SWs articulated that they view children's participation as important but when it comes down to it, their practice does not lead to children participating meaningfully. It is important to note that there is no suggestion of deception or deliberate manipulation by professionals in this situation; it is more the case that there is a dissonance between what is espoused and what actually takes place in practice.

All SWs said children's participation was very important but they all acknowledged that young people played no role in deciding when reviews took place, where they took place and who was invited. This indicates an example of espoused theory over theory in use.

#### ***5.2.4 Children and young people's negative experiences in reviews and ensuing reticence about attending***

The IRO Handbook states that the review meeting should be child-centred and whenever possible, the young person should attend (DfES 2010). However, it would not be appropriate to force a young person to attend, and young people should be free to not attend and still have the opportunity to meet with the IRO separately, should they want to (Pert et al. 2014).

Archard and Skivenes (2009, p.393) rightly state that 'children should not be intimidated by the circumstances in which they are asked to present their views'. It was concerning therefore that all of the IROs reported other professionals (especially school staff and foster carers) using review meetings to blame and shame the young person. This is a worrying finding and it is noteworthy that similar research by Pert et al. (2014), Dickens et al. (2015), Jelcic et al. 2014 or Thomas and O'Kane (1999) has not highlighted this as an issue. The interview extracts below demonstrate this problematic practice.

IRO 1: Foster carers and teachers will use the review as an opportunity to shame the child by bringing up their bad behaviour.

Clive: Have you got any examples of that?

IRO 1: I did a review at a secondary school the other day. The boy is in Year 7<sup>5</sup> with quite a few additional needs and his care plan is complex, but he was on that day facing permanent exclusion and the head had made a decision that he couldn't enter the school that day for his review. That got turned around but then there were about four education representatives and ... the big male teacher, head of year, he wanted to take us through the whatever, 28 incidents, and he was a tiny little boy, very small for his age with some physical disability, and I could just see him shrivelling up. So how on earth can that child have a voice in that meeting if somebody just says "oh, and on the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month you called your teacher an effing bitch" or whatever. You know, it's really unhelpful. ...and foster carers sometimes will talk about behavior incidents, I think sometimes to justify or to defend their own position.

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<sup>5</sup> Age group 11-12

It is not appropriate to use the review as a mechanism to 'settle scores' with young people or to seek to shame them. The bullying behavior IRO 1 described is inappropriate for a review meeting and indeed any other meeting, and should not be the way that professionals treat young people regardless of the circumstances.

Overall, the IROs reported that this practice of being blamed, shamed or placed under the spotlight was a major barrier to children and young people attending their reviews, let alone engaging and participating in them. For example, this exchange with IRO 2 outlines how this pressure on the young person can reduce the chances of meaningful participation:

Clive:           What do you think the main things are that lead to good participation from young people in children's care reviews?

IRO2:           Well, I suppose they've got to feel safe... [They] feel like they're under the spotlight. They're being kind of criticised, everyone's talking about them, everyone's looking at them, they're worried about bad things that will be said and so that's the kind of thing which deters young people.

Both of the quotes from IRO 1 and 2 outline how these meetings lead to young people feeling blamed, but they also provide an explanation for Katy's combative approach outlined in Chapter 4, Section 4.5, where she detailed how she had to go to a review to 'fight her corner'. Although Mannay et al. (2017a) highlight that some teachers had oppressive views in relation to children in care no previous research has outlined quite as clearly as this how stressful, difficult and oppressive a review meeting can be for young people. Another quote which powerfully depicts this is detailed below:

IRO6:           I'm trying to convey to them the meeting is about them and it's for them and that if people try to use the meeting as a way to criticise them or shame them then I should explain that's not the case and that shouldn't happen, especially in my reviews or the reviews I chair.

Clive:           Does that happen sometimes?

IRO 6:           Yeah, sometimes you can tell. I mean, especially schools – and some carers as well – tend to bring up issues about problems and how and

what he or she has done and that's not - that shouldn't be - the main centre of the meeting.

I think foster carers– hold the review like a hammer over a child. It's like 'you wait 'til your father gets home'. 'You wait 'til the review. We're going to talk about this.' And so one thing that would hinder the child in the review would be allowing that kind of attitude to dominate. So you do sometimes find in a review yourself having to say to a foster carer, 'We're not going to talk about that. It's not about that. This isn't what the review's about'. It's about the IRO - that sometimes has to then be very directive, 'cos some people will insist that they talk about how shitty this kid is.... So that can be a real hindrance, especially when they're with the foster carer all the time, and the foster carer's feeding them with ideas about reviews that are not true!

There's a sense in which children can feel quite compromised in a public space... You kind of feel that there's a space where secrets might come out or they might betray people. They might betray their foster carers; they might betray their parents; they might betray themselves... So that's why none of these events in a child's life are isolated.

If the child and young person has a negative experience at a review then it is understandable that they then may become reticent about attending. Many of the children and young people who come into the care system will not only have had poor experiences of parenting but poor experiences of the professionals and systems that are meant to be there to protect them (Muench et al. 2016). These children and young people are likely to be cautious about who they can trust.

Linked to this possible reticence about participating in reviews will be whether children feel heard when they actually do participate or if they come away feeling that their involvement has only been tokenistic. A number of SWs acknowledged that the current system can be quite tokenistic in terms of participation by children in their review meetings. In the quote below, SW 6 gives their view of what they think participation means. In reality though, they are merely detailing the LA's responsibility under the Children Act 1989 to work in the best interests of the child. To this SW, child participation seems to mean ensuring the child understands (as far as is possible, depending on their age) the decisions made by the LA. If we relate this back to Hart's



Ladder of Participation, it would be considered as tokenistic at best; indeed, this is something the SW himself specifically acknowledges later in the interview.

SW 6: So participation for children would mean that the child's had a level of say in what happens for them and what the Local Authority undertakes to do in the best interest of the child, and that the child should understand as well as possible for their age why decisions are made, who people are, why the meetings are there. It's very difficult because you can have participation and talk about that all you like but actually the child still remains I think...

Clive: What does that mean to you?

SW 6: Well I think that just kind of shows that a lot of what we do can be quite tokenistic.... You know, it's one thing going and getting the child's view before the review, which is what I've done, but on reflection that's still quite tokenistic. That's a visit to a child with a pre-set of questions for a meeting that isn't going to change it in structure and the actual issues can be pretty abstract and complex and they are very, very difficult to explain to a child.

The SW here is articulating a view of many of the other SW participants, namely that they have a paternalistic approach which means that they feel that the concepts considered in review meetings are too complex for children to understand, and that even if they see the child prior to the review, it will not impact on the form the review takes place, the agenda, or what is going to be discussed at the meeting.

Later in this interview, SW 6 reiterated how tokenistic the process was, including how the voice of the advocate carried less weight than that of the other professionals involved, and as a result, the child's voice was less important. This would seem to be an example of the advocate being treated in a similarly paternalistic way to how children are treated. The SW then seemed to acknowledge that even the young person struggled to understand why the advocate's view was not taken as seriously as other professionals.

SW 6: ... [the young person] was very resistant [...] and it made it very very difficult for her to understand why we did those things... her involvement was tokenistic because she had an advocate who would

share her views but she couldn't understand why the advocate didn't carry the weight of opinion that I did or the other professionals in the room.

Clive: Were you able to be transparent with her?

SW 6: Within the boundaries of what relationship we had, which wasn't great to be honest. Unfortunately, her mother made some terrible decisions and this particular child was probably child five out of a sequence of children that has been abused by the local authority, so all she ever really saw was that I thought her mum was crap.

Clive: And what would you say is the main aim of a Children in Care Review?

SW 6: It's for the child to be listened to, for the child's voice to be heard and to ensure that we're all working together to ensure the best outcome for that child.

This response is interesting because there seems to be a clear contradiction between what the SW is saying is the purpose of the meeting and what he himself acknowledges actually happens prior to and during the meeting. Arguably, this is a further example of espoused theory and theory in use (Argyris and Schon, 1974).

### ***5.2.5 Structure and focus of the review not being child centred***

To effect meaningful participation the child and young person will need to be engaged during the meeting and feel that it is personal to them. In many respects the 'tick box' culture could be seen as the antithesis of this. SWs and IROs confirmed that reviews are used as a managerial tool and emphasizes the 'tick box' organisational culture that appears to be prevalent in this LA. A central part of the IRO role is one of quality assurance: ensuring that the care plan is meeting young people's needs and that a permanent arrangement/plan is agreed in a timely manner (Jelicic et al. 2014). It is possible that the manner in which this function is performed could either empower or disengage the child or young person:

Clive: Anything else in terms of what in your view is the main aim of the Children in Care Review?

SW 6: To make sure that we're doing our jobs. [laughs] I think just to keep an eye on the placement as well, just to make sure that there isn't any concerns or just to make sure that all targets are being met. You know, if the social worker said they're going to do something then you know, we're doing what we said we're going to do to support that child in that placement.

This quote about the review's role being to ensure that people do their jobs properly suggests a compliance element to the review process. Essentially, it is a process to check that SWs and other professionals are doing what they should be doing - part of an audit culture, and a sign of the impact of the modernisation agenda and managerialism (Diaz and Drewery 2016; Featherstone et al. 2014). As outlined in the literature review, managerialism and the modernisation agenda has led to a change to a compliance culture where there is an obsession with completing forms on the IT system and a lack of focus on working meaningfully with children and families to help improve their lives (Munro 2012). As Munro (2016) outlined social work should be about helping families make positive changes to their lives rather than 'writing pretty assessments and essays'. This audit and compliance culture has been outlined by various authors (Diaz and Drewery 2016; Forrester 2016; Featherstone et al. 2014; Munro 2012) as a common issue in the modern child protection system. This research suggests that review meetings are a microcosm of this checking culture. The SW stated that one of the main aims of the review is to ensure 'all targets are being met', which is a very clear example of the impact of managerialism.

A further barrier to children participating in their reviews, and an issue which was mentioned by IROs, was the practice of holding large meetings. This was also found to be a key barrier in the study conducted by Pert et al. (2014). A good example of the issues presented by large meetings was articulated by IRO 2:

Clive: What about barriers to participation? What do you think are the barriers?

IRO 2: Large meetings. Over-formal meetings. Say, for example, if we have a meeting where there's a lot of people, a lot of professionals, and you're just reporting on what they've done and talking about what they've

done or what's happened or giving their views then that's going to be very, very difficult for the child to listen to.

The practice of holding large meetings with numerous professionals in attendance was an issue that was raised by all IROs as presenting a potential barrier to young people engaging meaningfully in their reviews. This aligns with findings from Pert et al. (2014), which concluded that young people did not like large reviews and particularly did not like school teachers or foster carer's SWs attending the review. It is clear from both these research studies that we need to look at ways of reducing the number of professionals who attend reviews.

In this study, some IROs said that they would ask professionals to say what they had to say then leave if they did not think it would be necessary for them to stay for the whole meeting, but other IROs were less assertive and the large meetings just went ahead. This links to the issue of who decides who is invited to attend review meetings and where and when they are held. All IROs said that for the first review in particular, they had very little oversight of this and the young person did not have a say in this crucial question; instead, it seemed to be agreed between the IRO team administrators and the SWs. All subsequent reviews would then seemingly go ahead with the same list of invitees, and again young people had very little influence over this.

The impact of young people being excluded from the process of deciding who is going to be invited to their review meeting was highlighted by IRO 6:

IRO 6: I had situations when the young person became quite upset because she didn't know many people coming to the meeting and she was wondering why they were there. So, that was an example - that young person wasn't prepared.

Furthermore, the majority of SWs did not think that young people enjoyed or even benefited from their reviews:

SW 8: ...I don't know if it's the environment or everybody sat round the table, it's quite informal, and the IRO is asking everybody specific questions - I think sometimes young people can think "Oh my God, not me next, not me next. I don't want to talk" [laughs]. And then they feel like they just have to

sometimes go along with what everybody is saying, I've noticed sometimes. And they'll speak to me after and be like "Oh, I didn't really agree with that."

Clive: Oh really?

SW 8: And I say "Well, why didn't you say at the meeting?" "Oh no, I didn't want to cause a fuss". So I've had that a few times. I don't know if it's because of lack of confidence or sometimes young people may feel that everybody else around them is doing their jobs and they're just fitting in. I'm not sure.

Here, the social worker recognised that the meeting was stressful – that sometimes young people did not say something because they did not want to 'cause a fuss'.

I have highlighted above the barriers that exist to young people participating in their review meetings. The interviews with IROs and SWs have emphasised how difficult it can be to ensure that the child or young person remains the focus of the review when there are so many other competing pressures and demands. I will now turn to look at the factors which my research suggested can assist children and young people to participate in reviews.

### **5.3 Factors which assist participation in review meetings**

The SWs and IROs were able to identify some factors which they felt helped young people to participate in their reviews. These are considered below.

#### ***5.3.1 Quality of the relationship between the child and professionals***

As documented in Chapter Four, all ten young participants experienced a high turnover of SWs. It is worth noting that if the SW showed the right attributes towards the child - of taking time to get to know them, listening to them, doing what they said they were going to do and building a relationship with them – young people did establish a trusting, effective relationship with their SW.

All IROs acknowledged that their relationship with the young person was very important and that it was key to young people meaningfully engaging in their review process. However, because of challenges in terms of caseloads, IROs did not get to visit children either prior to or between reviews as required in the IRO Handbook

(DfES 2010), and they all acknowledged that this had an impact on their ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships with young people.

Studies surrounding children's participation suggest that 'developing an effective procedure for eliciting children's perspectives and establishing a trusting relationship takes time' (Anderson et al. 2003, p. 212). This is problematic if IROs only see children and young people twice a year and have no contact in between reviews. All IROs said that they would like to see young people more but that their caseloads prevented this. This aligns with the findings reported in Chapter Four, that children and young people saw the role of the IRO as chairing the meeting, but they had no contact with them between reviews.

Each IRO reported a caseload in the region of 85 children, which is considerably higher than the number the IRO Handbook recommends (50-70 cases). This impacts not just on the ability of the IRO to visit between reviews but also to build and maintain a positive working relationship with the young person. Some IROs reported that they did not need long to build up a rapport with a young person and that they were able to do so in just a few minutes before a meeting. This appears contrary to research by Ruch et al. (2012) and Smith et al. (2003), which found that it takes a great deal of time to build up a trusting relationship with a young person.

SWs also raised concerns about the ability of IROs to build up relationships with young people given that they only meet them twice a year:

SW 1: I wonder what he would have actually spoken truthfully to his IRO about because he took a long time to build a relationship with and a lot of intense direct work.

All the SWs and IROs agreed that participation in the review process was very important for young people and that a trusting relationship with the SW and IRO was at the core of that. For example, when asked how important meaningful participation was, SW 1 stated:

SW 1: It's that child and it's that child's life, so they need to know what's going on and have a say, because it's them that's got to live with it every day. It shouldn't just be a tick box exercise... it's normally done with an IRO, isn't it? So, in the hope that they have the same IRO every year that they can build a relationship with and speak honestly with, because

they may have had several changes of social workers. But it's ...whether that relationship is built with them or it's just another meeting that child's got to sit in and whether they feel they can speak honestly about it. ...it can only be meaningful if that relationship [with the IRO] is actually there.

All the SWs and IROs agreed that this concept of a positive relationship (between the IRO, SW and child/young person) was at the heart of meaningful participation. This quote also highlights the issue of the high turnover of SWs and that therefore having a consistent IRO may help with the young person's engagement. It is striking how normalised it is that young people experience a high turnover of SWs.

SW 2 also felt that meaningful participation was dependent on the young person having a meaningful relationship with the SW. When I asked SW 2 what she felt helped young people engage in their review process, she said:

SW 2: Making sure that the social worker's got a relationship with the child in the first place so that then the social worker is able to communicate with the child and the child is able to be open about their wishes and feelings, and be able to tell the social worker, by whatever means - it might be talking, it might be drawing or whatever - what they think about their home situation or their current living situation, and about things that are really important to them that are either really working for them or really not working for them.

This illustrates the importance of SWs using different tools to engage children and young people and the importance of them taking time to build up that positive working relationship.

Aside from the importance of the relationship with the SW and IRO, some professionals also identified the advocate as playing a key role in assisting young people to engage meaningfully in their review meetings:

SW 3: I find that advocacy services have really been beneficial. I think where young people feel that they have a good relationship with an IRO as well, because obviously that's a separate part in IROs' gaining their views I think. Young people are more likely to participate if the IROs have built up a good relationship with them through the Child in Care

process. I think obviously if it feels meaningful to them then if you're reviewing a Child in Care case where nothing really is changing and that child's views aren't being taken into consideration then that's going to hinder participation.

This account underlines the importance of the young person having positive relationships with the professionals involved. It also raises questions about how realistic it is for a young person in care to have a positive working relationship with the SW (who may have changed several times in recent years), the IRO (who often only sees them twice a year), and the advocate (who may only be offered for the first review). It is important to question whether we have made the review process too dependent on too many positive things occurring to make it a meaningful experience for children and young people.

I asked IROs to outline the factors they felt helped and hindered children and young people in engaging in the review process. There was consistency in their responses. All IROs agreed that the quality of the relationship the child/young person has with the SW and IRO would impact on their engagement in the review process, this is line with previous research (Jelicic et al. 2014).

### ***5.3.2 The child/young person chairing their own review meeting***

As discussed in the previous chapter, the children who were most positive about their experience of review meetings were those who chaired them. I was therefore interested to obtain the perspectives of SWs and IROs regarding this practice.

Most IROs and SWs were positive about young people chairing their own reviews, although there were some reservations given. For example, SW 5 stated:

SW 5: It can go either way, can't it. It can become extremely productive, with a really engaged young person. I can think of one or two over the years that would, I think, be really switched on and really actually would have made a lot of professionals maybe buck their ideas up and maybe become a bit more child focused. I can obviously think of one or two where they might feel it is an opportunity to rub a few people's noses in it and maybe have a bit of fun at everyone else's expense. I suppose unless you give people the chance, you never know that maybe being



given that kind of responsibility could bring out the best in them. There are some young people who are or often feel quite disenfranchised.

This quote implies some fear or reluctance on behalf of this SW to allow the young person to chair their own review, as there is some suggestion that they may 'abuse' the power they are given by 'rubbing people's noses in it'. This view was given (albeit less overtly) by other SWs and IROs, and it may lead to SWs or IROs not giving children the choice to chair their own reviews. This ties in with comments made by George in the previous chapter, whereby he said he would have been interested in potentially chairing his own reviews but he had only recently found out he could do this and he is now nearly 18 and only has one review remaining.

However, most SWs were positive about young people chairing their own reviews and saw it as an effective way of increasing meaningful participation by young people in the review process:

SW 4: I did a Child in Care review about six months ago where it was chaired by the young person... and he decided how he wanted to do it, and we started off by playing hangman to work out what his favourite things were... so it was completely different to how a normal Child in Care review would be. My experience would be that when things are calm and settled and straightforward then participation is thought of more. When things are falling apart or in crisis or we feel like adults need to step in and make those decisions, I would think that participation is much less then - whether that's in court proceedings or placement breakdowns, all those kind of things.

Although the SW here acknowledges that participation is important, it is only realistic (both in terms of meaningful participation but also in terms of the young person chairing their own review) if the placement is settled and things are going well. Therefore, when considering the care/control point, SW 4 clearly felt that participation was important, but when things were in crisis the adults had to take over and make the decisions for the young person to 'protect them'. It can therefore be seen that participation is fine if all is going well and people have time, but as soon as things are in crisis (which is arguably when we should be considering the young person's views the most), participation becomes a secondary concern. This echoes a finding in Thomas' and O'Kane's (1999) study, almost twenty years ago, and is further evidence of a lack of progress.

There have been a number of studies into SW's views of children's participation which have considered this particular control/care point. Shemmings (2009) found that SWs had a desire to 'protect children', including from 'adult decisions and discussions', and viewed this as more important than upholding children's rights to participate in decisions made about their lives, while Vis et al. (2010) found that professionals often acted consciously to prevent participation by children within the child protection system. As Bessell and Gal put it:

*...adults within or associated with the system tend to act as gatekeepers, determining when, if and how children's views might be treated seriously.*  
(Bessell and Gal 2009, p. 287)

Research does acknowledge that children are a genuine resource with something meaningful to offer society as they are 'experts' on childhood and their own lives (Hale 2006). However, as this study suggests, practitioners are not always able to work in a child-focused manner which gives children the opportunity to show that they are the 'experts'.

#### **5.4 Summary**

There are a number of reasons why young people do not engage meaningfully in their reviews, including the number of professionals at the meeting, the set professional-based agenda and also the young people's reticence to raise their concerns due to 'not want[ing] to cause a fuss'. This aligns with research by Archard and Skivenes (2009, p. 393) which concluded that 'children may simply lack the confidence to speak their mind even in the most favourable circumstances to the most sympathetic adults'.

This chapter has highlighted multiple barriers to children participating in their reviews, including the organisational culture which appears fixated on arbitrary timescales and does not support children-centred practice (Munro 2012); high caseloads for SWs and IROs; limited contact between IROs and young people; reviews potentially becoming a 'blame and shame' process for young people; limited choice for children and young people, the high turnover of SWs; an inexperienced workforce who appear to have had little training on participation and a lack of clarity about what it actually means - let alone how to ensure that it happens in practice.

In terms of factors that assist children in participating in their reviews, the practice of children chairing their own reviews does offer some encouragement; this will be discussed further in the next chapter.

**Chapter Six:**  
**Senior Managers' Views of CiC Reviews**

**6.1 Introduction**

This chapter will explore the views and perceptions of the seven Senior Managers (SMs). Three of the SMs were at director level in the Local Authority (LA) and four were heads of service. These SMs all came from the same LA area as the children and young people, Social Workers (SWs) and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). I was interested to consider the extent of their awareness and understanding of frontline practice and the challenges that SWs and IROs faced, and whether they would share the same broad understanding as the other participants in relation to children's participation in their review meetings.

In the previous two chapters, I outlined some of the challenges and barriers that SWs and IROs reported in terms of children and young people participating meaningfully in review meetings. Issues were raised in relation to social work's bureaucratic processes (Munro 2012), its relationship with information technology and the organisational culture which exists in this particular LA – and potentially more widely in the child protection system nationally. SWs and, to a lesser extent IROs, did not appear to have a clear understanding of what participation means and it was noted that very few of them had attended participation training. I intended to ascertain whether the SMs had a clear vision in terms of children's participation in their reviews, and in decision-making and practice more widely.

The previous two chapters raised broader points regarding the status of SWs, and in particular, the professionalisation agenda which social work leaders have pursued in recent years (Forrester 2016; Munro 2012). Attention was also drawn to the challenges SWs face in terms of drawing on training and research to ensure their practice is evidence based, or at the very least, evidence informed (Munro 2012). Two main themes have emerged during the analysis of the data from the SMs, particularly when compared with the data from the children and young people, SWs and IROs. The main themes and sub-themes were:

1. Organisational culture and an apparent disconnect between the perspectives of SMs and other participants:

- a) understanding of the impact of high caseloads and the importance of relationships between SWs, IROs and children and young people
  - b) knowledge and understanding of the review process
  - c) understanding of participation
2. The concept of good social work practice and the evidence base for this.

I will explore each of these areas in turn within the following sections.

## **6.2 Organisational culture and the apparent disconnect between the views of SMs, frontline staff and children and young people.**

A theme that arose when comparing interviews with the range of other participants, was the apparent disconnect between what the SMs saw as the challenges within the service and the perspectives of frontline staff and children and young people. Additionally SMs seemed to have different views from the perspectives held by other participants in relation to the service that is offered to children, young people and their families, and the impact this has on children's participation.

### ***6.2.1 Impact of high caseloads and importance of relationships between SWs, IROs and children and young people***

The young people all highlighted the difficulty of building trusting relationships with their SWs, primarily because of the high turnover of staff. It was noted by many of the young participants that this had impacted on their ability to participate in reviews; and one young person said that she had refused to attend her reviews as she had such a poor relationship with her SW. They also discussed the benefits of their relationships with SWs and IROs when these were more positive and felt more genuine – rather than workers being overly focused on completing tasks or requiring young people to repeatedly answer the same question. The young participants also highlighted that some SWs lacked competence and respect for them, for example, by not completing tasks in a timely manner. This is a finding that is echoed by Selwyn and Riley (2015) who found that ‘maintaining and developing positive relationships are at the heart of children and young people’s concerns’ (Selwyn and Riley 2015, p.1). The research also maintained that:

*Rather than rushing, the young people wanted their social workers to take time to get to know them. Without this, the young people did not feel comfortable trusting their social workers with their personal and intimate thoughts and feelings.*

(Selwyn and Riley 2015, p.6)

Similarly, Godar (2015, p.13) describes the quality of the relationship between children and professionals as 'crucial'. Therefore, it is surprising that SMs in this study rarely touched upon the importance of the SW's and IRO's relationships with children and young people, the impact of a transient workforce and the challenges SWs faced in having the time to get to know children and young people. Indeed, SM 1 commented:

SM 1: I think it's just having people that can commit to do that [engage the child or young person]. I don't think that's a social work role, I think that social workers just wouldn't have time to do that, and I think you need a different skill set to do it. I'm not saying all social workers couldn't do it, I'm sure they could if they had time, but I don't really think that's the best use.

This comment raises wider questions about what the role of a SW is, if not to engage a child or young person and put them at the heart of their practice. It is also contradictory to the body of research in this area. For example, Munro (2011, p.29) noted 'how highly children value face-to-face contact with their social workers', while Ofsted reported in 2011:

*Children and young people need to be actively encouraged to express their views by someone they trust. Their social worker, or other lead professional, is best placed to ensure they are asked about their wishes and feelings. This means professionals need the knowledge and skills to communicate with children, and to understand the significance of what they are being told.*

(Ofsted 2011c, p.39).

It is noteworthy, then, that SM 1 suggested this was not part of the SWs' remit and appeared to see their role as more of a case manager. SM 2 made a similar comment when asked how they thought participation could be improved if they had a magic wand:

SM 2: If money wasn't an issue, I would have someone in every team who wouldn't necessarily be a social worker, probably would come from a more youth worker type of background but a person whose role it really is to engage and also to get messages out to young people and to be the owner of that team, someone who is not burdened down with a caseload.

I don't believe that 'give me another ten social workers and everything will be alright', I just believe that doing something a little bit different there would be good.

This point contradicts the responses from the young participants, who felt that a consistent relationship with the same SW and IRO was helpful, and played a key role in assisting them to participate meaningfully in their reviews. Furthermore, it also runs counter to the wider message from research that children and young people would prefer one stable adult professional in their lives, rather than a plethora of professionals (Selwyn and Riley 2015). It potentially suggests that SWs do not have these relationship skills, nor require them, and their time could be better spent elsewhere.

When discussing the potential impact that high caseloads and excessive paperwork could have on SWs having time to engage with children and young people, it appeared that senior managers did not share this concern. This is exemplified in SM 2's response:

SM 2: Some of our social workers spend an awful lot of time sat in the office doing paperwork, and we hear a lot about that, but we see other social workers who manage to balance that and do a lot more face-to-face work. We have done our own exercises to try and capture how much face-to-face work some of our social workers are doing and we understand there can be a quite significant difference and that doesn't necessarily correlate to having things like up-to-date plans and other bits of paperwork in place...sometimes you will see a lot of recordings. Texts and phone calls are all very important, but they are not an entire substitute for being sat in front of someone.

SM 2 seems to suggest that some SWs would prefer to be in front of the computer than spend time with young people. This would appear to be slightly different to SWs' perspectives, for example, one SW stated in her interview that when a child came into care she wanted to spend time with him ensuring that he had settled into placement, but instead her manager and SM put her under pressure to fill out the 21 forms that need to be completed when a child comes into care. This SW made the point that the 21 forms contained much of the same data and that they could easily be condensed down to about eight forms at most. As Munro (2011, p.43) contends, the 'extent to which frontline workers prioritise the bureaucratic aspects of their work, and complying with performance indicators, so that finding time to spend with children and young people and create good communication comes low on the list and hence is frequently omitted'. SMs appeared to be potentially naïve about the realities of SWs having the time to do all of the tasks required.

When SWs and IROs were asked what they would do if they were "king of the world" and could change one thing to improve children's participation in reviews, almost without exception, they mentioned more time and lower caseloads. By contrast, during the SM interviews, this was barely touched upon; more focus was placed on processes and paperwork being completed properly and on time. This evidenced a clear disconnect between the perceptions of SMs and the views of frontline staff and young people on the challenges that SWs face in relation to carrying out effective direct practice with children, young people and families. Additionally, the young people interviewed highlighted the impact of high caseloads on the service that they received. However, SMs were either not aware of this as an issue or were 'willfully blind' about the impact it had on the services provided to children and young people (Heffernon 2012). Heffernon, who has written powerfully about the issue of willful blindness across different sectors, argues that this may arise when SMs '*choose*, sometimes consciously but mostly not, to remain unseeing in situations where we could know, and should know, but don't know because it makes us feel better not to know' (Heffernon 2012, p.24). It is noteworthy that Heffernon (2012) suggests SMs in up to 70 per cent of organisations are willfully blind. Therefore, there is no moral judgement on this, and the SMs in this LA would therefore be normative in this regard.

The majority of the SMs suggested that since some SWs managed, in their views, to carry out high quality direct work with families and complete the paperwork in a timely manner, all SWs should be capable of doing this. This could be considered a simplistic view that fails to consider the complexity of the current challenges faced by SWs and the notion that, while some SWs may be able to carry out high quality direct work as



well as fulfilling the bureaucratic purposes of the role, they are the exception as opposed to the rule (Diaz and Drewery 2016).

Frequent changes of SW or infrequent visits are noted to 'reduce opportunities to hear children's views and understand their experience' (Cossar et al. 2011), and in their review of the IRO role in 2013, Ofsted concluded that high caseloads were a significant barrier to IROs carrying out their roles effectively (Ofsted 2013). SM 3 was a notable exception in her recognition of the time pressures on SWs and IROs and the impact on children and young people's participation:

Clive: Do you think social workers have the time and resources to prepare young people properly for Children in Care Reviews?

SM 3: No, I don't.

Clive: Any reason why that is?

SM 3: I think it's because they've just got too much work to do. I'm sure most social workers would want to give more time but I think there's lots of competing demands. ...I think for real participation it is a very labour intensive, time intensive exercise and you really have to give it space... I don't think caseload ties, workload management really allows and builds in enough time for that to take place properly.

While it is positive that this SM identified the issue, it was notable that, despite their position of authority and responsibility, there was no discussion as to how it was being addressed. Indeed, it was almost as if this was just the accepted norm in this LA.

Some of the SMs appeared to deflect the responsibility for meaningful participation and child-centred practice onto service users themselves or individual professionals. For example, SM 1 raised the issue of children and young people's anger towards the 'system' as a potential barrier to their participation in reviews:

SM 1: I think a lot of the barriers will be young people's perceptions of the system already and what their experiences have been, and some of that may just be anger because they haven't come to terms with it. It may not be that the system has treated them badly but, actually, the

system has still interfered in their life and they may have parents in the background that are very angry at the system.

Unfortunately the system sometimes doesn't keep its word, it says things and then it doesn't follow through. You know we keep saying to social workers how important it is when they are going to be late, that they do something about that and they make efforts to let people know, just like they would expect to be told. But I think there is a whole combination of things like that which could so easily undermine the work of saying that we care and we want to listen and all of those messages.

In a similar vein, SM 7 commented:

SM 7: If everybody was great and good at what they do then things tend to function but the barriers will often be around incompetence. Communication – social workers who don't respond to you – it boils down to social work competence practice.

These comments tied in with a general theme from six of the seven SMs that the faults lie with individual SWs and their poor practice. An Ofsted inspection and social work health check report carried out in this LA shortly after I conducted this research highlighted that there were issues in terms of this LA's organisational culture, and both reports stated that the LA had a 'blame culture' (Ofsted and LA report 2017). It could be argued that my research also points towards a potential blame culture in this organisation. It appeared that SMs blamed individuals for poor practice which let children down, rather than reflecting on wider organisational or systemic issues. The SMs did not reflect on their own role in 'the system' or, indeed, if there was poor practice from an individual, how they were challenging this. As Schooling (2016, p15) noted: 'Where management oversight is strong there is a culture of continual challenge to improve practice at all levels. Importantly, where positive and constructive challenge is encouraged, it also helps to remove a culture of blame'. Featherstone et al. (2014) located four elements to poor organisational cultures: shaming; risk averse-audit as tyranny; distancing mechanism through technology and system design; failing to take care of social workers. The interviews with the SMs often reflected these themes. This comment from Forrester (2016) is of relevance to the organisational structure that appeared to be present in this LA:

*There is lots of attention paid to the management of the service with very little sense of a shared understanding of what the service is actually for. Without this the attempts to manage the system become weirdly empty. Much time and effort is devoted to activities that do not seem to have a clear purpose or likely impact.*

(Forrester 2016, p.11)

Arguably, the blame culture which potentially appears to exist in the LA research site is likely to impact on practitioners' well-being, and their ability to carry out their work effectively with children, young people and their families. This is an issue, as child protection practice 'is so highly charged and emotional it is essential that middle and senior managers create a safe context for talking about doubts, uncertainty and the emotional impact of the work' (Morrison 2005, p.21).

There have been a number of studies that have raised the spectra of blame culture in children's services (Leigh 2017; Shoesmith 2016). As such, this LA may not be unusual in this regard. Bennis states:

*It is essential culture of blame be avoided, instead middle and senior managers must ask staff 'how did we contribute to this mess?' This encourages a shared responsibility and shared learning.*

(Bennis 2009, p.38)

The data suggests that SMs were not able or willing to ask themselves 'how did I contribute to this mess?' The effects of a blame culture being cultivated by SMs cannot be minimised. It has a severely negative impact on practice; indeed, 'the fear of being criticised or blamed for problems encourages practitioners to adopt coping mechanisms such as denial, blame and projection' (Menzies-Lyth 1988, p.87). There was some evidence of these aspects within the SWs and IROs interviews, with IROs stating that they had to challenge SWs poor practice (see Chapter Five, Section 2).

### **6.2.2 SMs knowledge and oversight of the review process**

Of the seven SMs who were interviewed, only one had been to a CiC review in the last year, five had not been to one in over twenty years, and one SM had never been to a review. However, some of the SMs mentioned that they did now plan to go and observe a review. The responses given by SM 3 were typical:

Clive: Who do you think decides who attends the review?

SM 3: I think that would be in discussion between the social worker and the IRO. I would like to think it also included the views of the young person but I don't know how often that happens.

Clive: And what about where the review takes place? Who do you think decides that?

SM 3: Probably IRO and social worker but also maybe carer as well. I'd like to think it was the views of the young person but I don't know how often that happens.

There seemed to be a lack of curiosity from all SMs in relation to what was happening in frontline practice, as illustrated in this exchange with SM 4:

Clive: Have you heard of any examples or been to anywhere children have chaired their own reviews?

SM 4: I've heard that we are doing that in some areas, yeah.

Clive: But you've not actually been to one?

SM 4: I haven't been to one, no.

When considering whether children and young people are always present at the review, SM 4 went on to comment:

SM 4: I don't know how many young people have to finish school early to have their reviews, I haven't got an answer to that, or whether they're always outside of school. That must be a big challenge to make sure that that is managed.

This comment is particularly noteworthy because, in a service that is based around the needs of children, one would think it would be possible to ensure that the review occurred at a time outside of school hours. The lack of awareness is also surprising given the strong emphasis nationally on educational outcomes for children in care. The issue of reviews being in school time – with young people complaining about

being called out of class and the lack of privacy – has also been documented in numerous studies (Mannay et al. 2017a; Selwyn and Riley 2015). As SMs did not appear to be aware of this type of detail, it may make it difficult for them to improve practice within the LA. The distance from services by SMs witnessed within the study LA can be compared with the praise that Kensington and Chelsea Children's Services received from Ofsted, where it was noted that: 'Practice leaders maintain a strong understanding of what is happening on the frontline' and 'Practice weeks have been introduced where leaders spend a week discussing cases with social workers and observing practice and, as a result, leaders know what is being done well and what could improve' (Ofsted 2016b, p.36)

In a similar vein, one SM outlined the lack of consensus and understanding between SMs about even the fundamental purpose of the review. The point was raised by SM 5 when asked about the agenda for the review:

SM 5: Well I think the agenda is set by the IROs and there's a fairly standard agenda here which I now understand doesn't include reviewing the care plan. The reason given for that is that we, within the children's services bit aren't following the process of ensuring that the care plan is bang up to date at the point at which the review meeting is held. But I am slightly bemused by this. It's news. I only had this conversation this morning. Because I'd understood - from an off-the-cuff comment that one of the service leaders made which was something along the lines of, "We've got all the emphasis on having a good care plan but the review doesn't actually review the care plan." I thought that was the purpose of the review, is the plan the right one? Are we on the right track? And apparently that's not how the agenda's set here. I had a meeting with the IRO Senior Manager this morning and I asked him that. He said, "No we don't. We haven't for years." So I said, "Why is that?" and he said, "Because of all the issues that we've got about the care plan being up to date and the right care plan. So we can't spend the meeting reviewing something that's either out of date or not relevant." When I would have thought that that's exactly what the meeting should do so that if the care plan's not right at the beginning of the review it certainly should be right at the end. But I don't want to take any more battles on really with the IROs at the moment, I'm trying to build bridges.

According to the IRO Handbook (DfES 2010), a central aim of the CiC review is to review the care plan; this SM is outlining that this is not happening in this LA, and they appear to have no plans to resolve this issue despite holding ultimate responsibility for it. The final comment ('I don't want to take on any more battles with the IROs at the moment') evidences a potential lack of understanding of the current situation in this LA, as it is the SWs that this SM leads that are supposed to be drafting and updating the care plans.

Leigh (2017) notes that where blame culture exists, rather than pulling together to overcome perceived adversity, the opposite occurs. Leigh gave the following example of what occurred when staff were informed that Ofsted were coming to complete an inspection:

*The whole office has gone into meltdown. Team managers are stressed and have been seen crying. Regular trips are made to Helen's office as Helen seems to be the only one who is able to console them. I asked Helen why this is and she said it's because they don't see her as 'a threat' as she is the manager of a family support team and not a child protection team.*

(Leigh 2017, p.39)

In the research site LA, there appeared to be some evidence of demarcated lines where, rather than working together, different parts of the service blamed each other. This could also be linked to the IROs predisposition for blaming individual SWs for their perceived incompetence.

In Chapter 5, SWs and IROs highlighted issues with form filling and the overly bureaucratic nature of child protection practice in this LA. Previous research by Pert et al. (2014) and Thomas and O'Kane (1999) has demonstrated that young people do not like filling out consultation forms, and they do not see it as a meaningful way of assisting them to participate in their reviews. Some SMs interviewed for this study referred to the importance of written consultation forms, as evidenced in this exchange with SM 5:

Clive: Whose responsibility is it, do you think, to prepare children and young people for looked after children reviews?

SM 5: I think in the big picture it's primarily the social worker's responsibility to help young people understand what the purpose of a review is and to prepare them for what it's gonna be like – if it's in the early days – and to help prepare them to express their view and how they want to do that. To get the 'my views' written down and all of that. I think that's all within the social worker's gift.

As stated above, research has shown that children and young people do not like such forms, so it was unfortunate that this was still being highlighted by SMs as being so important. It was positive that other SMs were aware that putting things down in writing was not always the best tool to use with children or young people.

SM 6 was critical of the focus on the written form and mentioned the use of new technologies:

SM 6: I also think another barrier is the focus still on the written form; ...I think we should use far more technology like Momo, the advocacy app, and Skyping.... texting. You know, the ways young people are comfortable with communicating.

It is an interesting point, as from a SM point of view, the written form may provide greater accountability. However, this format does not necessarily respond to the needs of children and young people. This pressure on using the written form can be linked back to Chapter 4, where the young participants commented on SWs asking them the same questions repeatedly – as though the SWs needed information to be able to put in a case note, rather than showing a genuine interest in the child or young person.

All seven SMs were aware that children and young people sometimes chaired their own reviews and were positive about this happening. SM 2's response was typical:

SM 2: We could help them understand that the reviews are a really great place for their voice to be heard as well, around their progression, around their plan and their opportunity to take control and chair their own reviews at times, which we have seen happen in some of the older ones... We obviously need to try and support that as a service area to make sure we are helping young people to feel confident enough to

chair their own reviews and see what we can do to support that side of it.

SM 1 similarly commented:

SM 1: What I would hope it does is build the young person's confidence in the review and that the review is actually about them and that their voice is central and important within this review. For that reason, I would like to see young people chair it because the worry is that a young person will go to a review and there is a group of adults around and they sit there very passively, very quietly, and we won't necessarily hear what they want to say to us. Then it's a missed opportunity, so I think that more than anything is the reason and also that there are lots more skills and confidences that they will build by taking a bit of control and chairing their review or were part of the review.

It was interesting that for some of the SMs, who had lengthy careers in the sector, young people chairing their own reviews was not a new idea. Furthermore, it was noteworthy that for many of these SMs, it appeared that not much had changed or improved in relation to children participating in reviews.

Clive: How effectively do you think we engage young people in their reviews?

SM 5: Most of my career it was terribly variable. I'd say I went through periods when kids hardly ever went to their reviews 'cos again I think the culture of the organisation was if they don't wanna sit in there they don't have to. So I think it's still very variable and I think our understanding is probably still quite variable about the extent to which children are at the heart and young people are at the heart of their meeting.

The comments suggest that there was an acceptance that things are just the way they are and there were no plans to address this potential issue. Similarly, SM 5 relating to when she worked in a residential children's home and the young people had decided to chair their own review meetings, went on to comment:

SM5: Well, that example that I gave you, that will have been about 28 years ago. Now I don't think we've made progress since then really. That was



practice 28 years ago and we're still in a situation where we've got a handful of kids chairing their own meetings.

Dickens et al. (2014) found that, despite the discourse around child-centred practice, the proportion of children attending their reviews has not changed significantly in the 18 years since Thomas and O'Kane (1999) carried out their study. The acceptance of 'variable' practice outlined in this interview is further demonstrated in all of the SM interviews, where they seemed to have low expectations of social work practice in relation to engaging and carrying out effective child-centred practice. Such low expectations are illustrated by the following comment:

Clive: If you had a magic wand and you could do anything to improve children's participation in children in care reviews, what would it be?

SM 7: I would want everyone to know what they are doing and that they do things in a timely manner – that might help improve reviews.

### ***6.2.3 Understanding of participation***

In the previous chapter, it was ascertained that most SWs did not have a good understanding of what 'participation' really means. IROs demonstrated a greater knowledge but bemoaned the lack of training in this area. Given the strategic role of SMs, I was interested in their understanding of the term 'participation', as, arguably, without SMs having a good understanding of this concept, it is difficult for them to drive forward any improvement in this essential area of practice.

From my interviews with the seven SMs, the data suggests that their understanding was potentially superficial and that tokenistic participation was deemed 'good enough'. They used buzz-words but there was no mention of research or what evidence suggests 'works'. The following comment from SM 3 illustrates the manner in which participation was considered:

SM 3: So I suppose the overarching thing is that we want to know and understand what the views of children are and that can be on a personal basis, on a day-to-day social work basis. But it can also be on a service development basis. So there's also an effort to try and get the views of young people when we're making decisions about how we deliver services. And participation for me means that we ask children

what their views are, whatever the level, that we ensure that those views are included in the consultation process or whatever it is and then we tell the children what the outcome of that was after. That would be my view of what is participation.

The notion that children are told 'what the outcome of that was after' places this child's participation on a low level in relation to Hart's Ladder of Participation. It is not in line with restorative principles of working with young people and their families (Stanley and Featherstone 2015), which in turn helps to empower them. This is significant, as for the last 12 months this LA had invested significant funds in trying to embed Restorative Practice principles, and all SMs and most IROs had been on a three-day course on Restorative Practice (LA agency report 2017).

Another example came from SM 5:

Clive: In general terms, what does participation mean to you?

SM 5: It means that children and young people are fully engaged with - if we're talking about participation - with us. Fully engaged in our system. That they've been properly involved in understanding why we're involved, what we're doing, that they've been empowered to express a view about what they want and what their important things are, that they're empowered to express that in different forms.

The notion that the child or young person should be 'fully engaged in our system' reflects tokenistic participation when considered in terms of Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation. While the SM does talk about empowerment, the language used suggests that the child does not have ownership of the system. We can link this back to Munro's (2012) assertion that social work is about 'doing the right thing not doing things right'. In this LA, the interviews with the SMs indicated that their management style was based on the technical rational approach:

*As many commentators have noted, safeguarding and social work practice with children and families over recent decades has been dominated by a 'technical, rational approach to practice...the development and introduction of procedures, checklists and processes as a way of managing the increasing volume and complexity of the work and to assist practitioners to predict and minimise risk.*

(Earle et al. 2017)

This approach is not confined to this particular LA. Indeed, as Broadhurst et al. (2009) found, in a recent example across five LA areas, 'workers consistently claimed that it was easy to lose sight of the primary activities of supporting families and safeguarding children, to the second-order activities of performance and audit' (2009, p.8). This is epitomised by the competing priorities of "putting (data) in" and "going out" to see families (Peckover et al. 2008, p.139).

One SM seemed to have a relatively limited understanding of the meaning of participation:

Clive: If you had a magic wand and there's something... that could improve children's participation in children in care reviews, what would it be?

SM 4: I'd like to be certain that every professional going to a review understands exactly what they're there for and what their role is. Because if everyone does that then it should be a good experience.

Role clarity, though important, does not in itself impact necessarily on children's participation in review meetings or wider practice. This answer suggests potentially low expectations of social work practice. It is noteworthy that the SM made no reference to children in their response. This SM further commented:

Clive: Do you speak to staff about participation generally? What would your messages be in relation to that?

SM 4: Erm ... I think, the conversations we've had, or I've had have been this kind of thinking about participation and thinking about direct work of children and the potential difference. So understanding a child's experience, understanding their lived experience - what's it like being them is kind of direct work and listening. Now some teams say that's child participation but I think that's slightly different. At a team day recently young ambassadors were there talking about their experience. That's participation, isn't it? ... So I think it's complex; I don't think it's ... and I think in our ... in social care maybe that gets mixed up a bit.

This SM describes her experiences coming from a group session at a team day – not something that is embedded into the everyday practice of working with individual children and young people. This appears to be the only direct experience related to participation that SM 4 is involved with. This relates back to Section 6.2.2 and the lack of knowledge and involvement that SMs had with the reality of practice on the frontline. This SM's insight is only facilitated because they attended this team day and saw this presentation. There is not a direct strategy to enable the participation of children and young people in their reviews.

Six of the seven SMs seemed to think that when participation (or their understanding of participation) did not happen properly for young people, it was not a result of high caseloads or issues with the bureaucratic nature of the system; this was in contrast to what SWs and IROs said. SMs reported that SWs did not 'get it' in some way, and that SWs would almost prefer to spend their time behind a computer screen and filling out forms, than carrying out direct work ascertaining the wishes and feelings of young people and acting upon them whenever possible.

### **6.3 The concept of good social work practice and the evidence base**

Over the last thirty years, social work has embarked on a professionalisation agenda (Howe 2014). Despite this drive for professionalisation, the professionals interviewed in this study still seemed to have limited knowledge about what we mean by good social work practice and how to carry it out. As Munro (2016) outlines, the central aim of social work should be helping families change; unfortunately, the focus instead appears to be on completing lengthy forms and ultimately paying lip service to the children and families who should be at the heart of practice (Diaz and Drewery 2016).

The previous two chapters presented data indicating that SWs and IROs were in a state of crisis; where high caseloads meant that they were too busy 'fire fighting' to reflect meaningfully on their work with children and families. This led to a disconnect between what they said was important –children's participation– and what happened in practice. When discussing in more detail the practicalities of the meetings (such as who set the agenda, who chose those invited to the meetings, where and when they took place), it became evident that young people played very little or no role in deciding these aspects. This suggests tokenistic participation and further, that SWs

struggled to understand in depth their practice and the potential impact of this on young people and their families. The data suggests that SWs lacked the tools to know how and what could be done to implement meaningful participation.

It has been argued coherently that although SWs are enthusiastic in relation to the notion of evidence-based practice and agree that their work would be more effective if it were informed by evidence, when questioned, the majority of SWs are not able to name an evaluative study or piece of research (see also Sheldon and Chilvers, 2002). This chapter reflected on the analysis of data produced with SMs in that when I asked SMs about what they believed 'worked' or what evidence suggests is good practice in relation to children's meaningful participation, they were not aware of any up to date research or evidence. These interviews with SMs suggested that they had a potential lack of understanding of evidence-based or evidence informed practice and the ways in which this could be embedded into the work carried out with families.

The data suggested an overemphasis by management on 'management tasks'. Munro (2011, p.44) suggests that managers need to take responsibility for improving practice; they 'need to create the space and priority to allow it to happen'. The following exchange with SM 3 illustrates this point:

Clive: Overall, just thinking about it from your role, do you think IROs generally have helped improve outcomes or permanence for children and young people, not just in terms of participation but more widely?

SM 3: That's quite a difficult question isn't it? I think, well if I'm saying to you that I think the experience of the review is better now than it was then I'm sure the IRO must have had a role in that. Whether outcomes for young people are better now than they were prior to IROs I think that's a very difficult one and I don't know if I could say whether they are or not really. I suppose evidentially with children in care prospects are no better now than they were ten, fifteen years ago overall. I don't know.

Clive: Are they not?

SM 3: That's what we hear.

Clive: Have they not got any better in the last fifteen, twenty years?

SM 3: I don't know.

This comment indicates that there is limited evaluation of the services that are being delivered in this LA. SWs are finding it increasingly difficult to comply with their administrative requirements alongside their task of understanding what a child's life is like and then delivering appropriate and effective support (Burgess et al. 2013; Holmes and McDermid 2013). IROs face similar time pressures, but equally, their focus sometimes seems to be on criticising the SW for not completing all tasks. Meanwhile, the SMs appear to potentially have a limited understanding of the perspectives of frontline SWs and what good social work should look like.

#### **6.4 Summary**

Through this chapter's examination of the SMs' views of CiC reviews, it has become evident that SMs are potentially distanced from the review process, and have different views to other participants on the challenges faced by SWs and IROs. The SMs also did not appear to have a clear understanding of the concept of participation. There appeared to be a general air of acceptance about a 'system' that would not change. In the final chapter, I will outline the key findings from this research and make recommendations for improvements and opportunities for further research.

## **Chapter Seven:** **Conclusions and Key Messages**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This final chapter will draw together my findings so that I can attend to the central research questions. I will then consider how this study adds to the existing body of research. The limitations will then be discussed. Finally, I will detail the key messages, make recommendations for how services could be improved and make suggestions for areas of further research.

### **7.2 Summary of Key Research Findings**

#### ***7.2.1 How does the current CiC review process encourage meaningful participation of children and young people?***

The data suggests that the current review process does not encourage the meaningful participation of children or young people. The young participants reported that they had experienced numerous changes of Social Workers (SWs) and that this had impacted on their ability to trust and develop a meaningful relationship with them. In turn, this impacted on how they engaged in the review process. The relationship with the SW was seen as very important; when young people reported having a poor relationship with their SW, they also felt more negatively about the review meeting itself. The young participants said that their relationship with their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) was much more stable and that this benefitted them – although none of the young people had ever met with their IRO between the reviews. Overall, the young participants showed an acute awareness of the time pressures the SWs who worked with them faced, and some showed a frustration with the “system” that prevented certain outcomes being achieved. It is interesting to note that generally young people were not frustrated or angry with professionals on a personal level.

The three young participants who chaired their own reviews appeared to have greater ownership over the process and decisions that were being made. Of the four participants who had positive views of their review meetings, three of these had chaired their own meetings. However, six of the ten participants described finding the review frustrating and stressful.

Most SWs and Senior Managers (SMs) demonstrated a limited understanding of the concept of participation. IROs showed a better understanding but were vocal about the lack of participation training. Additionally, professionals were only able to give limited examples of how participation was being encouraged, such as children and young people chairing their own reviews and the use of new technologies, such as mobile phone apps. SMs also talked about their conversations with Care Ambassadors<sup>6</sup>, which were intended to enlighten them as to how the care experience could be ameliorated. However, only one SM could provide a concrete example of something that had come out of these meetings and subsequently improved the 'system' for young people. Most of the SMs –all of whom had had lengthy careers in the sector– said that as far as they were aware, there had been no real changes in the last 25 years in relation to how effectively CiC reviews engage young people. This is a disappointing finding but one that aligns with previous research (Pert et al. 2014).

Most examples that the professionals introduced in terms of children and young people's participation seemed tokenistic when considered in relation to Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation. There was an acknowledgement by the professionals that although children and young people were asked for their views, this would rarely impact on the decisions made. This approach may make children and young people *feel* like they have a voice but *in reality* their voice does not count; in this respect the process appears to be perfunctory (Hart 1992). The young participants suggested that their views (and the views of their advocates) were not taken as seriously as the views of professionals who attended their reviews. Young participants were aware that when it came to contentious issues, their view was unlikely to be acted upon and that even IROs seemed powerless to resolve complex issues such as contact arrangements.

### **7.2.2 To what degree do children and young people understand the purpose of reviews?**

The data suggests that the young participants had a good understanding of the reasons for their review; they generally said that it was to check how everything is going, which is an informal way of saying 'to review their care plan'. It is noteworthy that in the interviews with SMs and IROs, reference was made to many children in this LA area not having up-to-date care plans. This is contrary to statutory guidance

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<sup>6</sup> Care Ambassadors are paid positions within the LA that are occupied by young people who are or have been in care. The Care Ambassadors advise and participate in training for professionals working in the sector.



which states that all children in care should have an up-to-date care plan which is reviewed regularly by the IRO (DfES 2010).

The young participants in this study appeared to have a better understanding of the process than those in previous studies (Pert et al. 2014; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999). This may have been because the participants were older or because those that agreed to take part in this study were more likely to be engaged or interested in the review process. However, the young participants displayed only a limited understanding of the role of the IRO, with all participants believing that they were just there to chair the review meeting, which is presumably because this is all they were doing. This corresponds with previous research findings (Pert et al. 2014; Ofsted 2013). This would suggest that more work should be done with children and young people and IROs in relation to the role of the IRO; I will discuss this point further in my policy recommendations below.

### ***7.2.3 To what degree do children and young people believe that their views are taken into consideration during and following reviews?***

Children and young people interviewed as part of this study did not feel that their views were taken into account during and following reviews. Consequently, some did not see the value in contributing to a process whereby matters concerning them had been pre-ordained by professionals. Some of the young participants explicitly commented that they felt they had been let down by SWs who did not follow up tasks that were agreed at reviews and that were important to them. Subsequently, this had an impact on the children and young people feeling able to trust the professionals working with them, and their engagement in the review.

The young participants, IROs and SWs appeared to be in agreement that young people did not have any means to input into the practicalities of the meeting; for example, where the review would take place, when they would take place, who would be invited and what would be on the agenda. SWs and IROs confirmed that these decisions were taken by the professionals, and in some cases, by the IROs’ administrative support staff. This meant that sometimes young people were not invited to their reviews (as they happened sometimes during school time to meet timescales) or on occasion, they were not even informed that their reviews were taking place. There was also an issue whereby reviews took place during school time which meant that, on occasion, children would miss essential classes to attend which in turn could

impact on their educational achievements. The only exception to this was when the young people chaired their own review meetings.

My research suggests that in this LA, the review meetings were ineffective at resolving complex issues such as contact. The children and young people did not feel that their views or those of their advocates were given as much weight as those of other professionals. Social workers also acknowledged that young people and their advocate's views were given less weight than other professionals who attended the review meetings. Linked to this was the impression that professionals tended to demonstrate a "paternalistic" attitude towards the children and young people, and felt that they could not involve them in certain elements of their care plan.

For many children and young people, the review did not appear to enhance their rights to be included in the decision-making process, contrary to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Instead of playing an active part in the process, the review became something that was "done to them". Typical comments from the young participants revealed that rather than the processes working with them, they felt that they had only two options: to adopt a passive approach in order to bring the meeting to an end, or to battle against the 'system'.

#### ***7.2.4 To what degree do SWs, IROs and SMs believe that children and young people meaningfully participate in reviews?***

All of the professionals noted that the participation of children and young people in their review meetings could and should be improved. Many appeared to use rhetoric to outline the importance of children and young people's participation, but when the topic was explored further, most – particularly SWs and SMs – displayed a paternalistic attitude towards the children and young people and felt that they needed to be shielded to some degree from what they considered to be adult issues. The professionals, particularly the SWs and IROs, also appeared to recognise that their attempts to engage children and young people were largely tokenistic.

Data suggests some disconnection between the SM's views and those of the other participants. The young peoples' views in respect of the challenges faced by social workers (such as high caseloads) seemed more aligned to the views of the SWs and IROs than to those of the SMs. This is a noteworthy finding, which has not been highlighted in previous studies, and it warrants further investigation.

The findings concurred with those from Pert et al. (2014), in that although children and young people were attending reviews, they were not necessarily active participants and indeed had not always actively chosen to attend. The findings also supported those of Thomas and O’Kane (1999) who found that those children who were attending their review meetings found them ‘boring’ or ‘scary’. Thomas and O’Kane’s study did find that only half of children interviewed attended their review, whereas in my study, all young participants had attended most of their reviews – although sometimes under duress. Sinclair (1998) found that preparation and choice for young people in relation to reviews were both lacking – this was also the case in my study.

It appears that the extent to which children and young people from this LA participate in their review meetings has not changed or improved in the last twenty-five years, despite the introduction of the IRO role in 2002 and the ratification of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. The right to participation is one of the three cornerstones of the Convention, alongside the right to protection and the right to provision. It has been argued that although the Convention is hailed as an important step toward children’s participation and fairer power relations, it has actually reinforced existing forms of power and does not empower children (Lang 2016).

A striking finding was that only one of the seven SMs had been to a review in the last 15 years. Most had not been to a review in over twenty years and one had never been to a review. When asked for basic information about the review process, there was a lack of knowledge and curiosity from the SMs. SMs appeared unsure about what ‘good’ social work practice looks like and they appeared to have low expectations for both the children and young people in care, as well as the staff they lead. As there has been limited research into SMs’ views of children in care and participation, this was a new finding, which requires further study.

Some of the SMs did not seem to think that it was their responsibility to know about the review process, let alone to improve it. When asked about children and young people not being able to attend their reviews due to school times, one SM commented that this must be ‘difficult to manage’. As corporate parents, SMs took limited ownership of the experiences of children in care. Some of the SMs pointed to individual SWs’ failings, commenting that since some SWs managed to complete all tasks, all SWs should be capable of the same. Overall, the approach from the SMs mirrored the “technical rational approach”, where the following of procedures and

completion of forms appeared to be more important to them than children's participation. This needs to be considered in the context of the austerity which has seen LAs face cuts of between 35-40 per cent and at the same time, a significant increase in workload for SWs. There have also been significant cuts in the number of SMs in most LAs (ADCS 2016; Education Select Committee report on social work reforms 2016), and this LA had experienced cuts to the number of SMs working in Children's Services. As such, limited responsibility is put upon these individual SMs. I need to be mindful of my failings as PCFSW in this LA during this period, particularly in terms of ensuring that SMs were aware of the potential or perceived challenges faced by SWs in terms of workloads.

### ***7.2.5 What are the barriers to meaningful participation?***

From the young participants' perspectives, the main barriers to meaningful participation were their relationship (or lack thereof) with their SWs, the high turnover of social work staff and the subsequent impact on relationship building, and the amount of time professionals had to spend with them.

Most of the young participants emphasised the importance of a 'humane' element to their relationships with their SWs and IROs. The examples of good practice related to instances where a SW or IRO had taken the time to spend time with young people, such as sharing a joke or sitting down for a cup of tea and a chat. Such exchanges made the child or young person feel that the professional actually cared about them. This echoed the findings by Selwyn and Riley (2015), where the importance of the relationship between the young person and the professional is emphasised. Some of these exchanges would be difficult to capture in an assessment or case note but clearly matter a great deal to children and young people: there is a sense of the professional communicating with a genuine interest, rather than because they have an assessment to write or a form to complete. In other words, basic social work; it is concerning that this type of practice appeared to be the exception rather than the norm. In the words of one young participant: a professional who 'talks to me normally' (Kiera).

Some young participants held a derisory view of SWs. One young person explained this by saying 'they always ask the same questions'. This is contrary to basic good practice; of SWs being led at the child's pace or being able to build a meaningful relationship with the child (Selwyn and Riley 2015). Some of the young participants

also made reference to some of their SWs being incompetent, including regularly turning up late for meetings and visits or indeed not visiting at all.

This research found that none of the young participants had met their IROs between the review meetings. This is contrary to the guidelines set out in the IRO Handbook (2010), whereby it is stipulated that IROs have ongoing oversight of the case and meet young people before reviews. IROs also acknowledged that they would see children between reviews only if they were going through dispute resolution procedures with the LA, which in itself was very rare. All of the SWs and IROs identified the impact of high caseloads upon their ability to ensure that children and young people were able to participate in their review in a meaningful manner. It was striking that only one of the SMs raised high caseloads as an issue; this highlights the disconnect between the views of SMs and all other participants in relation to frontline practice.

Some of the young participants also raised the issue of professionals having enough time for them. The retention of SWs and high caseloads in an on-going national issue which shows no sign of being resolved. A recent study has shown that 92 per cent of social workers are working an average of 10 hours unpaid overtime per week. As a result of this unpaid overtime, over 50 per cent of current social workers are considering leaving the profession within the next eighteen months (Osbourne 2017).

Another barrier to meaningful participation was workers' commitment to this concept, and some professionals showed greater reticence about involving children in matters which they saw as 'adult issues'. There were concerns expressed that professionals over-involving children was preventing them from being 'normal' children. As Bruce (2014, p.515) notes, 'despite the imperatives to involve children, a recurring theme has been the difficulty in achieving a balance between the child's right to have a voice and a duty to protect children and young people'. Sanders and Mace (2006) raise the issue of inappropriate exposure to information and responsibility. In this study, professionals' concerns appeared to be more in relation to the children and young people not knowing what was best for them – a "paternalistic" attitude – rather than the need to protect them from information.

It became apparent that in this LA, some young people are still not invited to their reviews as they are set at a time that they are not available, in order to meet timescales prescribed either by Government guidelines or local policies. The necessity of meeting such timescales appeared to routinely trump the need for children to have the opportunity to attend and participate in their review meetings.

This was another noteworthy finding and its presence implies that Munro's (2012) recommendations in relation to the child protection system have not been implemented in this particular LA.

Other barriers that were identified included children and young people's experiences in the review itself and whether they felt it was worth expressing their viewpoint if it did not seem that it would be taken on board. Archard and Skivenes (2009, p.393) rightly state that 'children should not be intimidated by the circumstances in which they are asked to present their views'. It was problematic, therefore, that all of the IROs in the study reported other professionals (especially school staff and foster carers) using review meetings to 'blame and shame' the young person. It was noted that foster carers and school staff in particular would, on occasion, use the review for this very purpose. This is a troubling finding which is unique to this study and it is noteworthy that this has not been highlighted previously by similar research, such as that by Pert et al. (2014), Dickens et al. (2015) and Thomas and O'Kane (1999).

Some of the young participants articulated an awareness of the constraints of 'the system' and of needing to fight it to make their voice heard. Some were also aware of how 'the system' meant that their designated professionals did not always have time for them. The SWs and IROs spoke about the difficulties of bureaucracy and how this impacted on how much time they could spend with young people. The picture which emerged was reminiscent of Forrester's (2016) depiction of 'zombie social work', whereby targets and processes are prioritised over real efforts to improve the lives of vulnerable children and families. This LA appeared to be in a state of defensive practice; relying on technical solutions to problems. This is line with Munro's (2012) view that social work is too focused on 'doing things right when it should be focused on doing the right thing', and suggests that in this LA, very little has improved since Munro made her recommendations in 2012. In addition, the SMs appeared to have limited curiosity and clarity in relation to how to ameliorate the issues in the system.

### ***7.2.6 What can be done to improve children and young people's participation in reviews?***

SWs and SMs in particular had limited understanding of the concept and tended to give perfunctory examples of participation. There was a clear contradiction between what professionals would say in terms of participation and what they were actually doing in practice. All professionals would refer to participation as a good thing and suggested that children and young people should at least have 'a level of 'say'', but

when it came to it, they would often dictate – ‘this is what the LA is doing’. It is noteworthy that SWs stated at the beginning of the research interviews that children’s participation was important, but then went on to outline how they did not even try to meet the basic elements of participation, such as ensuring children play a role in deciding when and where the review takes place. This evidences a disconnect between what SWs think they are doing, and what is happening in practice. This would appear to be an example of willful blindness (Heffernan 2012) and espoused theory and theory in use (Argyris and Schon 1974). Training in participation, particularly for IROs and SWs, may be an important first step for the professionals in this LA area.

The young participants and professionals involved in this study made various suggestions for improving participation. For the young participants, this generally came down to making them feel more comfortable; for example, making the process feel more like a ‘chat’, the provision of food or them being able to bring a friend to the first review.

This research highlighted that when children chaired their own reviews, it had a very positive impact on their engagement in the meeting. This study showed that whilst some IROs were committed to providing young people with the opportunity to chair their own meetings, some IROs were not and therefore, did not offer young people this option. This lack of consistency is an issue which requires consideration in this LA. Young people chairing their own reviews has not been previously researched; given that this study has highlighted that it can improve children’s participation, it would benefit from further exploration across a range of LAs.

When children and young people had a good relationship with their SW or IRO they were more likely to participate in their review meetings. This is in line with the findings from Pert et al.’s (2014) study and emphasises the importance of LAs having policies to improve the retention of staff and manageable caseloads.

### **7.3 Substantive insights**

Despite the plethora of legislative, policy and guidance frameworks that exist to promote the involvement of children in decision-making, as detailed in the literature review, existing research painted a very bleak picture (Pert et al. 2014; Ofsted 2013; Barnes 2012; Thomas 2011, Thomas and O’Kane 1999). These studies outlined that children and young people felt dissatisfied with the levels of participation offered to

them. This study supports this viewpoint and examples where children and young people were able to participate were limited and often perfunctory.

Taking reviews as a process and not a single event (Thomas 2011; DfES 2010; Sinclair 1998), children and young people reported being offered little opportunity to input their views at any stage of the review. This was most acutely felt in the planning and preparation stages of the review process. Young people, IROs and SWs all agreed that young people had little to no control over who would be invited to the review, when it would be held and where it would be held. It was only the more confident children or young people who seemed to be able to exercise some control over the process. A feeling of lack of control has significant implications for children and young people's self-confidence (Bostock 2005). It is imperative that workers try to promote the self-determination of an already vulnerable group (The College of Social Work 2013). Better preparation of children and young people before their reviews is necessary (Roesch-March et al. 2016; Sinclair 1998), and more emphasis should be placed upon SWs and IROs to ensure that this happens. None of the young participants had met their IRO between the reviews and were only given a brief chance before each review to consider, with the IRO, any issues they wanted to discuss at the review. This supports the findings of previous studies that children did not feel adequately prepared or consulted for reviews (Pert et al. 2014; Munro 2001; Thomas and O'Kane 1999).

This study also found, in line with previous studies, that the relationship between child and worker is key in ensuring meaningful participation occurs (Pert et al. 2014; Thomas and O'Kane 1999). The main barriers highlighted by SWs, IROs and the young participants, were high caseloads, an overly bureaucratic system and IROs not meeting children regularly enough. Subsequently, this meant that children did not feel adequately involved and felt as though their views were side-lined. This was touched upon by Pert et al. (2014) who reported a 'procedural approach' taking precedence to children's participation. Thomas (2011) reported a common theme as being that children feel disillusioned with the review process and that their views are not listened to. Similarly, Munro (2001, p.9) stated: 'most report that the purpose of the meeting is to talk about, rather than to, them'. This study has confirmed these findings and suggests that children generally have negative views of the review process.

Children and young people's attendance at reviews was highlighted as being a significant area for improvement in previous research (Pert et al. 2014; Towler 2012; Thomas and O'Kane 1999). All interviewees in this study attended their reviews



although many of the professionals interviewed gave examples of when this had not occurred.

It was noteworthy that the SMs and IROs in this study did not appear to be leading the way in terms of children's participation. There was no clear vision presented; SMs seemed to lack curiosity about what was happening in frontline practice. There was limited evidence of the impact of Munro's (2012) review of the child protection system in relation to trying to make social work less process driven and less focused on bureaucratic processes. The following observation by Forrester seems pertinent to the situation in the study LA:

*There is lots of attention paid to the management of the service with very little sense of a shared understanding of what the service is actually for. Without this the attempts to manage the system become weirdly empty. Much time and effort is devoted to activities that do not seem to have a clear purpose or likely impact.*

(Forrester 2016)

This ties in with IROs describing reviews as another crisis meeting and of having to 'wing it' at times, rather than the meeting being properly planned. According to one SM the central purpose of the review – to review the care plan – was not taking place due to there being an issue with SWs ensuring that this document was up to date. Given that, in line with policy and legislation, reviewing the care plan is the key objective of the review, it was worrying that this basic element of the review did not appear to be taking place.

#### **7.4 Limitations**

All research has limitations and a study for a professional doctorate is additionally limited by a lack of resources, a team of co-researchers and, often, the relative inexperience of the researcher. The case study approach allowed a nuanced insight into the everyday practice in one LA area. This does, however, mean that the results cannot be generalised and it is unknown if the findings reflect the national picture. This is often a limitation within qualitative research approaches and indeed, generalisability was not the aim of this study. However, many of my findings correspond with earlier studies, which suggests that some of the key themes may well be characteristic of practices beyond this specific LA. If one considers recent research

such as the Care Crisis Review (2018), Forrester (2016), Pert et al. (2014), Shoesmith (2016), Featherstone et al (2014), Muench et al (2016), there appears to be a pattern with which the findings of this small scale study correspond. This pattern suggests that a combination of austerity, the modernisation agenda, NPM and systemic issues in social work have had a challenging impact on the quality of practice by SWs in relation to children in care. The complexities SWs, IROs and SMs face in the current climate should not be minimised and the extra challenges provided by a seemingly powerful inspectorate (when a poor inspection often leads to SMs losing their jobs) may also lead to this situation being all the more challenging for those who are trying to improve the lives for children in care.

In terms of the young participants, bar one who was eleven years old, all were over the age of fourteen. This does mean, therefore, that the age range is narrow. It would have been beneficial to interview children from a broader range of ages. A further limitation is that all of the young participants opted into the study and thus, it is unknown whether their views are reflective of the care population in general or whether those who did not wish to be interviewed may have had drastically different experiences. Importantly, this could also mean that there are potentially worse stories, as these young people were still willing to engage with the research. Other studies have offered similar conclusions (Mannay et al. 2017a). Nevertheless, it is significant that this, arguably more engaged, sample presented highly problematic experiences. This is noteworthy, because it suggests that we have only scratched the surface and that, troublingly, a more differentiated sample could present with increased levels of marginalisation.

I undertook the research in the LA area where I was employed in a senior role at the time. As well as my own difficulties with the familiarity problem, which I discussed in the methodology chapter, there was also the dynamic of me being known to all of the SMs, as well as some of the SWs and IROs. The extent to which this impacted upon the responses given is unknown. It may be that professionals were more candid with me than they might otherwise have been; this particularly appears to have been the case with the SMs. With regard to the SWs, it may be that some were reluctant to be completely open about the challenges they faced, given my senior role in the department.

## **7.5 Key messages and areas for future research**

### **7.5.1 Key Messages**

One of the key findings from this study was the lack of understanding that professionals had about participation and, although they suggested that participation by children and young people is important, such statements were usually qualified and practice examples were often tokenistic. It would therefore be beneficial for professionals to receive training about why participation is important, for example, in relation to increasing confidence and empowerment of children and young people, and how it can be implemented. Such training would ideally involve children and young people who have either been in care or are currently in care. It could also provide a forum for discussion and formulation of a policy and vision in relation to the meaningful participation of children and young people in reviews. The Principal Social Worker in the LA, along with the Care Ambassadors, would be well placed to develop and deliver this training. This would hopefully help move practice from an obsession with 'what' and 'when' to 'how' and 'why' (Forrester 2016). It is particularly important that there is a review of the training that IROs receive on a national basis, particularly in relation to participation, as IROs and SWs need further support in this vital area of practice.

Given the consistency of the IROs workforce, IROs should visit children and young people at least once between reviews so that this relationship can be improved. It is noted that this recommendation is in line with current policy (DfES 2010) but is not something that is being put into practice in this LA. One of the benefits of the IRO visiting between reviews would be that they would be able to discuss the review agenda with the child or young person. It would make sense for this visit to take place about one month prior to the review date. The IRO and child or young person would then be able to decide together who was going to be invited, the time that the review would occur, the location, any refreshments and whether a split review would be required. This pre-review meeting would give the child or young person much greater ownership from the start over *their* review. The IRO would also be able to discuss with the child or young person about chairing *their* meeting. When we consider some of the language used by the professionals in this study LA – 'this is what the LA is doing'; 'I know the case better'; 'our system' – it appears that currently it is the LA that 'owns' the review rather than the young person.

It is further noted that most of the professionals considered it the SWs role to prepare the child or young person for the review meeting. It may be beneficial for a greater

part of this function to be fulfilled by the IRO, and it could be undertaken at the pre-review visit. This could provide a greater opportunity for ownership for the young person particularly as it would come from someone independent of the social work team whose role it is to scrutinise the LA care plan.

A training day for children and young people based around why their review is important, and how they can participate, could be offered to all children and young people within six months of coming into care. This event could be led by young people who have chaired their own meetings. It could help to educate children and young people about how to chair a review, and provide them with a menu of choices regarding how they can participate, including using new technologies such as the Momo app<sup>7</sup>.

Given that the SMs appeared somewhat detached from frontline practice it is recommended that they should attend a review meeting at least once a year and shadow a SW and an IRO at least twice a year. It is noted that when SMs have greater knowledge and oversight of what is happening on the ground, they have been praised by Ofsted (2017) in LAs which are considered to be Outstanding.

The structural and systemic reforms which were outlined in the Munro (2012) review of the child protection system have had limited impact on the social work practice in this LA. The reforms suggested by Munro (2012) are sound and evidence based and this research further highlights why such systemic changes are necessary. The technical rationale approach pervaded social work practice in this LA and led to SWs spending too much of their time fulfilling bureaucratic processes rather than getting to know children and young people and supporting them to improve their lives. In order for this to change, a change in culture is required within this LA. Shortly before I carried out this field work, a piece of research in this LA concluded that SWs spent 80 per cent of their time in front of a computer and 70 per cent of the data that SWs filled out on the LA ICS forms were already inputted in other parts of the system. This LA urgently needs to carry out a review into which forms are necessary, which are not and which can be amalgamated. Unless the bureaucratic elements of the role are streamlined and reduced, SWs will not have the time to concentrate on relationship building with the children and families they are working with. In turn, the morale of SWs should improve if they can see the value of the work that they are doing. Munro eloquently reinforces this point:

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<sup>7</sup> The Mind Of My Own app allows children and young people to express their views using an online questionnaire.

*Social work with child protection used to be the elite part of social work. Back in the 1980s and 90s it was very difficult to get a job in child protection because when people got one they stayed there. The teams around London would've been full of people who had been in post for years and years.*

*That demoralisation of the staff is a direct response to managerialism not recognising the nature of the work that you need to do with families. To me, the need to challenge the work conditions that we need is one of the important tasks ahead. To get a very strong narrative on why we need to have these supports. That they are not because you're fluffy and silly and need extra care, it's because you're doing more challenging work.*

(Munro 2016, 14:08)

Finding strategies to improve the retention of SWs and the appeal of a career in child protection social work is essential, both within this LA and nationally. SWs need to enjoy, as far as possible, the work that they are doing rather than feeling as though they are rushing from one crisis to another, and with an ever present anxiety that they will be blamed if a tragedy occurs.

A noteworthy finding from this research was that SWs and IROs caseloads were very high - at around 80 for a full-time worker - and they often appeared to be overwhelmed by the complexity and sheer amount of work. This would suggest that there needs to be further investment in SWs and IROs in this LA, as the evidence is clear that when caseloads are lower, the standard of social work practice is better and more likely to be child focused (Ofsted 2017; Diaz and Drewery 2016). For IROs to fulfil the functions recommended above, particularly in relation to visiting children and young people between reviews, then caseloads should be around 50 for a full-time worker with an absolute maximum of 70. For SWs to realistically be able to fulfil both the family support and relationship building functions of their role and the bureaucratic requirements, their caseloads should be no higher than 15. This type of caseload has played a key role in LAs such as Essex achieving a 'Good' rating from Ofsted.

The young people who chaired their own reviews and the professionals who attended these reviews were all very positive about how these meetings improved children's participation in the review process. In view of this finding, this LA should ensure that

all young people are given the opportunity to chair their own reviews, or at least part of the review. There should be consistency across the LA in this regard as it is currently dependent on how dedicated individual IROs are to children having this opportunity. Nationally, LAs should consider how often young people have the opportunity to chair their own reviews and what can be done to make this practice more consistent. Within this research it was found that when young people chaired their own review they were more likely to have made an input into decisions regarding the practicalities of the meeting. When young people do not wish to chair their review, it is still important that they are given the opportunity to lead on other decisions such as who is invited to the review, where it is due to take place and when.

Professionals should be encouraged to make reviews more enjoyable for children and young people. As well as the difficult subjects that may need to be discussed, it should be remembered that reviews can also be an opportune moment to celebrate the child or young person's life. Reviews need to become less formal and more strengths based— so that children and young people feel encouraged and want to participate. This could involve carrying out an activity or game during the review, and/or food being made available for attendees which young people help choose. In this sense, much could be learned from family group conferences which are much better at ensuring meaningful participation by young people than child protection conferences and CiC reviews (Brown 2007).

IROs are meant to be independent from the LA. In recent years, however, there has been mounting 'dismay' at the lack of independence of some IROs (Tickle 2016). In a 2014 judgement, Mr Justice Holman said: "The whole point and purpose of the system and machinery of independent reviewing officers is precisely to keep the local authority (who are no doubt extraordinarily busy and overworked) on their toes and to be asking awkward questions" (Tickle 2016). This creates tension, particularly as most IROs are directly employed by the LA.

The debate about the usefulness and necessity of the IRO role has come further to the fore following the government's fostering stocktake report that was published in February 2018. One of the 36 recommendations was that LAs should have the option to remove the IRO role and use those savings to invest in the frontline:

*The real issue is whether, rather than spending large amounts of money checking that children are being appropriately placed and cared for in the case system we should invest that money in more frontline and line management*

*staff to make that happen...Our conclusion is that, despite the commendable commitment of some individuals, we saw little to recommend the IRO role (Narey and Owers 2018).*

This recommendation has been strongly criticised by BASW, NAIRO and the Children's Commissioner (Stevenson 2018). One favourable aspect that the IRO role has generally brought to children in care is stability; in previous research turnover of IROs has been noted to be low (Dickens et al. 2015).

The purpose of this thesis is not to answer the question of whether the LA should be able to dispose of the IRO role. However, my research would suggest that given the current challenges in terms of retention and high turnover of SWs, the IROs provide a degree of consistency to young people and as such, it would be unfortunate if the role no longer existed (at least in this LA).

### **7.5.2 Areas for future research**

This research suggests that meaningful participation of children and young people in reviews was largely absent in this LA. The data suggested that professionals' understanding and commitment to the concept was limited; the pressures of high caseloads and a bureaucratic system were undermining opportunities for professionals to build the rapport with children and young people which help them to engage; and there was a worrying disconnect between SMs views and all the other participants.

There has been limited research previously into the views of children and young people and professionals with regard to children's participation and CiC reviews. When we consider the poor outcomes that children in care experience (Mannay et al. 2017a), building their confidence, self-esteem and life skills is essential. It is problematic that the review process appears in some instances to be another experience that can be oppressive for children and young people. It is almost as if these children, who come into care because they are neglected by their parents or carers, are neglected again by SWs, IROs and 'the system' (Ferguson 2012).

Future research would be helpful to determine if the findings of this study are applicable to other areas of England and Wales. An ethnographic study considering children and young people chairing their own reviews would be particularly beneficial; to see how this dynamic is managed and what benefits or challenges it can bring.

It would also be interesting to interview children and young people of different ages. In this study none of the young participants wanted to use drawing or pictorial methods, but it may be that a different researcher would find such an approach useful and gain greater insight from doing so. It would also be advantageous to pilot a range of creative methods with children and young people before beginning the fieldwork.

A new and important finding in this study was the suggestion that reviews were sometimes being used to 'blame and shame' children and young people, or as an opportunity to pit professionals against each other, with IROs calling into question the competence of SWs. It would be beneficial to determine whether this is an endemic issue across the system nationally, or whether this is just isolated to the LA where I undertook my research. It is noteworthy that shortly after this study had been carried out, this LA received a 'Requiring Improvement' rating by Ofsted in relation to children in care –the average rating across LAs – suggesting that poor practice in this area is not limited to this particular LA.

Due to time commitments and the focus of my research, I did not interview any foster carers for this thesis. Given their position of privilege in children and young people's lives it would be interesting for a study to include their views. Their perspectives on the dynamics between the different professionals, and the manner in which the child or young person is empowered, would add another layer of understanding.

Another noteworthy finding from my research was the lack of knowledge displayed by the SMs about participation and CiC reviews. It would be useful for further research to determine whether this is more of a systemic issue, as there is limited research into SMs' views and abilities in leading effective services. This is an issue that is raised more widely by Ofsted (2017), who note the importance of SMs ensuring that they are not distanced from frontline practice. The number of SMs has been cut in most LAs in recent years (ADCS 2016). Therefore, SMs' ability to continue to fulfil all of the required functions may be limited. It would be beneficial for research to clarify what is working well in LAs at a SM level so that this can be shared between LAs. In some respects this process is starting to happen with the idea of 'good' and 'outstanding' LAs sharing their knowledge with LAs that are struggling (Ofsted 2012).

I note that care plans were apparently not being reviewed in this LA area, and – given that this is the central purpose of the review meeting – it would be interesting to know if this oversight is an issue which is occurring in other LAs. Lastly, it is noted that Ofsted in their inspection carried out weeks after the fieldwork took place did not pick



up many of the areas of concern that I have highlighted in this research; this suggests that further research could be carried out into the effectiveness of Ofsted at inspecting LAs.

## **7.6 Final Conclusions**

This study provided an insight into the views and perceptions of young people and professionals involved in CiC reviews. The CiC review is the key mechanism by which the care plan can be discussed and scrutinised. It is only by involving the child or young person in this process that an accurate picture can begin to be obtained to meet the stated aims.

The importance of involving children and young people in decisions that affect them has gained momentum over the last thirty years. Despite this, there has been limited research where children and young people have been asked directly about their experiences. This study is therefore a contribution to the field. The young participants' perceptions have been compared with the professionals who are involved in delivering the service. This gives insight into how those who deliver services may see things differently to those who are in receipt of them.

The study found that the young participants had a better understanding than SMs of the challenges faced by SWs in offering them the service that they deserved and required. For example, the young participants had noted the time pressures on the professionals working with them and knew that this impacted on the care provided to them. There appeared to be a disconnect between what SMs thought was happening on the frontline, the potential reality experienced by the young participants and the views of the IROs and SWs. This is a new and noteworthy finding.

A further new finding from this study was that reviews were sometimes used as a process to 'blame and shame' children and young people. Teachers and foster carers in particular were noted to 'have a go' at children or young people. Reviews could also be used as a process to criticise SWs for not having completed tasks – and it was noted that such undermining practices could have an impact on the confidence, respect and relationship between the SW and the child or young person.

The bureaucratic elements of the SW and IRO role were noted to frequently take precedence over what would be in the best interests of the child or young person. Review meetings sometimes became 'crisis meetings' or held to fit timescales rather than when would be convenient for the child or young person. SMs appeared to prioritise the bureaucratic features of the role.

There was a clear disconnect between the espoused theory of SWs, IROs and SMs and the theory in use. Professionals suggested that participation was important but in practice they did not involve children and young people in decisions – such as when the review would take place, where it would take place, what would be on the agenda or who would be invited. When there were contentious issues, the young participants were aware that their view carried less weight and the professionals confirmed that they felt certain decisions could only be made by the professionals involved. Again, this is a new finding.

Where children or young people had chaired their own review, participation was much improved. In these circumstances the young participants felt that they had far greater ownership over the process. This element was the key positive finding from the study and would warrant further research to see if it can be confirmed and how this approach could become embedded.

Overall, this study has offered a valuable insight into the perspectives of children, young people, IROs, SWs and SMs on CiC reviews and participation. These accounts have raised a number of important points that can be taken forward in policy, practice and future research. The impact from the study will be negotiated; I plan to publish a number of journal articles and provide workshops for staff on this essential area of practice across England. I shall also be writing a report aimed at young people, SWs, IROs and SMs in the LA where I carried out this research. This shall be taken to the in care council and the Local Safeguarding Children Board. It is hoped that this will be able to make some positive impacts on CiC reviews and contribute to improving the everyday lives of children in care, as well as practitioners' confidence and practice in this area.

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## ***APPENDIX ONE – Letter to child / young person***

Hello [name of young person inserted]

We would like to hear what you think.

Your local council want to hear what you think about having a social worker and what it's like to attend lots of meetings. We want to find out from you if you are told by the adults working with you about what's happening and why and most importantly if you feel like your ideas are listened to.

We want to do this so that we can change the things that you think need to be changed so that other children will benefit in the future.

A researcher, called Clive would come and talk to you for 30 minutes, what you say will be used as part of a research study to try to improve social work practice in your area. What you tell Clive will be anonymised and if we use quotes of what you say for our report none will know it was you who said it. The report will be shared with senior managers to help them improve social work in your area and Clive will also use the interviews for a course that he is doing at a University. What you say will only be shared with other professionals who work with you such as your social worker if you say something which makes us worry about your or someone else's safety or welfare.

If you want to speak to Clive then let your foster carer or parent know. If you do not want to speak to Clive then let your foster carer know so that they can inform Clive and he will not contact you again.

Thank you

## ***APPENDIX TWO – Detailed letter to child / young person***

### **Exploring children’s and professionals views of child in care reviews**

My name is Clive Diaz, I am a researcher at Cardiff University. I would like to ask you to take part in a new research project.

This information sheet tells you all about the project and what is involved. You don’t have to take part, so please read through this information carefully before deciding. If you want to, you can talk it over with your parent/carer or someone else. If there is anything you don’t understand, please ask.

#### **What is the project?**

I am carrying out a research project to find out what children and professionals think about the various meetings that take place for children in care and in particular how people feel about children in care reviews.

#### **What is involved?**

If you are happy to take part in the project, I will ask you to take part in one interview that will last about half an hour.

In this interview, I will ask you some questions about your experiences of children in care reviews and in particular I will ask what you think and feel about your IRO and social worker and whether you attend your children in care meetings and whether you feel listened to during the meetings.

In the interview I may ask you to do an activity, these might include things like drawing a picture of your children in care review and you talking about the people who come to the meeting and what role they play in the meeting and how you feel about that.

#### **What will happen to the information from the interviews?**

If you agree, I will audio-record the interviews and produce a written record of what is said. This record will not contain your name or anything that identifies you, your school or any other people or places.

You will be able to keep any other work you make during the project activities (such as drawings) but I might ask to take copies of these, to use in pieces of writing or to show to people in public talks. I won't show anyone anything you have made/written that identifies you or anyone else, and you don't have to let me take copies of things you have made if you don't want to.

**Will anyone know what I've said?**

I will not tell anyone that you are taking part in the study, or anything that you say in the interviews, unless I think that you are in danger or someone has been harmed. If this happens, I would have to tell someone, to make sure you are safe. If this happens, I would discuss this with you first.

**Do I have to take part?**

No. It is up to you and your parent/carer(s) to decide whether or not you take part. If they say it's OK for you to take part but you don't want to, you don't have to.

**Can I decide later to stop taking part in the project?**

Yes. You can decide to stop taking part in the project at any time, and you do not have to explain why. If you don't want to be in the project any more, I will not use the information I have collected from you. This will not affect you or how your social worker or IRO works with you in anyway.

**Thank you for reading! If you have any questions, please ask me. If you want to speak to me at any point during the study, please contact me (Clive Diaz) by email on [email address inserted] or by phone on [phone number inserted].**

**If you have any other questions about the study you can also contact the project supervisors:**

**Dr. Alyson Rees** [FletcherA@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:FletcherA@cardiff.ac.uk)

**Dr. Dawn Mannay** [MannayDI@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:MannayDI@cardiff.ac.uk)

## ***APPENDIX THREE – Consent form for children and young people***

### **Exploring children’s and professionals’ views of child in care reviews**

If you are happy to take part in the research project, please fill in and sign the consent form below. If you have any questions, please ask.

<i>Please circle 'YES' or 'NO' for each statement</i>	
<b>I have read the information sheet.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b>Someone has explained the project to me.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b>I have had the chance to talk about the project with an adult.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b>I understand what the project is about.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b>I have asked any questions that I want to ask.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b>I understand that I can choose to take part or not.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b>I understand that I can stop taking part at any time.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b>I agree that work that I produce as part of the project (such as drawings) can be used in published work in the future.</b>	<b>YES / NO</b>
<b><u>I agree to take part in the research project.</u></b>	<b>YES / NO</b>

**FULL NAME** .....

**DATE** .....

**Researcher's signature** .....

**Date**.....

## **APPENDIX FOUR – Letter to Professionals**

### **Exploring children and young people’s participation in child in care reviews**

My name is Clive Diaz, I am a researcher at Cardiff University and Principal Social Worker here at [name] Local Authority. I would like to ask you about your views of child in care reviews and particularly about how children and young people participate in them.

This information sheet tells you all about the project and what is involved. You do not have to take part, so please read through this information carefully before deciding.

#### **What is the project?**

I am carrying out a research project to find out what children and professionals think about the various meetings that take place for children in care and in particular how people feel about children in care reviews.

#### **What is involved?**

If you are happy to take part in the project, I will ask you to take part in one interview that will last about half an hour. In this interview, I will ask you some questions about your experiences of children in care reviews.

#### **What will happen to the information from the interviews?**

If you agree, I will audio-record the interviews and produce a written record of what is said. This record will not contain your name or anything that identifies you.



**Will anyone know what I've said?**

I will not tell anyone that you are taking part in the study, or anything that you say in the interviews, unless I think that someone has been harmed or is in danger. If this happens, I would have to tell someone, to make sure children and young people in the local area are safe. If this happens, I would discuss this with you first.

**Do I have to take part?**

No. It is up to you whether or not you take part.

**Can I decide later to stop taking part in the project?**

Yes. You can decide to stop taking part in the project at any time, and you do not have to explain why. If you don't want to be in the project any more, I will not use the information I have collected from you. This will not affect any professionals work with you.

**Thank you for reading! If you have any questions, please ask me. If you want to speak to me at any point during the study, please contact me (Clive Diaz) by email on [email inserted] or by phone on [phone number inserted].**

**If you have any other questions about the study you can also contact the project supervisors:**

**Dr. Alyson Rees**

ReesA1@cardiff.ac.uk

**Dr. Dawn Mannay**

MannayDI@cardiff.ac.uk

## **APPENDIX FIVE – Consent form for professionals**

### **Exploring children’s and professionals views of child in care reviews**

If you are happy to take part in the research project, please fill in and sign the consent form below. If you have any questions, please ask.

*Please circle 'YES' or 'NO' for each statement*

**I have read the information sheet. YES / NO**

**I understand what the project is about. YES / NO**

**I have asked any questions that I want to ask. YES / NO**

**I understand that I can choose to take part or not. YES / NO**

**I understand that I can stop taking part at any time. YES / NO**

**I agree that work that I produce as part of the project (such as drawings) can be used in published work in the future. YES / NO**

**I agree to take part in the research project. YES / NO**

**FULL NAME .....**

**DATE .....**

**Researcher's signature** .....

**Date**.....

**APPENDIX SIX – Questions for semi-structured interview with children and young people**

Understanding of the Process	Safety, Wishes and Feelings
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you tell me what a Looked After Child (LAC) review is?</li> <li>2. How do you find out about them?</li> <li>3. Who comes to these meetings? (USE CUT OUT CARDS)</li> <li>4. What do you think about these meetings?</li> <li>5. Did they talk to you? What did you talk about?</li> <li>6. How did you feel at the end of the meetings (HAPPY FACE SYMBOLS)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Do you know what a social worker does?</li> <li>8. Do you know what an IRO does?</li> <li>9. When you want something in your life to change who do you tell? When would you bring something like this up?</li> <li>10. How many Social workers have you had?</li> <li>11. What do you think about the number of social workers you've had?</li> <li>12. Did you like or not like any of them?</li> </ol>
What 'good' looks like to CYP	Other possible probing hints and tips
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. What was good about the ones (SW/IRO) you liked?</li> <li>14. What did the ones you didn't like so much do?</li> <li>15. If you were in charge (of the social workers/IROs) what would you change?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. What are the meetings for?</li> <li>17. Advocates?</li> <li>18. What happens to make you feel included? Ignored? Etc.. What would you like instead?</li> <li>19. Why is that the best thing/ worst thing.</li> <li>20. What would be your perfect review meeting?</li> </ol>

## ***APPENDIX SEVEN – Young participants’ demographics***

Pseudonym	Participant type	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
Katy	Young Person	17	Female	White-UK
George	Young Person	17	Male	White-UK
Charmaine	Young Person	15	Female	White-UK
Josh	Young Person	16	Male	Dual Heritage – White-UK & Black Caribbean
Emma	Young Person	15	Female	White-UK
Jordan	Young Person	15	Male	White-UK
Mason	Young Person	11	Male	White-UK
Tyrone	Young Person	15	Male	White-UK
Kiera	Young Person	17	Female	White-UK
Chloe	Young Person	16	Female	White-UK

