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An exploration of manager's practices in and attitudes towards staff vetting in children's residential centres

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**An exploration of manager's practices in and attitudes towards
staff vetting in children's residential centres**

A thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfilment
of the requirements for award of
Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies

By

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September 2009

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Department of Social Sciences and Law

DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the **Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than the part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate: _____

Date: _____

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the practices of centre managers in vetting staff for employment in residential child care. The study also aims to explore the attitudes of these managers towards current vetting requirements. The study examined practices and attitudes of managers of children's residential centres within the non-statutory sector only but on a national basis.

The methodology utilised in this study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted and the data was subsequently analysed in order to develop a questionnaire. On development, sixty-nine anonymous self completion questionnaires were distributed on a national basis, following which the data collected was analysed.

It can be concluded from the review of the literature and an analysis of the findings that vetting staff is a safeguarding measure for children and young people in residential care. Centre managers indicated that it is a necessary and worthwhile process however cautioned that it is not a stand-alone safeguarding measure and should be part of an overall system that aims to protect vulnerable young people. Managers pointed out that the process of vetting does not always give sufficient information on prospective employees and suggested that the inclusion of 'soft information' would be of benefit in providing an additional safeguard.

There are some aspects of the vetting process which could be improved upon and these are referred to in the recommendations section of the conclusion of this study.

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CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter, through a review of available literature, examines the development of residential care for children in Ireland and gives a synopsis of the outcomes of inquiries into residential care which occurred both in Ireland and internationally. The inquiries occurred as a result of reported abuse in various child care institutions and this chapter will focus on the recommendations arising from these inquiries which pertain to staff vetting arrangements. The need for staff vetting given these findings is also examined and a brief outline of the current inspection system of children's residential centres in Ireland is presented.

Residential care for children

Historically the provision of residential care for children in Ireland was governed by the Poor Law Act 1838, the enactment of which led to the provision of care for children in workhouses¹. On the introduction of the industrial school system to Ireland in 1868 various religious orders in Ireland were requested to take on the responsibility of establishing these industrial schools and the maintenance of the children within them. Where they agreed to do so and were in a position to provide suitable premises for the accommodation of the children, they were certified as being fit for the reception of children into care (Kennedy, 1970).

On its introduction, the Children Act 1908 was the most significant piece of legislation pertaining to the care of children in Ireland as it superseded all previous legislation governing the treatment and care of children in the Irish republic (Shannon, 2005). It included detail pertaining to the categories of children that could potentially be committed to Industrial Schools², the period of detention within them, the duties of the managers of such institutions and the certification and inspection of both reformatory and industrial schools. However, the perception of children in terms of the role they held in society and attitudes and opinions regarding the matter of

¹ A place where people who were unable to support themselves could go to live and work – established in the 17th Century in Ireland.

² 'A school for the industrial training of children, in which children are lodged, clothed and fed, as well as taught', Children Act 1908.

‘welfare’ of children changed little in real terms in the years following the implementation of the Children Act 1908.

As a result of this lack of change in attitudes towards the concept of child welfare and little apparent improvement in service delivery, the Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools was established to examine the problems within the system of child care and to make suggestions for alterations that would improve it (Kennedy, 1970). The publication of the Kennedy Report in 1970 created, for the first time, an awareness of and concern regarding what residential child care actually constituted. It exposed the child care institutions at that time as being largely unfit to meet the complex needs of the children being admitted to their care and a picture of an apparent disregard for child welfare emerged (Shannon, 2005). This Report was very much in tune with the changing times of child care provision in Ireland and it brought about a significant shift in emphasis – from a punitive/reformatory style which stressed the importance of correction and control, provided in large institutions by untrained staff with little opportunity for training, to a more caring and understanding style provided in smaller, family-style homes by professionally trained and recognised care workers (Brennan, 1994). The Kennedy Report also identified the child in care as one often with complex emotional difficulties requiring the interventions of a competent and skilled work force, equipped with specific training to address the presenting needs of the children.

The Report was a significant driver for change in legislation governing the area of child care in its recommendation that all laws pertaining to child care be examined and brought up to date (Kennedy, 1970; Brennan, 1994). The Committee emphasised that ‘all staff involved in child care must be carefully selected and carefully trained for the particular aspect of the work in which they are involved’ (Kennedy, 1970, p. 15). The report also pointed to the variety of residential care provision for children and strongly emphasised that all Homes providing care for children, irrespective of their status, should be subject to regular inspection. However, it was not until the publication of the 1991 Child Care Act that this review and amalgamation of legislation occurred, bringing with it a new system of care delivery and inspection of residential care as recommended in the Kennedy Report.

The Child Care Act 1991 represented a significant improvement in terms of child protection measures and the promotion of the welfare of children in Ireland. Prior to the enactment of this legislation, the Children Act 1908 had governed practice pertaining to the care of children and young people. The Child Care Act 1991 requires a Health Board to make arrangements to ensure the existence of an adequate number of residential places for children in its care. Arising from this Act two sets of Regulations³ were developed which govern the operation of such homes run by, or on behalf of, the Health Board and also set down strict guidelines for the quality of care provided in children's residential centres. The Regulations established in 1996 permits any person as authorised by a Health Board to enter the premises of a residential centre for the purposes of inspection. This process of inspection provides for an audit of residential care provision by the various service providers and ensures that children's welfare and safety is protected and promoted by an external body.

Inquiries into abuse by staff in residential care settings

In the United Kingdom throughout the 1990's a pattern emerged whereby media reports of cases of institutional abuse of children led firstly to a public inquiry into the institution, followed by a Government review of the broader context for the inquiry and culminated in recommendations for new policy initiatives (Stanley, 1999; Corby et al., 2001). Examples of these patterns can be seen in such high profile public inquiries as the Report of the Staffordshire Child Care Inquiry 1990 (the 'Pindown Experience') and the Leicestershire Inquiry 1992 which were followed up by the Government reviews conducted by Utting (1991) and Warner (1992). These inquiries served to highlight the vulnerability of children and young people in the care system and pointed to a need for comprehensive safeguarding measures to be put in place in order to protect this group. Though the Staffordshire Inquiry did not result in any prosecutions of staff members involved, children who had been subjected to this regime were compensated through the courts (Corby et al, 2001). One of the heads of the children's homes which had been the focus of the Leicestershire Inquiry was convicted of a number of serious sexual and physical assaults on residents in his care (Corby et al, 2001).

³ The Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995 and the Child Care (Standards in Children's Residential Centres) Regulations 1996.

Following the outcome of these inquiries, the Warner Report (1992) made significant and comprehensive recommendations for the recruitment, selection and appointment of staff in the residential child care sector. These recommendations included seeking police checks, taking up of references, identity confirmation and educational/qualification confirmation. It placed specific emphasis on the responsibility of a prospective employer to gather all relevant information including references, their verification and any additional information the referee may be in a position to supply, prior to the final interview stage. The basis for this approach, they state, is to allow the employer to address any gaps that may exist in the candidate's curriculum vitae (Warner, 1992; Corby et al. 2001).

The Support Force for Children's Residential Care was set up in the United Kingdom in 1995 following the publication of the Warner Report with the purpose of offering advice to individual authorities with particular reference to the appointment, selection, personnel management, support, development and training of residential care staff. The Support Force produced a Code of Practice (Department of Health, 1995) for the employment of residential child care workers in order to help employers implement the recommendations of the Warner Report. The Code indicates that reference requests should clearly identify the context within which the employer is seeking the information, specify the requirements of the position being applied for, and they should allow the referee to comment on the candidate's capacity to fulfil the requirements of the position (Department of Health, 1995).

The Report on the Inquiry into the Operation of Madonna House (Department of Health, 1996) reported on operational practices within a children's residential centre in Ireland. Madonna House was initially established in south county Dublin in 1955 as a residential home providing temporary care for very young children. Due to an increasing demand for the homes' services, the period of stay being longer than anticipated and a pattern of repeat admissions of children to the home, the services being offered by Madonna House expanded to meet these needs. An Inquiry Team was set up in 1993 to review the management and operation of the residential centre as a result of allegations of misconduct that had been made against certain members of staff and the home closed over a phased period in 1995. The process was primarily concerned with an inquiry into the qualifications, competence, and the manner in

which care duties were discharged by staff members at Madonna House in light of the various allegations made (Department of Health, 1996).

Though only one person was convicted of offenses against children arising from the Madonna House Inquiry, redacted sections of the report later obtained by RTE and broadcast in its three-part documentary 'States of Fear' referred to a highly punitive environment for children created by many staff employed there (Raftery, in Irish Times, September 2009). The report which was published in 1996 made a number of recommendations addressing the area of staffing in children's residential centres, specifically the Report stated that 'securing Garda reports on potential staff should be compulsory prior to appointment of all grades of staff in children's residential centres' (Department of Health, p.110). The Report noted that Garda reports should not be seen as a substitute for comprehensive recruitment procedures and such procedures should be clearly detailed. The Report emphasised that references should be sought directly by the Resident Manager of the centre who should specifically inquire of the referee if there were any concerns relating to the applicant's ability to provide appropriate care to vulnerable children. Reference was also made to the provision within the Child Care Act 1991 for the inspections of children's residential centres. It recommended that national standards be developed to guide this inspection process and that the process should review the quality of standards and assess the outcome of service provision by the residential centre. Following the publication of this report, children's residential facilities came under enormous scrutiny (Lalor, 2001).

The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse was established in 2000 with the primary aim of providing a sympathetic and experienced forum in which victims could recount the abuse they had suffered in various child care institutions in the state. The Commission was required to identify and report on the causes, nature and extent of physical and sexual abuse, with a view to making recommendations for the present and future (Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009). The report was published in 2009 and catalogues the physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect that thousands of children suffered at the hands of those to whom their care was entrusted by the state and/or their parents. The report highlights the action of those responsible in these institutions in response to the abuse as being wholly inadequate and often permissive of it. Staff members who were known or suspected of abusing children, either religious or lay people, were sometimes moved to another

place of employment as a way of addressing the issue. Though some perpetrators of abuse have been convicted, the numbers are small when compared with the extent of abuse recorded in the Commission report.

Staff vetting within the Irish context

The current system of vetting staff for employment in children's residential centres is informed by a circular which was issued by the Department of Health and Children (DoHC) in 1994 entitled 'Recruitment and Selection of Staff to Children's Residential Centres operated by Voluntary Bodies'. This circular was issued for the purposes of fulfilling the requirements of Section 66 of the Child Care Act 1991 which refers to the need to establish pension arrangements for staff employed to work in non-statutory children's residential centres. Consequently the basis for this directive on recruitment and selection had no direct connection to the safeguarding and protection of children in residential care. The circular specified that all staff recruited to work in children's residential centres must sign an authorisation to enable Garda authorities to verify their details and each candidate should nominate at least three referees, unrelated to them, including their present employer where applicable, who would be in a position to advise on the candidate's character, qualifications and work experience (Department of Health and Children, 1994). It is the employers' responsibility to contact each referee verbally and in writing to attain the necessary information on the candidate. The DoHC issued further guidance on this matter in the form of another circular in September 1995 stating that as an additional measure expanded arrangements were being introduced for the provision of Garda vetting in respect of candidates being employed in areas of the health service 'where they would have substantial access to children and vulnerable individuals' (DoHC 1995).

The National Standards for Children's Residential Centres (Department of Health and Children, 2001), by reference to the above circular, states that all staff working in a children's residential centre, including relief staff, students and volunteers, must be 'appropriately vetted before taking up duties' (2001, p.8). The Standards specify that this includes the taking up of past employer references, including the candidates most recent employer reference, as well as criminal records checks from An Garda Síochána and other police authorities as relevant. However similar concerns as those identified by Utting (1997) regarding delays experienced by agencies in securing

police checks have been expressed in the Irish context by Barnardos. They note that the length of time waiting for checks to be returned can create a lack of continuity in service provision with positions being left vacant. An agency also incurs the risk of losing prospective staff to other employers due to such delays or to avoid such a loss may employ a candidate in lieu of a correct Garda check (Barnardos, 2006). In 1999 an internal Garda working group which was established to review the work of the Garda Criminal Records Office and the vetting function within An Garda Síochána resulted in the establishment of the Garda Central Vetting Unit in January 2002. It was hoped that the establishment of a dedicated service would help to alleviate these delays experienced.

In 2002 Barnardos Northern Ireland, Barnardos Ireland, the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) organised a conference the purpose of which was to present the policy agenda for safeguarding children on a cross-border basis. These organisations were cognizant of the importance of rigorous vetting procedures as a child protection measure within the field of child care. They felt the need to establish common vetting arrangements in response to an increasingly mobile workforce within social welfare services not only on a cross-border basis but also within the wider European context. The conference called for

...development of common standards of vetting in both parts of the island. In particular constitutional issues need to be resolved in the republic of Ireland with other equivalent legislation or systems that allow agreed minimum standards of vetting North and South (Leeson, 2003).

The National Children's Advisory Council (NCAC) was requested in 2002 by the Minister of State with Responsibility for Children to provide feedback and advice regarding the arrangements for vetting staff working with children. The Council found that the level of vetting carried out in Ireland falls far below the standard within Northern Ireland and the UK, as well as in many European countries (Peyton, 2002). The Council explicitly stated that ensuring that those with convictions for offences against children are not able to access employment in childcare services is an essential safeguard. It recommended that consideration be given to placing vetting on a

statutory basis and the development of a standard form for requesting references from previous employers.

The Garda Central Vetting Unit (GCVU) currently processes vetting requests in respect of prospective employees of designated agencies who would have substantial unsupervised access to children and vulnerable adults. The list of designated agencies that can request clearance from the GCVU is the result of ad hoc understandings and arrangements that have been made over the years and often in response to crisis situations (An Garda Síochána, 2004). As a result of these arrangements, the system for processing Garda vetting requests for prospective staff in children's residential centres varies considerably both between the statutory and non-statutory sectors and across centres within the non-statutory sector. These checks are restricted to convictions only, unlike other jurisdictions where 'soft' information such as cautions, allegations or inquiries can be exchanged where it is of relevance to the position the candidate is applying for (An Garda Síochána, 2004). Employers processing Garda checks in this country not only don't have access to such 'soft' information, the Garda check is only valid from the date of issue and there is no known formal requirement currently for the renewal of such checks.

The need for staff vetting

During the early part of the 1990's in the UK, William Utting conducted a wide and comprehensive review of residential service provision, in particular safeguards that were in place, and documented his findings in a wide-ranging report (Utting, 1997). The report examined all aspects of care and service provision within residential centres and in particular it scrutinised the area of staff vetting. It emphasised the role references have in providing the employer with key information about the candidate. It also expressed concern at the delays experienced by organisations in receiving completed criminal checks on candidates resulting in employers feeling pressured to hire a candidate pending the outcome of the check.

Meredith Kiraly (2001) conducted a study on the manner in which staff are selected and supported to provide residential care for children. Kiraly notes that the origins of abuse by care staff are numerous and complex for which many solutions have been put forward including better training for staff. The author highlights good selection

procedures as being an important deterrent factor for child abusers. Peters and Getz (cited in Kiraly 2001), stress the importance of the reference in the vetting process for the selection of child care workers and recommend that the most useful reference is that which specifies the qualifications of the referee and the duration of their acquaintance with the candidate. Barnardos Ireland echoes this emphasis on references in stating that ensuring the quality and appropriateness of references is essential. Sourcing the required number of references is simply not adequate; the employer must satisfy themselves that the referee knows the person well enough and in a capacity that is appropriate to give the required information (Barnardos, 2006).

The Scottish Executive recently developed guidance notes based on relevant legislation and standards on safe recruitment aimed at employers in the social care and social work sectors (Scottish Executive, 2007). The guidance notes cover all aspects of safe recruitment including job description, person specification, the interview process, criminal record check, reference check and the assessment/selection procedure. The guidance identifies the purpose of seeking references as being to obtain objective and factual information that will help support appointment decisions. Requests for references should seek objective verifiable information, in which the use of pro forma reference forms would be beneficial. The guidance cautions against a reliance on open references, that is, 'to whom it may concern', and the use of testimonials. Gaps in a candidates employment history is another area of caution and one that should be addressed by the employer to ensure a satisfactory outcome (Scottish Executive, 2007).

It has been observed that pre-employment vetting procedures cannot guarantee the recruitment of staff who will not act in an inappropriate or unsafe manner with young people (Department of Health and Social Services, 1986; Warner, 1992; Kiraly, 2001), and many of the developments in the area of child protection have been driven by scandal rather than being based upon a proactive assessment of children's needs (Gallagher, 2000). Lane (cited in Crimmens and Pitts, 2000), talks about the human nature context of residential child care and expresses the view that safe services of good quality will only be provided if the workforce is of a high quality. Lane is of the view that a comprehensive approach to safeguarding as opposed to a singular focus on one area is necessary in residential child care.

The Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children produced a document, the purpose of which was to present to politicians and the public the key priorities to which a Government must commit in order to maintain the momentum towards a society that truly values children (ISPCC, 2006). Within this document, they identified ten points of action, one of which refers to vetting. The report echoes the findings of the NCAC report four years earlier in reiterating that vetting procedures in Ireland are still inadequate and fall well below the systems in operation in our neighbouring countries. This disparity, the report highlights, leaves the Republic of Ireland an attractive place for those wishing to avoid the more rigorous systems imposed in their own jurisdictions. In order to avoid such weaknesses in our system, the report recommends placing vetting on a statutory basis as well as introducing legislation to facilitate access to 'soft' information.

Though organisations such as Barnardos and the ISPCC have worked tirelessly to raise awareness of the deficits in current child care service provision, including highlighting the need for comprehensive staff vetting practices, their ability to drive and effect change on a statutory basis in the area of vetting of staff for children's services has been non-existent. These organisations are working at the coalface of child protection yet it would appear that there has been a reluctance to take their views on board and transform them into legislation. Such development of policy and the subsequent enactment of legislation would provide a statutory basis for the implementation of this safeguard within services that seek to protect some of our most vulnerable young people.

Cleaver et al (2009) stress that safeguarding is the responsibility of all those working, or in contact with, children, hence the importance of designated persons within children's residential centres taking responsibility for ensuring that all staff are properly vetted. Hughes (2009) emphasises the necessity of challenging organisational structures that neglect the staff dimension, of which vetting is a crucial aspect. In reference to the UK system of seeking criminal record checks, Cleaver (2009) highlights that many of the previous instances of abuse of children in care by practitioners involved staff that had no previous offences identifiable through police records. The UK system which allows for the exchange of 'soft information' through

the criminal records check will assist in the prevention of such persons having access to employment in the social care sector.

Current inspection and vetting practices in Ireland

The Child Care Act 1991 is currently the primary legislation governing the registration and inspection of children's residential centres in Ireland. This Act led to the establishment of a number of Health Board Registration and Inspection teams nationwide for the purposes of inspecting and registering all non-statutory children's residential centres. The Irish Social Services Inspectorate was established in 1999 within the Department of Health and Children for the purposes of inspecting children's residential centres operated by Health Boards otherwise known as statutory services. In 2001, the National Standards for Children's Residential Centres (DoHC, 2001) were developed based on legislation, regulations and findings from research that identified best practice. The Standards provide considerable guidance in interpreting the provisions relating to residential care detailed in the Child Care Act 1991 (Shannon, 2005). These National Standards are the main tool which is utilised in the inspection of both categories of centres and the standards cover all aspects of the operation of a children's residential centre, including, as previously stated, reference to the vetting requirements which must be applied to all categories of staff working in children's residential centres. Inspectors have the authority to ensure that vetting requirements are adhered to through the process of inspection.

The inspection process is a system of evaluation and feedback which helps to ensure that the quality of the lives of children in care meet agreed standards and that children and staff are protected from abuse and neglect (Department of Health, 1991). The process of inspection in Ireland is currently the only external system which attempts to ensure that requirements in relation to the vetting of staff are adhered to. Though the inspection process itself and the Regulations within which it operates is on a legislative basis, worryingly the vetting of staff is not. Findings from recent inspections in both statutory and non-statutory children's residential services in the Republic of Ireland have consistently identified shortfalls in vetting practices, highlighting that centres were not in compliance with the requirements of the Department of Health and Children (Social Services Inspectorate Annual Report, 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004).

Conclusion

The overview of residential provision for children in this country as conveyed in this literature review has demonstrated that changes within service provision and in practice have consistently been reactive. The Inquiry reports referred to throughout this literature review each identified the importance of comprehensive staff vetting policies and procedures for children's residential services though their emphasis on particular aspects of vetting varied and included police/Garda checks, reference checks, comparison of employees record with references supplied, and the sharing of "soft information".

For the purposes of this research, two distinct aspects of the vetting process will be explored - the attainment of Garda checks and obtaining three written references which are then verified. The study will attempt to explore current practice vis-à-vis these specific aspects of the vetting process as well as exploring the attitudes of centre managers towards current vetting practices within the non-statutory residential child care sector. These managers have varying degrees of responsibility for the recruitment and vetting of all child care staff employed to work in their centres. Information on current practice in the area may give some indication of the difficulties experienced by managers in completing the vetting process as per the expected requirements. Their attitudes may lend insight towards the value that these managers place upon vetting practices and may highlight some of the influences on these practices. The research may also help to establish some of the reasons why the current guidelines on the area are not consistently adhered to in full by employers in the non-statutory residential child care sector⁴. The author believes that the views of practitioners are an important foundation in the initiation of development in any given context.

⁴ The exploration of this matter within the non-statutory sector will be elaborated in the Methodology chapter of this document.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the population sample used in this study, including how participants were chosen, and the methodology utilised. The author will discuss how the data collected in the research was analysed and the chapter concludes with ethical considerations and an examination of the limitations of this study.

Prior to the undertaking of this research, the study including its aims and objectives, were discussed with the researcher's line manager and college supervisor. Available research and literature from Ireland and internationally on the subject of vetting staff working with children and young people was reviewed for indications as to what constitutes best practice in the area. This review showed a lack of available literature on the topic of staff vetting in children's residential centres and demonstrated that there has been little direct research conducted on the topic and in particular research that examines the views of those responsible for this task.

Procedure

Sarantakos (1998) highlights the purpose of pilot studies as discovering possible weaknesses, inadequacies, ambiguities and problems in all aspects of the research, so that they can be corrected before actual data collection take place. In consideration of these factors, the researcher conducted a pilot study of a semi-structured interview with one participant. The participant for this pilot study was a colleague of the author, a former centre manager. Following this pilot, some of the questions were re-phrased as they had proven to be unclear for the pilot participant. Following feedback, some questions were altered to specifically attempt to capture the opinion of the respondent.

The first phase of the research consisted of eight semi-structured interviews with centre managers. According to Seidman, 'At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience' (2006, p.9). The interviews also enabled the researcher to obtain large amounts of data regarding participant's perspectives and practices

quickly, a matter that is highlighted by Marshall & Rossman (1999). The semi-structured nature of these interviews, whilst ensuring that specific areas of interest were covered, also allowed opportunity for the author to explore particular comments or aspects of practice that were individual to each manager. This type of interview also allows 'people to answer more on their own terms..., but still provide a greater structure for comparability' (May, 2001, p.123).

The information obtained in the interviews, combined with the literature review, informed the development of the self-completion questionnaire. A pilot study was conducted with two of the author's colleagues, former managers of residential centres and the findings from this indicated a lack of clarity in the phrasing of some of the questions. The feedback enabled changes to be made prior to issuing the final document and served to augment the structure of the questionnaire.

The author chose self-completion questionnaires as a research method because it enabled access to a larger population in a relatively short timeframe. Though the author was aware that she was dependent upon the honesty of respondents when completing the questionnaire, she wanted to provide this population with an opportunity for what May (2001) describes as an anonymous expression of beliefs.

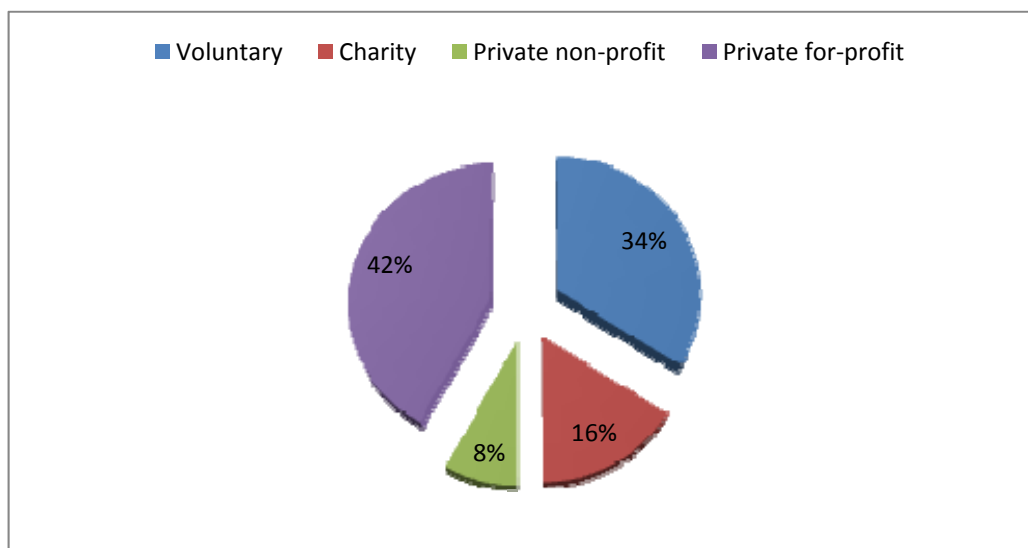
There are however, disadvantages to the use of self-completion questionnaires, with the response rate having the most significant impact. The researcher endeavoured to satisfy that all appropriate measures were taken to minimise the likelihood of non-response. Sarantakos (1998), May (2001) and Bryman (2008) all emphasise the importance of including a clear cover letter which, they state, has a significantly positive impact on response rates to postal questionnaires. The author included a cover letter with the postal questionnaires which introduced both the research topic and the researcher (see Appendix B). A follow-up letter was issued to all sixty-nine participants on the initial response due date to prompt and encourage non-respondents to return their questionnaires. A further follow-up phone call was made to all participants three weeks after the initial response due date.

Sample

Bryman (2008) defines a sample as a segment of the population that is selected for investigation. For the purpose of this study the researcher considered that managers of children's residential centres would be the most appropriate sample of the available population, particularly because of the level of responsibility they hold for staff and practices in their centre. The author was aware from her work experience that manager's level of involvement in the vetting process varies considerably amongst organisations. However regardless of the level of involvement it was important to explore the perspective of centre managers in order to ascertain attitudes towards the practice of vetting staff and to attempt to gain an understanding of how these attitudes may influence practice.

The figure below shows a breakdown of the four categories of children's residential centres represented amongst the research participants in both phases of the research.

Figure 1: Centres represented in study (n=51)



The sample group in this study was chosen by a means of purposive sampling, the goal of which is to sample participants in a strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the research question that is being posed (Bryman, 2008). In research where this method of sampling is employed, the researcher purposely chooses subjects who in their opinion are relevant to the research topic (Sarantakos, 1998). The sample group consisted of managers of non-statutory children's residential

centres in the Republic of Ireland and was selected for one predominant reason. Staff employed to work in statutory centres are subject to a recruitment process by Human Resource departments within the Health Service Executive (HSE) which, to the author's knowledge, is relatively consistent. Conversely non-statutory centres vary significantly in their organisational structure and the author wanted to target this in order to identify variances in practice.

In the first stage of the research, which consisted of interviews, the following criteria were employed in the choice of the sample:

- The location of the centres was within one Registration and Inspection Service area of the HSE.
- The centre managers represented four different agency types – voluntary, charity, private-non-profit, and private-for-profit.
- The author's level of involvement with the manager/their centre in a professional capacity. Of the eight managers selected for interview, the researcher had never been involved in the inspection of four of the services for which the managers were responsible. Of the remaining four, the researcher had had no direct involvement with the centre manager or the service in the previous eighteen months. This decision was made in an attempt to reduce the potential for a biased approach to data collection and also in an effort to disassociate the role of researcher from Inspector for the participants.
- The centre managers must consent to their voluntary participation in the research.

In order to select the managers for participation in the interviews, the author used the register of non-statutory children's residential centres within one HSE area. The author divided all of the registered services in this area into four category types – charity, voluntary, private-non-profit and private-for-profit - then identified two centres from each of these categories with whom she had had none or little direct contact in her professional capacity within the past eighteen months. In making this selection, the author attempted to get a mix of gender and mix of managerial experience based on information contained in the HSE register on the centres. Eight

managers were identified as interview candidates for this first stage of the research and all eight consented to participate.

For the second stage of the research all registered centres nationwide, operational at the commencement of this research, were identified through contact with the relevant registering bodies nationwide. One centre was excluded from this research on the basis of potential for researcher bias as the researcher was involved in an inspection of this service at the time of conducting this research. Sixty-nine centre managers, out of a total of seventy, were identified for this second stage of the research which consisted of the distribution of self-completion questionnaires to each manager. The author had no statistical information on these centres other than the category type they represented. Of the total questionnaires sent, forty-three were returned completed and one questionnaire was returned by the postal service stating no addressee could be found.

Data collection

According to Davies (2007),

...all qualitative research methods begin with the assertion that social researchers are located in a subjective context, and cannot lay claim to neutral or scientific objectivity (p.151).

This statement is particularly reflective of this research as the authors professional role is primary in ensuring that vetting practices in children's residential centres are conducted according to established requirements. The interviews were deemed feasible as the researcher was able to gain access relatively easily to participants. Interviews were considered appropriate because the focus of the research was to ascertain manager's views of a topic which is likely to be influenced by their experience of the matter. The author believed that a face-to-face interview would allow for manager's views on the topic of vetting to be discussed in detail. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow the interviewees to be able to elaborate on their answers whilst at the same time maintaining a level of control over the format of the interview. This view is consistent with the approach to qualitative data analysis within grounded theory which emphasises the importance of not starting out with too

many preconceptions leading to a premature closure of the research focus (Bryman, 2008).

The interviews were arranged three to four weeks in advance via phone contact and this was followed up with a letter of confirmation which also included detailed information on the study (see Appendix D). Interview candidates were asked approximately twenty questions during the course of the interview (see Appendix A), though the number of questions varied depending on the responses from candidates which prompted additional questions specific to that interview. The questions focussed on the manager's awareness of vetting staff in children's residential centres, vetting practices within the centre, and the manager's experience of vetting as a safeguard for children in residential care. Each interview was recorded using a digital audio-recording device which was later transferred to a hard drive back up and transcribed by the researcher. The interviews were flexible in terms of time and format which suited the author's working schedule. Conversely, disadvantages highlighted by Denscombe (2003) including the time-consuming aspect of qualitative data analysis, particularly when non-standardised responses are a feature, were experienced by the researcher.

The second stage of the data collection phase comprised the development of a self-completion questionnaire containing twenty-four questions (see Appendix C). An analysis of the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews informed the development of the questionnaire. The questions consisted of a combination of three question types – closed questions which allow the answers to be structured into pre-defined categories and lend themselves to quantifiable and comparable information; open questions which are 'more likely to reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent', (Denscombe, 2003, p.156); and the use of a Likert scale. Bryman (2008) describes a Likert scale as essentially a multiple-item measure of a set of attitudes which in this research related to the area of staff vetting. The goal of the Likert scale in this study was to measure the intensity of centre manager's feelings toward this research area. The author felt that the combination as described here would elucidate the information the author was looking for.

Data analysis

A combination of methods was used to analyse the data in the self-completion questionnaires. A system of coding was applied to the interview transcripts. In such a system there is a basic understanding that coding involves a movement from generating codes that stay close to the data to more selective and abstract ways of conceptualising the phenomenon of interest (Bryman, 2008). This process of coding was also used to analyse the open-ended questions in the questionnaires that produced qualitative data, and content analysis was utilised to analyse the data from the closed questions. Content analysis, according to Bryman (2008) is an approach that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories. Some of the questions required a 'yes' or 'no' response which was linked to a pre-determined system of allocation of responses to categories. Many of the questions also contained an explanatory section where the respondent was required to elaborate on their initial answer to a question. In analysing these responses, the author followed a process of breaking down the data, examining it in detail, identifying categories and relationships between categories. This process resulted in concepts and themes emerging from the data (Bryman, 2008).

Ethical Issues

Bryman (2008) suggests that 'ethical issues cannot be ignored as they relate directly to the integrity of a piece of research and the disciplines that are involved' (p. 113). Prior to this research being conducted, consultation regarding the research proposal took place with a member of the Health Service Executive area ethics committee for approval. In considering the ethical implications of this research, the researcher was cognisant of the three ethical principles to which Denscombe (2003) refers. Firstly, researchers have a duty to consider in advance the likely consequences of participation and to take measures that safeguard participant's interests. In this research participating managers may have felt that their contribution could have implications for the operation of their centres. For instance, if they indicated that they were not fully compliant with expected vetting requirements, the researcher would be made aware of this and the interviewee would be cognisant of the researcher's professional role. However the researcher clarified with participants that any information obtained would only be utilised for the purposes of this research and would not have implications otherwise. Disclosure of information for both interview

participants and respondents of completed questionnaires was made in full awareness that it was done so on a confidential basis, anonymity would be preserved throughout and beyond the process, and personal or organisational identities would not be revealed in the final document. If however an issue of child protection arose through this research the author had an ethical obligation to make this known to the relevant persons in authority. This ethical obligation would have superseded that of maintaining the anonymity of research participants.

The author included her contact details on the cover letter with the questionnaires and a number of managers made phone contact. These managers identified themselves when talking with the researcher and some other managers also identified their service on their questionnaires. When transferring the data from the completed questionnaires to an Excel spreadsheet, any identifying information was removed in order to treat all information in the same anonymous manner.

The second principle to which Denscombe (2003) refers is the avoidance of deception or misrepresentation by the researcher being open, honest and explicit with their participants. The author provided participants with a detailed information sheet which covered all aspects of the research (see Appendices B and D) and the author was clear in acknowledging her professional role as an inspector.

The third principle is that of informed consent. Bryman (2008) suggests that this principle means that prospective participants should be given as much information as may be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in the study. Written consent was sought from the interview participants and they received detailed information in various formats prior to the interview, including an outline of the questions being asked in the interview. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time and that their participation was entirely voluntary.

Limitations

Davies (2007) argues that ‘there are particular risks of researcher bias if you are embarking on a project in a field where you already feel ‘at home’’ (p.157). In such instances, Davies suggests that the researcher has an obligation to embark on the

exercise as though they know nothing and to work hard at being open to interpretations and patterns that differ from their own prior assumptions. The author was very much aware of the relevance of appropriate staff vetting practices in children's residential services and the potential influence the findings of this research could have for inspectors of these services. Sarantakos (1998) refers to the problems and distortions which can result from the effects of interviewer bias. Both Sarantakos and Denscombe (2003) indicate that the researcher must attempt to reduce the effects of such bias through processes including their presentation, the expectations of data obtained, and the manner in which probing takes place throughout the interview. The author attempted to maintain a neutral position to all information that was being presented in the interviews.

The author felt that her professional role may have decreased the likelihood of participants to reveal the full extent of their experiences of staff vetting, particularly when indicating whether or not the participants fully comply with expected requirements in this area. This role is acknowledged throughout this document and the author is cognisant that having declared this role to participants at the outset of the research, it may have had an impact on some aspects of the study. Access to the sample in this study, in particular the interview candidates, was a straightforward task, with all eight of those initially contacted agreeing to participate. The author was cognisant of the potential for respondents to answer questions and give commentary that would reflect on their practice in a more positive light than perhaps their actual practice may have done.

Many authors including Gilbert (1993), Denscombe (2003), and Bryman (2008) note the main difficulty associated with self-completion questionnaires is that of a low response rate. It would appear from a review of relevant literature on the subject that anything above a 50% response rate is acceptable (Bryman, 2008). The response rate (62%) to the postal questionnaires was relatively high and this may have been influenced by the respondent's awareness of the author's professional role. However the research topic is of relevance to centre manager's practice which may have also influenced the high response rate in both aspects of the study.

The author found a paucity of literature specifically examining or discussing the area of vetting staff in residential child care which had significant impact throughout this piece of research.

Conclusion

The sample population used in this research was centre managers of children's residential centres in the non-statutory sector. Their views were sought through semi-structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires which allowed for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. This data was analysed through a system of coding primarily, though content analysis was also utilised. The limitations which the author experienced throughout this study have been identified as well as important ethical considerations.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings from this research study. The author commenced the research with eight semi-structured interviews with managers of non-statutory children's residential centres, the data from which informed the second phase of the research – the distribution of sixty-nine self-completion questionnaires. The data from the semi-structured interviews will firstly be presented, followed by the data obtained from the 43 completed and returned questionnaires.

Phase One: Interviews

Eight managers of non-statutory children's residential centres participated in a semi-structured interview for the purposes of this research. There were two managers representing each of the following four categories of centres: private-for-profit, private-non-profit, charity and voluntary, of which six managers were female and two male. Three key themes emerged from an analysis of the interview data and the findings will be presented here under those three themes. The themes were managers understanding of vetting and their view on the adequacy of the current vetting requirements; manager's opinions regarding vetting as an ongoing process; and vetting as a safeguard for children in residential care.

Understanding of vetting and adequacy of current vetting requirements

Managers' understanding of the term 'vetting' was explored at the outset of each interview. There was much similarity across the responses obtained with the main thread of understanding presented as an investigation or exploration of a person's past with a view to ascertaining their suitability for the area of residential childcare work. Four of the managers referred to this process as highlighting criminal convictions of prospective employees, while three managers noted the importance of this process in ensuring that young people were kept safe and protected. None of the eight managers interviewed presented as having a clear understanding of the basis for the current vetting requirements. Some managers suggested that perhaps the basis for the requirements lay in legislation including the Child Care Act 1991 and the Children's

Act 2001. Others referred to the National Standards for Children's Residential Centres and the inspection process, while others still cited inquiries into Irish childcare institutions as the basis for these requirements. When informed of the true basis for the current requirements, one manager expressed surprise, 'That's amazing. I'm only two years out of college and I fully believed that it was because of the Madonna House and Kilkenny' (I.2)⁵. Another manager indicated that practices have improved in the area of residential childcare stating that people wouldn't have been as rigorous in the past with checking references (I. 3).

Four of the managers expressed some concerns at the current system of vetting and felt that it was not an entirely adequate system, referring to it as a 'loose system'(I. 8) and one that had 'loopholes that people can wiggle their way through' (I.1). Two of the managers mentioned their dependency on trust in two main areas. Firstly in terms of the honesty of the employee when completing Garda check forms that they would include all previous addresses, as one manager stated 'I wonder if you were to fill in a Garda vetting form and you were to fill in false addresses or leave out addresses, how do you verify that?' (I.6). Secondly, a dependency on the honesty of those people completing references was referred to, 'You are trusting other people in the profession as well to cooperate, especially if you are getting references from people' (I.3).

Three managers, however felt that the current system is adequate and they did not feel that further additions could be easily made to it. One manager in particular felt that the system is quite thorough and to make any further alterations to it would only serve to increase the frustrations experienced by managers when processing applications. The attitude expressed by this manager was that vetting is completed on the basis that it is an expected requirement which must be complied with, however for them the emphasis was on getting to know the person through their induction,

...yourself as a manager and the other staff members being vigilant about that induction process, that's what will give you the confidence about a person's working ability more than all the checks in the world (I.4).

⁵ 'I' followed by a number denotes an interviewee's response. There were 8 interview participants.

Vetting as an ongoing process

In relation to the matter of vetting as an ongoing issue, seven of the eight managers stated that vetting is a matter that continues throughout an employee's career within the organisation and should not be forgotten about once a staff member commences employment. As one manager explained,

...it shouldn't be an entry-only issue, because you just don't know. As much as you know everyone working in the service and they have been vetted very in-depth on their way in, people can get up to all sorts while they are working. I think it's something that needs to be carried through definitely (I.1).

Many of the managers referred to systems within their organisation that enabled the vetting process to be continued beyond the initial commencement of employment including probationary periods of employment, formal appraisals and supervision with staff members.

Vetting as a safeguard including the exchange of soft information

Though individual attitudes towards the safeguarding element of vetting varied considerably amongst respondents, the majority (6) of managers indicated that the vetting process could provide a safeguard for young people in residential care. Overall managers felt strongly that although vetting did provide a safeguard it was a minimum in terms of safeguards that could be applied and vetting alone could not be depended upon to provide a flawless safeguard to young people in residential care. Some of the managers again referred here to the dependency on trust and honesty of prospective employees and previous employers to provide accurate information. Other managers cited vetting as being part of an overall system within the centre and organisation which lends itself to safeguarding young people, including supervision, induction and probation. One manager indicated that the culture of a centre is an important aspect of safeguarding practice explaining it as staff having a general awareness and understanding of having open doors and knowledge of where your colleagues are at all times in order to ensure that young people are safeguarded as much as possible through general daily practices.

The attitudes of managers towards the exchange of soft information also varied to some degree. For the purposes of this research 'soft information' was defined as

information regarding people who may pose a risk to children but who do not have any criminal convictions for child abuse. Respondents noted that this was a delicate area which would need to be handled sensitively by professionals who held the interests of vulnerable young people as their priority. Some managers pointed to the potential for damage to a person's reputation or career that such a practice may have, '...everybody has a constitutional right to a good name and it could lead to all kinds of legal difficulties' (I.3). However, the general consensus amongst the eight managers interviewed was that the exchange of soft information would provide an additional safeguard to young people in residential care with one manager stating,

While I believe that people are innocent until proven guilty, you have to do everything you can to ensure that the people you are bringing in to care for children are the best people to do that (I.1).

Summary

All of the eight managers interviewed had a thorough understanding of vetting and seven indicated that it is a continuous process. Half of the managers indicated that the current vetting requirements are adequate with the other four indicating that there are additions that could be made to improve it. Generally, all eight managers interviewed were of the view that the inclusion of soft information would act as an additional safeguard in the vetting process.

Phase Two: Questionnaires

Sixty-nine questionnaires were distributed to managers on a national basis representing the four categories of centres previously referred to. Of these, forty-three managers returned completed questionnaires and the data from these questionnaires are presented below under key themes which emerged from the data. These themes were manager's involvement in the vetting process and the value they placed on this; vetting practices in centres; information which is obtained by managers via the vetting process; factors influencing compliance with current vetting requirements; and vetting as a safeguard for children in residential care.

Manager's involvement in the vetting process

Though the author defined 'vetting' as the taking up of a Garda check and three references for the purposes of this study, it is also understood by managers in a broader context which involves the interview stage prior to taking up reference checks and Garda checks, as well as the sourcing and verification of qualifications. Managers made reference to participation in various aspects of the vetting process as they understood it. Some managers indicated that their responsibility for overseeing the vetting process was shared with the Human Resource departments within their organisation, with two specifically identifying that their HR departments had previously been responsible for this task until it had been highlighted by Inspectors in an inspection of their service that they should be involved in this process.

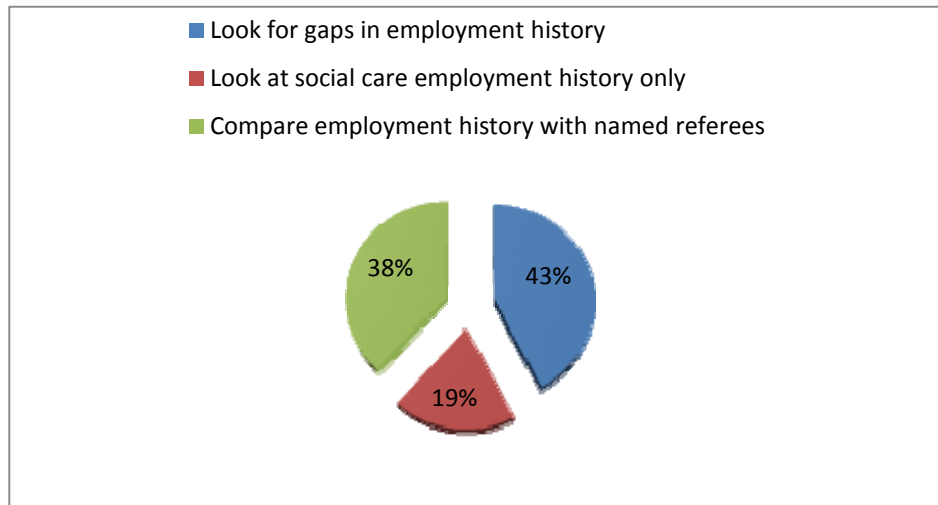
The vast majority (97%) of managers stated that vetting staff is an extremely important part of practice with the majority of managers highlighting that their level of involvement as manager in the vetting process was central, particularly in terms of their own perceived responsibility for ensuring the protection and welfare of young people in their care. Some managers also indicated that they were in a position to know the specific requirements of their service and therefore felt that it was crucial they should be involved in filling any gaps in their team in order to ensure the best fit. One manager said 'As manager, I am responsible for an effective service and know what I need from an employee to achieve this (R. 23)⁶. Six managers, across three categories of centres (charity, voluntary and private-for-profit), stated that they are not involved in the vetting process, with one of these stating 'As long as proper policies are in place and followed I feel it's not necessary for me to be involved' (R.26).

Vetting practices

The information which managers indicated they actively look for when examining a prospective employee's curriculum vitae is presented in the chart below.

⁶ 'R' followed by a number denotes a respondent to the questionnaire. There were 43 respondents in total.

Figure 2: What managers consider when examining prospective employee's curriculum vitas (n=43)



A considerable 86% of respondents indicated that a Garda check and 3 written references are of equal importance as a source of reliable information, ‘They both supply us with different types of information and cannot be used in isolation (R. 4). One manager stated:

Garda check will look at if there are convictions; reference focus on ability/suitability for post. Would argue that you can't have one without the other. Both are crucial in making a decision to hire or not (R. 1).

A significant 93% of respondents indicated that the verification of references provides an invaluable source of additional information on prospective employees,

A Garda check will hopefully give an up to date of any previous convictions and a reference from last employer should give a picture of work practice, however I find the follow up phone calls to verify a reference is usually more assuring” (R. 31).

The vast majority (80%) of managers indicated a preference for a standardised reference form over a letter of reference as a more beneficial source of information on a prospective employee. In general, manager's expressed that a letter of reference was too broad and general in terms of information provided with some managers stating that relevant information can too easily be omitted in a letter, ‘I know from writing letters of reference that you simply omit negative details or give subtle messages’ (R. 41). On the whole, managers expressed the view that a standardised

reference form provided much more specific information required to ascertain a candidate's suitability for their service. One respondent stated that a standardised reference form is more beneficial as it '...can be drawn up with specific questions specified by the employers to seek specific information in relation to candidate's suitability in lots of practice areas' (R. 15).

The majority (76%) of managers felt that the exchange of soft information amongst professionals could be of benefit in terms of providing a manager with a more complete picture of the prospective employee resulting in an additional measure which safeguards and protects young people in residential care. '...soft information should be exchanged by professionals if it will assist in the protection of children and vulnerable client groups' (R. 43). However, many of those who expressed this opinion had reservations about the matter regarding how it would be managed and pointed to a need for strict guidelines to govern it. Three managers (7%) disagreed that the exchange of such information could result in the increased protection of young people in residential care, referring to it as 'hearsay' and 'word of mouth'. Managers highlighted the potential dangers in exchanging this information, including the damage that may be caused to a persons' career/future. Conversely, three managers pointed to the benefits of the exchange of soft information in view of the low conviction rates in child sexual abuse cases.

Though 79% of respondents indicated that they follow the same vetting process for all categories of staff in their centre, their comments suggested that students were often an exception to that rule. Practice with students varied with managers indicating that some colleges conduct a Garda check for students, others do not; some students have acquired a declaration from their local Garda station under data protection stating there are no known convictions against them, others don't; some managers wouldn't ask for three written references from a student and others stated that it would not be possible to get three written references for a student. By contrast, many managers emphasised that staff status is not a relevant issue at all, that a person's contact with or access to young people in the residential centre is the focal point in conducting vetting, therefore all should be subject to the same process. As one manager stated 'When you start compromising the process for different staff, holes will appear in your safety net' (R. 18).

There was a general consensus amongst the majority of managers that a Garda check and references are of equal importance as a source of information on a prospective employee with most managers emphasising the relevance of verifying information contained in references. However, students were overwhelmingly an exception to the rule of following due process in vetting staff. The majority of managers are of the view that a standardised reference form is more beneficial and that the inclusion of soft information in the vetting process is of benefit to it.

Information obtained via the vetting process

Just over half (51%) of managers agreed that the Garda check together with three written references provided sufficient information on prospective employees. A noteworthy proportion of respondents (29%) indicated that they were uncertain as to whether or not these sources provided sufficient information. Further elaboration on this matter indicated that some managers found a Garda check reliable and references not so. Other managers referred to the type of information that is provided in references relating to a candidate's character and personality which they viewed as relevant information.

A considerable 65% of respondents indicated that they have been in a position where they commenced staff without having the above minimum source of information. Managers qualified their answer by detailing the circumstances under which they either had or would employ staff without this information, with the main reason given as being low staffing levels in the centre, that is, staff shortage brought about by crisis or emergency situations in their centre. For managers who stated they would commence an employee without complete vetting, there was no consistent pattern to indicate a base line of acceptable or minimum information required. Several managers simply stated that under no circumstances would they employ a candidate without having the relevant pieces of information as per the vetting requirements.

In relation to recorded convictions, 93% of managers stated that if a prospective employee was found to have a conviction this would influence their decision-making in hiring the person. Comments on this matter reflected a lack of certainty regarding action to be taken in this situation. Of those whose decision to hire would be influenced by a conviction, ten respondents referred to traffic offences in the context

of being a 'minor offence' and most would hire regardless of such a conviction, whereas convictions which managers perceived to be more serious, for example assault, aggression, would influence managers not to pursue a persons' job application. Six managers also indicated that an employee's honesty regarding the matter of a conviction would also be an influencing factor, that is, whether or not the employee had informed the employer of the conviction prior to the Garda check being carried out.

A majority of managers (62%) indicated that they would put information regarding a concern relating to a previous employees practice in both the written and verbal reference for the employee. A lesser percentage (36%) stated that they would not put the concern in writing but would instead inform the new employer verbally. The remaining 2% of managers indicated that they would put their concern in writing.

Though just over half of managers indicated that the Garda check and three written references provide adequate information on a prospective employee, a significant 65% of managers stated that they have employed a person without having this minimum amount of information. A resounding 93% of manager's decision-making would be influenced by a prospective employee's conviction.

Factors influencing compliance with current vetting requirements

Four factors were identified in the interviews conducted in the first phase of this research as influencing compliance with the current vetting requirements. The most influencing factor, identified by 62% of respondents, was the fact that vetting is a legal requirement. This was closely followed by an awareness of past abuse which has occurred in residential settings, with the third most influential factor being the registration and inspection process for centres. The factor which most people referred to as having the least influence on compliance with the requirements was information on the topic of vetting obtained from staff members attending college.

Managers were also asked what factors they felt prevented compliance with expected requirements. The factor most cited (41%) as preventing compliance was that of time, specifically with reference to the delays experienced by managers in awaiting the return of Garda checks for staff. Additional factors referred to are listed below:

- Staff: shortages/large staff turnover/pressure to fill rota at short notice
- References: difficulty in getting referees to respond; difficulty in getting written references verified; referees having moved on from listed place of employment; getting three references for staff, particularly graduates with no prior experience in the field of social care
- Poor practice; poor management
- Complacency; laziness
- Lack of awareness of requirements.

Vetting as a safeguard for young people in residential care

Whilst 52% of respondents indicated that vetting provides an effective safeguard for young people, 90% are of the opinion that vetting is only one part of a system of safeguarding practices in children's residential centres. The following quote reflects one manager's view and was also echoed by many other respondents,

It provides safety to a point. Continued safety for all children in residential care involves following all care practices which will be undertaken having due regard to standards, regulations, statutory requirements and best practice in addition to adhering to principles and rights that affect children (R.40).

Just over half (51%) of managers disagreed that vetting staff is only important at their point of entry into the organisation, with some managers referring to the need for more regular Garda checks being conducted on existing employees.

Seven managers (16%) stated that they had experienced a situation whereby a matter of concern regarding a staff members' practice arose following an incomplete or poor vetting process. Managers indicated that they and/or their organisation had since learned from this experience. Of these seven, four (9%) also stated that they had experienced a situation where information came to light through the vetting process and ultimately the candidate had not been offered the position of employment. Ten managers in total (23%) had experience of this situation.

Of the forty-three respondents, 74% of managers were of the view that vetting protects children from potential abuse. Managers cited the risk that would be posed to

children in terms of potential abuse and being placed in an unsafe or vulnerable situation as the main potential implication of incomplete vetting for children in residential care. Managers indicated that incomplete vetting creates the potential for abusers or inappropriate/unsuitable adults to get through the vetting process and have access to children. Other potential implications were an unprofessional service; inability to meet the needs of young people; compromising the safety of other staff members; lowering of standards; and creating a generally unsafe environment.

Though only half of respondents indicated that vetting acts as a safeguard for young people in residential care, 74% stated it protects young people from abuse. The majority of managers are of the view that vetting is just one part of a larger system of safeguarding measures.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of the findings which emerged from the data collected in this study. Through an analysis of these findings three main themes emerged in the data. The adequacy of the current system of vetting was the first theme which emerged. Approximately half of all managers in this study stated that the current system of vetting is adequate, with a significant majority of these indicating that they relied on other practices including induction and ongoing supervision to supplement the vetting process. The second theme to emerge relates to the safeguarding aspect of vetting. There was an almost even split in managers views on this element of vetting for children in residential care, with approximately half stating vetting does provide a safeguard. The third theme which emerged from the findings was influences on the vetting process. Factors such as the legal aspect of vetting, awareness of past abuse in residential settings, and the registration and inspection process were identified as influencing compliance with the vetting requirements. The main factors which prevented compliance included delays experienced in the process, staffing levels in centres, and difficulties experienced in obtaining references for prospective staff.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study in the context of the available literature on the topic of staff vetting. Through the analysis of the research data three broad themes emerged under which the findings will be discussed. These are ‘adequacy of the current system of vetting’, ‘vetting as a safeguard for children in residential care’, and ‘influencing factors on the vetting process’.

Adequacy of the current system of vetting

None of the eight managers interviewed for this study made reference to the Department of Health and Children circular on staff recruitment as the basis for current vetting requirements. When informed of this fact, many were expressly surprised having assumed that the requirements were based upon safeguarding children in residential care. The circular also refers to qualifications and verification of these though this aspect of the vetting process was not examined in this research.

The author felt that this finding was an interesting one from the perspective of the manager’s awareness of, and active engagement with, policy that defines their practice in recruiting staff to work in their centres. Aronson et al (2007) state that

People who base their attitudes on a careful analysis of the arguments will be more likely to maintain this attitude over time [and] more likely to behave consistently with this attitude (p.202).

From the responses obtained in the interviews, it is apparent that the managers had not carefully analysed the basis for the vetting requirements and so their attitude towards them was not necessarily based on factual information, rather it was influenced by social factors such as best practice in the area, and the enforcement of these requirements through the process of inspection.

Four of the managers interviewed indicated that the current system of vetting is adequate, and supporting this view 51% of questionnaire respondents agreed that the Garda check together with three written references provide sufficient background

information on prospective employees without the need to source additional information. Three of these managers also emphasised their dependence on processes beyond the vetting including probationary periods, induction and supervision, to give them an indication of an employee's suitability for the post. This matter was highlighted by Warner (1992), 'It is not enough simply to select and appoint the right staff. They have to be supervised and appraised' (p.171), and also by Gallagher (2000) in relation to the adoption by many organisations of a whole range of more stringent procedures.

The vast majority (90%) of questionnaire respondents indicated that vetting staff is only one piece of a system of safeguarding practices in children's residential centres. Kiraly (2001) highlights that the induction/socialisation process for staff is as important as good selection processes and refers to ongoing supervision as '...a hallmark of good human services practice' (p.122). The importance of these additional measures is also highlighted by the Irish Social Services Inspectorate in their practice guidelines on safeguarding and child protection in children's residential centres in which they state 'Staff members should have regular formal supervision and the overall performance of the staff member should be subject to regular appraisal' (ISSI, 2003, P.7).

Four of the managers interviewed stated that the current system of vetting is not adequate. In qualifying their answer, they referred in particular to three main factors - the dependency on the honesty of the prospective employee; their own lack of willingness to rely on Garda checks which they believe highlight convictions only and not suspicions of inappropriate behaviour; and a reliance upon or trust in previous employers that they will provide accurate and honest information. This third point is one about which many managers expressed concern as it is the candidate that is nominating specific persons as referees. Kiraly (2001), notes that references have been found to be largely unreliable because the candidate selects them for their capacity to sell the candidates own strengths, and findings in the Scottish Care Commission (2008) point to major concerns across all care services relating to the taking up of references that are from appropriate sources and are appropriate in content and therefore reliable.

Just over half (51%) of respondents stated that a Garda check and three references does not provide sufficient background information on a person. Though the majority of respondents indicated that the source of references is important, a surprising 6 managers (13.9%) agreed that getting three references regardless of their source is a priority for them. The Support Force Code of Practice highlights this issue stating that ‘Prospective employers should require candidates to provide a full employment history and should reserve the right to approach any **previous employer**’ (Department Of Health, 1995, p.29, emphasis in original). The Code also states that references should be supplied to the interviewing panel prior to the candidate’s interview so that all relevant information can be explored at that point rather than offering a position pending the collection of references. The Scottish Executive in their guidance on safer recruitment also emphasise that the purpose of seeking references is to obtain factual and objective information in order to support appointment decisions and that a reliance on testimonials or open references, that is, ‘To whom it may concern’ should be avoided.

“Ideally, references should be obtained before interview so that any issues of concern they raise can be explored further with the referee, and taken up with the candidate at interview” (Scottish Executive, 2007, p.9).

One respondent pointed out that ‘A letter of reference can be too subjective and give very little information on a prospective employee’ (R. 26). Amongst the questionnaire respondents, a significant majority (80%) felt that a standardised reference form is more beneficial in terms of providing relevant information. This finding supports similar recommendations for a pro forma document that asks information pertaining to specific categories made by Warner (1992); Kiraly (2001); and the Scottish Executive (2007). Kiraly (2001) also emphasises the importance of one person doing all of the reference checks as this improves consistency which is particularly important in large organisations. The findings from both phases of this research indicate that in many situations the task of checking references is not the sole responsibility of one person within an organisation and in fact in some cases, there are at least three persons involved in this process. Kahan (1994) stresses the importance of managers of residential centres being fully involved in the entire process of staff selection, from developing job descriptions, through interviewing, to vetting of prospective staff.

One interesting finding that emerged from this study relates to the two sides of references – the sourcing of them by prospective employers and the furnishing of them by employers when an employee applies for another position. Managers in both phases of the research referred to the need to obtain as much reliable and detailed information in a reference on a prospective employee and the dependency on trust in the author of the reference for all relevant information. On the contrary, some managers did indicate a reluctance to make some matters of concern known to prospective employers wither in writing or verbally.

Half of the managers in this study stated that vetting requirements are adequate but they also referred to other measure of practice within their centres, including supervision and induction, which would supplement the vetting process. Those managers who indicated that it is an inadequate system referred to the insufficient information which is obtained through the process, and in particular, the tendency of letters of reference to be vague in detail. There was a strong expression of a preference for a standardised reference form that managers indicated could provide more relevant and succinct information.

Vetting as a safeguard for young people in residential care

In general, the findings from this research indicate that approximately half of participants are of the view that the process of vetting staff is a safeguard for children in residential care, though as noted above, the majority of respondents to the questionnaire expressed the view that it is not the only safeguard. Rather safeguarding is a combination of systems and practices, of which, vetting is a vital component. ‘...vetting should be considered as only one element – albeit an important element – of safe recruitment and selection practices’ (An Garda Síochána, 2004, p.14). What Colton (2002) describes as the ‘wholesale failure of the public care system’ (p.39) is, in his opinion, a reflection of a number of factors including lack of adequate education, training, and supervision; poor selection systems and a failure to deal effectively with the threat posed by adults to vulnerable children.

A number of managers referred to the inclusion of ‘soft information’ which, in the opinion of one manager ‘...would strengthen the process and contribute significantly to protecting children’ (R. 27). ‘Soft information’ does not have one universally

implicit definition, however it is widely understood by professionals in the area of social care to mean information that is known about a person or people who have been identified as a potential risk to children but have not received a criminal conviction for their behaviour. The matter of 'soft information' received much attention following the conviction of Ian Huntley for the murders of two ten year olds in the village of Soham in the UK. Though pre-employment checks had been conducted on Huntley which did not highlight any convictions, it emerged in an inquiry following his conviction that the police had been in possession of information on Huntley pertaining to suspicions of earlier sex crimes several of which involved children (Thomas, 2003). The findings of this inquiry prompted changes in legislation in the UK which led to the setting up of a single independent agency responsible for the vetting of all categories of staff wishing to work with vulnerable people (Independent Safeguarding Authority, 2009).

All eight managers interviewed felt that the exchange of 'soft information' in the context of vetting staff for employment could provide an additional safeguard to young people in residential care. However, seven of them were quick to point out the many associated difficulties with this issue including the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes 'soft information'; who holds the information and with whom it is exchanged; and the impact of false allegations on an individual's future and career. Various arguments have been put forward by organisations including the ISPCC and the National Youth Council of Ireland calling for legislation to be introduced in the Irish context which would enable the establishment of a system through which 'soft information' could be recorded and made available within the vetting process. One of the provisions of the bill containing an amendment for a referendum on children's rights will permit legislation to be introduced that will provide for the use of such 'soft information' in the vetting of staff with unsupervised access to children and vulnerable adults (McDonald, 2007).

Some managers felt unequivocally that all information relevant to an employees work should be shared between concerned parties, with one manager stating that '...the person themselves shouldn't have an issue with that if they've done nothing wrong'. This manager went on to say,

...by not sharing that information you're colluding with someone who may well be going through the system abusing people or aren't anywhere near as child-centred as they make out they are (I. 8).

The majority (93%) of respondents stated that the exchange of soft information would provide an additional safeguard though should not be used in isolation and most expressed the need for caution when using such information. The significant majority that expressed this view also had concerns regarding its use akin to those expressed by the managers interviewed. Some referred to what they described as the 'professional' exchange of such information, that is information exchanged between professionals working in the area, for example from the Gardaí to centre managers. Most felt that ultimately any additional information that would lead to the increased protection of children should be shared. The report issued by the Working Group on Garda Vetting considers that legislation needs to be introduced to standardize the situation in relation to vetting and within this legislation 'the disclosure of 'hard' and 'soft' facts according to a two-tiered system of vetting' should be included. (An Garda Síochána, 2004, p.30). In a report published by the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, it stated that of 5,989 incidents of child abuse reported to police in the year ending 31st March 2003 only 775 convictions resulted in that same year. However, the report does not specify whether these convictions were of cases solely reported in 2003 or if they had been reported prior to that (Crime and Society Foundation, 2006). Another report published in 2002 indicates that of 38 individuals who reported child sexual abuse to the Gardaí, only six cases (16%) resulted in court proceedings with four guilty verdicts (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, 2002).

Given the general feeling amongst managers of a need to obtain as much relevant information on prospective employees as possible, it was somewhat surprising to find that almost half (46%) of respondents to the questionnaire indicated that they do not consistently follow the same vetting process for students. Most managers went on to explain that students would be supervised at all times by staff when with young people. Another reason put forward by managers for a lack of consistent adherence to the required vetting process was linked to the systems operated by various colleges. Not all colleges obtain a Garda check for students; this is the responsibility of the agency where a student is on placement. The Working Group on Garda Vetting recommended that,

...all organisations that recruit and select persons who would have substantial unsupervised access to children and vulnerable adults should avail – and should be entitled to avail – of the vetting services of the Unit (GCVU) (An Garda Síochána, 2004, p.14).

They stipulate that prospective students on placement who would have substantial unsupervised access to children should be included in this group. Though managers indicated that students would be supervised at all times, it is difficult to see how this could be realised in practice at all times given the busy, even sometimes chaotic, nature of residential child care.

Ten respondents to the questionnaire indicated that they had experienced a situation where new information on a prospective employee was revealed through the vetting process. Three managers indicated that a criminal conviction was highlighted on the Garda check which had not been previously declared by the applicant. A further two managers stated that further information came to light on the candidate through the verbal verification of their references. The issue of honesty of prospective employees is a matter that was identified elsewhere throughout the research as being of significance in influencing managers decisions to continue with a candidate's application for employment. Kiraly (2001) in advising on pre-employment checks refers to them as 'screening devices', none of which 'qualify a person for a job, but failure on any one should normally rule out the appointment on honesty grounds if no other' (p.116). In three of these situations the information emerged through the Garda check and in a further two, the information was obtained through the sourcing and verification of references. Four managers indicated that as a direct result of this information the people concerned were not offered a position of employment.

Though half of all managers indicated that vetting is a safeguard for children in residential care, a significant majority of them do not follow the same process of vetting for students as they do for staff, which is a matter of concern. Managers were clear in making the point that vetting is not the sole safeguard with the vast majority of managers stating the inclusion of soft information in the vetting process would be of benefit. However, managers cautioned against the potential dangers in relation to this and emphasised the need for clear and stringent structures around the exchange of such information.

Influencing factors on the vetting process

Four factors emerged from the interviews as influencing managers to comply with vetting requirements. These were the legal aspect of vetting, an awareness of past abuse in residential care settings, the registration and inspection process, and knowledge obtained in college on the matter. Factors which managers stated prevented compliance with the vetting requirements included delays experienced in the process, staffing issues in the centre, difficulties in obtaining references for a variety of stated reasons, and poor management.

Five of the eight managers interviewed indicated that the time delay they experience in relation to the return of a Garda check is the only difficulty with the vetting process. Managers stated that they are often waiting a period of several weeks and on occasion up to a number of months for a completed Garda check to be returned from the Garda Central Vetting Unit (GCVU). They highlighted that this has a significant impact on their service delivery as it delays the process of starting an employee which has knock-on effects on the operation of the centre and the care of young people, particularly where a centre is short-staffed. A similar finding emerged from the questionnaires with 18 managers (41%) referring to the time delay experienced in awaiting the return of a Garda check as a factor which prevents compliance with expected vetting requirements. This finding is consistent with the matter highlighted in the Warner Report (1992) relating to the delays experienced by service providers in the UK in obtaining police checks for prospective employees. Warner was of the view that posts in residential child care were qualitatively different from most other jobs working with children not only because of the substantial unsupervised access to children, but also the fact that staff would have access to children for longer periods of time.

There continues to be a backlog due to the sheer volume of applications for vetting since those agencies and professionals requiring vetting expanded. It is to this backlog that some managers attributed their reasons for commencing staff without having fully vetted them, indicating that they are left in a difficult situation of trying to meet the needs of the children in their care and yet ensuring they do so safely. Conversely, 12 of the managers (27%) stated that under no circumstances would they hire someone without having completed the vetting process. Whilst acknowledging

the difficulties such delays can create for managers, it is concerning that the number of managers who would adhere to this expected practice is so low.

The factor rated as most influential in ensuring compliance with the vetting requirements, with 27 managers (62%) identifying it, was the legal obligation of vetting. This response may be as a result of a misconception regarding the requirements for vetting in children's residential centres. Though the Department of Health and Children circular requires that all staff working in children's residential centres be vetted, there is no statutory basis for vetting and current Garda vetting arrangements are continued on an administrative basis only. The Working Group on Garda Vetting Report was of the view that the administrative vetting process was inadequate and required remedial measures including placing the Garda vetting process on a legislative footing (An Garda Síochána, 2004).

Awareness amongst managers of past abuse which occurred in residential settings was the second most influential factor on vetting, as rated by 60% of managers. This awareness has been created by the publication of inquiry reports including the Madonna House Inquiry Report in Ireland, and numerous inquiry reports of a similar nature and findings in the UK. Corby notes that such inquiries are 'the most formidable instruments of government available for investigating allegations of negligence or wrongdoing' (in Crimmens and Pitts, 2000, p.2). As a result of such inquiries, grave doubts are cast upon the continued viability of residential care as a protective measure for young people and the public are particularly distrustful of the residential care system (Corby et al, 2001). The publication of the Ryan report in May 2009 reflects a very dark chapter in the Irish history of residential care for children. It has once again brought residential care provision for children under close scrutiny by governmental departments as well as lobby groups and organisations that have child protection and welfare at their core.

Corby et al (2001) point out that whilst some of the recommendations of the UK inquiries have had a direct impact on practice, others have led to the establishment of research or reviews of particular aspects of service provision. One of the main areas of practice which was influenced, in particular by the Warner report, was the area of

staff recruitment and selection. Another area which was highlighted as a result of these inquiries is that of inspection and monitoring processes for residential centres.

The registration and inspection process emerged in this research as the third most influential factor in ensuring compliance with vetting requirements. Two managers referred to the role of inspectors in the vetting process in their interviews indicating that inspectors played a significant role in ensuring compliance with the requirements. The Department of Health in the UK issued guidance on the practice of inspection in social services and in this identified the purpose of inspection as helping to ensure that quality of life of service users meets agreed standards; statutory needs are met and good practice is promoted; service users and staff are protected from abuse; and action is identified to improve performance against established standards (Department of Health, 1991). Morgan (2000) asserts that the inspection of children's homes is an external check on welfare provision and its effectiveness.

The delay experienced by managers in obtaining a Garda check far exceeded other difficulties, and was the main factor identified as preventing compliance with expected vetting requirements. The most influential factor in ensuring compliance was the legal aspect of the current requirements.

Conclusion

On reflection of the findings of this study, the author feels that there are a number of pertinent issues which will be referred to here. The interviews, which worked well in terms of providing in-depth information, could have been more structured to focus on relevant issues. More time would have enabled a wider sample to be contacted for the first phase of the research which could have extended beyond one HSE area and this may have presented alternative practices and, in particular, influencing factors on vetting practices. Whilst there was a relatively high response rate to the questionnaires, the author had anticipated a higher rate of response. If this research was to be expanded upon, the author is of the view that a focus on more interviews, either via telephone or in focus groups, would yield more substantial information. The author chose to focus on one sample group which resulted in very relevant information that is practice orientated. However, in order to pursue the findings from this research, the author believes that extending the sample population to include

other groups would yield more benefits in terms of policy development. Specifically, the author feels that the inclusion of the Garda representatives and other groups such as Barnardos and the ISPCC which lobby for legislative change in the area of vetting would greatly contribute to the development of policy and practice in this area of staff vetting.

Conclusion

The findings from this research showed that just over half of all research participants stated that the current vetting arrangements are adequate with a majority of the remaining half indicating that the current requirements do not provide sufficient information on a prospective employee. Approximately half of all participants stated that vetting provides a safeguard to vulnerable young people in residential care however, they emphasised that it should not be considered in isolation. Rather it is part of a larger system of policies and practices designed to keep young people safe. The vast majority of participants indicated that the inclusion of soft information on all prospective employees, exchanged in a safe and structured environment, would act as an additional safeguard for these young people. These findings are a reflection of the lived experiences of managers currently working in the non-statutory sector of residential child care. Their experiences and attitudes towards this aspect of residential care should be used to inform improved practice in the area.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The findings from this research indicated a wide variance in the extent of involvement that managers experienced in the vetting process of staff in their centre and that in many cases the tasks of vetting are distributed amongst staff members within a centre. Kahan (1994) has highlighted the importance of one person taking sole responsibility for this entire process in order to ensure consistency of practice and satisfy that all required information has been received and verified.

This study found that although half of participants were of the view that the current system of vetting is an adequate one, the majority of managers feel that vetting is only one aspect of an overall system that seeks to safeguard young people in residential care. Some managers highlighted the renewal of Garda checks of long term staff members on a regular basis as a measure by which the safety of young people could continue to be protected. However, the main difficulty reported by managers in the vetting process is the time delay they experience in awaiting the return of a Garda check, a similar finding was reported by Warner (1992) who emphasized the need for police to prioritise the criminal checks of staff working in children's residential services. Due to the reported implications of such delays experienced by the managers in this study, it is imperative that changes be made to the current vetting system in order to prevent unnecessary delays.

Although managers indicated that a Garda check and three written references are of equal importance within this process, a significant majority of managers believe that a standardised reference form is a more reliable source of information than an open letter of reference, a view that is supported in literature by Warner (1992), Kiraly (2001), and the Scottish Executive (2007). The data in relation to obtaining and verifying references, as well as their source and content revealed some interesting findings that provide important considerations for future practice. Such a form allows the manager to specify the information they are looking for on the candidate and can afford them the opportunity to inquire if the previous employer would re-employ the candidate and also to indicate if they had any concerns in relation to the candidate or their practice. The source of references is an important factor to consider when

looking for an employee to work with vulnerable young people. The reference should specify a candidate's ability to work with this specific group. If an employer is dissatisfied with the referees provided by the candidate, they should actively seek other referees from the candidate's work history to satisfy their search for relevant information.

Surprisingly, only half of the managers who participated in this research stated that vetting provides a safeguard to young people in residential care despite research indicating that it can act as a safeguard in Warner (1992), Kiraly (2001), An Garda Síochána (2004) and Barnardos (2006). This finding may be indicative of the value placed on the process by managers. Though some managers did refer to the time delay factor in receiving completed Garda checks as the main reason for their commencing employees without being fully vetted, this finding may also offer some explanation for the lack of adherence to full vetting requirements which many managers reported in this study and which has also been found in the Social Services Inspectorate annual reports of the findings of inspections. Boxer (2009) notes that working practices are often less to do with protocol and more to do with what becomes established over time by the workforce itself through familiarity. This point may be of relevance in explaining the lack of adherence to vetting requirements.

A significant majority of participants indicated that the inclusion of 'soft information' would lend itself to providing an additional safeguard to children in residential care if specific guidelines were developed to support this aspect of background information and this finding must be given due consideration by policy-makers.

The three factors managers rated as being most influential in ensuring compliance with vetting requirements are the legal aspect of the matter, an awareness of past abuse in residential settings, and the registration and inspection process. Given this finding, it is imperative that the vetting of staff is placed on a legislative basis which recognises its role in safeguarding vulnerable young people and facilitates the enforcement of these requirements.

Recommendations

- One person within an organisation should be assigned the responsibility of completing staff vetting for a residential centre. This allows consistency of practice; confidentiality regarding information collected and reduces the likelihood of gaps occurring in the vetting process. This person should preferably be the centre manager who is in the unique position of knowing the type of person, including their qualifications, skills and experience, required to fill the vacancy.
- Residential centres should utilise a standardised reference form that includes all of the relevant categories of information they require in order to make an informed decision regarding the suitability of the applicant for the vacant post.
- The Garda Central Vetting Unit should establish and agree a realistic and prompt timeframe within which Garda checks will be returned to employers. This timeframe should be cognisant of the needs of managers in providing an adequate level of staffing in their centre to appropriately meet the needs of the young people placed there. A suggested timeframe would be four weeks.
- Students on placement in residential centres should be subject to the same vetting requirements as full time staff. This should apply to all categories of staff employed to work in children's residential centres, regardless of the nature of their work.
- Vetting of staff should be placed on a legislative basis as a matter of priority. This legislation should allow for the exchange of 'soft information' amongst professionals working in the area of residential child care in order to further safeguard young people.
- Whilst the author acknowledges that vetting is only one aspect of the safeguarding process for young people in residential care, it is imperative that expected requirements for vetting staff is stringently adhered to at all times.

- Vetting of staff should be recognised as an ongoing process that does not end at an employee's entry into an organisation/centre. Organisations should develop and implement structured measures of re-evaluating an employee's vetting throughout their employment.
- Further and more detailed research, encompassing a wider range of groups of relevance to this area, should be conducted. This research could significantly contribute to the development of policy and practice in the area of staff vetting.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Section 1 – Knowledge of the vetting process

1. What is your understanding of the term ‘vetting’?
2. What are the requirements for vetting staff in children’s residential centres?
3. Please describe the process of vetting of staff in this centre.
4. What is your level of involvement in the process of staff vetting:
5. What is your understanding of the reasons for vetting in children’s residential centres?

Section 2 – Views on the current requirements for vetting

6. Are staff in your service always vetted according to the requirements? If not, why not?
7. (a) Can you describe the process you follow when seeking references for candidates.

(b) Is the taking up of references an effective way of vetting staff? In what way is it effective/not effective?
8. (a) Can you describe the process you follow when seeking Garda checks for candidates.

(b) Is the taking up of Garda checks an effective way of vetting staff? In what way is it effective/not effective?
9. What, in your opinion, are the difficulties associated with vetting?

Section 3 – Vetting as a safeguard

10. In your opinion, how can staff vetting, meaning the taking up of a Garda check and references, safeguard children in residential care?

11. What is your view on the belief that the exchange of ‘soft’ information would provide an additional safeguard to children in residential care?

APPENDIX B

Cover letter with questionnaire

D.I.T.

Mountjoy Square

Dublin 1.

01 8823444

2nd June 2009

Dear Manager,

My name is Catherine Hanly and I am currently a student on the Masters programme in Child, Family and Community Studies at Dublin Institute of Technology, Mountjoy Square. The completion of a dissertation is partial fulfilment of the requirements of the MA. I am also an employee of the Health Service Executive, working as an Inspector of non-statutory children's residential centres.

The area of research I have chosen to explore is that of staff vetting in children's residential centres. As you are aware, this is a critical aspect of practice in the area and is one that is continually being raised by professionals in the field. The purpose of this questionnaire is to explore the views on vetting practices in children's residential centres amongst the population of centre managers working in non-statutory children's residential centres. It is important to get an understanding of managers' attitudes towards this topic in order to establish reasons for differences in the implementation of existing guidelines in the practice of staff vetting in children's residential centres. If we can establish this information, we can assist the development of practice in the area.

You are asked, through this questionnaire, to give your view on some of the opinions that have been expressed on the topic of vetting practices in children's residential centres. All information will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be included in the dissertation. Your view will be reflected anonymously along with the views of other centre managers in the findings of the dissertation. Given my own professional involvement in this sector, the completed questionnaires cannot be linked with the respondent in any way, to further ensure anonymity.

I have included a stamped addressed envelope with this questionnaire and would appreciate if you could return the completed questionnaire to me before **Friday 26th June**.

Thank you very much for your participation in this research.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Hanly

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire for Managers of non-statutory children's residential centres

Instructions: this questionnaire will take approximately 30mins to complete. Please answer each question as fully as possible.

1. Please tick **one** of the following which most accurately describes the type of organisation you work for:

a) **Voluntary** _____

b) **Charity** _____

c) **Private non-profit** _____

d) **Private for profit** _____

2. An earlier part of this study involved interviewing Managers of non-statutory children's residential centres. These Managers indicated that the type of organisation they work in (e.g. larger organisations with a separate HR department, heavily layered management structure) influences their level of involvement in the vetting process. What has your experience been in terms of your level of involvement in the vetting process in your current organisation?

3. Do you think that as a Manager your level of direct involvement in the vetting process is important? (Please circle your answer)

Yes **No**

Please explain your answer:

Instruction: Please answer questions 4 – 10 by circling the answer that best represents your level of agreement with the statement using the following scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.

4. Vetting staff in children’s residential centres is an extremely important part of practice.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The Garda and/or police check together with three written references provide sufficient background information on prospective employees without the need to source additional information.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Vetting staff protects vulnerable children from potential abuse.

1 2 3 4 5

7. The source of references is not important; but getting three in total is a priority.

1 2 3 4 5

8. The verification of references provides an invaluable source of additional information on prospective employees.

1 2 3 4 5

9. Vetting staff is only important at their point of entry into the organisation/centre.

1 2 3 4 5

10. Vetting staff is only one piece of a system of safeguarding practices in children’s residential centres.

1 2 3 4 5

11. Do you follow the same vetting process for all types of staff, i.e. full-time, relief, student placements, etc.? (Please circle your answer)

Yes **No**

Please explain your answer.

12. Inspection reports have consistently highlighted a lack of adherence to the requirements for vetting in children’s residential centres. What factors, in your view, prevent people from complying with these requirements?

13. Research has indicated that, when used appropriately, the exchange of ‘soft information’* between professionals can result in the protection of children. What is your view on this?

(* For the purposes of this research, ‘soft information’ is defined as information regarding people who may pose a risk to children but who do not have any criminal convictions for child abuse)

14. Do you think that the current vetting requirements provide an effective safeguard for children in residential care? (Please circle your answer)

Yes **No**

Please explain your answer.

15. Given that the purpose of the vetting process is to provide reliable up to date information on a prospective employees' background, which of the following would you place more value on as a source of such information?

- a) **A Garda check** _____
- b) **3 written references** _____
- c) **Both of the above are equally important** _____

Please explain your answer.

16. Which type of reference do you think is more beneficial in terms of providing relevant information on a prospective employee? (Please tick one)

- a) **A standardised reference form** _____
- b) **A letter of reference** _____

Please explain your answer.

17. When examining a prospective employee's CV, do you:

- a) **consciously look for gaps in their employment history** _____
- b) **look at their social care employment history only** _____
- c) **compare their employment history with their named referees** _____
- d) **none of the above** _____

(Please tick all answers that represent your practice in this task).

18. Please rate the following in terms of their importance as an influencing factor in complying with the vetting requirements in your centre/organisation.

Instruction: 1=not an influence at all, 2=somewhat of an influence, 3=of significant influence, 4=complete influence on the process.

- a) **the Registration and Inspection process** _____
- b) **awareness of past abuse which occurred in residential settings** _____
- c) **information on the matter obtained from staff members in college** _____
- d) **it is a legal requirement** _____

19. Managers indicated that they have, on occasions, commenced staff members without having received all of the required vetting information. Have you yourself been in a position where you had to do this? (Please circle your answer)

Yes **No**

Under what circumstances, if any, would you employ a staff member without having completed the vetting process?

20. Have you ever experienced a situation where a matter of concern arose regarding a staff member's practice following an incomplete or poor vetting process?

(Please circle your answer)

Yes **No**

What lessons, if any, were learned from this?

21. Have you ever experienced a situation where information came to light through the vetting process and as a result young people in the centre were ultimately protected by the process? (Please circle your answer)

Yes **No**

Please elaborate.

22. If you were asked for a reference and you had a concern about the staff member's practice would you: (please tick)

a) Put the relevant information in their written reference _____

b) Not put it in the written reference but inform the employer when they were seeking verbal verification of your written reference _____

c) Include the relevant information in both the written and verbal reference _____

d) Not mention the concern at all _____

23. If you received a completed Garda vetting form for a prospective staff member which stated that the person had a conviction, would this influence your decision-making process vis-à-vis hiring that person? (Please circle your answer.)

Yes **No**

Please explain your answer.

24. What in your view are the potential implications of incomplete vetting for children in residential care? Please explain why you feel these are the potential implications

Thank you for completing this questionnaire, please return it in the included stamped addressed envelope before Friday 26th June to: Catherine Hanly. c/o HSE, 3rd Floor Park House, North Circular Road, Dublin 7.

APPENDIX D

Information sheet for interview participants

Who is the researcher?

Catherine Hanly is currently a student on the Masters programme in Child, Family and Community Studies at Dublin Institute of Technology, Mountjoy Square. The completion of a dissertation is partial fulfilment of the requirements of the MA. She is also an employee of the Health Service Executive, working as an Inspector of non-statutory children's residential centres.

What is this research project about?

This research is an exploration of the attitudes towards vetting practices of centre managers working in residential care provision within the non-statutory sector. This exploration of attitudes will be gathered through a process of interviews and questionnaires. The topic of vetting in children's residential centres has received some attention over the years and though there are existing guidelines regarding the practice, there are differences in implementation practices. The findings from this research will be used to inform and develop practice in the area.

Do I have to participate?

No. Participation in the research is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw participation at any time.

Why were you selected?

Because of your experience in the area of residential care you will be able to offer an informed view on the topic of vetting in children's residential centres.

What will the interview involve?

The questions asked in the interview will focus on your thoughts and feelings on existing practices in vetting, your experience of this process, if any, and your suggestions for any improvements.

The interview will be conducted in your place of work if that is suitable, if not, it will be conducted in the researchers' place of work at a time that is in agreement with both parties.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes and will be recorded using a digital audio-recording device and will be transcribed by the researcher afterwards. You will be offered the opportunity to review the interview transcript and make any changes which you feel are necessary.

The researcher anticipates conducting interviews from late April to early May and will confirm arrangements via telephone at least two weeks prior to the scheduled interview.

What about anonymity/confidentiality?

The researcher will do her utmost to uphold the confidentiality and anonymity of all research participants. This will include separate storage of recorded interviews, transcripts, and contact details. Data will be presented in numbers, percentages and quotes, where appropriate, will not use any identifying information. Names of persons, places, or other singularly identifying characteristics will not be used throughout the research project.

I will be in telephone contact with you again in April in order to agree on a date, time and venue for the interview. In the meantime should you have any queries please don't hesitate to contact me.

Thank you very much for your participation in this research.

Contact details for researcher: