

## Uncovering The Pain: Parents' Experiences of Child Protection

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the results of the first Scottish survey of parents' experiences of child protection. It begins with what we already know. Parents are poorly served by existing child protection processes. Parents are not heard and judged, they feel threatened, and speak of feeling punished and harmed. We also know that these experiences give rise to anger and cynicism. Parents, especially mothers, feel their identity questioned and undermined. Suspicion of parents is endemic. 'Us and them' is a regular refrain relating to parents and social workers.

The survey results echo this existing knowledge. In addition, analysis of the survey results has brought to light less discussed consequences of child protection. These include the debilitating challenges of trying to maintain contact with a child or children in care, the frequency of misunderstanding ADHD, Autism and Associated Conditions, and the sheer depths of despair, helplessness, hopelessness and resignation felt by parents in child protection. Also revealed is being involved in child protection processes has a wider ripple effect that negatively impacts on other family members, results in the loss of jobs, social isolation from friends and neighbours and breakdown of relationships with services such as schools.

## Highlights

**First Scottish Survey of parents' experience of child protection backs up experiences of parents elsewhere.**

**Parents are not heard and judged, they feel threatened, punished and harmed.**

**Anger and cynicism is widespread.**

**Parents, especially mothers, feel their identity questioned and undermined.**

**Us and them' is a regular refrain relating to parents and social workers.**

**The Survey also points to:**

**the debilitating challenges of trying to maintain contact with a child or children in care**

**the frequency of misunderstanding ADHD, Autism and Associated Conditions**

**the depths of despair, helplessness, hopelessness and resignation felt by parents**

**How being involved in child protection processes has a wider ripple effect increasing family, social and economic isolation.**

## **Introduction**

PAR (Parents Advocacy and Rights) is a Scottish parent-led support group that supports parents with children in the care system, child protection, children's hearings, and other situations where they have lost care of their children, or risk losing care. In October 2019 PAR launched an on-line survey that invited sharing of experiences of child protection processes. The survey was made public on the PAR website with links sent to others with an interest such as kinship carers support groups and relevant women's organisations agencies eg. Refuges and those supporting victims of domestic violence. PAR members and subscribers were also contacted. The aim was to gain the first ever impression of parent and other relevant relatives' experiences of Scottish child protection systems and processes and to make this a contribution to the Scottish Government-initiated Independent Care Review that was taking place at the time (this Review has now been published: <https://www.carereview.scot/>).

The survey was in the form of a four-part, 35-question schedule involving a combination of Likert Scale responses and free text. This paper presents and discusses responses to the survey between October and December 2019. See Appendix 1 for the questionnaire.

The paper begins with what we already know about parent experiences of child protection.

### **Child protection: the parental experience**

Picking up pace in the early 1990s, for nearly thirty years, the experiences of parents in child protection processes have been gathered and documented. Some papers are given over wholly to the experiences. Others include these in broader studies of child protection practices. Reports are from parents in a wide variety of Anglophone countries and include a variety of research methods from small-scale studies to more survey-based data collection (Diorio 1992, Farmer 1994, Department of Health 1995, Farmer and Owen 1995, Westcott 1995, Bell 1996, Corby et al 1996, Fernandez 1996, Mason and Selman 1997, Croghan and Miell 1998, Booth and Booth 2004, Dale 2004, Kapp and Vela 2004, Spratt and Callan 2004, Dale et al 2005, Palmer et al 2006, Dumbrill 2006, Cameron 2009, Smeeton and Boxall 2011, Dominelli et al 2011, Ghaffar et al 2012, Maiter et al 2012, Birmingham Strategic Research Team 2014, Walsh and Douglas 2015, Memarnia et al 2015, Bilson 2016, Mellon 2017, Featherstone et al 2018a, Featherstone et al 2018b, Morris et al 2018, Robbins and Cook 2018). Though the following review of the literature is not exhaustive, there are key emergent themes in our knowledge of parental experiences of child protection processes.

### **No Power, Not Heard, Judged and Injustice**

The theme of powerlessness is consistent from early on (Diorio 1992). Accounts of decisions already arrived at, being excluded, judged in intimidating, embarrassing and humiliating manners, blamed and on trial feature (Farmer, 1994; Corby et al, 1996; Maiter et al, 2012). The mothers and fathers in the study by Corby et al described hearing statements made about them by professionals in the conferences that were factually incorrect, but not feeling able to challenge these (1996, p. 480). Birth parents in Featherstone et al echoed this: 'We felt so powerless in the whole process – even when the judge said there should be contact – it did not happen. SSD [Social Services Department] just wanted adoption – at any cost' (2018, p. 23). Over half of the fifty-one parents in the Corby et al study reported being

unheard. Kapp and Vela refer to this as 'the unheard client' (2004). Being judged or feeling on trial is frequently referred to. In Featherstone et al's study one mother felt 'unfairly judged/ labelled ("the report said I was 'hostile' so he could not stay, but I was not hostile – I am 'loud")' (2018, p. 22).

Unfairness is a consistent thread throughout but keenly felt by parents with special needs. In the case of parents with a learning disability, Booth and Booth found that:

So far as the parents were concerned, they were undone by what went on before the court hearings, not what went on in them. The strong sense of injustice so many of them nursed focused on their conviction that they had been 'fitted up' and misrepresented by the evidence put before the court (2010, p. 117).

### **Threatened and In Fear**

'Threatened' was the feeling of parents in the research by Birmingham's Strategic Research Team:

The power of SWs and lack of parental influence, combined with the ultimate fear their children may be removed, left parents feeling almost 'threatened'. The result was compliance: 'I've basically been told if I do anything they don't agree with, they're going to go for custody of my son. So, I can't afford to annoy them in any way' (Parent) (2014, pp 47-48).

Fear of 'the enormous amount of power that practitioners exert over their lives' was also expressed by Canadian fathers (Dominelli, et al, 2011, p. 355). In Dumbrill's study of the experiences of eighteen parents, sixteen described experiencing child protection services as using power over them in ways they perceived to be 'absolute', 'tyrannical' or 'frightening' (2006, p. 30). These powerful emotions were '...evoked by their sense that workers held pre-conceived and narrow views of their family, that they were not necessarily acting in the best interests of the children and that decisions had already been made, making any negotiation futile' (ibid). An earlier Scottish report included similar feelings particularly surrounding the 'fear of child removal (which) is pervasive and amounts to a hugely influential block on decent relationships with child protection workers' (Scottish Executive, 2002 p.114).

## **Punished and Harmed**

The parents in the Birmingham study by the City's Strategic Research Team also described feeling punished: '...it feels like all the failures that Social Services have been having with other cases...we're being punished for the failures. They're being overzealous with us to make up for the mistakes...' (Parent)' (2014, p.94). The Birmingham study concludes by recommending that 'Parents left in the CP process – who feel they have removed the risk (other parent) - can feel they are still being stigmatised, monitored and punished even after doing the right thing' (2014, p. 93). Being punished also surfaced in the experiences of the birth mothers in Featherstone et al (2018a). 'Harmed' has been expressed elsewhere (Department of Health, 1995, Croghan and Meill, 1998). In fact, Bilson, discussing rising levels of suspicion of abuse, suggests that unfounded investigations are in themselves harmful (2016).

## **Anger and Conflict, Hostility and Cynicism**

Corby et al observed '... a good deal of non-verbal behaviour signifying tension and disagreement. With regard to parents, such behaviour included angry or despairing looks and shaking of the head. Professionals often looked knowingly and disbelievingly at each other when parents made comments with which they disagreed' (1996, p. 481). In their study of child protection cases that have led to adoption, Featherstone et al found feelings of being deceived (2018). One consequence of negative experiences is hostility and cynicism, summed up in: "My warning to people now is that if you need help the last people you should go to is to social services. We warn anybody we can. They are not there to help" (Croghan and Meill, 1998 p. 454). Cynicism is also obvious in a 1986 publication by the parent self-help organisation, PAIN in chapter headed: 'Things The Authorities Say' that goes on: 'Even if you haven't done it (child injury), it would be better if you say you have' quoted in Crane (2015, p. 465). One parent in the Birmingham Council study echoes that of other parents who fear that vehement reactions categorise them as hostile (Featherstone, 2018a): 'Very annoyed...It made me feel like the kind of person that they were making me out to be... they were making me out to be this big horrible mad...aggressive kind of person...' (quoted in 2014, p. 84). Schofield et al's study of parental experiences across three countries noted that:

For some parents, anger was the dominant emotion. What the child welfare services did to them felt like harassment and they actively tried to document the treatment they and their family were said to have suffered, storing boxes of papers. They saw the fight to get the child back as restoring their self-esteem, because they never gave up. As one mother said 'Even if I am knocking my head against a brick wall, I cannot stop' (2011, p. 81).

Anger (at a lack of apology over being assumed to be guilty) was expressed by Canadian fathers in their experiences of child protection (Dominelli et al, 2011) and in a later study, also of fathers' experiences, by Brandon et al, 2017, in which assumptions of guilt and mistrust by social workers played a part in initiating angry feelings.

### **Social Worker Qualities**

In the literature under review, there is mention of good, and for want of a better word, poor skills. An alarmingly negative picture of practice behaviours and processes is described with very few examples of positive social work involvement: 'Negative characteristics were commonly referred to as 'arrogant', 'snotty', 'bossy' and 'couldn't care less' and were seen as precipitating uncooperative client responses...not having telephone calls returned, were a major source of frustration for many parents' (Dale, 2004, p. 150). Dominelli et al, 2011 found fathers making the same complaint. In addition to failed telephone calls, Buckley et al observe that 'Punctuality was also considered important by service users and several commented on how irritating they found it when appointments were broken'. They quote a parent: 'They'd make an appointment, and you're waiting, and they wouldn't turn up, you know . . . like, 'I'll come on Tuesday at three o'clock' we're still waiting for her on Friday at three o'clock, you know . . . you're left hanging there'. Buckley et al continue: 'Frustration with the apparent indifference shown by workers was compounded by the perception of service users that they would not 'get away' with the same type of inconsistent and unreliable behaviour themselves' (2011 p. 106). Frustration over this lack of consistency and courtesy has also been voiced in fathers' experiences: "They say, 'right it is 4.59, I finish in a minute so we are going to cut the meeting short'.... you can't just be a Social Worker from 9 till 5, what happens if a kid gets beaten up at 6 o'clock?" (Brandon et al, 2017, p. vii).

The seemingly minor etiquette or organisational deficiencies of failure to return calls, unpunctuality or postponing meetings and home visits with no or short notice amount to a clear message of uncaringness. Thorpe and Thomson observe that

From the body of parental perceptions research, there is a worrying indication that child protection practice may increasingly be perceived as 'inhumane'—patronising, provocative and punitive: 'Many parents feel judged as totally bad and, as a result, are treated with disrespect, and denied even basic courtesies of civil human interaction (2003 cited in Dale 2004, p. 153).

In addition to the description of workers as 'inhumane' (also in Featherstone et al, 2018), the word 'cold' comes up frequently. 44% of the sixty-one parents in Maiter et al's study spoke thus about their workers (2012). Morris et al use 'cold-hearted' and quote one parent about the social worker in the case of her child: 'She saw me sobbing in reception and she walked past me twice and then said there were nothing wrong' (2018, p. 17). Of the image of Irish child protection workers in their study, Buckley et al are brief and brutal: 'hostile, powerful and to be avoided if possible' (2011, p. 104).

There are a few examples of caring skills: "This guy treated me with respect, he didn't raise his voice... He was very low-key, he didn't question any of my answers, let me speak, helped me find solutions to the problem that just arose. And it wasn't rushed on me, I did break down quite a few times, he handed me a tissue, which I thought was very nice, and just more or less told me not to give up hope, that things were going to work out if I did things that they wanted me to do" (quoted in Cameron, 2009, pp. 179 – 180). Cameron goes on to quote one accolade from a parent about her social worker: She even offered to clean one day. She said well, I'll help you clean no problem..." (ibid., p. 69). Appreciation of concrete help crops up regularly (Palmer, 2006, Birmingham Strategic Support Team, 2014). Amongst this type of help that was appreciated Maiter et al note 'These workers made special efforts to support them during crisis periods, and provided instrumental help such as organizing Christmas gifts and bringing groceries, baby formula, and baby food' (2012, p. 7). The Focus Group in Robbins and Cook felt that 'instead of maybe threatening all the time through social services, saying so we're going to put your children on a protective register, maybe go and help a bit more and show some awareness' (2018, p. 1673).

## Comments

1. Suspicion seems endemic. In particular, suspicion of parents. Invariably child protection means protection from parents. It:

...involves a very different conception of the relationship between an individual or group, and others than does care. Caring seems to involve taking the concerns and needs of the other as the basis for action. Protection presumes the bad intentions and harm that the other is likely to bring to bear against the self or group and to require a response to that potential harm (Tronto, 1993, pp. 105–106).

In this way, parents can be 'othered'. The mothers in Smeeton and Boxall's study felt they had 'lost ownership' of their own stories (2011 p. 447). Threatened identity also appears in the Schofield et al study of parent experiences in England, Norway and Sweden (2011). One Australian parent in Hardy and Darlington's study spoke of the effect of the child protection process on her identity: 'they stripped me totally of my parenthood' (2008, p. 256). Erasure of identity as a parent was also found in the Canadian study of fathers (Dominelli, et al, 2011, p. 357). Practices involving late or absent copies of reports or having to ask for these (Ghaffar et al, 2012, Birmingham Strategic Research Team, 2014), cancellation of meetings with little prior notice (Morris et al, 2018) and the lack of encouragement to have legal advice, or an advocate (Walsh and Douglas, 2015) also combine to 'other' parents. It can be speculated that at base, this negation of self, dehumanising and 'othering' of parents is a powerful element in the experiences of child protection. In cases where there is an added race, nationality or culture dimension, the effect of such 'othering' can be more acute as in the case of the aboriginal father in Dominelli et al (2011, p. 362).

2. The research has generally involved many more mothers than fathers (Clapton, 2009, Brandon et al, 2017). What we do know of fathers' experiences of child protection is firstly,

that in general, men or overlooked, whether as a resource, a risk, or both (Brandon et al, 2017). Secondly, for those fathers that are non-abusive, their experiences echo those of mothers – with an added dimension of social work suspicion about their capability to parent a child (Clapton, 2009, Dominelli et al, 2011, Brandon et al, 2017). Thirdly, men's presentation of self in tense situations can be deemed a cause for exclusion: "Then they cancelled the meeting, said I was aggressive...I said 'I talk the way I talk mate. I can't help it. I'm not aggressive, I'm just pissed off'" (Brandon et al, 2017, p. 99).

3. The need for parent advocates is raised by Birmingham Council's Strategic Research Team (2014) and Walsh and Douglas. The latter underline the difficulties in communication with child protection workers, when they note that 'Mothers did not know about or did not understand what was happening in relation to their children (including where their children were located at times), why certain things were taking place or what their rights were (2015, p. 100).

So, mindful of what we emerges from the existing literature, this paper now presents the results of the PAR Survey.

### **Doing Surveys**

Online surveys are now in regular use. Methodologies typically take one of two forms: (1) e-mail-based surveys in which participants are e-mailed directly and the response returned by e-mail and (2) Web-based surveys in which the survey is hosted on a Web site for participants to complete. In the case of web-based surveys, potential participants may be solicited using networks of contacts, recommendations and advertisements. Alessi and Martin (2010) offer a useful discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of online surveys. An advantage being that lay people, self-help groups and other citizens' organisations can compile them and use the results to draw attention to issues, injustices, their interests and campaigns. In this sense such surveys are democratic and empowering for those who may not have access to more sophisticated means of research.

The disadvantages of online surveys are well documented (McInroy, 2016) and include:

- bias – the 'reach' of the survey may be limited to interests close to the originators

- the anonymous nature of online responses means that the authenticity of the responses cannot be verified
- in surveys that seek an evaluation of services, responses that praise are regularly outnumbered by those that complain or are negative
- there is no safeguard against the survey being completed multiple times by the same person or persons.

It is possible that one or all of these drawbacks were present in the present survey, and they are acknowledged as shortcomings.

As a response to the potential disadvantages of the PAR survey, it has to be noted that, parents who have experienced, or are in ongoing child protection processes, face considerable barriers to having their voices heard. This may be because of fear of reprisals or the consequences for their children should they be identified. And, because many of the parents involved in child protection processes do not have the resources or spirit to express their views through traditional channels such as elected representatives or writing to the press, the internet with its capacity for ease of use and anonymity, offers a convenient medium for voicing discontent or, as noted, less frequently, satisfaction( Buckley et al, 2011).

For this group of respondents, the findings do provide this channel for their lived experiences and perceptions of agency intervention. The value of the results is supported by the relatively large response rate and the lack of any previous survey of Scottish parents' experiences and views of child protection processes. Furthermore, an element of transferability is present in this study in that the themes that will be discussed are echoed in already published research on parents' perspectives, thus lending integrity to the results of an analysis of the survey.

### **The Challenge of Researcher Bias**

The author has worked as a qualified children and families social worker for forty years and now lectures and writes on the subject. He is passionate about the capacity of social work to bring about change for the good in people's lives and has published extensively on many aspects of social work practice. He has brought a critical eye to adoption, social work history and contemporary children and families social work practice. He was involved in the

foundation of PAR, his partner and friends are members of PAR, and he has met other members of the group. He was invited to analyse the results of the survey on the basis of being a supportive and engaged academic and as such trusted to treat the responses with care and compassion. In the words of Banks (1998), the author is an 'indigenous-insider', that is a researcher that holds the values and perspectives, plus knowledge, of the community being researched. Here, bias can be 'a source of insight as well as error (Aguiler 1981, p. 26).

### **The Survey Findings**

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis were used to identify and analyze patterns in the survey responses as added to individual questions, and in the Free Text sections. The first step of thematic analysis is to become familiar with the data through repeated reading. The second generates initial codes that begin to show patterns. The third step is to search for 'big' themes in these patterns. The fourth step reviews and refines the themes. The fifth step gives a name to these themes. The sixth step offers the result of the analysis with excerpts from the text that provide illustration. In addition, 'member checking' was employed as a method of validating the survey results: 'Member checking involves sharing results with participants to determine whether the themes of a qualitative study accurately represent their experiences' (Anzur and Myers, 2020, p.6). In this case, the results were shared with PAAR members and it was felt that these were reflective of their experiences and the other parents and family members involved in child protection with whom they were in contact.

Eleven themes emerged in the analysis of the survey results. Six of these corresponded to themes identified in the existing literature and these are presented first in order of frequency of expression, e.g. the theme with the most instances throughout the survey responses was that of being 'punished or harmed' (on forty occasions, such a feeling was expressed). Comment has been kept to a minimum to allow these voices from child protection to be heard, but also restricted to two per theme for reasons of space.

#### *Punished and Harmed*

I was absolutely destroyed by it and I consider it an achievement that I did not actually kill myself. The only reason I did not is that I could not add bereavement to

the huge suffering my girls were already living with because of the social worker. My girls are back with me now but we are all deeply scarred. At one terribly low point while we were apart I had a nervous breakdown because of the emotional stress (S1.FT90<sup>1</sup>).

A second contribution spoke directly (physical) harm their child:

My child was left with tooth decay from 2002 to 2005 with tooth decay - aged 5 my child had 8 teeth extracted From 2007 to 2010 we raised concern about child's teeth - A's teeth were "dirty, rotten, pitted and chipped and black stumps". 2010 we asked the Family Court for a specific order that child receive dental treatment. 2011 child received dental treatment to 16 teeth including extraction of both primary and adult teeth (S4.FT39).

In thirty-four instances there were expressions of anger and conflict (though the latter is an implicit thread throughout the survey).

#### *Anger and Conflict, Hostility and Cynicism*

Value judgements and references to outdated theories with the application of the social services handbook rhetoric, only added to the levels of persecution felt. Fabricated and cut and pasted false reporting and blatant lies has totally ruined my life and because no one within LA SS, SSSC would allow complaints to be rectified and corrected, I have been left feeling like a child abuser and have missed out on a right to private life and family for 21 years (S1.FT60).

...lies in reports are taken as facts even when proven, if can't prove one allegation then social services change allegations throughout proceedings, social services ignore complaints under guise of can't investigate whilst in court despite proof of lies, children are encouraged into giving negative answers to questions that are misleading in order to be used against parents and often ignored when they say they want to come home. Social work should be honest and truthful not biased and not work with preset agendas. Contact with Social work should be recorded fully for

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<sup>1</sup> Responses are titled according to the relevant section of the survey, e.g. S1 FT90 is Section 1 Free Text entry number 90

both party's protection as the inherent dishonesty from most social work in my experience is disgusting... (S4.FT23).

Anger and conflict shaded into hostility and cynicism in some cases:

It had nothing to do with child protection, it's all about them. everything they wrote was utter rubbish, made up crap because they know nothing is recorded, it might be in black or white it might on certain occasions even signed but you can't complain, god forbid if you do all they do is even expand the lies they tell about you to make sure you never ever dare to complain ever again (S1.FT48).

In twenty-nine contributions, feelings of lack of justice ('unfair') were evident.

### *Injustice*

Two children were on the protection register for 17 months, for no valid reason other than being related to their sibling. These 2 children were referred to the Children's Reporter and as there was no valid reason for referring them the Reporter dismissed the case immediately. Nevertheless, SS kept these 2 children on the register for a further 10 months. What a total waste of money and resources, sending a sw out every fortnight for 17 months for 2 children who were never at any risk from their parent or their sibling. These 2 children were traumatised by this 17 month experience. And though the wildly inaccurate child plans for these 2 children have been repeatedly challenged by the parent, in writing, these 17 month old, inaccurate child plans are still on file and in use and have been shared inappropriately with 3rd parties. This is not GIRFEC. This in no way has been in these children's best interests. It has caused them a great deal of detriment (S1.FT46).

Social work reports were frequently handed to us in the waiting room of hearings, where we often discovered for the first time, anecdotes which were simply untrue, based on "community reports". Motivations were ascribed to myself, my partner and my children which again, were simply untrue, and any attempt to clarify in the hearing were brushed off. When the children attempted to clarify things in hearings we were subsequently accused of coaching them. There was no ability to get any erroneous information corrected (S1.FT87).

There were fourteen references to having no power, not being heard or judged.

### *No Power, Not Heard, Judged*

Anything I sent in writing prior to meetings was ignored and disregarded. Anything I sent in writing following meetings was ignored and disregarded. Minutes of meetings were incredibly inaccurate and when challenged about the inaccuracies I was, again, ignored and comments disregarded. (S1.3.5 - Section 1 Question 3.5)

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### *Threatened and In Fear*

Eight responses spoke to being in fear:

Any involvement with social services make you fear for yours and your children's life. They write biased opinions about you as a person without having ever met you or heard your story. They have made me so scared and paranoid of losing my children, it's made me ill (S1.FT28).

I live in fear every day that my son who lives at home with me will be taken away from me, also through no fault of my own I have wrapped him up in cotton wool because I'm terrified he dare get a knock or bruise or cut as little boys inevitable do

and if he does, my heart panics thinking someone may report me. I live in fear every day from social services (S1.FT74).

A sixth dimension in the literature was that of the qualities of social service provision and social workers. These too feature in the survey responses.

### *Social Worker Qualities*

The author has struggled with how to engage with some of the more scabrous comments and invective relating to social work involvement. Whilst most of the above themes already emerging carry implicit assessments of social work, more direct comment has emerged. This has been dismaying and alarming to read. Although some discretion has been exercised, it is fair to say that the survey responses are colourful and damning of social workers' behaviour. Whilst this may not be too surprising given the obstacles to partnership with parents that are built in to a child protection system that regularly sets the needs of children against those of parents (as indicated earlier), and the potential for biased survey responses already discussed, the depth of lack of trust in social workers is astonishing. On a scale of 1-10, 81% (n=128) said they had no or little trust in the social worker working with their family (S1.Q.7). When asked whether they felt treated with respect and dignity by social workers and other professionals (S1. Q4), 87 out of the 129 that answered said 'never' and a further 29 said 'rarely', making 90% who felt that they were never or rarely treated with respect. Free text responses provided added evidence: "the majority of social workers these days do not seem to have an ounce of compassion or empathy towards the children and families they say they are there to protect!!!" (S1.FT55).

An additional theme within these comments was that of social worker turnover rates and absences: "Social worker changing 5 times in 8 months didn't help anyone either" (S1. FT62) and: "Our social worker was off sick more than she was working and apparently another 4 social workers were also off sick and this left some people us included having no social worker for months" (S1 FT65).

Just one comment in the survey spoke well of social workers: "I'm an approved adoptive parent, not the sinister, bad parent the social worker alleged) so I have also experienced excellent social workers (in our home area of ...) who were open and honest, well informed, adhered to best practice and were in every way worthy of praise" (S4.FT43).

Just as themes in the literature overlap so too have the survey themes, for example, not being heard is a form of injustice.

### **Additional Themes arising from the Survey Results**

There were additional emergent themes not as common in the existing literature on experiences of child protection involvement.

#### *The Challenges and Agonies of Doing Contact*

The effort that goes into establishing and maintaining contact is superhuman given the obstacles when children in foster care may be many hours and miles away (“the two hundred mile journey there was too much for me” (S1. FT21) and children placed in separate foster homes in separate towns (S1. FT85). In the questionnaire’s section on Contact, one grandparent said:

Contact was in unsuitable venues and supervised by unqualified overly interventionist staff. Contact with wider family members (who needed to travel distances) were obstructed by social work. There was no desire to maintain contact with cousins and wider family despite the children's isolation and distress in care. Absolutely inhumane (S2.FT4).

Contact sessions are reported to be slow to set up (four months for siblings to wait to see each other S2.FT 44), held in poorly equipped and unsuitable premises by overly interventionist staff, painfully awkward and “continually interrupted for the smallest of reasons” (S2. FT15) with no positives recorded (“My sons cuddle me but this is not reported” S2. FT18). And as widely known, moves within care were frequent (26 weeks in 18 different placements in one case).

There were also reports of injustices large and small, such as respite provided for carers of their children but not for the parents whilst their child was with them, Facetime provided for carers to be introduced to children but not made available to parents to speak with their children. One response concludes: “Just hard all round, I grieve before I see them and I grieve afterwards and I'm always left to think/feel what is the purpose of it and would it be better off I didn't see them at all” (S2. FT23).

#### *The Frequency of Misunderstanding ADHD, Autism and Associated Conditions*

This theme emerged in six accounts: “School told social services I was mentally ill and making up his autistic traits so he was denied support - apart from respite which made his behaviour worse” (S1. FT21). Another commented: “The social workers have no training in Autism, ADHD yet they are writing reports saying she gets upset after telephone contact so it must be the family causing her distress. When the calls are stopped, her behaviour is just the same. She has autism” (S4.FT37).

*Despair, Helplessness, Hopelessness and Resignation*

The depth of these emotions is striking (“if the government wants my child I have no choice” – S1.FT59) and there is a sense of being brought as low as possible:

Contact is always so hard, my kids are happy but very confused, huge identity issues and academics have been effected also. Writing letters is a tedious task and serves no real purpose as my kids aren't told anything I write and aren't given the photos I send anyway. Just hard all round, I grieve before I see them and I grieve afterwards and I'm always left to think/feel what is the purpose of it and would it be better off I didn't see them at all (S2.FT23).

*Invective*

As noted earlier there were frequent belittling of or damning references to social workers and social work behaviour, many of these expressed a depth of feeling that social workers were engaged in a personal campaign of vindictiveness against the family or parent (“hell bent on getting my kids” (S3.FT34), “they just like taking babies from vulnerable people” (S4.FT6). The ascribed actions of social workers are unable to be confirmed or denied, as are the claims made in the survey, however the *feeling* of being the target of individual purposeful malice is strong:

The majority of the time the SW never answered her phone which is ridiculous as I would phone her office saying I'm the child's mother wanting to speak to her to be told she wasn't in the office then I'd ring back and ask to talk to her due to a private matter and not stating who I was and she's answer the phone straight away so she was purposely ignoring my calls (S4.FT38).

Eruptions of invective are undoubtedly common and unavoidable given the adversarial nature of UK child protection processes, however, care needs to be exercised over using these as further evidence of malfeasance on the part of parents.

### *'Cards Marked'*

The idea of having one's 'cards marked' surfaced in the study by Broadhurst and Mason (2020). Parents stressed over never being permitted to be a parent again after a child protection investigation and removal of a child. This surfaced in the survey in brief remarks: "continual lies still held on file" (S1.FT68), "even years later, once statements are proven as false, they remain on file" (S4.FT32) and in despair over feeling never being able to be free of child protection investigation:

I was never told about an investigation, I was allocated a social worker when I moved back to my own area. He had removed my older children years before & said from the start he would have my other children removed from my care (S1.FT25).

### *The Diminution of Social Capital*

Lastly, the survey has uncovered worlds where considerable amounts of time must be taken off work with the prospect of losing a job or a detriment to a career, lost partners, lost friends ("lost a lot of friends as social work wanted to run checks on anyone that came into my house. I have no social life now" Q1. FT2), the inception of poor school-family relations ("assumed by the school that they were abused, but in reality had significant additional needs" 1QFT68), neighbour hostility ("verbally abused", "partner was labelled a paedophile by neighbours because people were trying to guess why the children had gone" 1Q.FT82) and damage to members of wider family ("it affected my parents' depression" 1Q. FT27).

The 'ripple' effects of a child protection investigation can then be understood as emanating outwards from parent and child to adversely affect relationships with next of kin, friends, neighbours, other universal services such as schools, but also to place a brake on present and future career prospects.

### **End Note**

This paper has been designed in two halves that hopefully hold together. What we already know of parents' experiences of child protection processes and the first survey of these involving Scottish parents. The survey's limitations have been pointed but nevertheless they provide further weight to, and expand, the themes in the existing literature and as such ought to be afforded attention. The survey analysis has also thrown up items that are less frequent in the literature. These items are offered as potential signposts for future investigation.

Taken as a whole it is hoped that the survey has given a platform to people whose voices are rarely heard and opened a window on practices that ought to change for the good of everyone involved in protecting children and supporting families.

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## Appendix 1

**Parent experience of children's care system in Scotland****1. Experiences of the child protection investigatory process**

1. Were you included in decisions being made about your child?

Always/More often than not/Rarely/Never

2. Did you receive reports and invitations voluntarily to meetings at least 7 days in advance?

Always/More often than not/Rarely/Never

3. Were you given an opportunity to share your views before and during key meetings?

Always/More often than not/Rarely/Never/

A Free Text option was provided here to include responses that did not use the Scale

4. Did you feel treated with respect and dignity by social workers and other professionals involved in the child protection case?

Always/More often than not/Rarely/Never

5. Did the child protection investigation lead to financial hardship?

Yes/No

6. Has the child protection investigation affected your ability to work or future career options?

Yes/No

The first section concluded with a scale relating to trust:

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being not at all, 10 being completely) how much did you feel you could trust the social worker working with your family?

Then Free Text: Any further comments regarding your experiences? For instance did the child protection investigation affect your feelings of self-worth? Did the investigation affect your health? Is there enough support for parents during such investigations? What could be different?

**2. Experiences relating to their child having been removed to and in care**

1. Have your children been removed from your care?

Yes/No

2. How long has or was your child in care?

Less than 3 months/3 months-1 year/1-2 years/More than 2 years

3. Were your children placed with a family member?

Yes and they continue to be/Yes but only after a period in foster care/Family was not approved/Family was never considered

4. Have your children been separated from each other?

Yes/No

5. Were you given clear reasons for removal?

Yes/No

6. Please tick any of these official reasons for removal that were given

Physical abuse/Sexual abuse/Domestic violence/Risk of emotional harm/Neglect/Medical, Disability, Special Education Needs, 'Fabricated and Induced Illness'/Poverty/Poor engagement and cooperation with Social Work

7. Has your child been returned to your care?

Yes/No

8. Was there any support following the removal of your child?

Yes/No

9. Was there any support following the return of your child?

Yes/No

10. Has your child been adopted?

Yes/No

11. If your child was adopted do you have contact and if so what form does this take?

Free Text

### 3. Experiences relating to contact with their child whilst they were in care

1. Do you have/ did you have contact with your 'looked after child'?

Yes/No

2. How frequent is/was this?

1-2 times a year/1-2 times a month/1-2 times a week/3 or more times a week

3. Is/was contact meeting the needs of your child?

The question here offers a complex choice of responses ranging from a yes to a no with nineteen possible points in between.

4. Are/were contact facilities suitable for you and your child, e.g. premises, catering, travel to and from? Please rate 1 star (not suitable) to 5 stars (Very good)

5. Is/was your contact supervised?

Yes/No

6. Did your contact change over time? Increase or decrease?

Increased/Decreased

7. Was contact cancelled regularly by the local authority or regularly disrupted?

Yes/No

8. Do you have 'indirect contact', that is not face-to-face?

Yes/No

9. Does your child have contact with any siblings from whom they are separated?

Yes/No

Then Free Text: Any further comments regarding your experiences of contact? What would you change? What would you keep, or want more of?

#### 4. Representation and advocacy

1. Have you had legal advice and support?

Yes/No

2. Did you have legal advice and representation pre- removal proceedings (court)?

Yes/No

3. Did you have legal advice and representation after removal proceedings (court) commenced?

Yes/No

4. Do you feel you had adequate and effective legal support?

Yes/No

5. Have you had an independent supporter or advocate for you?

Yes/No

6. Were they helpful?

Yes/No

7. Would you have benefited from such support earlier?

Yes/No

Free Text: Any further comments regarding your experiences of support during care proceedings, or lack of it?

The questionnaire concludes with an invitation to add anything else:

'The next section is an invitation to tell us more if you wish. Is there anything that we have forgotten or extra that you would like to tell us about your contact with social services?'