AN OVERVIEW OF SUPERVISION IN FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRES
IN THE WESTERN REGION

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ABSTRACT

Supervision plays a key role in the provision of health and human services. An extensive literature exists on supervision as an element of professional support and development in what are commonly referred to as the ‘helping professions’. This study provides an overview of supervision in Family Resource Centres (FRCs) in the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme (FRC Programme) in the Western Region. Administered by Tusla, the newly established Child and Family Agency, FRCs provide a range of community-based family supports and services. They are defined by their community development approach which informs the values and methods underpinning their work. A strategic framework for family support was adopted by the FRC Programme in 2011. The importance of ensuring that workers who are responsible for implementing the family support strategy have structured supervision and guidance, so that they have the tools and competencies to engage successfully with families and the broader community is widely recognised. The level of supervision that is available for FRC workers is examined in this study and current challenges are identified. Ways of ensuring more effective supervision are considered. The research calls for the development of a supervision strategy which promotes a common understanding of its purpose and value within FRCs. Research Participants also identified the need for clear guidelines and standards for supervision practice as well as appropriate training to support the delivery of more effective supervision in FRCs in the Western Region.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

Widely accepted as an essential component of professional practice in what are commonly referred to as the ‘helping professions’, supervision is a phenomenon that is defined and practiced in a myriad of different ways. Often a contested practice suggestive of both surveillance and support, supervision can be provided formally by an experienced and qualified professional and informally by colleagues and peers. Many promote it as an essential process to validate professional identity, develop the reflective capacity of workers, encourage a solution focused approach to practice and enhance experiential learning. Others argue that it is increasingly being used purely as a managerial tool to monitor targets, outcomes and accountability. Like many phenomena, its impact is largely influenced by who is providing it, how it is being provided and the extent to which its provision is underpinned and informed by an empirically sound paradigm.

This study is concerned with supervision in Family Resource Centres (FRCs) in the Western Region of the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme (FRC Programme) which is recognised as Ireland’s largest community-based family support programme (Family Support Agency, 2011). O’Neill’s definition of supervision is recognised in many FRCs and was employed for the purpose of this study: ‘Supervision is a partnership process of on-going reflection and feedback between a named supervisor and supervisee in order to ensure and enhance effective practice. When provided in a supportive manner it offers a regular, structured opportunity to discuss work, reflect on practice and progress and to plan for future development’ (p.19, 2004). Within FRCs the concept of supervision is loosely referred to as staff support, supervision and support or support and supervision. In the interest of clarity and with the understanding that support, along with accountability and learning, is one of its three functions (O’Neill, 2004), it is referred to simply as supervision throughout this text.
1.2 Theoretical Approach

The administration of the FRC Programme recently transferred from the Family Support Agency to Tusla, the new Child and Family Agency that was established in January, 2014. The new Agency represents the most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland (Tusla, 2014a). The move necessitated a shift in focus within FRCs from the coordination of community development initiatives to the delivery of community-based family supports and services. Further adjustments in work practices may well be required, before the role of FRCs within the national service delivery framework and the local areas pathways model adopted by the Agency (Gillen et al, 2013), is clarified.

Effective family support requires a mixture of description and questioning that is informed by action leading to change (Dolan, Pinkerton and Canavan, 2006). People working in the area need to incorporate theory and research into their practice. This involves, ‘Identification and implementation of a practice task and subsequent reflection of the task’ (Dolan, Canavan and Brady, 2006, p. 43). Connecting theory to practice not only facilitates the professional development of individual practitioners but also promotes best practice in agencies in relation to the design, delivery and effectiveness of their services (ibid). The study is grounded in Kolb’s experiential learning theory which defines learning as: ‘The process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’, (1984, p. 41). Kolb’s reflective model is centred on the transformation of information into knowledge after the situation has occurred. It involves four stages: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. In this way the learning that is gained from a situation is continuously applied and reapplied building on a practitioner’s prior experiences and knowledge. O’Neill emphasises the critical role of the organisation in supporting individual learning and professional development: ‘The components of supervision – accountability, support and learning - need to be firmly valued and established in the overall culture of any organisation...and must be prioritised and recognised as necessary by both management and staff alike’ (2004, p. 57).

This study grew out of the researchers’ experience of working directly with FRCs in a support and training capacity. It is influenced by the belief that supervision is an invaluable learning tool in supporting workers to develop professionally and to respond
effectively to changes in policy and practice within their operational environments. It aims to present a comprehensive overview of supervision in FRCs in the Western Region which boasts fifty-three FRCs and two outreach Centres. The research is timely given the recent change in the wider FRC Programme and the changing environments that the staff and volunteers within individual FRCs are working in. Specifically the research attempts to demonstrate the current levels of access to supervision in FRCs; describe how supervision is provided; define the purpose and value of supervision as it is perceived by staff and volunteers; highlight the challenges that present in providing supervision and identify areas that could be improved or developed in order to enhance the experience of supervision within FRCs.

1.3 The Structure of the Study
The introduction to the research is presented in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 provides the context for the study and describes the background to the FRC Programme, the unique nature of the work of FRCs and the policy landscape within which they operate. The literature review in Chapter 3 presents the key discourses relating to the research topic. The rationale and the objectives for the research, together with the research design and the methodology that was used in its execution, are explained in Chapter 4. The ethical considerations as well as the limitations of the research are highlighted. The findings from the questionnaire-based survey and interviews are described in detail, under the five research objectives, in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses the research findings and their implications with reference to the wider literature. The main themes and arguments are drawn into an overall conclusion in Chapter 7. It is hoped that the research findings will impact on the current understanding of supervision within FRCs, generate debate on contemporary practice and strengthen and inform future supervision practice in FRCs in the Western Region.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

2.1 Introduction
Chapter 2 provides the context for the study and describes the setting in which the research is carried out. The section on the background to the FRC Programme highlights the importance of the voluntary input into it. The geographical location of the study is detailed. The value of a community development approach in informing the development of local responses to identified needs is included in the description of the nature of the work of individual FRCs. The policy landscape that has influenced recent developments within the FRC Programme is succinctly explained. Finally, how family support is delivered is discussed with regard to the importance of effective supervision for workers.

2.2 Background to the FRC Programme
The first ten FRCs were funded on a pilot basis by the Department of Social Welfare in 1994 to mark the International Year of the Family. This decision was motivated by the recognition of a gap in statutory provision for community development activities to support families and tackle child poverty (Family Support Agency, 2011). In 1998, the Commission on the Family recommended expansion of the programme as FRCs represented, ‘…extraordinary value for money for state investment’ (p.16). Through its established network of 106 centres nationwide and two outreach Centres, the FRC programme delivers universal family support services in disadvantaged areas across the country (Tusla, 2014a).

In addition to combating disadvantage, the FRC Programme aims to improve the functioning of the family unit (Tusla, 2014a). Each FRC receives a budget allocation from Tusla which is ring-fenced to cover the costs associated with core-funded workers, rent and overheads. Individual FRCs are legally constituted as ‘not for profit’ companies which are limited by guarantee. All FRCs rely on volunteerism and volunteers are engaged at all levels of activity; either acting as company directors on the board of management or directly assisting core-funded workers to implement local
action plans. As part of a nationally administered programme, FRCs can access regionally based support services. Two Regional Support Agencies (RSAs) are contracted to promote best practice and monitor the development of the required skills base for effective management of FRCs by providing technical support, advice and training (Family Support Agency, 2013).

An integral part of Tusla’s Local Area Pathways model, FRCs act as a first step to community participation and social inclusion (Tusla, 2014a). A regard for community as a critical arena for addressing difficulties and promoting a range of benefits is well known within the areas of social policy and social service provision (Chaskin, 2008). Ensuring that each FRC is rooted in the community, local people are involved in developing responses to tackle the issues that they have identified. Often described as participative and empowering organisations, FRCs support individuals and families whilst also building the capacity and leadership of local communities. McKeown identifies the critical nature of this: ‘The centrality of community development in informing the approaches, values and methods underpinning the work of FRCs is a defining feature of their contribution’ (2013, p.7).

2.3 Geographical Location
The FRC programme is organised into two regions: the Eastern Region and the Western Region. The Western Region has a total of 53 FRCs and two outreach Centres (Figure 2.1) that are supported by the RSA, West Training & Development. The Region is comprised of nine counties, each boasting a different number of FRCs: Donegal (9 FRCs), Sligo (4 FRCs), Roscommon (1 FRC), Mayo (7 FRCs), Galway (6 FRCs), Clare (4 FRCs), Limerick (4 FRCs), Kerry (12 FRCs) and Cork (6 FRCs and 2 outreach Centres).

2.4 The Work of FRCs
The work of FRCs is located within a community-based model of family support. Family support is underpinned by a number of specific theories from the social sciences (Devaney, 2011; Devaney et al, 2013) and is used as an umbrella term that covers a broad range of family-focused services and programmes. Calling for clarification, Pinkerton (2000) maintained that family support encompassed a range of outcomes and needed to find direction within its diversity or risk the danger of meaning nothing.
More recently, Dolan, Pinkerton and Canavan claimed that while the clarification agenda still needs to be addressed, ‘…family support has become a major strategic orientation in services for children and families’ (2006, p11).

Increasingly, family support practice is taking into consideration the community context and recognising that the wellbeing of individuals cannot be safeguarded separately from the wellbeing of families and communities. According to Gilligan: ‘Experience within Ireland and elsewhere suggests that the most promising future for family support lies in an inclusive vision where elements from a diverse range of fields including community development are joined in a common venture to promote family support’ (2000, p.28).

In an Irish context, Murphy (1996) first described family support as a broad range of provisions developed by a combination of statutory and voluntary agencies to promote
the welfare of children and families in their own homes and communities. It has since been defined as: ‘Both a style of work and a set of activities that reinforce positive informal social networks through integrated programmes. These programmes combine statutory, voluntary, community and private services and are generally provided to families within their own homes and communities. The primary focus of these services is on early intervention aiming to promote and protect the health, wellbeing and rights of all children, young people and their families. At the same time particular attention is given to those who are vulnerable or at risk’ (Pinkerton, Dolan and Canavan 2004, p. 22). The definition is accompanied by a set of ten practice principles. These principles are wide ranging, cover a set of generic good practice approaches and advocate a strengths-based, accessible and flexible service that is needs led and delivered in partnership with families, professionals and communities (Canavan, 2010).

2.5 Contemporary Policy Context

Universal and targeted services and development opportunities are provided by FRCs. These correspond to levels one and two of the Hardiker Model (Hardiker et al, 1991) of conceptualising family support needs. Given that each community is unique, each FRC prioritises a programme of work that is aimed at supporting families in its own catchment area. In 2011 a strategic framework for family support within the FRC Programme was developed (McKeown, 2013). For many FRCs, the adoption of this framework required a fundamental shift in focus from community development to community-based family support. Updated in 2013, the strategic framework is aligned with national policy on children and families as articulated by the Commission on the Family (1998); the National Children’s Strategy, (Department of Health and Children, 2000) the Agenda for Children’s Services (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2007); the Strategy Statement of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012) and the Task Force on the Child and Family Support Agency (2012).

The most recent Programme for Government in Ireland (Department of the Taoiseach, 2011) gave a commitment to radically reform child protection services and to realign all relevant services into a single, integrated and accountable agency for children and families. Tusla, the new Child and Family Agency was established in January 2014 and assumed responsibility for a range of services including the FRC Programme. Tusla is now the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for
children (Tusla, 2014a). Before its establishment, the Task Force on the Child and Family Agency (2012) recommended the use of a shared national service outcomes framework for service delivery. An outcomes focus is the defining current orientation in much of our state policy (Canavan, 2010) and five national outcomes for children were identified (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011a). These are named as the right to be:

1. Healthy both physically and mentally;
2. Supported in active learning;
3. Safe from accidental and intentional harm / secure in the immediate and wider physical environment;
4. Economically secure;
5. Part of positive networks of family, friends, neighbours and the community / included and participating in society.

The strategic framework for family support confirms these five outcomes, as they relate to children, families and the broader community, as national FRC Programme Outcomes (McKeown, 2013). For many FRCs, the adoption of the strategic framework necessitated a commitment to realigning the focus of their work plans from community development to managing community-based family supports. Interventions in health and social services are commonly characterised into three types: (1) prevention or developmental family support; (2) early intervention or compensatory family support and (3) treatment or protective family support (ibid). FRCs combine the ‘developmental’ model and the ‘compensatory’ model and focus on strengthening the family’s capacity to provide a nurturing environment for all family members while also intervening to address problems that have developed and become manifest (ibid). FRCs identify families in need of support and ‘…build up trustful relationships with them and are well placed to co-ordinate the provision of specialised support to meet a families individual needs’ (Department of Health and Children, 2004, p. 45).

2.6 Delivering Family Support
Gilligan (1995, p.7) observed that family support involves a, ‘…low key, local, non-clinical, unfussy, user-friendly approach’ and that family support work is not about replacing naturally occurring supports but using formal sources of support to enhance the informal networks that already exist. Pinkerton commented: ‘…family support is
less about grafting on a service than facilitating the flow of existing support’ (2000, p. 217). Family support services that are community-based and have involvement by the community are more likely to be accessed by families (McKeown, 2000). The community development approach of FRCs endorses this principle. FRCs consult widely with local communities and organisations to define their key priorities and work that is undertaken responds to the needs of children, their families and the broader community in a way that emphasises prevention and early intervention. They deliver services and development opportunities in an environment that is welcoming and non-stigmatised; operating what is commonly referred to as ‘an open door’ policy. Their unique position ensures that those individuals and families that stand to benefit most from participation receive the personal supports required to so (Family Support Agency, 2013).

The delivery of effective family support, across all key disciplines, requires considerable knowledge, skills and attitudes on the part of workers (Pinkerton, Dolan and Percy, 2003; Pinkerton, 2000). Delivering services in different situations and across a range of sites - working with individuals, families, groups or in wider community settings - requires different skills and abilities (Pinkerton, Dolan and Canavan, 2004). It is critical that working methods and all available tools are applied skilfully, purposefully and in an appropriate way (Pinkerton, 2000). Engagement with families and the success of subsequent interventions depends on two key ingredients: the characteristics of workers themselves and the tools and skills base available to them, hence the critical importance of supervision and support programmes cannot be underestimated (ibid).

2.7 Family Support, FRCs and Supervision
The underlying rationale for the strategic framework for family support within the FRC Programme is that close personal relationships, particularly in the family, are central to the well-being of parents and children (McKeown, 2013). For the same reason McKeown (2013) claims that it is critically important that workers who deliver the strategy have supportive relationships at work in the form of structured supervision and guidance. Supervision is not only about accountability, but involves a commitment to support and guide workers so that they have the tools to engage successfully with individuals, families and communities. Supervision requires a commitment to reflective
practice as well as an acceptance of the value of experiential learning and can be one-to-one or in groups (McKeown, 2013). The merit of regionally-based group sessions - to provide a greater variety in the range of experiences available for reflection and learning - is highlighted in the strategic framework document. Many of the professional workers currently employed in FRCs have significant skills, knowledge and experience in community development rather than in family support. Recognising this, McKeown emphasises the importance of effective supervision in implementing the strategic framework and empowering workers to cope with the changing nature of the work as well as the stresses and demands of supporting individuals, families and communities (2013).

2.8 Conclusion
This chapter has outlined the context for the study. The research is timely given the potential impact of current changes within the FRC Programme. The move to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and the subsequent shift in focus from community development to community-based family support has required significant changes in attitudes and work practices. Managing an FRC on a voluntary basis demands a significant time commitment. In addition to negotiating the changing landscape in which FRCs are now operating in, volunteers that sit on the voluntary board of management are required to comply with numerous legal and ‘best practice’ obligations. The two RSAs offer training in the provision of supervision and provide templates for associated policies and procedures. However, the voluntary nature of the management structure of FRCs means that this is not always availed of and advice and support is sometimes sought only after issues have begun to emerge in the workplace.
CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction
There is a significant body of literature on the subject of supervision and this review aims to present a comprehensive overview of the major themes and concepts that are relevant to the research. The aim is to provide a broad background and justification for the study. The review begins by tracing the development of supervision. A number of fundamental definitions are explored and its key functions are described. Some of the common approaches to supervision and the different models that are employed within social care and the broader helping professions are explained. An overview of the principle drivers for implementing supervision structures within organisations is provided, with particular reference drawn to the current policy context in Ireland. Finally the review examines the evidence base for supervision that is available in the literature before concluding by considering the factors that contribute to the provision of effective supervision.

3.2 Background Context
Supervision has been written about extensively and numerous explorations address its history, styles, methods and approaches (Hensley, 2002). Historically its development has gone hand in hand with the activities of the field of social work and was underpinned by professionally defined notions of ‘competent’ and ‘accountable’ practice (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). Supervision first emerged in the United States towards the end of the 19th century. It was created as a teaching forum within the charitable sector, with paid social work staff managing a volunteer workforce (Busse, 2009). Emerging initially as an administrative task, closely followed by the developing emphasis on education and support, its focus has shifted over time, mirroring the role of social work within society and the organisational context within which it operates (Wonnacott, 2012). According to Lord Laming (2009), supervision is the ‘cornerstone’ of good social work practice – an opinion reiterated by the Monro Review (2011).
Acknowledging that supervision has been a core activity of those employed in social work settings for at least thirty years, Morrison (2005) points to the fact that concerns about child protection in the 1980s, and risk management in mental health and criminal justice settings in the 1990s, raised the profile and importance of it. Nowadays, supervision remains a pivotal activity in delivering services, not just in terms of child protection but across the whole family support and safeguarding spectrum. Increasingly the role of supervision is being recognised in a range of health and welfare settings e.g. the development of adult protection services and vulnerable adult policies both emphasise its importance (ibid). Although supervision is now relevant to all fields of human services and has become mandatory practice in many, the practice of supervision is often very differently understood and interpreted (Davys and Beddoe 2010). Increasingly, as it has developed as a professional activity in its own right, supervision is practiced across a range of professions in an array of organisational and private settings (ibid).

3.3 Towards a Definition of Supervision
Supervision is acknowledged as an essential component of professional practice that provides a chance for the supervisee to reflect on personal and professional needs in order to improve performance and to receive support (Fone, 2006). A popular description breaks the work into two components: ‘super’ and ‘vision’, indicating a form of interaction with another more superior person that focuses on the professional work and organisational issues and concerns of the person being supervised (O’Neill, 2004; Noble and Irwin, 2009). While supervision has been recognised as a valuable and necessary component of practice among some disciplines in Ireland, the introduction of structured supervision is still a relatively new undertaking for many others including youth and community development (O’Neill, 2004). Describing it as a partnership process of on-going reflection and feedback, O’Neill describes it as: ‘A regular, structured opportunity to discuss work, to reflect on practice and progress and to plan for future development’ (2004, p. 18).

One of the earliest definitions of supervision describes it as a process in which one worker is given responsibility to work with another worker in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives (Harries, 1987). Kadushin and Harkness define supervision in social work as: ‘The process of overseeing, directing,
co-ordinating, enhancing and evaluation the on-the-job performance of workers for whom the supervisor is responsible’ (2002, p.23). Recognising its underlying complexities and range of meanings in different settings, such as social care, nursing and psychology, Morrison provides a broad definition of supervision as: ‘A process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives which together promote the best outcomes for service users’ (2005, p. 32).

Examining the practice of supervision in different groups of professionals for over twenty years, Davies and Beddoe (2010) suggest that supervision is not about complying to ensure that ‘rules are followed’ rather it is the application of professional skills, knowledge and principles to variations of professional practice. It provides a forum for interactive dialogue wherein practitioners can critically engage with their practice, reflect on their actions, review their decisions and learn. Hawkins and Shohet have also worked with different helping professions for many years and define it as: ‘A joint endeavour in which a practitioner, with the help of a supervisor, attends to their clients, themselves as part of their client practitioner relationships and the wider systemic context, and by so doing improves the quality of their work, transforms their client relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession’ (2012, p. 60).

3.4 The Function of Supervision

Although there are numerous approaches to supervision, much of the literature focuses on a functional model of it, describing it as fulfilling a number of different functions (Wonnacott, 2012). In some countries, supervision is a discrete occupation, linked to specific training and certification. In others it is an activity expected of frontline managers in the field, where there are varying degrees of support and training to fulfil this complex task (Bradley, Engelbrecht and Höjer, 2010). In a review of its development over the past twenty-five years, Bernard (2006) reports that, despite increased sophistication and the emergence of supervision as a distinct professional activity, the development of new models has been relatively limited. Instead what has occurred has been a refinement, exploration and testing of existing models. Whilst some models are highly detailed and structured, others are based on a set of practice
principles or theory and provide an ‘approach’ rather than a specific blueprint for supervision (ibid.).

Kadushin (1976) identified the three key functions of supervision as administrative, educative and supportive. The administrative function considers accountability to the policies, protocols, standards and ethics which are prescribed by organisations, legislation and regulatory bodies. Brown and Bourne observed this as conveying: ‘The responsibility both to ensure that agency policy is implemented - which implies a controlling function - and a parallel responsibility to enable supervisees to work to the best of their ability’ (1996, p. 10). The educative function refers to the on-going professional development of practitioners and building their knowledge, attitude and skills. The supportive function addresses the supervisors responsibility for: ‘Sustaining the worker’s morale, helping with job-related discouragements and discontents, giving supervisees a sense of worth as professionals, a sense of belonging in the agency and a sense of security in their performance’ (Kadushin, 1976, p.20). Although they have been labelled differently and the balance between then has varied widely, these three functions have withstood the passage of time and are often presented in the literature as authoritative standards that are apolitical (Bradley, Engelbrecht and Höjer, 2010).

Morrison (2005) distinguishes supervision as a process rather than an event and identifies four distinct objectives or functions, three of which are similar to those identified earlier by Kadushin. The four are: (1) competent accountable performance (the managerial or normative function); (2) continuing professional development (the developmental / formative function); (3) personal support (the supportive / restorative function) and (4) engaging the individual with the organisation (the mediation function). The mediation function involves the establishment of healthy feedback mechanisms from the individual to the organisation and vice versa. It explicitly recognises the complex and competing personal, organisational and professional agendas that are present in the supervision encounter and highlights the need to work collaboratively and in partnership.

O’Neill (2004) argues that there is no need to specifically name Morrison’s mediation function as it should naturally be subsumed into the process and practice of the original three functions of supervision outlined by Kadushin – management (administrative
function), education and support. The author proposes that supervision can be viewed, overall, as a response to needs:

1. ‘The need of the worker to be supported challenged and developed in a demanding, complex and often stressful environment;
2. The need of the service user (client) for safe, quality care and support;
3. The need of the organisation to ensure best practice and accountability of its employees’ (2004, 19).

3.5 Drivers for Contemporary Practice

The development and refinement of supervision has been accompanied by an associated complexity of definitions and variations in practice within different professional groups and across disciplines (Ferguson, 2005; Morrison, 2005). Hawkins and Shohet (2012) point to the growing number of ethical guidelines, systems of accreditation and professional standards that have been established by a wide variety of professional associations. They emphasise the growing recognition of supervision for all the ‘people professions’ whether they are educational, caring or developmental. In the context of delivering quality services across the social care spectrum, Morrison (2005) recognises eight particular drivers for supervision:

1. A growing focus across disciplines on supervision;
2. New standards set by professional bodies;
3. The movement towards integrated care services, leading to extended roles and staff operating in more complex environments;
4. A focus on workplace development;
5. Employer liability for duty of care to staff under stress;
6. Mixed economy of welfare and the need to ensure quality of service delivery;
7. Change management: supervision enables staff to negotiate new roles;
8. Increased expectations from staff for good supervision.

The need for standardised practice in supervision and the importance of implementing appropriate supervision structures, particularly within voluntary organisations, is emphasised by both Clark (1997) and Adirondack (1998).

Supervision is currently in a new phase of change (Davys and Beddoe, 2010). The expansion of supervision practice in the health and social care professions can be linked to the growing culture of regulation and compliance within these professions and the
explicit linking of supervision to driving quality and accountability (Beddoe, 2010; 2012). In addition, political and organisational anxiety about ‘risk’ and the recommendations of a number of high profile child abuse enquiries has significantly contributed to a resurgence of interest and adjustment in supervision practice in order to respond to the associated public critique of professional practice. While the literature predominantly portrays supervision as facilitative and supportive, government policy increasingly promotes supervision as ‘risk focused’ and as a vaccine against mistakes (Beddoe, 2012). This need for practitioners to be able to critically examine all aspects of their practice has resulted in the emergence of a wide variety of forms of supervision (Davys and Beddoe, 2010; O’Donoghue and Tsui, 2012). Terms such as ‘clinical supervision’, ‘counselling supervision’, ‘peer supervision’, ‘external consultancy supervision’, ‘managerial supervision’ and ‘professional supervision’ are all found in the literature and are all frequently referred to by the shorthand ‘supervision’ in day-to-day conversation (Wonnacott, 2012).

There is an emerging body of literature on the move away from supervision as an integral component of practice for professional development to management setting the agenda and using it increasingly to monitor worker performance and measure accountability and efficiency (Noble and Irwin, 2009; Howard, 2012). Donoghue and Tsui (2012) point to the growing perception that supervision is essentially an accountability process. Increased requirements for measurable outputs, rationalised service, efficiency, effectiveness, performance management and quality assurance have all created new priorities for the managers of public services and have had an impact on the nature of supervision internationally (ibid). A broader and more helpful view of supervision promotes it as a tool to encourage learning, enhance professional development and improve practice and service provision within organisations (Thompson, 2006).

Carpenter et al (2012) view the promotion of the well-being of workers as an important driver for supervision. Good supervision motivates and assists workers in building purposeful relationships, making professional judgements and providing an overview of practice. This ultimately assists in the retention of skilled practitioners but also fulfils the employer’s obligation to fulfil a ‘duty of care’ to employees working in difficult and challenging roles. The employer’s duty of care has been covered extensively in the
literature (Eardly, 2002; Peyton, 2003; Oade, 2009) and is another factor in the on-going development of supervision policies and practices in many areas (O’Neill, 2004). The relationship between employer and employee in which a duty of care is owed is incorporated into legislation in Ireland in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005. Lack of supervision can result in work overload, stress, sickness and absence as well as a reduction in personal and professional competence and confidence (Children’s Workforce Development Council, 2009).

3.5.1 The Irish Context
O’Neill (2004) suggests that the combination of public disquiet at the level of emerging scandals and abuse in our society and services, the growing body of legislation relating to accountability and the public expectation for higher standards and measurable outcomes all point to the need for a recognised framework for accountable practice and for the on-going development of staff in a supervised and supportive environment. Direct references to national standards in supervision requirements are made by professional bodies representing a number of disciplines including residential child care, nursing, occupational therapy, social work and psychology. O’Neill (2004) also draws attention to the number of Inquiry Reports into child abuse that made recommendations in relation to supervision standards as well as government publications such as the National Children’s Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000) and Our Duty to Care (Department of Health and Children, 2002).

Since 2004, the number of such references has increased. Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children states: ‘HSE should ensure that there is a Staff Support and Supervision Policy in place that supports staff’ (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011b, p. 43). The Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook (Health Service Executive, 2011) identifies the four main functions of supervision as: management; support; learning and development and mediation. The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ryan, 2009), the Roscommon Inquiry (Gibbons, 2010) and more recently the Independent Child Death Review Group (Shannon and Gibbons, 2012) refer to a myriad of systemic failures in our child protection and welfare services and the need to ensure that adequate professional supervision is in place for staff.
3.6 The Evidence Base for Supervision

Recognising the growing emphasis on evidence-based practice, Mor Barak et al (2009) provide good circumstantial evidence for the effects of supervision on outcomes for workers. The authors conducted a meta-analysis of 27 research articles, published between 1990 and 2007, which involved a combined sample of almost 11,000 workers in child welfare, social work and mental health settings. The results showed that the supervisory dimensions of social and emotional support, task assistance and supervisory interpersonal interaction were positively and significantly related to beneficial outcomes for workers. Social and emotional supervisory support was defined as the response to worker’s emotional needs and job-related stress. Task assistance referred to the supervisor’s ability to provide tangible, work-related guidance and the supervisory interpersonal interaction dimension signified the supervisee’s perception of the quality of the relationship with their supervisor and the extent to which this helped them to be more effective in their work. The beneficial outcomes that were identified included job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation, personal well-being and perceived effectiveness.

Butterworth et al (2008) surveyed the literature on supervision within the nursing profession that was published between 2001 and 2007. The authors point to two new messages from the literature. The first underscores the responsibility of health care organisations to sustain and develop supervision practice and the second points to the potential benefit that supervision has on patient outcomes. They concluded that, while it was not possible to attribute all of the positively reported effects merely to supervision, it was perfectly reasonable to suggest that structured opportunities to discuss case related practice and personal and educational development are vital to nurses, their practice and patient safety. Koivu, Saarine and Hyskas (2012) examined the wellbeing and levels of work satisfaction of female nurses in Finland. The study concluded that supervision can, and should be, conceptualised as an additional job resource associated with other job and personal resources that mutually reinforce each other to promote wellbeing at work.

Supervision is the aspect of the organisational environment which research has most consistently linked to worker retention (Child Welfare League of America, 2005). Considering the high turnover of child protection workers in Australia, Gibbs (2001)
shows that the quality of supervision is a critical factor in staff retention. He suggests that a key message for supervisors is to emphasise the value of individual workers to the organisation, leading to increased self-esteem and self-efficacy. A qualitative study of factors that contributed to decisions to either remain or leave employment in child welfare in the US highlighted the importance of a strong organisational culture of supervision (Ellett et al, 2006). Consistent with the literature, Chen and Scannapieco (2010) found that job satisfaction, supervisor’s support and worker’s self-efficacy were substantial factors associated with child welfare worker retention. A number of authors (Landsman, 2007; Renner, Porter and Preister, 2009; Strand and Dore, 2009; Yankeelow et al, 2009) have substantiated the critical connection between the provision of high quality, consistent supervision for child welfare workers and worker retention in the US. Chiller and Crisp (2012) focused on the potential of effective supervision as a factor in facilitating workforce retention in the field of social work and argue that regular supervision can increase retention rates. In a review of the literature examining the links between supervisory support and turnover and retention rates, Carpenter et al (2012) concluded that good supervision helps workers to stay in their jobs whilst those that leave often cite poor supervision as a reason for having left.

Youth work practice by its nature is a stressful occupation, often characterised by long hours, a hectic schedule, working with young people in difficult situations and a scarcity of resources (Jenkinson, 2009). Exploring the importance of supervision in youth work practice in Ireland, the author observed that it promoted better team work, improved practice and helped to ameliorate the effects of stress caused by challenging issues that arose in the workplace. McNamara, Lawley and Towler (2008) strongly linked supervision to the quality of services experienced by young people and specified: ‘Only by asserting the centrality of supervision to professional youth work practice will young people remain at its heart and continue to achieve positive and life enhancing experiences’ (2008, p.8).

Carpenter et al (2012) provide an overview of the evidence concerning the value of supervision. Positive outcomes identified in the literature include social and emotional wellbeing, improved self-efficacy and sense of empowerment and organisational commitment and intention to stay. Cearley’s (2004) study of child welfare workers in the US showed that the practice of supervision and a supervisor’s empowering
behaviour significantly affected workers’ sense of effectiveness and their ability to make decisions. Also researching child welfare workers, Juby and Scannapieco (2007) found that quality supervision increased both the workers perception of the resources available to them as well as their ability to execute their job assignments more effectively. The study suggested a direct relationship between the levels of support received in supervision and the supervisee’s ability to manage their workload and maintain a positive attitude toward their job regardless of caseload size or other adverse working conditions. A study of Canadian child welfare workers by Stalker et al (2007) revealed that supportive relationships with supervisors led to high levels of job satisfaction despite the fact that workers also scored high on a measure of emotional exhaustion (burnout). The general assertion that a close, quality supervisory relationship is related to job satisfaction and low levels of burnout among social service workers was supported by Mena and Bailey (2007). Kim and Lee (2009) concluded that the major implications of their research was that developing or improving supervision is a key strategy for preventing burnout and turnover in health care settings and that skilled supervisors and their relationships with frontline workers are critical assets and resources for any organisation.

Some of the literature is less conclusive about the evidence base for supervision. Spence et al (2001) reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature relating to supervision within four ‘allied’ mental health professions: clinical psychology; occupational therapy; social work and speech pathology. Despite widespread acceptance of the value of supervision among practitioners, they found little empirical evidence to demonstrate that supervision produces long-term improvements in clinical practice or better client outcomes. Nevertheless, they resolved that the limited data that was available provided tentative evidence of its role in facilitating high-quality practice and is likely to be a significant factor in enhancing positive outcomes for clients. Bogo and McKnight (2006) reported on peer-reviewed articles addressing social work supervision over a ten year span (1994-2004). They concluded that many of the articles concerned with supervision were descriptive, exploratory, conceptual or theoretical in nature. A review of the literature on supervision in the public sector behavioural health care arena in the United States by Hoge et al (2011) supported the views of Bogo and McKnight (2006) and declared that the methods underlying the majority of published works were either methodologically weak or poorly described. However, despite this, the authors
concluded that the literature relevant to supervision within the public sector was suggestive of its positive impact, but was in no way definitive.

3.7 Factors Related to Effective Supervision

The first prerequisite for ensuring effective supervision is to ensure that supervisors themselves also have access to good supervision so that they can monitor the quality of the supervision relationships that they are responsible for on an on-going basis (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Wonnacott, 2012). Within the diversity of ideas about supervision the one least contested is the significance of the supervision relationship.

The ability to establish and maintain the supervision relationship is a core requirement of a supervisor and an integral component of effective supervision (Davys and Beddoe, 2010). Kavanagh et al (2003) examined the supervision practices that impacted on mental health practice and morale in public health services in Queensland, Australia. Positivity of the supervision relationship emerged as a key feature of effective supervision both in terms of its impact on practice and on job satisfaction. Tracing the development of supervision, the significance of the relationship is summed up by Bernard: ‘Relationship factors continue to be where the action is, literally. Everything else revolves around it’ (2006, p 15.). Ash (1995) suggested that the supervisory relationship is an aspect of supervision that is particularly difficult to legislate for as it exists outside the boundaries of procedural frameworks and is centred on the actual interchange between the supervisor and the supervisee. O’Neill (2004) maintains that effective supervision requires the use of a range of skills by the supervisor, similar to those skills that are used by competent practitioners in the course of their daily work.

Good supervision is not only the responsibility of the supervisor; it is a joint venture between the supervisor, the supervisee and their organisation (Wonnacott, 2012). Examining the value of supervision for health professionals in managing work-related stress and burnout, Howard (2008) pointed to the importance of broader influences such as organisational culture and management style on workers’ wellbeing. In Ireland, Jenkinson (2009) found that one of the biggest challenges in supervision practice in youth work organisations was the varying levels of understanding and commitment to the process. Numerous factors influence people’s perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of supervision. The author determined that not least among these are:
‘The degree of clarity and understanding of what supervision entails, people’s previous histories of being supervised and the level of commitment and support from agency management in relation to supervision’ (2009, p. 163).

Ensuring that supervision is effective - whether introducing it into an organisation for the first time or reframing the existing supervision approach - requires a number of considerations (O’Neill, 2004). These include the culture, commitment, capacity and mandate of the organisation. A culture of openness, accountability and transparency within the organisation – openness to change, openness to difference, accountability of omissions as well as for actions and transparency regarding practice and processes is essential. The commitment to supervision must be apparent within the organisation which requires it being prioritised and recognised as valuable and necessary by both management and staff. The capacity to provide quality supervision, in an organisational context, demands skilled, insightful supervisors who are themselves participating in regular effective supervision. Finally, an organisational mandate for supervision will contribute to its effectiveness and ensure that it is regarded as a recognised and respected resource for all (ibid).

3.8 Conclusion
The literature review provides a background to the research. Established definitions and discourse on the function of supervision are outlined in light of the critical role that it plays in supporting workers in relation to their efficacy and well-being. There is a growing recognition, within the helping professions, of the importance of professional standards and the need for greater accountability. There is also widespread acknowledgement of the value of providing effective supervision and supporting the professional development of all workers. Supervision can be viewed narrowly as a management tool and the growing emphasis on providing it could be solely attributed to changes in public sector management and the need for greater efficiencies. However, the literature also contests that the contemporary landscape of the practice of supervision can be linked to an increasing commitment to high standards of delivery and a focus on practice outcomes. It is now widely accepted that good practice approaches advocate a strengths-based, accessible and flexible service that is needs led and delivered in partnership with families, professionals and communities.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction
This chapter provides a rationale for the research and describes the methodology that was employed to execute it. The aim and objectives of the study are defined and the research design, which provided a framework for the collection and the analysis of the data, is outlined in detail. The sampling procedures or specific methods of investigation that were used to collect the data that informed the research are explained and defended. How the data was analysed is explained and the extent to which further data collection was influenced by the initial findings of the study is described. Some of the limitations of the study are highlighted along with the problems that were encountered in sampling and completing the data collection. Finally, the ethical issues encountered during the research process are explained.

4.2 Rationale for the Research
The FRC Programme is Ireland’s largest support programme delivering universal and targeted services and development opportunities for individuals and families in disadvantaged areas (Family Support Agency, 2011). The ‘…need to encourage FRCs to further develop their capacity for family support using a community development approach’ (Family Support Agency, 2010, p. 11) has resulted in a concentration on providing specific family supports and services rather than progressing community development initiatives and programmes. Comprised of 106 community-based Centres and two outreach Centres, the FRC Programme is now administered by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency which was established in January 2014.

A strategic framework for delivering family support was adopted by the FRC Programme in 2011 and revised in 2013 (McKeown, 2013) taking account of the Report of the Task Force on the Child and Family Support Agency (2012). The framework is aligned with national policy on children and families and the recognition of the importance of delivering services in and through communities (McKeown, 2013). The necessity and importance of ensuring that workers who deliver the family support
strategy have structured supervision and guidance, so that they have the tools to engage successfully with families, is strongly emphasised. In the strategy, supervision is described as: ‘An opportunity for staff to reflect upon and cope with the stresses and demands of supporting individuals, families and communities. It is an important aspect of building a safe and healthy climate for staff and should offer the same quality of care that they in turn, are expected to offer to others, including opportunities for positive change’ (McKeown, 2013, p. 41).

An exploration of the current levels of supervision that are available for workers in FRCs is therefore timely. The research aims to provide a comprehensive overview of supervision in FRCs. It will identify current challenges and suggest ways of ensuring more effective supervision structures for workers in their efforts to implement the FRC Strategic Framework for Family Support. In this way FRCs in the Western Region will contribute to furthering the commitment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency to improve outcomes for children and their families where families are viewed as the foundation of a strong healthy community (Tusla, 2014a).

4.3 Aim and Objectives of the Research
This study aims to present a comprehensive overview of supervision in FRCs in the Western Region. The specific objectives of the research are to:

1. Demonstrate the current levels of access to supervision in FRCs;
2. Describe how supervision is provided in FRCs;
3. Define the purpose and value of supervision in FRCs;
4. Highlight the challenges to providing supervision in FRCs;
5. Identify areas that could be improved or developed to enhance the experience of supervision within FRCs.

4.4 Research Design
The research consists of the collection of primary data and a review of the literature that was available on the research topic. A mixed methods approach was used. Mixed methods research is becoming increasingly attached to research practice and recognised as the third major research approach or research paradigm along with qualitative research and quantitative research (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007). Several definitions for mixed methods research have emerged over the years. These incorporate
various elements of methods, research processes, philosophy and research designs (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). It has been defined as an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research that recognises the importance of traditional qualitative and quantitative research but also offers an opportunity to provide the most informative, complete, balanced and useful research results (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007). Creswell and Plano Clark describe it as: ‘A research design that focuses on collecting, analysing and mixing both qualitative and quantitative data. Its central premise is that the use of both approaches provides a better understanding of the research problem’ (2007, p. 5).

This mixed methods study is explanatory in design and was comprised of two key phases: a questionnaire-based survey and one-to-one interviews. Explanatory designed, mixed methods research is explained by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) as the collection of quantitative data followed by analysis of the data and the use of the results to inform the follow-up qualitative data collection in order to provide more detail about the quantitative results. An extensive baseline survey was used to explore access to supervision as well as perceptions concerning its purpose and value in FRCs in the Western Region. This primarily yielded quantitative data together with some qualitative information. The quantitative data and the qualitative themes that emerged from the first dataset were used to inform the data collection for the second phase of the study. The focus of the second phase was to identify areas for improvement or development in order to maximise access to supervision for workers and provide them with more effective opportunities for support and guidance in their work.

4.5 Methods of Data Collection

Two commonly used collection methods were used to gather the data for this two phased investigation. The first phase consisted of a questionnaire-based survey, which was administered electronically through the web-based SurveyMonkey (2014) platform. The questionnaire aimed to examine levels of access to supervision, describe how it is provided as well as the challenges that exist in relation to its provision, in FRCs. This was followed by eight semi-structured interviews in line with the researcher’s intention to examine how the identified challenges could be addressed.
4.5.1 Questionnaire-based Survey

The popularity of the internet and ease of access to it has impacted on social research in many ways. Internet sampling is now an integral part of the research armoury of modern researchers with many using it as their preferred sampling procedure (Sarantakos, 2005; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). A major advantage of questionnaire-based, self-completion surveys is that they can be emailed to respondents and are less expensive to conduct than in-person interviews (Sarantakos, 2005). However, because the respondents ‘see’ the questions, the visual presentation of questions and the general layout are extremely important in self-administered questionnaires (De Leeuw, 2008). In addition, follow-up reminders and remailings are essential to generate a good response rate (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

All fifty-five Centres in the Western Region (fifty-three FRCs and two outreach Centres) have ready access to the internet. A self-completion questionnaire (Appendix 1) was devised using the web-based tools available on SurveyMonkey (2014) which allowed a high degree of creativity in the design. The questionnaire included a cover letter which aimed to introduce the respondents to the research topic, neutralise mistrust and motivate participation by guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality. The questionnaire design (SurveyMonkey, 2014) included a security facility to anonymise all of the responses by disabling any connection between responses and individual email addresses. An invitation to participate in the research (Appendix 2), with the website link to the questionnaire, was forwarded to the fifty-five Centres. A follow-up email, encouraging participation, was sent on a weekly basis and the questionnaire remained open for a period of four weeks.

A series of closed questions and a limited number of open-ended questions were divided into five sections in the questionnaire. Section 1 posed some general questions on access to supervision while Section 2 explored the respondent’s attitude to its purpose and value using a summated rating approach (Likert, 1932). Sections 3 and 4 investigated further detail in relation to the nature of the supervision that is provided in FRCs as well as respondents comments on its benefits and potential improvements that could be made. Section 5 allowed for any additional comments in relation to the research. The questionnaire was piloted with one FRC to ensure that the questions were unambiguous and fully comprehensible. A pilot study aims to establish whether the
techniques of data collection generate enough information, whether the questionnaire is well constructed and whether any adjustments are required (Sarantakos, 2005). Questionnaire-based surveys typically have a low response rate and need to be simply designed and easy to follow and understand in order to maximise returns (Robson, 2011). Some minor design changes were subsequently made before the questionnaire was circulated.

4.5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

As a research strategy, interviews are a powerful data collection tool which involves asking questions which may be open-ended, closed-ended or both (T-eddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Interviews are often used in combination with other methods in a mixed method approach to research and a commonly used typology distinguishes between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Robson, 2011). Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted for the purpose of this study. The main advantage of face to face interviews is the availability of the interviewer to structure the interview situation and to motivate respondents (De Leeuw, 2008). In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has an interview guide that serves as a checklist of topics to be covered along with a default wording and order for the questions which can be modified, based on the flow of the interview. The advantage of this type of interview is that additional unplanned questions can be asked to follow up on information that is provided during the interview (ibid). Consequently, specific comments and reflections made during the interviews could be explored for wider ranging precedents in order to generate broader conclusions about ways of addressing the identified challenges.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an FRC co-ordinator in eight of the nine counties in the Western Region. There is only one FRC in County Roscommon and it was not sampled as the interviewee would be immediately identifiable. The limited resources that were available for the research meant that a representative sample could not be interviewed. Small scale surveys commonly employ non-probability samples and are acceptable where there is no intention to make a statistical generalisation to any population beyond the sample surveyed (Robson, 2011). The researcher’s knowledge of the FRC Programme was used to inform the sampling strategy and participants were selected for interview based on their level of experience.
and the depth of information that could be generated. Robson (2011) refers to this as purposive sampling which typically involves the researcher using their judgement to achieve a particular purpose, sampling cases that are ‘information rich’. FRC co-ordinators were selected as the most relevant group to interview. In their role as line managers and as experienced practitioners, they are expected to provide supervision to other workers in the FRC. They are ideally placed to provide a comprehensive insight into the value of supervision and to consider how existing structures and practices could be improved so that the identified challenges could be addressed. The following criteria for sampling were used in the selection process in each of the eight counties: location; stage of development of the FRC (established for at least five years); number of people employed by the FRC (three or more); number of years that the Co-ordinator had been managing the FRC (at least five years) and the Co-ordinator’s availability and willingness to be interviewed.

A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 3) was developed and piloted with two FRC co-ordinators that did not participate in the interview process. Initial contact was made by phone with the selected candidates. The purpose of the research as well as the methodologies employed to address the research questions were explained. Confidentiality, anonymity and the voluntary nature of participation was assured. All eight co-ordinators indicated their willingness to participate and signed a consent form (Appendix 4) before the interviews were conducted. The preliminary findings of the questionnaire-based survey were forwarded to the eight interviewees a week before their interview. This advised them of the challenges that had been identified in the questionnaire and set the context for the interview questions. Each interview aimed to encourage the interviewee to use their own experience and knowledge to generate possible solutions to these challenges that would promote more effective supervision practice in FRCs in the Western region.

4.6 Data Analysis
The quantitative data generated through the questionnaire-based survey was primarily analysed using the facilities provided by SurveyMonkey (2014). This platform readily provides question summaries and data trends so that tables and graphs are easily produced. Filtering and cross tabulation facilities allowed detailed exploration of the data. Sub-sets of data were compared to identify trends and associations between
different respondents and/or specific questions. The results are presented in detail in the next chapter. The qualitative data from comments and responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire was exported into a Microsoft Word document and coded. Codes serve as shorthand devices to label, separate, compile and organise data to identify the most common topics and themes (Bryman, 2004). In this way, the information was grouped into a number of categories that were more easily described.

The one-to-one interviews generated detailed data. The average duration of each interview was forty minutes and particular attention was taken to ensure that the opinions of the researcher did not influence the responses. Each interview was audiotaped and the tapes were transcribed. Following transcription, the data was read and re-read to develop an overview of the database, note initial ideas and generate appropriate codes. The codes were then clustered to identify a number of themes from the data. Robson (2011) describes this as thematic coding analysis and defines it as a generic approach to the analysis of qualitative data which involves constant comparison analysis to organise the data into similar ‘chunks’ or ‘segments’ followed by grouping the initial codes into a smaller number of themes. Grouping evidence and labelling ideas in this way promotes a broader and more comprehensive interpretation of research data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Mixed methods interpretation involves looking across the quantitative results and the qualitative findings and drawing conclusions or inferences from the two separate strands as well as the combined results in order to best answer the objectives of the research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). The results from the analysis of both datasets are presented in the next chapter and discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

4.7 Limitations of the Research
As a small scale study, the results of the study cannot be generalised beyond the research population. Direct observation of the practice of supervision within FRCs was not part of the research methodology. The findings are based on reported perceptions and rely predominantly on the integrity of the respondents and the researcher. The fact that the author works in a support capacity to some of the FRCs within the Region could, potentially, have inhibited some respondents from being totally objective. This is despite continued assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.
There is a widespread trend towards decreasing response rates to questionnaires in developed countries (Robson, 2011). The extent to which the questionnaire was circulated within individual FRCs is unknown as it was emailed to the central email address with a request, from the researcher, to circulate it to all members. There is no way of estimating whether there was any bias in findings from the absence of data from those that did not respond. As with any self-completion questionnaire, it was not possible to determine the level of attention given to the questions or whether the exercise was completed by respondents in a perfunctory manner.

Interviewing is a highly subjective technique and there is always the danger of bias (Bell, 1996). Care was taken to ensure that questions were phrased and presented as objectively as possible. FRC co-ordinators were appraised as the most ‘information rich’ population to interview for the reasons outlined in Section 4.5.2. However, additional time and resources would have allowed for supplementary interviews with other workers and volunteers in order to generate a more comprehensive and representative assessment of the ways in which supervision could be developed and improved. Despite this, the research promotes a better understanding of the provision of supervision in FRCs and more specifically, how it could be improved and more effectively delivered.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical research involves getting the informed consent of the research participants as well as reaching agreements about the use of the data and how its analysis will be reported and disseminated (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1998). Sarantakos (2005) claims that efforts have been made in recent years to ensure that research is more accountable and that ethical standards are now an integral part of any research. The basic ethical standards in social research are: proper identification – not giving false impressions; clear information concerning questioning and the research questions; concern with the welfare of the respondents; free and informed consent; right to privacy; right to anonymity and the right to confidentiality (ibid).

In this study participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research as well as the potential benefits of participating in it. Clarity, brevity and frankness are the key considerations in providing information on which consent is based (Walliman, 2005).
The survey questionnaire (Appendix 1) included a cover letter explaining why the research was being undertaken, the purpose of the questionnaire, how data would be managed and who would have access to the research when it was collated. Workers and volunteers were openly invited to respond to the questionnaire and privacy and confidentiality was completely assured.

Interview participants were presented with the preliminary findings from the questionnaire and signed a consent form before the interview proceeded (Appendix 4). Participation in the interview process was optional and potential interviewees were given seven days to consider this. The consent form made it clear that withdrawal was possible at any stage during the process and participants were invited to openly discuss any concerns that they had. Interviews were held in venues that were chosen by the participants in order to protect their privacy. Permission was sought to tape the interviews and confidentiality in relation to the information that was conveyed during the interview process was guaranteed by the researcher.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the rationale for the research and has described the design and methodology that was used to explore the research questions. The sampling approach and methods of data collection that were employed to investigate the aim and objectives of the study are detailed. Every effort was made to ensure that the research was conducted in accordance with the basic ethical standards of social research. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collated and analysed to generate the findings and key themes that are described fully in the next chapter, Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction
This chapter presents the qualitative and quantitative findings from the questionnaire that was circulated to fifty five projects in the Western Region of the FRC Programme. The findings from the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with eight FRC Co-ordinators in eight of the nine counties in the Western Region are also depicted. The most salient findings from the collected data are presented under the five research objectives, which were to:

1. Demonstrate the current levels of access to supervision in FRCs;
2. Describe how supervision is provided in FRCs;
3. Define the purpose and value of supervision in FRCs;
4. Highlight the challenges to providing supervision in FRCs;
5. Identify areas that could be improved or developed to enhance the experience of supervision within FRCs.

5.2 Participation in the Questionnaire
Over a four week period, 160 responses to the questionnaire were received. This sample (n=160) was comprised of six cohorts: Co-ordinator; Development Worker; Administrator; Volunteer Director (i.e. a member of the Voluntary Board of Directors of an FRC); Volunteer Worker (i.e. volunteers in FRCs other than Volunteer Directors) and Others (i.e. FRC workers that are not core-funded but are funded through a variety of other funding streams). Figure 5.1 shows the percentage of respondents to the questionnaire in relation to their role within the FRC. Co-ordinators, Development Workers and Administrators are all core-funded by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Thirty eight Volunteer Directors - company directors that are responsible for managing their local FRC - responded to the questionnaire. The Volunteer Worker cohort had a total of nine responses and the Others cohort was comprised of fifteen responses. Overall, the response rate to the questionnaire was excellent. Allowing for vacancies that were undergoing a recruitment process at the time that the fieldwork was conducted, the response rate for Co-ordinators was 85%, for Development Workers it
was 41% and for Administrators it was 62%. The response rate for the other three cohorts was not calculated as the records that are available for the numbers involved in the FRC Programme are not as reliable as the records for core-funded workers.

Table 5.1 shows the length of time that both core-funded workers and the Others cohort have been employed in their FRC. The majority of core-funded workers have been in position for over five years i.e. 70% of Co-ordinators, 63% of Development Workers and 64% of Administrators. The majority (60%) of the Others cohort had been employed by the FRC for between 1-5 years.

Table 5.1 Length of Time Employed by the FRC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>&gt; 5 years</th>
<th>1 - 5 years</th>
<th>&lt; 1 year</th>
<th>&lt; 6 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-ordinators</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Workers</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3 Current Levels of Access to Supervision

Access to supervision was examined for four of the six cohorts that responded to the questionnaire. Volunteer Directors in FRCs are not supervised but can access advice and support in relation to their role as company directors from one of two RSAs in the FRC Programme. The number of ‘Volunteer Workers’ that responded to the questionnaire was small (n=9). Although seven of the nine respondents said that they would like to have access to supervision, the sample size is not representative of the volunteer body within the FRC Programme. However, some of the comments from this cohort were noteworthy: ‘I would like to have some access to supervision and feedback, even every now and then - we could have supervision as a group’ or ‘I’d like to know if what I am doing is O.K. I work mostly with young people’.

Figure 5.2 demonstrates the reported levels of access to supervision and Figure 5.3 shows the reported frequency of that access. A high percentage (70%) of Co-ordinators reported having access. However, of these only 32% received supervision either monthly or every 6–8 weeks and 29% said that they received it 3–4 times a year. The ‘Other’ option (39%) incorporated a range of responses indicating that supervision was organised on an ad hoc basis, provided once or twice a year or was provided as required. One respondent commented that: ‘I have access in theory but the Board members do not have the necessary skills to provide it’ and another stated that: ‘Everyone else has it but there is no structure in place for the Co-ordinator’.

![Figure 5.2 Reported Levels of Access to Supervision](image-url)
In relation to Development Workers, 81% reported having access to supervision. Of these, 46% received it either once a month or every 6–8 weeks, 8% received supervision 3–4 times a year and a further 46% indicated that supervision was provided informally or a couple of times a year. A very high percentage of Administrators (94%) reported that they had access to supervision. Thirty-six percent received it either monthly or every 6–8 weeks, 32% received it 3–4 times a year and 32% received it either informally a couple of times a year or on an ad hoc basis.

The Other cohort that responded to the questionnaire (n=15) included family support workers (n=5), childcare workers (n=4), special projects officers (n=3) and participants in JobsBridge, the National Internship Scheme or the Community Employment (CE) programme. The respondents within this cohort who reported having access to supervision was high at 93% - although none of them reported having it on a monthly basis. Fifty percent received it every 6–8 weeks, 10% received it 3-4 times a year and 40% received it informally.

![Figure 5.3: Reported Frequency of Access to Supervision](image-url)
5.4 How Supervision is Provided

Analysis of the data demonstrates that Co-ordinators access supervision either internally within the FRC from a Volunteer Director or externally from peers or a qualified professional. Co-ordinators predominantly provide supervision to other FRC workers and volunteers. Thirty-eight Volunteer Directors responded to the questionnaire and almost half of those (n=17) stated that they provide supervision to FRC workers with six of them just supervising the Co-ordinator. Of the Co-ordinators who reported that they have some level of access to supervision (n=32), 68% of them accessed it from the Chairperson or another Volunteer Director(s). The percentage of Co-ordinators that formally or informally access external supervision, including peer supervision, was 32%. Almost all FRC Co-ordinators (98%) provide supervision and the average number of people that they supervise is five.

A high percentage of Development Workers (73%) reported that their supervision is provided by the FRC Co-ordinator. One Development Worker was supervised by both the Co-ordinator and a Voluntary Director. Many Development Workers (43%) also stated that they provide supervision. Two of these indicated that this was primarily to volunteers working on specific programmes, or to students doing work experience with the FRC. Almost all of the Administrators that responded to the questionnaire (93%) indicated that the Co-ordinator provides their supervision, while 7% of them accessed it from a Volunteer Director. It is also the Co-ordinator that supervises and supports the majority (69%) of the Others cohort.

The extent to which different topics are discussed in supervision meetings is presented in Figure 5.4. ‘Workload Management’ and ‘Future Goals’ was important across all four cohorts with the reported frequency ranging between 72 and 100%. ‘Work Not Achieved’ was less important for Administrators and Co-ordinators than for the other two cohorts. The reported frequency for ‘Accountability’ was in the 50 - 62% range across all cohorts while ‘Training Needs’ varied from a reported frequency of 59% for Co-ordinators to 79% for Administrators. Only 29% of Administrators and 46% of Development Workers reported that ‘Learning Gained’ was discussed in their supervision meetings. ‘Other Topics’ discussed during supervision meetings included: time management; conflict management; annual and quarterly budgets; cuts in core funding and wider developments within the FRC Programme.
Figure 5.4
Supervision Meetings: Topics Discussed

- Workload Management
- Work Not Achieved
- Future Goals
- Accountability
- Learning Gained
- Training Needs
- Other Topics

Reported Frequency %
- Co-ordinators
- Development Workers
- Administrators
- Others
One hundred and thirteen respondents answered the question of whether there is a written policy and procedures in place for supervision: 81% of respondents said yes; 4% said no and 15% replied that they did not know. One respondent said: ‘There are written procedures for staff support and supervision but I don’t think they’re used’ and others claimed that although there was a policy in place it wasn’t always fully implemented. In relation to supervision records: 72% of workers and volunteers with access to supervision said that the meetings were recorded; 21% said that supervision meetings were not recorded while 7% did not know. Where supervision records were maintained, access to those records was confirmed by all respondents with the exception of one Development Worker.

5.5 Purpose and Value of Supervision

The perceived purpose and value of supervision in FRCs was explored in Section Two of the questionnaire, using a summated rating approach (Likert, 1932). Respondents indicated that the value of supervision depended on how frequently it was provided, whether it was provided in an informed and positive manner and whether there were proper structures and procedures in place. Ninety-seven percent of the sample either agreed or strongly agreed that supervision is beneficial to workers. Supervision was considered essential for organisations that work with people and comments suggested that it enhances accountability, competency and professionalism. One respondent remarked: ‘When used properly, supervision can help practitioners work really effectively, identify gaps in skills or training needs and highlight areas for development’. Some of the more negative comments stated: ‘My experience is that any issues or concerns that were mentioned have not been addressed’; ‘I am provided with very little supervision or support in my work and it has led to frustration, demotivation, lack of direction and a waste of my abilities’.

Although 81% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that supervision is beneficial to people using the FRC, 15% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The comments that were made indicated that good supervision leads to improved practice, which in turn, enhances the service that people receive and that well supervised workers are generally more competent in helping people deal with a variety of issues. In relation to supervision being beneficial to the FRC as an organisation, 96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. One respondent stated:
‘A good team can achieve good results and a strong organisation is built on a team supported by good supervisions’. Another respondent suggested that supervision gives: ‘Space to reflect on areas of work and so it benefits the organisation as learning from past experiences can be used to influence how things happen in the future’.

Almost all (97%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that supervision helps workers to cope with difficult situations. One respondent determined: ‘It’s especially important now with all the changes and the new emphasis on family support’. Some Co-ordinators indicated that supervision removes the sense of being isolated and unsupported and that if supervision is carried out regularly it can prevent difficult situations from arising in the first place. Administrators are frontline workers that ‘meet and greet’ people, many of whom are distressed and looking for support, in the reception area of the FRC. A number of them remarked on the importance of being able to discuss the day-to-day challenges of dealing with this in their supervision meetings. While 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that supervision provides useful learning opportunities, 10% neither agreed nor disagreed. Some respondents indicated that learning opportunities are not always taken up and a Volunteer Director stated: ‘People learn in a number of ways and supervision provides an opportunity to explore options’.

Although 94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that supervision provides feedback on your work one respondent said: ‘It would be great to see how you are doing in a constructively, critical way’. Another respondent observed: ‘We are not always the best judge of our own work – also with all the changes there’s a need to have space for feedback’. In relation to improving accountability and or responsibility, 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. However, there was also a suggestion that this depends, ‘…on the quality of the supervision - poorly structured supervision can undermine staff and create difficulties’. There was agreement from 88% of respondents that the purpose of supervision is to support workers. However, a number of comments also suggested that its purpose is twofold and that accountability and focus are equally important: ‘It is about staff delivering on work areas and having those areas reviewed’. Another respondent viewed its purpose as beneficial to the employer because: ‘It flags issues and opens dialogue around processes in the workplace’.
The question which suggested that the purpose of supervision is to manage performance was the only question that recorded a noticeable level of disagreement. Although 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, 18% neither agreed nor disagreed and 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed. On further analysis, 19% of Development Workers, 15% of Co-ordinators, 12% of Administrators, 8% of Volunteer Directors and 7% of the Other cohort disagreed or strongly disagreed. Some comments suggested that managing staff performance was difficult when supervisors (the Co-ordinators) are not attending supervision themselves. Other comments suggested that managing performance was only one aspect of supervision and that regular team meetings and reviewing the FRC Work Plan were also important considerations.

5.6 Challenges to Providing Supervision

Although high numbers reported that supervision was beneficial, high numbers in all four cohorts also testified that the quality of the supervision could be improved. Respondents indicated that it was helpful to be able to discuss their work, particularly in relation to recent changes and the increasing emphasis on delivering family supports and services. Having an opportunity to review past achievements, plan future goals and reflect on practice were all mentioned as aspects of supervision that respondents valued.
A number of challenges to providing supervision were identified in the questionnaire (n=46). These are organised into the following key areas: (1) frequency and timing of supervision sessions; (2) the value afforded to supervision; (3) the need for more formal, structured supervision within FRCs; (4) supervision skills and the importance of the supervision relationship and (5) access to supervision for FRC Co-ordinators.

5.6.1 Frequency and Timing of Supervision Sessions
The need for improvements in the frequency and timing of supervision sessions was widely commented on in the questionnaire. Some respondents felt that there was not enough focus on the importance of regular, one-to-one supervision meetings whilst others recognised lack of time as a serious challenge, ‘...it is difficult to fit the regular sessions into a busy schedule – time is an issue for all FRCs’. There was also widespread acknowledgement that effective supervision requires structured meetings that occur at regular intervals, on a pre-planned basis. One respondent suggested that supervision meetings should be scheduled at the beginning of the year and that supervision is only beneficial if it is consistent. Changes in the membership of the voluntary board of directors, as new members need time to become familiar with their roles and responsibilities, was also identified as a factor that can result in supervision being neglected, particularly for Co-ordinators.

5.6.2 The Value Afforded to Supervision
Reference (n=9) to the value of supervision, particular in times of change, was made. The emphasis on the provision of community-based family supports and services with the move to the new Agency was mentioned by core-funded workers as well as Volunteer Directors. Respondents suggested that supervision is particularly important for workers in the community and voluntary sector as the work can be stressful and is often emotionally demanding. Many comments alluded to a general lack of appreciation of the importance of supervision and pointed to the fact that supervision meetings could be deferred or cancelled at short notice. Meetings could also be interrupted if someone was looking for the Co-ordinator. Some respondents stated that they would prefer not to have to ask for supervision and would like to have it scheduled routinely into their work. The importance of supervision for supervisors was highlighted and it was suggested that Co-ordinators who provide supervision should: ‘...lead by example’.
5.6.3 Formal, Structured Supervision

A number of comments (n=12) called for a more formal and structured approach to supervision, ‘…supervision needs to be a structured meeting that has definite outcomes and is not just a tick box exercise’. Other respondents proposed that having an agreed agenda for supervision meetings that facilitated spending time reflecting on work achievements as well as non-achievements would be beneficial. The need for the staffing sub-committee of the Board to take responsibility for overseeing the overall supervision function within the FRC was highlighted: ‘Staff liaison meetings are essential...to provide a voice for staff and to help the Board to understand what’s happening on the floor behind the closed door’. One respondent suggested that there should be a system in place that allows the RSA to check the effectiveness of the supervision structures that are in place in each FRC. Three respondents called for a common approach to the provision of supervision across the FRC Programme: ‘I think that if staff support and supervision is to happen effectively it has to be standardised and practiced across all FRCs’.

5.6.4 Supervision Skills and the Supervision Relationship

The importance of having access to a supervisor with the appropriate skills and experience to provide effective supervision was identified as being centrally important to the efficacy and value of supervision. Clarity on the role of the supervisor and the purpose of supervision was also identified as being important, ‘…if there is misunderstanding about the function of supervision and the supervisor it can be destructive and unhelpful to other staff and the organisation’. The need for training and up-skilling, for both Co-ordinators and Volunteer Directors was recorded (n=8):

‘The Co-ordinator needs some training at being a supervisor – she is too nice to challenge me – even when I know that I need to be. Although the supervision sessions are useful they could be more constructive and really talk about the hard things’;

‘I need consistency and also someone who is trained and experienced in [providing] supervision. My job is complex - I have a lot of responsibility and [I] am under a lot of pressure - my work areas have changed recently and supervision does not meet my needs in terms of the challenges [that] this brings’.
Although training on the provision of supervision is available from one of two RSAs in the FRC Programme, not all FRCs avail of it. Some questionnaire respondents suggested that the responsibility of voluntary board members to actively ensure that all FRC workers are supervised necessitates greater participation in, and commitment to the training that is available.

5.6.5 Access to Supervision for FRC Co-ordinators
The reported levels of access to supervision in FRCs are presented in Section 5.3. The challenge of not having regular access to supervision and the necessity to examine other options, such as external supervision, was highlighted by a number of Co-ordinators (n=10). However, it was also clear that many FRCs are not in a position to fund this: ‘It would be very beneficial to have outside supervision but due to lack of funding this is not possible for FRCs’. Lack of time was also identified as a difficulty. The need for continuity in the provision of supervision was well articulated. Some Co-ordinators expressed frustration about their dependency on volunteers to provide supervision; particularly as membership of FRC boards of management are constantly changing. The possibility of external supervision providing constancy was highlighted: ‘I need consistency and also someone who is trained and experienced in supervising someone at my level – I need external supervision by a trained professional’.

5.7 Improvements and Developments: Semi-structured Interviews
Semi-structured interviews (Appendix 3) were conducted with eight FRC Co-ordinators from eight of the nine counties in the Western Region. Unlike the other counties, Roscommon has only one FRC and was not sampled. The interviews were conducted after the findings from the questionnaire were analysed. Their purpose was to invite the Co-ordinators to consider how the five challenges that were identified in the questionnaire could be addressed. The eight interviewees confirmed that the named challenges are issues that they are all aware of in practice. They also corroborated that the impact of having limited access to supervision, particularly during the current climate of change in the FRC Programme, can result in increased stress levels as well as a sense of being very isolated:
‘You need to know that you have someone to go to, someone that you trust and find credible, particularly during times of change. Otherwise you can feel very alienated. I know that the Voluntary Management Committee is there but they’re not always there and you can feel very isolated’ (Interviewee 5).

‘It’s very stressful and there are serious consequences regarding self-care and even how you do your job. As a Co-ordinator you’re managing and juggling so much...making decisions daily. We all have supervision and support needs’ (Interviewee 1).

5.7.1 Frequency and Timing of Supervision Sessions

The eight interviewees recognised the importance of having access to regular and frequent supervision meetings for all workers. However, even with the best of intentions, interviewees confirmed that this does not always happen and meetings can, too easily, be cancelled or postponed. Recommendations concerning the ideal frequency of meetings ranged from monthly to every six or eight weeks. Four interviewees also suggested that provision should be made for more frequent meetings if necessary e.g. during induction or if a worker is going through particular changes or difficulties:

‘I have someone at the moment that requires weekly supervision and that can go on for a while ...then it’s a fine line to manage them out of that - when they’re ready – and to meet monthly like everyone else’ (Interviewee 4).

Interviewees expected that meetings should take up to an hour and at most an hour and a half. The suggestion that meetings should be block-booked and scheduled well ahead of time was positively responded to by the eight interviewees:

‘We diary it in so that it doesn’t become ad hoc. It’s part of our vocabulary. It’s not something unusual - people know what to expect and that it’s in everyone’s best interest’ (Interviewee 5).

‘At the moment we’re doing it every four weeks to get everyone used to it and to build it into their diary. We schedule a date for the next meeting at the end of each supervision and support meeting...but maybe we should schedule meetings biannually so that they are prioritised’ (Interviewee 1).
5.7.2 The Value Afforded to Supervision

All interviewees stated strongly that the value of supervision is undersold within the FRC Programme and that it needs to be prioritised:

“We don’t value it enough. They understand it in social work, in terms of managing caseloads and life and death issues but in FRCs we’re dealing with similar issues...more and more. At the frontline we’re working with families in crisis, mental health issues...even suicide! We need to realise the benefits of supervision and the critical nature of it. It’s one of the five (FRC) Programme outcomes... if we’re not looking after ourselves and keeping ourselves well...how can we support our community to do so?’ (Interviewee 1).

“It needs to be prioritised and named in our work plans. It should be part and parcel of any good organisational approach to managing the workload and supporting staff” (Interviewee 4).

All interviewees maintained that a common understanding of the function of supervision was noticeably lacking in FRCs:

“The understanding varies from co-ordinator to co-ordinator. It probably flips between supporting the person, hearing their problems and not giving the supervisor a voice to maybe challenge certain practices to the other extreme of using it just as a monitoring tool to say what’s wrong’ (Interviewee 3).

“Theoretically we know what it means...from the point of view that everyone knows that it’s needed. But in practice, when you break it down, there isn’t a common understanding especially when you look at the format and how we do it. It would be really useful to have a shared appreciation’ (Interviewee 8).

The eight interviewees agreed that a shared definition of the function of supervision was required and that the adoption of an agreed model of practice would ensure more effective delivery both within FRCs and across the FRC Programme. They said that this would also help to address the variations in practice that are evident:

“It needs to be a Programme issue because how else will you get a common understanding? It’s the nature of voluntary management...different people with different understandings. We need a common strategy with clear structures, guiding principles and practice guidelines in place in all FRCs’ (Interviewee 6).
‘Good supervision and support is invaluable within an organisation and it’s essential for all FRCs. It does tell the team and the individual that they’re valued…once it doesn’t become a stick or a carrot. It provides a space to bring things [forward] and helps to create a culture of taking responsibility and looking for solutions’ (Interviewee 2).

5.7.3 Formal, Structured Supervision

The importance of formal and structured supervision as a valuable and necessary component of professional practice and continuous professional development was recognised by the eight interviewees. There was widespread agreement that supervision, by its very definition, has to be properly organised and that a structured format contributes towards its purpose being fully acknowledged and respected:

‘Within this sector there can be some resistance to formal structures – but you need a secure base and good structures behind you to be able to be flexible and responsive in your practice. You need an organisation with good communication structures and good policies and procedures to be able to go out and know that you’re supported – almost like having a good family behind you’ (Interviewee 3).

The need for supervision contracts and signed records of individual sessions by the supervisor and the supervisee was acknowledged in the interviews. The responsibilities of both parties to be accountable and participate fully in the supervision process, including following up on agreed actions, were also highlighted. Regular team meetings, to support the operational management of the day-to-day work, were regarded as an essential requirement of the overall supervision structure. Each of the eight FRC Co-ordinators had access to a Staff Liaison or Staffing sub-committee of the voluntary board of directors that was responsible for overseeing employment practice and human resources issues. Some of these were more active than others in recognising the employer’s ‘duty of care’ and ensuring that there was some level of formal supervision structures in place. As one interviewee stated:

‘We have beautiful books….policies and procedures that get dusted down every now and then! What we have to do is implement our staff support and supervision policy and practice our procedures’ (Interviewee 7).
5.7.4 Supervision Skills and the Supervision Relationship

The complexity of the role and the requirement for effective supervisors to use a range of skills was readily acknowledged in the eight interviews:

‘Good supervisors have to have a range of skills. It’s not just about communication – it’s about mediation and being able to critique without criticism...to be able to get the best out of people constructively’ (Interviewee 2).

‘From previous experience, my personal belief is that supervision should be compulsory and that it should be provided by someone from within the profession – someone with the skills, experience and expertise to help you problem solve. It’s also about building a relationship over time to help you to do this’ (Interviewee 4).

‘Skills are really important because mostly it’s fine ...but sometimes you just have to have the difficult conversations’ (Interviewee 5).

Many Volunteer Directors have little or no experience of managing workers and providing supervision. In such circumstances, their ability to provide effective supervision for FRC Co-ordinators was questioned by some of the interviewees:

‘Our supervisors are volunteers, and with respect, they are not professionals in this area. We need to be supported and challenged by professional practitioners that know the field that we work in and you can’t always rely on volunteers for that’ (Interviewee 8).

Two interviewees suggested that the composition of the voluntary boards of management in FRCs needs to be considered and that people with experience of managing and supervising workers should be actively targeted and encouraged to join.

The need for training to develop confidence and expertise in providing supervision and to promote more standardised practice was expressed by the eight interviewees. One interviewee suggested that a supervisor’s forum, facilitated by the RSA, would be useful to explore common issues and enhance supervision skills. Others stated:

‘Skills vary and training is necessary – there’ll only be buy in if everyone understands it and appreciates the benefits of it. We need to adapt a model that will work for FRCs ...given the broadness of our work. I myself find that the triangular model [O’Neill, 2004] of accountability, support and learning works. We need to create the space to reflect on our work – it should be a pillar within the Programme’ (Interviewee 7).
‘There can be long periods when you don’t get it and you feel that you don’t have a right to demand it because you’re aware that volunteers may not have the skills or the confidence [to provide it]. I’m really lucky at the minute because some of the Volunteer Directors did training with the RSA last year. One of them really recognises the value and importance of it and is becoming a better supervisor as time goes on. But when she leaves the board ...what then?’ (Interviewee 6).

5.7.5 Access to Supervision for FRC Co-ordinators

All eight interviewees acknowledged the significance of appropriate supervision to challenge them to reflect on their own practice, both as practitioners and as supervisors. Many of them regularly access peer support, mostly on an informal basis. Some interviewees had received effective supervision from Volunteer Directors but continuity was problematic as many Volunteer Directors serve for a finite term (generally 3 – 5 years). Whilst external supervision was considered useful, either lack of resources and/or finding the ‘right’ supervisor with the requisite professional experience and knowledge of the sector was an issue. When asked what their ideal supervision structure would look like, six of the eight interviewees indicated that they would welcome an opportunity to access either facilitated group supervision or a peer support group that was dedicated to furthering professional development. Two interviewees stipulated that the group should be comprised of ‘peer professionals’ and not just FRC Co-ordinators. One interviewee that already participates in such a peer support group described their experience:

‘It’s supportive but it’s also about collaborative practice and opportunities – sharing resources, ideas and solutions. The different skills of the group and the range of expertise and experience within in are invaluable. They [group members] are from organisations doing similar work and they know and understand the environment’ (Interviewee 1).

Two interviewees suggested that group supervision could be facilitated by the RSA and three interviewees said the RSA was best positioned to provide one-to-one supervision meetings for the FRC Co-ordinators that they work with. Interviewees felt that the administrative function of supervision is, or can be, adequately provided by Volunteer Directors and that ideally this should be carried out in conjunction with either group supervision or some form of peer support.
5.7.6. An Additional Challenge
Interviewees were asked if they were aware of any challenges in the provision of supervision that had not been already highlighted. Two of the eight interviewees identified an additional challenge concerning the line management function of the Others cohort. These workers are not core-funded and are often not employed directly by the FRC but are employed by another organisation:

‘Providing supervision and support can be very complicated with non-core-funded staff, especially when they’re not employed by the FRC e.g. CE [Community Employment] participants. What happens when accountability and performance issues need to be addressed? Managing staff is a lot of work and there can be skills and capacity issues for CE people. Why should we operate, given that we’re supporting people’s lives, with a team that draws upon people that often require huge support themselves and aren’t professionally trained?’ (Interviewee 3).

5.8 Conclusion
This chapter described both the qualitative and quantitative findings from the questionnaire and the eight semi-structured interviews that formed the basis of the study. The response rate to the questionnaire was beyond expectations, clearly indicating that supervision practice is a concern in FRCs across the Western Region. Respondents were very forthcoming about sharing their views on the subject as well as describing their own personal experience of supervision. Wide variations in the understanding of the function of supervision as well as differences in supervision practice are apparent. Although the questionnaire respondents reported that they found supervision beneficial, most of them said that it could be improved in a number of ways. The findings identified five key challenges to providing more effective supervision. A number of improvements or developments that could be implemented to begin addressing those challenges and enhance the individual experience of supervision in FRCs have been proposed. These findings are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction
The main research findings are discussed in this chapter. The extent to which the results elucidate the research objectives is considered as the findings are contextualised within the broader literature. Access to supervision in FRCs in the Western Region is discussed in relation to its significance for individual workers and the organisation. Some of the influences from the wider voluntary sector that impact on supervision practice in FRCs are illuminated. The extent to which supervision is valued and understood in FRCs and the challenges that were ascertained regarding its provision are deliberated with regard to the implications that emerge for future practice. Key improvements and developments that were suggested by participants as a way of addressing these challenges are considered with a view to how they could be realistically and successfully implemented in order to support more valuable supervision practice within FRCs.

6.2 Current Levels of Access to Supervision
Dating back to 1994, the FRC Programme is now well established with over 60% of core-funded workers in position for over five years. Overall, a high level of access to supervision was reported in the research although closer inspection revealed that the frequency of that access was limited. The majority of FRC Co-ordinators (68%), Development Workers (54%) and Administrators (64%) that reported having some level of access do not have regular, scheduled supervision meetings. O’Neill specifies that of its very nature: ‘Professional supervision is seen as a regular, structured process. The frequency of supervision will be influenced by professional requirements, individual needs, the stage of development of the supervisee and the service expectations’ (2004, p. 62). If supervision is to be used as a realistic and effective resource within any organisation, O’Neill recommends that supervision meetings should be conducted monthly or at least every six weeks. Consequently, despite the relatively high levels reported in the research, the irregular incidence of supervision
meetings suggests that supervision is not timetabled as a priority and that a casual and *ad hoc* approach underpins its access within FRCs.

**6.2.1 Wider Influences**

Supervision is not only about the dynamics between supervisors and supervisees; it occurs in broader social and institutional contexts that shape the relationships and delineate what is possible (Hernandez and McDowell, 2010). Managed by local volunteers, FRCs are publically funded. Dacombe (2011) defines voluntary organisations as those that do not distribute profits, are constitutionally separate from the state, are formally organised, self-governing and benefit from some degree of volunteering. Commenting on the vulnerability of voluntary sector finances, Cunningham (1999) observed that voluntary agencies, many of whom have a unique ‘employee mix’ of professional workers and unpaid volunteers, are often sensitive to the charge of spending too high a proportion of their resources on staff support and development. Any money that is not spent on directly benefiting vulnerable groups or individuals can be perceived as ‘misspent’ (ibid). Throughout this study, numerous references were made to the lack of resources that are available for supervision. Field (2008) claims that an organisation should invest in supervision as a key mechanism to promote the development and competencies of its workers (and volunteers). Volunteers are engaged at all levels of FRC activity either as Volunteer Directors or as Volunteer Workers that assist paid workers to implement a variety of community-based programmes and initiatives (Family Support Agency, 2013). In 2013, a total of 1,293 Volunteer Workers (210 full time equivalent positions) supported the implementation of local action plans in FRCs in the Western Region (Tusla, 2014b). Only nine Volunteer Workers participated in this study and no conclusions could be drawn from such a small sample. Further research is required to determine the supervision structures that are required to ensure that such a resource is afforded appropriate guidance and support.

Noble and Irwin (2009) argue that the increasing fiscal restraint and rationalisation in public spending in most Western countries has had a significant impact on the provision of health, welfare and community services. Describing voluntary sector organisations as moving from the margin into the mainstream, Moxham (2010) highlights the challenges that exist in being publically funded and the burgeoning obligation to meet public sector accountability requirements. In the past three years core-funded budgets have been
substantially reduced in FRCs. Funding insecurity means that some FRC workers and volunteers are left with no choice but to fundraise to supplement basic operational costs. Research participants named the following as concerns in a broader sense and also as issues that they would like to address in supervision: cuts in core-funding, the sense that there is an increasing expectation to do ‘more for less’; the changing nature of the work of FRCs from the co-ordination of community development initiatives to the delivery of community-based family supports and the associated move to Tusla.

The importance of structured and formal supervision as part of professional practice and as a resource to equip workers to manage the on-going challenges of the workplace and the impact of the exposure to workplace stresses is widely supported in the literature (O’Neill, 2004; Morrison, 2005; Davys and Beddoe, 2010; Wonnacott, 2012). The demand shown in the research for more effective and formalised supervision reflects Hawkins and Shohet’s (2012) belief that effective supervision supports professionals to increase their individual and collective capacities to respond to the incontrovertible forces that continue to shape the context of the helping professions. The authors identified these forces as: a greater demand for services, higher expectations of quality of service and fewer resources. Westergaard (2013) effectively highlights the dichotomy posed for voluntary and community-based organisations (like FRCs) whereby the need for supervision becomes paramount as employees are working under increasingly demanding and stressful conditions but the financial imperatives are focused elsewhere and supervision becomes a casualty. Interestingly, back in 1995, Stanners suggested that the demands on voluntary organisations for greater accountability requires explicit skills in setting targets, monitoring performance and evaluating outcomes – which are the very tasks of supervision which makes it an essential component of quality assurance.

6.3 How Supervision is Provided
The approach to supervision practice varies from one FRC to another in the Western Region. What emerged through the questionnaire and was categorically confirmed during the interviews was the lack of a common understanding of the definition and function of supervision. Supervision is timetabled in some FRCs and workers have access to regular, scheduled meetings. In others a much more casual approach has been adopted and some workers believe that they have to ask for supervision. It is primarily
the FRC Co-ordinator who provides supervision to other workers and most Co-ordinators (68%) get their supervision internally from a Volunteer Director. Although Volunteer Directors were generally regarded as very supportive, it emerged during the interviews that many of them do not have a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the day-to-day work of FRC Co-ordinators and therefore lacked the skills or discernment to provide effective supervision for them.

In the research, all eight interviewees confirmed the existence of a staffing sub-committee, frequently referred to as Staff Liaison, which is responsible for overseeing the employer’s ‘duty of care’ to its employees. An integral part of this role is to ensure that appropriate supervision structures are in place. Over 80% of questionnaire respondents confirmed the existence of a written supervision policy and procedures. However, the extent to which these procedures are implemented is unclear, particularly when comparing reported access against frequency of access in the research. One-to-one supervision meeting with the line manager (the Co-ordinator) are supplemented by regular team meetings. It was evident in the research that team meetings are regarded as an essential element of the overall supervision structure in FRCs and are far less likely to be cancelled than the one-to-one meetings. Richmond (2009) endorses the use of such a layered approach and suggests that both individual and team development is supported through regular interactions and communication. In this way everyone has a general overview of the nature of the work of the organisation as well as the current workload and all team members are able to interact in a way that encourages self-responsibility and increases mutual support (ibid).

Commenting on the practice of supervision in mental health care systems in the US, Hoge et al (2011) describe similar issues to those that have been highlighted in this study. The authors revealed that public-service organisations do not always have clear policies on supervision practice in place; supervision was rarely part of agency staff development plans, most organisations lacked clear standards regarding the format and frequency of supervision and few monitored the situation to ensure that even minimum standards were being met. The authors proposed a number of reasons for this, many of which were also identified in this study: pressures on time; resource constraints; the lack of national standards or requirements regarding the provision of supervision and lack of supervision training as individuals often became supervisors based on seniority.
In mental health services in Queensland, Australia, Kavanagh et al (2003) identified similar problems with the delivery of effective supervision: lack of resources; infrequent sessions; insufficiently experienced supervisors; lack of formal guidelines and a need for training in supervisory skills. Unfortunately, FRCs are too familiar with many of these problems as parallel themes were mentioned frequently throughout the study.

6.4 Purpose and Value of Supervision

The overall aim of supervision should be to provide services in accordance with the organisation’s responsibilities and accountable, professional standards. The secondary aim should be the well-being and job satisfaction of all workers which communicates the employer’s ‘duty of care’ for those working in difficult and challenging roles (Carpenter et al, 2012). As early as 1995, Ash recognised that whilst supervision is widely accepted as an essential feature of practice in the caring professions, it often suffers from lack of resources and frequently happens more in the intent than in the reality. Despite written manuals, guidelines and even contracts, supervision is often sacrificed for more ‘pressing needs’ that require urgent action and an immediate response from managers (ibid). The same narrative could be used to describe the day-to-day reality for many FRCs that are endeavouring to respond to increasing needs in the community whilst operating within reduced budgets. The research signalled a clear demand for a common understanding of the purpose and value of supervision, amongst all workers and across FRCs. Different perceptions of the function of supervision emerged in the questionnaire e.g. in comparison to Co-ordinators, Administrators reported that there was a strong focus on ‘Training Needs’ and less emphasis on ‘Learning Gained’ during their supervision meetings. The importance of adopting a suitable model of supervision that would facilitate the broad remit of the work of FRCs, accompanied by an agreed set of practice principles and supported by an appropriate training and implementation strategy was clearly identified in the questionnaire and substantiated in the interviews. Having such a strategy would ensure that the practice of supervision is effectively and consistently executed in all FRCs whilst also corroborating the argument for sufficient resources to do so.
6.4.1 Supervision as a Function of Professional Practice

The recognition of supervision as a core element of professional practice is widely promoted in the literature and was highlighted by the eight interviewees in this study. In many professions, supervision is a mandatory activity that is regarded as fundamental to ensuring the development and maintenance of professional, reflective and ethical practice. However, in many others the concept is less common place, often misunderstood and not necessarily viewed as a ‘requirement to practice’ as there is no legal imperative in place to provide it (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012). Noble and Irwin (2009) underline the essential role that organisations play in promoting effective supervision practice and warn that an irregular, unpredictable and casual commitment to it can undermine its use and its value. As workers are being pressed to do ‘more for less’, they claim that the lost opportunity to access new knowledge and critically reflect on the issues that practitioners are facing in their daily work may be at the expense of professional practice and development. Similar sentiments were expressed by the interviewees in this study. Promoting the value of effective supervision, Juby and Scannapieco (2007) comment on the need for ‘bearable’ and ‘manageable’ jobs and observed that workers who had supportive supervisors tended to have positive attitudes to their work regardless of workload or other adverse working conditions.

More recently, Robinson (2013) examined the role and function of supervision in the retention of health and social workers in non-government organisations (NGOs) in Australia and the UK. Recognising that NGOs have to ration their activities based on their access to funds, the author observed an inconsistent approach to supervision which failed to adequately address the demanding nature of the work. Workers claimed that the lack of supervision compromised their role and professional identity by eliminating opportunities to explore complex issues and reducing the critical lens with which to establish the boundaries and the skills that were required to manage their work. During the interviews FRC Co-ordinators made similar arguments, advocating for more effective supervision systems and the necessary resources to support such systems. Where adequate supervision is not provided, some Co-ordinators believed that it placed their well-being at risk and reduced the effectiveness of their practice and interventions. Robinson (2013) concluded that effective supervision strategies are an essential element in the efficient use of resources and achievement of professional as well as user-based outcomes.
A body of research that links organisation variables such as quality of supervision to improved outcomes for ‘consumers’ or those accessing the services is now emerging (Poertner, 2008). Further evidence-based research in this area will support voluntary organisations, like FRCs, to be more confident about arguing that the delivery of effective supervision not only benefits the supervisee but also profits those using the supports and services that the organisation is providing. As Mor Barak et al (2009, p.25) observed: ‘Accumulating research on supervision indicates that the various dimensions of supervision may have protective, proactive or preventative roles in ensuring a positive work environment that can contribute to worker effectiveness and potentially to quality service delivery’.

6.5 The Challenges to Providing Supervision in FRCs

Five key challenges in providing supervision in FRCs were identified through the research: (1) the frequency and timing of supervision sessions; (2) the value afforded to it; (3) the need for more formal, structured supervision; (4) supervision skills and the supervision relationship and (5) access to supervision for FRC Co-ordinators. Although a high percentage of workers in FRCs reported that the supervision that they received was beneficial, they also indicated that it could be improved. The first three challenges are readily identified in the supervision literature and have been discussed in the previous section (Kavanagh et al, 2003; Hoge et al, 2011; Carpenter et al, 2012). They could be tackled immediately by adopting and implementing an agreed policy, with associated procedures, on the role of supervision within FRCs in the Western Region. Such a policy would describe the purpose and value of supervision, give clear guidelines on the frequency of supervision meetings and identify a formal, structured approach to the provision of supervision. The fourth and fifth challenges could be confidently addressed given time and are discussed in more detail in the next section.

6.6 Improvements and Developments

Many of the proposals that were presented by research participants to address the named challenges in supervision practice in FRCs were extremely practical. For example scheduling supervision meetings well ahead of time so that dates are prioritised and ‘in the diary’ could be easily executed. However, two key areas deserve further comment: supervision skills and the supervision relationship and access to supervision for FRC Co-ordinators.
6.6.1 Supervision Skills and the Supervision Relationship

The importance of the supervision relationship was highlighted by research participants. The subject is covered extensively in the literature (Kavanagh et al, 2003; Cearley, 2004; Stalker et al, 2007; Jenkinson, 2009; Chen and Scannapieco, 2010). Mor Barak et al (2009) propose that the most important implication from their study is that organisations will benefit from generating policies and investing resources in nurturing the supervisor / supervisee relationship and creating an organisational culture that promotes the value of such relationships. The authors recommend that organisations stimulate the mandatory nature of supervision in their policies and indicate the expected frequency of supervision meetings. Similar recommendations were made by research participants to improve supervision practice in FRCs. Organisations also need to evaluate internal levels of satisfaction with the structures that are in place, particularly in relation to the supervisor / supervisee relationship to provide a feedback mechanism to alert the organisation about the training needs of supervisors as well as inform individual supervisors about specific areas in which they could improve their skills (Mor Barak et al, 2009).

The need for training to improve supervision practice and up-skill supervisors, to develop their capacity to provide more valuable supervision, was strongly identified in the research. Because of the complexities involved in effective supervision practice and the fact that it requires an additional knowledge base, competencies, capabilities and capacities from those acquired in one’s original professional training - all supervisors need a period of formal training and development (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012). Munro (2011) cautions that investment and training is required to equip supervisors with the required skills to support individual workers and provide high quality supervision. Falender et al (2004) acknowledge that supervision is a domain of professional practice for which formal training and professional standards have been largely neglected. They advocate a curricular approach to supervision training that translates competencies to measurable criteria and consider ‘supervision of the supervisor’ as essential. Rapisarda, Desmond and Nelson (2011) also stress the importance of supervising the supervisor because of its significance in contributing to the quality of the supervisory relationship. Hawkins and Shohet emulate this concept: ‘The first prerequisite for being a good supervisor is to be able to actively arrange good supervision for oneself’ (2012, p. 51).
The capacity of some FRC Co-ordinators, many of whom have no formal training in the area and have limited access to supervision themselves, to provide effective supervision for other workers, is uncertain. The assumption is frequently made that competent practitioners make good supervisors and individuals who have never participated in effective supervision themselves often end up with supervisory responsibilities for others. O’Neill asserts: ‘The delivery of effective supervision in an organisational context demands skilful, insightful supervisors with a strong appreciation of the complexities of the specific work environment who are themselves participating in regular, effective supervision’ (2004, p. 60). Cousins (2010) claims that it is essential that supervision practice does not focus solely on questions of frequency and content, but also considers the complex interpersonal dynamics of ‘having difficult conversations’ and challenging performance issues. Steel succinctly defines the role of the supervisor as: ‘Supporter, facilitator, consultant and trainer’, (2001, p. 99) and effective supervision as the development of a relationship where the supervisee feels: ‘…psychologically held, listened to, heard, encouraged, challenged, confronted, stimulated and informed’ (p. 97). Consequently, the suggestion from one interviewee - of a supervisor’s forum facilitated by the RSA - to provide opportunities to promote and develop supervision practice and to confer with peers on emerging and complex issues merits further consideration.

6.6.2 Access to Supervision for FRC Co-ordinators: Alternative Modes
Although supervision exists theoretically in many organisations, McAuliffe and Sudberry (2005) suggest that it is not always smoothly translated into practice as finding time for ‘self-care’ is often difficult. Self-care and professional development are two themes that were mentioned frequently by interviewees in this study. Only one interviewee was satisfied with the quality of supervision that they received and this was only after Volunteer Directors had participated in training that was provided by the RSA the previous year. Other interviewees indicated that Volunteer Directors often lack the time, skills and / or understanding to provide it. In addition, some Co-ordinators may be reluctant to admit that they are experiencing difficulties. The reluctance of workers to show their vulnerabilities to their employer or line manager because of the fear of negative performance evaluation or being judged as not being able ‘to manage’ is a subject that is well covered in the literature (Bogo and McKnight, 2006; Bradley, Engelbrecht and Höjer, 2010; Bogo et al, 2011).
Six of the eight interviewees expressed their willingness to consider group supervision or peer support and believed that this could complement their one-to-one supervision meetings with a Volunteer Director. Field (2008) argues that whilst formal, one-to-one supervision is appropriate in the context of performance and workplace management, group supervision can enrich decision making by promoting insightful analysis. With skilled facilitation, the group setting provides collective expertise and appropriate challenge and can direct the discussion towards ‘next steps’ and solutions (ibid). Morrison (2005) defines group supervision as: ‘A negotiated process whereby members come together in an agreed format to reflect on their work by pooling their skills, experience and knowledge in order to improve both individual and group capacities’ (p. 246). Lohrbach (2008) suggests that once the group process is well-facilitated, a practice culture develops which allows for honest discussion and open-mindedness regarding insights and lessons learned from previous experiences.

Peer supervision can either be individually reciprocal or in a group of workers with similar needs and level of expertise – they can be from within the same organisation or from different organisations (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012). Hoge et al (2011) define peer supervision as a relationship in which advice and support is provided by peer professionals who have no accountability with regards to the work. While peer supervision can serve as an important adjunct to one-to-one supervision, the authors warn that it lacks critical elements of responsibility and authority. One interviewee reported very positively on their experience of an inter-professional support group. Concerned more with peer support and collaborative practice than the supervision of individual work, the group provides an ideal forum for collective reflection, realising solutions to shared problems and exploring perspectives from diverse practice backgrounds. The majority of interviewees cited a layered approach incorporating regular one-to-one meetings with a Volunteer Director to discuss performance and workload management issues as well as access to some form of systematic group or peer support as their ‘ideal’ supervision structure for FRC Co-ordinators. Such an arrangement could address the critical question of ‘who supervises the supervisor’.

6.6.3 Supervision Strategy for the Western Region

The call for a common understanding of the function of supervision was unanimous in the research both to enrich the professional lives of workers in FRCs but also to
produce better outcomes for those accessing the supports and services that are provided. The development of an agreed framework for supervision practice - one that is adequately resourced, sustained by a shared model of practice, guided by an approved set of standards and protocols and promoted by a comprehensive training programme - would help to prioritise it and promote better outcomes. The literature provides countless formulae for staging or reframing supervision at an organisational level: O’Neill’s dual-focus approach (2004, p. 30) incorporates both operational and developmental considerations, Morrison’s ten building blocks (2005, p. 47) and the five-step guide suggested by Hoge et al (2011, p. 196). Hawkins and Shohet (2012, p. 242) propose seven stages in the organisational process for introducing or upgrading supervision practice. The first stage is to inquire into current levels of supervision - which this research has undertaken. The second stage, which is to awaken interest in developing supervision policy and practice, has also been activated through the study. The authors identify the third stage as ‘initiating some experiments’ which recommends identifying core groups of people that have the desire and the commitment to make changes.

Co-ordinators are in a key position to promote more effective supervision practice within FRCs, both as supervisors and as workers asking for more effective supervision to support them to manage the increasingly complex demands of their day-to-day work. The RSA works closely with Co-ordinators and Staff Liaison sub-committees in each FRC in the Western Region. Confirming this, the research indicates that the RSA is well-positioned to support FRCs to come to a common understanding of the function of supervision and to develop a complimentary training strategy for the Western Region. The training needs to be flexible and negotiated rather than enshrined in a ‘one size fits all’ approach as all FRCs are different. It could be delivered locally or on a regional basis. The RSAs have already developed templates that promote best practice in relation to supervision policies and procedures and these are widely available. An integral part of the proposed training programme would be to provide on-going advice and support on implementing these templates. In this way, the continuous professional development of FRC workers and volunteers could be prioritised and routinely named as a core element of best practice in FRC action plans. The ‘supervisor’s forum’ that was mooted in the research would help to prioritise and develop supervision practice on a wider basis. Participation in such a forum could generate interest in the subject of
supervision beyond local boundaries and even contribute to a wider debate on the purpose and value of supervision within the FRC Programme.

6.7 Conclusion
This chapter discussed the research findings within the context of the broader supervision literature. The collective challenges that were identified in the study are robustly analysed and considered. The solutions to these challenges, as they were generated in the research, are employed to provide a rationale for adopting a more strategic approach to supervision practice and thereby support the professional development of workers and volunteers within FRCs. Questions that emerged in the research relating to professional practice and identity are examined against arguments about the importance of the supervision relationship and the skills and capacity of supervisors to provide effective supervision. A spotlight on the implications for future practice as well as the potential benefits of ensuring a more successful and consistent approach is wielded throughout the discussion. The FRC Programme is currently undergoing significant change. A shift in focus from the co-ordination of community development initiatives to the delivery of family support, the requirement for FRCs to position their work within the new service delivery framework adopted by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and reduced funding levels are on-going challenges. Supervision, of its nature, is a collaborative practice that is constantly developing. Having a shared understanding of the critical role of supervision in promoting skilled practice and continuous professional development will hopefully support FRC workers and volunteers in the Western Region to respond resourcefully to the changing demands in their operational environments.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction
This study aimed to provide an overview of supervision in FRCs in the Western Region and specifically to:
1. Demonstrate the current levels of access to supervision in FRCs;
2. Describe how supervision is provided in FRCs;
3. Define the purpose and value of supervision in FRCs;
4. Highlight the challenges to providing supervision in FRCs;
5. Identify areas that could be improved or developed to enhance the experience of supervision within FRCs.

7.2 Key Findings
The response rate (n=160) to the questionnaire, the gravity and complexity with which respondents commented and the willingness of FRC Co-ordinators to be interviewed demonstrate the importance of supervision in FRCs. The research clearly established that the understanding and practice of supervision varies considerably within FRCs in the Western Region. Although high levels of access to supervision were reported (Co-ordinators 70%; Development Workers 81%; Administrators 94% and Others 93%) subsequent analysis ascertained that supervision meetings were habitually provided irregularly and that access often tended to be informal or ad hoc. While respondents reported that the supervision was beneficial they also testified in high numbers that it could be improved.

Despite the fact that over 80% of respondents confirmed the existence of a written policy and procedures on supervision, the extent to which this policy was employed as a living, working document to direct best practice in relation to supervision practice was questionable. Supervision meetings focused predominantly on ‘Workload Management’ and ‘Future Goals’ rather than on the reflective aspect of the ‘Learning Gained’ from practice. Almost all Co-ordinators (98%) provide supervision to FRC workers while Co-ordinators get their supervision internally from a Volunteer Director (68%) or
externally from peers or a qualified professional. There was a strong indication that, despite the demanding work environment that FRCs operate in, supervision sessions are often interrupted, cancelled or deferred.

Five key challenges to the provision of supervision in FRCs were identified in the research. These were: (1) the frequency and timing of supervision sessions; (2) the value afforded to supervision; (3) the requirement for more formal structured supervision; (4) supervision skills and the supervision relationship and (5) access to supervision for FRC Co-ordinators. Many of the suggestions made during the interviews, regarding how best to address these challenges, were very practical and could be readily executed. A stronger supervisory culture within FRCs, based on an effectual, informed and live supervision policy, would ensure that supervision practice is more effectively realised. A casual commitment to supervision can undermine its use and value in an organisation and, in the absence of a clear framework in place, can result in a process that is inconsistent and disconnected from the needs of supervisees.

The requirement for access to effective supervision for FRC Co-ordinators was pinpointed as an important area for development. This is in line with best practice guidelines in the literature which stress the importance of providing constructive and effective supervision for supervisors. As a collaborative process, the skills and style of the supervisor has a profound influence on the quality of individual supervisory relationships and research participants suggested that this impacts on the outcomes of the process for supervisees. In the absence of funding for external supervision (from a suitably qualified professional), the research concluded that group or peer supervision may provide an additional forum to support the work of Co-ordinators and that a supervisor’s forum, facilitated by the RSA, would promote and develop supervision practice.

A key area identified for development was the need to have a common definition and understanding of the function of supervision within FRCs. This was viewed as essential to promoting its importance and providing access in a more structured, consistent and beneficial way. Respondents clearly believed that providing effective supervision for workers not only benefits their well-being, but promotes ‘self-care’, supports more competent, professional practice in challenging work environments and ultimately
ensures better outcomes for the members of the community that are availing of the supports and services that are provided. The research called for the adoption of a common policy on supervision – one that is supported by a comprehensive training programme to promote better supervision practice.

7.3 Concluding Remarks

Increasingly voluntary organisations like FRCs are struggling with fewer resources to cope with growing demands for services and higher expectations of quality of service. Outcomes for FCRs are now defined by national policy and are measured accordingly. Working within such an environment, FRC workers deserve to be properly supported and afforded opportunities for professional development. The research emphasised the importance of having a clear mandate within FRCs for access to formal supervision that is regular, structured and duly invested in. An agreed strategy on supervision could be adopted on a local, regional and even national level within the FRC Programme. Such a strategy would define its purpose and benefits, provide clear guidelines for providing effective supervision and delineate practice standards. It would firmly position any contradictory arguments about ‘resource implications’ within the wider context of the need to promote competent, professional practice and support reflective practitioners within FRCs. Individual FRCs would be supported to prioritise supervision and value it as critical process that can facilitate professional development as well as managing performance. An alignment between a common strategy on supervision and the development of local competencies within FRCs will not only support the effective implementation of the FRC strategic framework for family support (McKeown, 2013) but will also further the role of FRCs in advancing the prevention, partnership and family support agenda of Tusla (2014a). This study was conducted within a particular context and during a specific stage in the development of the FRC Programme. The discourse about supervision needs to continue within FRCs, the Western Region and the wider FRC Programme. As one interviewee articulated during the research: ‘We have beautiful books...policies and procedures that get dusted down every now and then! What we have to do is implement our staff support and supervision policy and practice our procedures’.
To whom it concerns,

My name is Mary Seale and I work with West Training & Development, the Regional Support Agency for FRCs in the Western Region (covering counties Donegal, Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Limerick, Kerry and Cork). I am currently completing my second year of a two year, part-time Masters programme in Family Support Studies with the Child and Family Research Centre, NUI, Galway. I plan to undertake a research project as part of that Masters programme.

It is hoped that the research will provide an overview of the role of supervision and support in FRCs, present a profile of current levels of provision and identify areas for improvement. Staff members (Co-ordinators, Development Workers, Administrators and other funded staff), volunteers and members of the Voluntary Board of Directors are all invited to participate so that a complete picture emerges.

The questionnaire is being circulated through Survey Monkey and will be supported by a number of interviews at a later stage. Please be assured that confidentiality is completely assured. All data will be anonymised and individual staff members, volunteers or Centres will not be identifiable in any way. The raw data will be destroyed once the thesis has been accepted and graded by NUI, Galway and all FRCs will have full access to the information in the thesis.

The questionnaire will only take a few minutes to answer – mostly by ticking the box of your choice. Please answer all questions as honestly as possible as the validity of the research findings will completely depend on your responses. I fully appreciate that I am asking you to take time out from an extremely busy schedule to complete this questionnaire and want to thank you sincerely in anticipation of your co-operation. If you have any queries in relation to the research please do not hesitate to contact me at 087 919 1112 or 091 567827.

Many thanks,
Mary Seale.

Sections 1 and 2 contain some general questions that can be answered by everyone—including Voluntary Board members.

Section 3 is for staff and volunteers that are working in FRCs and have access to supervision and support.

Section 4 is for staff and volunteers that are working in FRCs and do not have access to supervision and support.
Supervision & Support in Family Resource Centres (FRCs)

Section 5 is for everyone, including Voluntary Board members and is for any additional comments that you may wish to add.

In conclusion, please note that Voluntary Board members are invited to answer Sections 1 and 2 and click N/A in Sections 3 and 4 to progress and answer Section 5.

**Definition of Supervision**

Supervision is a partnership process of on-going reflection and feedback between a named supervisor and supervisee in order to ensure and enhance effective practice. When provided in a supportive manner it offers a regular, structured opportunity to discuss work, to reflect on practice and progress, and to plan for future development (O’Neill, 2004)

### Section 1: Background Information

This section is for everyone to answer—contains some general questions.

**1. What is your role in the FRC?**
- ☐ Co-ordinator
- ☐ Development worker
- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Voluntary Member of the Board
- ☐ Volunteer
- ☐ Other

If ‘Other’—please explain:

---

**2. Do you have access to supervision and support for your work with the FRC?**
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**3. Do you provide supervision and support?**
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If “Yes”—to how many people?

---
Supervision & Support in Family Resource Centres (FRCs)

(Section 1 continued)

*4. How long have you been with the FRC?

- Less than six months
- Less than one year
- 1-5 years
- More than 5 years

Section 2: Your Views on Supervision and Support

This section is for everyone to answer, regardless of their role in the FRC.

Please grade the following statements using the scale below:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

*1. Supervision and Support is beneficial to staff:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comment

*2. Supervision and Support is beneficial to people using the FRC:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comment
**3. Supervision and Support is beneficial to the FRC as an organisation:**

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comment

**4. Supervision and Support helps workers to cope with difficult situations:**

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comment

**5. Supervision and Support offers useful learning opportunities:**

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comment
*6. Supervision and Support provides you with feedback on your work:

   □ Strongly disagree
   □ Disagree
   □ Neither agree nor disagree
   □ Agree
   □ Strongly agree

Comment

*7. Supervision and Support improves accountability/ responsibility:

   □ Strongly disagree
   □ Disagree
   □ Neither agree nor disagree
   □ Agree
   □ Strongly agree

Comment

*8. The purpose of supervision and Support is to support staff:

   □ Strongly disagree
   □ Disagree
   □ Neither agree nor disagree
   □ Agree
   □ Strongly agree

Comment
**Supervision & Support in Family Resource Centres (FRCs)**

(Section 2 continued)

**9. The purpose of supervision and support is to manage staff performance:**

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Comment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 3: For those with access to supervision and support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have access to supervision and support in your FRC, please answer the following short, multiple choice questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otherwise, please select ‘N/A’ (not applicable) to progress to the next Section.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**1. How often do you receive supervision and support?**

- 3 – 4 times a year
- Once every 6 – 8 weeks
- Once a month
- Other
- N/A

If ‘Other’ – please specify

**2. Who provides your supervision and support?**

- The Co-ordinator
- Board member(s)
- Other
- N/A

If ‘Other’ – please specify
Supervision & Support in Family Resource Centres (FRCs)

(Section 3 continued)

*3. Are your supervision and support meetings recorded/ minuted?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Don’t know
☐ N/A

Comment

*4. Do you have access to these records?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Don’t know
☐ N/A

Comment

*5. Are there written policies / procedures in the FRC in relation to supervision and support?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Don’t know
☐ N/A

Comment

(Section 3 continued on next page)
*6. What do you discuss in your supervision and support meetings?

- Workload management
- Work not achieved
- Future work goals
- Accountability
- Learning gained from the work
- Training needs
- Other
- N/A

If ‘Other’ – please specify

*7. Do you feel that the supervision and support that you receive is beneficial?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- N/A

Please state the reasons for your answer:

*8. Do you believe that the supervision and support that you receive could be improved in any way?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- N/A

Please state the reasons for your answer:
Supervision & Support in Family Resource Centres (FRCs)

**Section 4: For those with no access to supervision and support**

If you do not have access to supervision and support in your FRC, please answer the following questions.

Otherwise, please select ‘N/A’ (not applicable) to progress to Section 5.

*1. Would you like to have access to supervision and support?*

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Not sure
- [ ] N/A

Please state the reasons for your answer:

Please provide your comments here.

**Section 5: Additional Comments**

For everyone to respond to.

Please include any comments that you may wish to add in relation to this study

Thank you

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire!
APPENDIX 2

To: Family Resource Centres (FRCs) in the Western Region
Re: Invitation to participate in Research

MA thesis on Supervision – Family Support Studies, NUI, Galway

To whom it concerns,

My name is Mary Seale and I work with West Training & Development, the Regional Support Agency for FRCs in the Western Region which covers counties Donegal, Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Limerick, Kerry and Cork. I am currently completing my second year of a two year, part-time Masters programme in Family Support Studies with the Child and Family Research Centre, NUI, Galway. I plan to undertake a research project as part of that Masters programme.

It is hoped that the research will provide an overview of the role of supervision and support in FRCs, present a profile of current levels of provision and identify areas for improvement. Staff members (Co-ordinators, Development Workers, Administrators and non-core funded staff), volunteers and members of the Voluntary Board of Directors are all invited to participate so that a complete picture emerges.

The questionnaire is being circulated through Survey Monkey (the link is provided below) and will be supported by a number of interviews at a later stage. The questionnaire is designed in such a way that no response can be linked back to individual staff members, volunteers or any individual Centre. In this way anonymity is completely guaranteed and people can be confident that the information that they are providing will contribute to providing a clear profile of supervision and support in FRCs in the Western Region.

The raw data will be destroyed once the thesis has been accepted and graded by NUI, Galway and all FRCs will have full access to the information in the thesis. I would really appreciate as many people as possible in your FRC completing it! It would be really helpful if you could forward it to all staff members (core funded or otherwise), members of the Board and other volunteers that are working to support the work of your FRC.
The questionnaire will only take a few minutes to answer – mostly by ticking the box of your choice. Please answer all questions as honestly as possible as the validity of the research findings will depend on your responses. I fully appreciate that I am asking you to take time out from an extremely busy schedule to complete this questionnaire and want to thank you sincerely in anticipation of your co-operation. If you have any queries in relation to the research please do not hesitate to contact me at 087 919 1112 or 091 567827.

Sincerely,

Mary Seale.

Link to the Questionnaire:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/supervisionandsupportsurvey
APPENDIX 3

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

(Interviewees received a copy of the preliminary findings from the Questionnaire a week prior to the interview).

The research objectives are to:

(a) Demonstrate the current levels of access to supervision in FRCs
(b) Describe how supervision is provided in FRCs
(c) Define the purpose and value of supervision in FRCs
(d) Highlight the challenges to providing supervision in FRCs
(e) Identify areas that could be improved or developed to enhance the experience of supervision within FRCs

1. Have you read the findings to date?

2. Do you want to make any comments / have any observations that you would like to share?

3. Do you think that the function of supervision is understood commonly amongst staff and volunteers and across the FRC Programme?

4. Are there any challenges in the provision of supervision in FRCs that have not been highlighted and that you would like to draw attention to?

5. In your experience what are the main impacts of the challenges that have been identified?
   - On Co-ordinators?
   - Other staff?
   - The FRC?

6. What areas could be improved or developed to enhance the experience of supervision in FRCs?
   In your response - please consider the key challenges that have already been identified in the research as a guide.
a) Frequency and timing of supervision sessions
   Prompt: What does best practice say?

b) The value afforded to supervision
   Prompts: Managing stress and the nature of the work?
            Benefits to the individual / the organisation and
            people using the FRC?

c) Formal, structured supervision and support
   Prompts: Supervision policy?
            Staffing sub-committee of the Board?
            Formal meetings?
            Team meetings?

d) The skills of the supervisor and the supervision relationship
   Prompts: Training?
            Volunteers – skills / experience of supervising?
            Supervising the supervisor?

e) Access to supervision for FRC Co-ordinators
   Prompts: Group supervision for Co-ordinators?
            Peer support / Network meetings?
            Funding?

f) Concluding comments?

Thank you for participating!
APPENDIX 4

AN OVERVIEW OF SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT IN FRCS IN THE WESTERN REGION

Consent Form

Research Participants – Semi-structured Interviewees

I agree to participate in a study being conducted by Mary Seale as part fulfilment for her MA in Family Support Studies with the Child and Family Research Centre, NUI, Galway, under the supervision of Professor Caroline McGregor, School of Political Science and Sociology. I have seen the questionnaire that was circulated through SurveyMonkey and have received a copy of the findings from that questionnaire.

I realise that I am being asked to take part in a semi-structured interview, which will be audiotaped. I know that I can decline to answer any of the questions should I so choose. All of the information that I provide will be treated in the strictest confidence and I will not be identified in the final report. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any stage by ceasing to participate. I also understand that the final report will be made available to all FRCs. I am satisfied that I have all of the information required to make a fully informed decision.

Participant’s Name:__________________________________________

I agree to participate:     YES        NO    (please circle one)

Participants Signature: _________________________________________

Date: __________________________
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act, 2005 (No. 10).*


