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All children in care to have social worker - Andrews

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AT LEAST one child in care in the Dublin North region was unaware they were fostered due to a lack of monitoring by Health Service Executive (HSE) social workers, Minister of State for Children Barry Andrews has revealed.

Mr Andrews said yesterday the case was one of a range of serious deficiencies identified by a recent inquiry into foster care in Dublin undertaken by the Health Information and Quality Authority (Hiqa).

The inquiry identified a failure by HSE social workers to assess some foster families and to visit some children placed with foster families. There was an example where an individual didn't know they were in foster care, he added.

"There is clearly a lack of a system in place or a management system available to ensure that there was a capacity to look back and audit this," said Mr Andrews, who admitted that social workers were struggling with case loads.

He said the positive thing about the revelations regarding the HSE's failure to comply with mandatory rules to assess and monitor foster carers was that this had been identified by HSE audits and ongoing investigations by Hiqa.

"Were it not for the increased prioritisation of child protection, I'm not sure if we would have those reports or the level of understanding that we do now," said Mr Andrews, who was alerted by Hiqa to the deficiencies in foster care.

He said the State-appointed inspectorate Hiqa, which oversees health and childcare services, was having a "transformative effect" on the HSE. He said he would provide extra resources to the agency to increase the number of staff dealing with childcare inspections later this year. There are currently just six Hiqa childcare inspectors.

In an interview with *The Irish Times* yesterday, Mr Andrews said the changes he was making to the childcare protection system should enable it to become "one of the best in the world". He said the Government was committed to ensuring all 5,700 children in care had a social worker by providing €15 million to recruit an extra 270 social workers this year.

Mr Andrews said calls for the child-protection system to be completely removed from the control of the HSE following the publication of the report into the death of 18-year-old mother of two Tracey Fay in 2002 were wide of the mark. "The case you are referring to is pre-HSE, and was handled by the health boards. The HSE is an attempt to centralise control and standardise the work of social work teams. If people are doing different initial assessments in Mullingar compared to those in Cork then how do we know when to prioritise stuff?" he asked.

The report into Tracey Fay's death concluded the British social services responded in a "more decisive and more prompt" manner than Irish authorities.

However, Mr Andrews said it was not true to say that the Irish system was worse.

"If you look at the UK model of providing social care through local authorities, this has been a complete failure by their own admission. I've spoken to professionals and politicians there and they acknowledge they have gone about things the wrong way."

Mr Andrews said a new State-appointed panel set up to investigate and publish reports into the death

of children in State care would “up the standards” in an area where deficits clearly existed.

“The panel will try and ensure that these reports come out in a timely fashion because you can’t have confidence in the system unless people can lift the lid from time to time and have a look at what is going on,” he said.

Mr Andrews said he was not aware of any disciplinary action against any HSE social worker following the deaths of 23 children while in State care over 10 years.

“None of the recommendations that we saw last week had anything to do with taking people to account so we have to assume that the failures are system failures and not individual examples of neglect.

“But if a recommendation comes out saying such and such an individual is clearly in dereliction of duty and shouldn’t be doing what they are doing, then that’s a recommendation we act on.”