

Why we cannot rely on the ailing HSE to protect our children

By Pdraig O'Morain

THE child protection measures announced by Children's Minister Barry Andrews sound impressive -- but the chances they will all be implemented are remote. They are remote because much of the responsibility for implementing them will fall on the HSE.

The Health Service Executive focuses on the health services. That's why it's there. The child protection services it runs are in disarray. This has been made clear by the Ombudsman for Children, by the Irish Association of Social Workers and even by the HSE's own surveys.

To be fair to the HSE, the task of running the health service is monstrous. New initiatives run a lethal gauntlet of funding cuts, organisational bureaucracy and emergencies, such as swine flu.

Indeed, the Irish Medical News recently got to number ten in a series of reports about HSE initiatives that ran into the sand, withered on the vine or appeared in stunted form -- and we've only had a HSE since 2005!

In all this, child protection services have been lost. Concerns about children pile up in in-trays -- that's if they make it to an in-tray. Many children in care have no regular social worker.

A separate child protection agency could do its work in a streamlined way that the HSE can never achieve given its enormous size and workload.

Desperately

A separate agency would have one role only -- the protection of children. That's why we desperately need such an agency.

There is also a vagueness about the proposals. Where is the funding for the promised 270 social workers to come from? Apparently, it will depend on rationalisation of funding and changes in work practices among staff working in child and family services. No doubt both are needed. But how long do you think it will take to sort that out?

New social workers are to have limited caseloads. Fine, but what's to happen to the kids who can't get onto those limited caseloads?

It's good that all residential childcare services will be inspected by the Social Services Inspectorate and here's hoping it will be able to afford the staff to do the inspections.

It's good that an out-of-hours social work service is envisaged for the whole country. "It is proposed that the out-of-hours social work crisis intervention service be piloted in two areas of the country based on day-service social workers volunteering for 'on call' crisis intervention out-of-hours service," says the Government plan. Right. Come back in ten years, so.

It's not all doom and gloom. We will get some of those extra social workers. The expansion of the HSE's National Counselling Service for people affected by past abuse is a good thing.

Tightening up on the obligation on state-funded bodies to report concerns about children is, I suppose, a good thing. I say "I suppose" because, right now, the capacity of child protection services to respond to these reports is limited.

rallying

The proposed memorial to abused children is also an advance. It may seem -- and it is -- highly symbolic. Yet such a memorial if prominent enough, if it's in our face, -- and I mean O'Connell Street in Dublin and the main streets of other major cities -- it will act as a rallying point for the improvement of child protection.

But to make the memorial really effective, let's add something powerful for the children of today: a national child protection agency with children, not hospitals, as its top priority.

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