

## Call for review of child protection



Chief inspector of social services Dr Marion Witton at the launch of the Hiqa guidance for the review of serious incidents involving children in care. Photograph: Eric Luke/The Irish Times

A Health Information and Quality Authority called today for tougher guidelines and tighter timeframes for reporting the deaths of children in state care.

Hiqa said steps urgently needed to be taken to regain public trust after delays and lack of transparency in previous reviews.

The recommendations follow the leaking of a report into the death of 18-year-old Tracey Fay amid opposition claims it had been suppressed.

Ms Fay, who was found dead in a coal bunker used by drug addicts in inner city Dublin in 2002, was one of 24 children to die in state care over the last decade.

Publishing the Hiaq recommendations, the group's chief inspector of social services Dr Marion Witton said the Health Service Executive (HSE) currently had no national standard or systematic way of reviewing serious incidents, including the deaths of children in care.

"We are recommending that national reviews should be undertaken by a panel of experts whose aim will be to investigate circumstances of death or other serious incidents to establish facts and share findings with families and the public," she added.

"Recently reported tragedies illustrate the urgency in ensuring this guidance is implemented with immediate effect."

The authority recommends all deaths of young people who are in care or known to the child protection system should be reported within 48 hours. Any reports on the deaths, or at least a summary of their findings, should be published within 30 days of completion.

Hiqa said the HSE should also work on internal policies to report and review all child protection and welfare incidents at local and national levels.

In a statement tonight, the HSE welcomed the publication of the Hiqa guidelines, saying they would ensure "greater transparency" in the child protection process and strengthen public confidence in it.

It said: "The death of any child in care or serious incident is a tragic event and the HSE is committed to fully investigating these matters in an appropriate and transparent way and to taking any actions required to ensure care of the highest standard."

The HSE's assistant national director of children and families, Phil Garland, said: "We now have a terms of reference to work within which is an important step in moving on to the next level of having an independent, standardised and transparent system in Ireland for the review of serious incidents including deaths of children in care."

"This will further enhance the existing systems that are in place and will address in an empathic manner the public's lack of confidence in our current review process in a manner that is in the best interest of the welfare of children in our care."

The HIQA guidance was earlier presented to Minister for Children Barry Andrews, who has tasked children's rights experts to examine the 24 deaths over the last 10 years.

Barnardo's chief Norah Gibbons and special protection rapporteur Geoffrey Shannon will report on the circumstances of each death. Along with a third member, they will examine how authorities worked with the child and families, the strengths and weaknesses of these contacts and will make recommendations to improve child protection.

Dr Witton said HIQA wanted its recommendations to be implemented by the HSE and other organisations involved in the care of children as soon as possible.

"Robust local and national child protection structures and systems are required to provide a unified, independent and transparent system for children in care," she added. "These children are among the most vulnerable in our society and they have the right to be protected and cared for."