

We all let down these children appallingly

By Pádraig O'Morain

The most shocking detail of the neglect and abuse of six children in the Co Roscommon area by their mother is this: their aunt told gardai that when they visited her she would give them money for sweets. Instead, they would buy foods such as tinned salmon to bring home to the other children.

This, to me, is worse than the urine-soaked sheets, the beatings and the starvation which went on for years.

It paints a picture of children utterly on their own in coping with what was being done to them, even though the evidence of their severe neglect was there for all to see.

Also shocking is the fact that the mother at whose hands all this happened was able to go to the High Court in 2000 to stop the Western Health Board from placing the children in the care of a relative.

How?

And then there is the overall question: how is it possible for children's abuse to be so obvious that it is virtually public and for the abuse to be allowed to go on?

We asked recently in this newspaper if the Baby P case of child torment and murder under the eyes of the authorities could happen here. We concluded that the answer was yes, and this case proves it.

We cannot use the excuse that this happened long ago. It didn't. It happened during the Celtic Tiger years and what was happening was obvious to all.

Here were children whom nobody wanted to sit beside at school because they smelled. Here were children with head lice so big they ran down their faces.

You didn't have to be a social worker or a childcare expert to know that these children were being neglected to the point of abuse. Yet it was allowed to go on for years and years.

It is absolutely vital that we find out why. In the 1990s the country was horrified by the catalogue of abuse perpetrated on his children over decades by Joseph McColgan in Co Sligo. Over the years evidence had emerged of what was happening but it was not acted upon. At least, we thought after that case, this cannot happen again.

But it has.

Social workers visited this awful house but it was cleaned up by the children on their mother's instructions before they arrived. Cups were put on the table. Food was bought.

We know from cases here and in Britain that it is entirely possible for an abusive parent to pull the wool over social workers' eyes.

But if the mother was able to prepare for visits by social workers, she must have known they were on the way. Were there no unannounced visits? And if not, why not?

If there are legal constraints to making unannounced visits then they need to be addressed. If there is a culture in social work of not making such visits then that also needs to be addressed.

Yet these social workers did, nonetheless, try to have the children moved to live with relatives --

until the High Court stopped them.

Investigation

On what grounds did the High Court stop the children being removed to relatives? Did it know the living hell the children were in? If not, why not? Who paid for the High Court case? Was it, as has been suggested, a right-wing Catholic organisation?

What did the Western Health Board do about the High Court case? Could it have done more?

We need a thorough investigation by the Ombudsman for Children or by the Irish Social Services Inspectorate.

This country, and this society, let these children down appallingly, and we must know why.

- Pdraig OMorain