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Many children in foster care have no social worker

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ALMOST HALF the children in foster care in Dublin North West and one-third in Dublin North Central have not been allocated a social worker by the Health Service Executive (HSE), according to a State-appointed childcare watchdog.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (Hiqa) has also identified serious problems related to the management of files on foster children, which have been stored in unlocked rooms and often contain incorrect names and dates of birth of children.

There are files missing and a number of personal items belonging to children – such as photographs, letters and baby bracelets – have been allowed to fall from files onto the floor without any accompanying identification tags, noted Hiqa in letters to the HSE.

The “extremely serious” findings of its early inspection last September caused the agency to immediately halt its inspection to demand further information from the HSE, inform Minister of State for Children Barry Andrews about the serious problems, and contact the data protection commissioner to provide guidance to the HSE.

Records released to *The Irish Times* under the Freedom of Information Act show Hiqa chief executive Tracey Cooper warned HSE chief executive Brendan Drumm of “large numbers of children in care, living with unapproved carers, who have not seen or been seen by an HSE authorised person for a considerable period”.

Ms Cooper asked the HSE to provide information before close of business the following day on the length of placements of children in unapproved foster care and the last visit by social workers to all children in Dublin North West and North Central.

The early inspection report by Hiqa revealed a catalogue of problems in relation to the monitoring and assessment of children in foster care.

Only 189 of the 389 children in foster care had an allocated social worker in Dublin North West, while 109 foster carers in Dublin North Central had no access to a social worker.

The Dublin North region significantly outperformed the other two Dublin regions – Dublin North West and Dublin North Central – with just five of 109 children not being allocated a social worker.

Hiqa concluded the HSE was in breach of the Childcare (Foster Care) regulations. In a subsequent letter to Prof Drumm in November 2009, Ms Cooper identified the serious problems with information management at the HSE.

The letter also noted Hiqa had begun a three-weekly performance-monitoring arrangement with the HSE to deal with the problems. Hiqa is a State-appointed inspectorate to oversee health and childcare issues.

Phil Garland, HSE assistant director for children and families, told *The Irish Times* last night that major improvements had been made to foster care services since the inspection took place and more were on the way.

“We have an action plan in place and that will complete assessments for relative and non-relative carers this year. We have got to make sure there is better governance across the board. I am delighted these issues are being highlighted because this is helping us to improve services,” he said.