

Twenty dead and 6,500 at risk of abuse: the State's children today

ANALYSIS: There are similarities between what is in the commission's report on sexual abuse and the problems in the current care system for vulnerable children, writes **CARL O'BRIEN**

IT MAKES for shocking reading. The State knew that 20 deaths – many as a result of State neglect – took place within the space of a few years. Many vulnerable children were in accommodation that was not subject to any form of independent inspection. And all the while, the State was aware that 6,500 children were at risk of abuse or neglect.

These are disturbing findings. But they aren't the conclusions of a State investigation into historical abuse of children in institutions. They are facts about children in State care today, where vulnerable young people continue to be failed by a system under severe strain.

After reading the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, the similarities between then and now are haunting.

For anyone who has seen the State's child protection system up close, it's hard to come to any other conclusion except the following: children at risk are, in many ways, as excluded and as marginalised as they were during the era of industrial schools.

The State's obligations towards children who cannot be cared for by their families are clear. Health authorities have a positive duty under the Child Care Act, 1991, to "identify children who are not receiving adequate care and protection" and to provide them with suitable protection.

The reality, however, is that social services are operating against a backdrop of scarce resources, staff shortages and heavy caseloads. Many child protection teams can only respond to the most urgent cases through crisis management.

An unpublished report completed by the HSE last month, for example, found 6,500 cases of children at risk of abuse or neglect who had not been allocated a social worker.

If industrial schools were State-sanctioned toxic environments for children, their equivalent must be the emergency care hostels, or the "out of hours" system, in Dublin. This service was devised to provide short-term accommodation for young people at risk until more suitable accommodation could be found. In practice, it means children are left to roam the streets during the day, exposing them to a brutal and dangerous culture of drug abuse, prostitution or crime.

Frontline social workers say too many young lives have been lost in instances where they could have been better cared for in a more structured and supportive environment.

We know some of their names: there is Kim O'Donovan, a 15-year-old girl who was found dead at a city centre BB of a suspected drugs overdose; David Foley, a 17-year-old who died of an overdose three years after voluntarily seeking care from the State; and 18-year-old Tracey Fay, who was found dead after injecting herself in 2002.

Most deaths have been the subject of internal inquiries or reports, but few have ever been published, which means we're unlikely to ever learn lessons or ensure greater accountability.

The Government's rhetoric on protecting children is impressive, but our avowed commitment to children is rarely translated into actions.

The shelves of the Department of Health, for example, are creaking with reports and recommendations on cases where the State failed to provide sufficient care for children.

There is the Kilkenny incest case, Kelly Fitzgerald in Mayo and the McColgan family in Sligo, the Dunne family in Monageer and soon, we presume, the Roscommon abuse case.

They contain recommendation after recommendation aimed at overhauling child protection services and ensuring children at risk can be afforded protection.

But most of their recommended changes – better co-operation between State agencies, a standardised approach to dealing with abuse concerns, more emphasis on preventive measures – are marked by the same pattern of inaction.

The Children First guidelines, for example, continue to be implemented inconsistently by health authorities, the Garda and other agencies, a decade after they were introduced.

The Government has spoken about learning lessons from the monumental tragedy of the industrial schools scandal. But its past performance suggests this won't be a priority. And so abuse and neglect continue – just in different settings.

“Their only crime was poverty,” said the commission report, in relation to the 170,000 children who passed through the industrial schools. The same could be applied to children who are failed by the care system, who are overwhelmingly from some of the poorest communities in the country.

Our duty is to ensure that lessons are finally learned from these failings and, as child welfare groups such as Barnardos have said, to ensure vulnerable children's voices are heard.

Too many children suffered in our industrial schools. How many more must suffer or even die as a result of chaotic and underfunded child protection services?