

Over 23 children in State care may have died, says Andrews



Child law expert Geoffrey Shannon and Norah Gibbons, Barnardos director of advocacy, who are members of an expert group set up to review all existing reports into child deaths in State care, speak to reporters yesterday.
Photograph: Alan Betson

CAROL COULTER and KEN MURRAY

THERE MAY have been more than 23 deaths of children in the care of the State in the past 10 years, Minister of State for Children Barry Andrews has said.

Mr Andrews was speaking yesterday as details were confirmed of a new independent group to review the HSE's investigations into the deaths of children in care since 2000.

Speaking to reporters in Dublin, Mr Andrews said that "there was some issue about the figures" involved.

"The assistant national director of the HSE mentioned 20 on Thursday morning, I mentioned 23 in the Dáil on Thursday afternoon, and also in *The Irish Times* on Saturday morning there was reference to further individuals.

"So what we've decided to do is ask the HSE for completeness to make sure that there are no other cases that might come under, that might be appropriate for scrutiny for this independent panel."

The Irish Times reported on Saturday on the case of William Colquhoun, who was admitted into the HSE's system of emergency care at the age of 16 after running away from home in Co Kildare.

Within two years, and after a succession of different care placements and social workers, he died of a drug overdose.

Mr Andrews said that the expanded list included some people who were not children but "have a care history".

"We want to know what went wrong and why they took their lives or why they died".

On Monday night, Mr Andrews announced the setting up of an expert group to review all the existing reports on child deaths in State care since 2000.

Two of its members, child law expert Geoffrey Shannon and head of advocacy in Barnardos, Norah

Gibbons, yesterday outlined their intentions for the review.

The third member, expected to be an internationally recognised expert from outside the jurisdiction, has yet to be announced.

Mr Shannon said that the purpose of the review group was to ensure accountability and build on the learning contained in the reports compiled to date.

“The core of the group will be independence,” he said.

“We will be fearless in ensuring all the information we find will be brought to the attention of the public.

“It is extremely important that learning is taken from every case where the State failed to provide adequate care to children and that this learning informs future legislation, policy and practice in the best interests of children. What we hope will be achieved is a rich and useful data set, and a pathway to recommendations for children in the care of the State.”

Ms Gibbons said that she hoped that the review would help to build confidence in the child welfare system. “However, children are at the centre of this review and the review group is committed to doing this work with due regard and respect for the privacy of the children involved in any such case,” she said.

“When a death happens, a quick inquiry should be carried out.”

She stressed that this was not an inquiry, and was not seeking to apportion blame, but they would examine the reviews with an open mind.

If the system or individuals had let children down, this would be reported.

Asked about the timescale for their report, Mr Shannon and Ms Gibbons said that they had not yet seen the documents and could not estimate it until they did.

They also needed to rent an office, and Ms Gibbons had to finish her report into the Roscommon incest case, which is expected to be completed in the coming weeks.

They would produce a schedule for the Minister as soon as possible, and expected to be at work within weeks.