

Some children in care 'not seen by social workers for 10 years:

CARL O'BRIEN, Chief Reporter

SOME CHILDREN in State care have not had a visit from a social worker for up to 10 years or more, according to a highly critical report to be published later this year.

In addition, social services inspectors have found that more than 500 child protection and welfare concerns regarding children in foster care were never addressed or resolved by social work teams.

The findings are based on an audit of more than 1,000 foster-care files by the Health Information Quality Authority (Hiqa) in the Dublin north-west and Dublin north central areas which commenced last October. Among the findings are that:

- Record-keeping was so poor that inspectors have had difficulties establishing an accurate number for children in foster care;
- Many files were either incomplete, incorrectly recorded or missing. In some cases, items belonging to children (such as photographs, letters and a baby bracelet) had fallen out of files with no identification to attach to the file or child;
- Children as young as five were placed in supported lodgings, a more independent form of care designed for people in their mid to late teens;
- Of just over 800 children in foster care in these area late last year, well over 200 had placements with unapproved foster parents for significant periods or were without care plans.

In a confidential letter last year, head of Hiqa Tracey Cooper warned HSE chief executive Brendan Drumm that the findings were very serious for children in its care. "These issues give rise to further concern as to how the HSE is able to assure itself that the necessary systems and processes are in place to safeguard and manage the quality and safety of children in care."

She also warned Minister for Health Mary Harney and Minister for Children Barry Andrews of the serious consequences. "The HSE has no assurance that the carers are suitable people, children have no opportunity to complain if they are unhappy or unsafe," she said.

Hiqa has also warned the HSE that it is in breach of at least 10 separate statutory duties relating to childcare standards in the Dublin area alone.

For example, social-work staff have a statutory responsibility to visit children in foster care at least once every six months. However, the audit of foster-care files found that just over 240 children had not been visited during this period of time. Of this figure, most had not been visited for up to four years (223). A further 20 had not received a visit for between five and 10 years or more.

The HSE said it has been addressing the gaps in foster care since last October. "Progress on this is now well under way. The practice of placing children with non-relative unapproved carers has ceased," it said. Where child-protection concerns existed, the HSE says it has reviewed the cases and taken action.