

Padraig O'Morain: How on earth did HSE allow a child pornographer to be a foster parent?

By Padraig O'Morain

The news that a man who had fostered children is in jail for possession of child pornography should ring very loud alarm bells in the HSE and the Department of Health.

Two questions immediately arise: how did he get to be a foster carer and how did he continue to be a foster carer despite neighbours' suspicions?

The answer to the first question is simple enough. The answer to the second is the one that's frightening.

The vetting process involves questioning by social workers, a training course which might help to reveal inappropriate attitudes and Garda clearance.

But it would not be difficult for a person with a predilection for child pornography to circumvent this process so long as he has not been convicted.

Despite the public image, many of these sort of people who view these vile images are well-educated, clever people and would have little difficulty in lying their way through the vetting process. That's why maintaining contact with children in foster care and following up on concerns about their treatment is vital -- and that's where it starts to get frightening.

Every child in foster care should have a social worker and so should the foster family. This is meant as a support to both child and family and also as a protection to the child.

The fact is that many foster families have no social worker of their own and this has been the case for many years now.

What does this mean? It means that children are denied the protection they need, that in a way they are cut adrift.

Lack of social work support has been a feature of the system in good times and bad. Foster families themselves, the vast majority of whom are good people doing a very important and difficult job, have complained for a long time about lack of support from the childcare system.

These families sometimes desperately need help to maintain their fostering of a troubled child who may not even want to be with them.

I believe cases of sexual abuse are unusual in the fostering system but we know children have made complaints about physical and sexual abuse in the HSE Dublin North-East Region and that some of these were confirmed though none led to a prosecution.

That, together with this latest news, underlines that vigilance simply has to be built in to the fostering system. The broken system which has existed for many years is bad for children and decent foster families.

That neighbours had suspicions about this man when he was a foster carer is a very worrying feature of this case.

The system has to be fixed for the sake of children and families - that's the lesson we need to learn from this man's vile activities.

- Padraig O'Morain