

Tracey Fay's legacy:

THE TRAGIC story of 18-year-old Tracey Fay provides a graphic insight into how our child protection system is failing some of the most vulnerable young people. Abused and neglected as a child, the State took her into its care to safeguard her welfare. Yet, she ended up falling through the cracks of a chaotic child protection system which was never able to meet her needs. Tracey's story is not an isolated one. More than 20 young people in State care or after-care have died over the past decade, sometimes in horrific circumstances. They include Danny Talbot (19), David Foley (17), Kim O'Donovan (15) and Michelle Bray (14). Frontline social workers say many of these lives were lost needlessly due to a system dominated by crisis management rather than early intervention.

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 crushing reality, however, is that social services are operating against a backdrop of scarce resources, staff shortages and heavy caseloads.

This crisis in child protection services is not helped by a culture of excessive secrecy on the part of Health Service Executive (HSE) management. The HSE has consistently failed to publish any of the reports into the deaths of children in its care. It only became apparent that there was a report in existence on Ms Fay's death when details were leaked to this newspaper last year.

Even the most basic statistics regarding social work services are far too often hidden behind a veil of confidentiality. For example, an annual report into the adequacy of child and family services is heavily censored and omits virtually all criticism of child protection services.

It is also grossly hypocritical of the HSE to criticise the media and Fine Gael's Alan Shatter for publishing details of the report into the handling of Ms Fay's care. There is a need for sensitivity – but there is also a clear public interest in highlighting the failures of social work services. If anything is to be learned from the mistakes of the past, there must be automatic reviews of all deaths of children in care. Greater openness should not be feared. On the contrary, it would lead to enhanced accountability, better management and would make the case for increased investment in this sector.

Little has changed in recent times. Many children at risk are still being failed by a social work service which often responds too late. The system needs urgent reform. There must be uniform application of child protection laws and guidelines throughout the State in tandem with a properly resourced family support system which intervenes earlier in the lives of children at risk rather than waiting until they are in crisis.

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