

'We've paid lip service to child protection,' says Shatter:



MARIE O'HALLORAN

MINISTER OF State for Children Barry Andrews has insisted in the Dáil that

“there was no intention whatsoever” to cover up the cases of children who had died in State care.

During the debate on unpublished reports into the deaths of 23 children in the past decade the Minister also stressed: “I have absolutely no agenda to protect any reputations corporate or otherwise.”

However, Fine Gael spokesman on children Alan Shatter whose publication of the report into the death of Tracey Fay led to the debate, said: “The real problem is that we have a Minister for Children who lacks the authority and the statutory powers to ensure that whatever policy he, with good intentions, intends to implement, actually is implemented.”

The party’s health spokesman Dr James Reilly asked what was a suitable length of time for “due process”, when a child died in 2002 and a report was still being awaited eight years later.

Labour deputy leader Joan Burton expressed grave concern about what she called the “culture of secrecy in the HSE, secrecy for its own sake” which sought to avoid public discussion.

Health spokeswoman Jan O’Sullivan said “there is a huge issue now in relation to the credibility of the State in protecting the most vulnerable of children who are in the care of the State”.

Sinn Féin Dáil leader Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin called for the creation of a full Cabinet position for a Minister for Children.

During the debate, Mr Andrews gave some details of the deaths of eight children who had died accidentally or from underlying medical conditions, eight cases still under review including a murder and three deaths by suicide.

The junior minister also said there were six cases where no further action was anticipated. “It is my intention that all of these reports will be put into the public domain in so far as they are possible”. Referring to Tracey Fay, he acknowledged that “the State has failed that young person” and he said “I certainly very deeply regret the circumstances that has led to the deaths”. But he rejected a “presumption that some of these reports were gathering dust in my office. This certainly was not the case at all. Where reports have been written they are often case review files and not intended for publication at all”.

He criticised Fine Gael's publication of the report into the death of Tracey Fay. "You can be sure that if the precedent set yesterday is to continue, then nobody will co-operate with a non-statutory inquiry because they can safely assume that some member of the Houses of the Oireachtas will publish a report that is not meant for publication."

Mr Shatter said there was an "alarming number of children in State care who died as a result of suicide or taking an overdose. Indeed I'm not quite sure when you can always distinguish between overdose and suicide, because where a death is labelled as result of an overdose, that overdose may well be suicide".

The Minister told him in November 2008 that the report into the death of DF was "imminent" but it had yet to be published.

He was also "greatly concerned that if we don't have true transparency and accountability in our childcare services, we will never implement properly the reforms that are required to ensure that children are truly protected.

"We've paid lip service to child protection." He added: "It is entirely wrong that we criticise the hierarchy for concealing instances of sex abuse, while the State conceals incidents of children dying in the care of the State."

Ms Burton said she was "very concerned that a culture of secrecy has developed in the HSE, which is secrecy for its own sake and which seeks to avoid, if you like, public discussion by concerned citizens, mothers and fathers, people who are social workers, people who are not social workers in the cases of very troubled children whose families may not be in a position to help them, or whose families may in many cases have absolutely failed them".