



NEWSLETTER

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN EMERGENCIES




Prof Geoffrey Shannon and Assistant Commissioner John O'Driscoll at the publication of an audit into An Garda Síochána's child-protection management. Photograph: Irish Times/ Dara Mac Dónaill

Children can only be removed from their families with the consent of their parents or guardians or by court order. There is only one exception to this. Under Section 12 of the Child Care Act 1991, a member of An Garda Síochána can remove a child from the care of his or her family where "there is an immediate and serious risk to the health or welfare of a child". Dr Geoffrey Shannon, an acknowledged expert in the field of child protection, recently produced a report on how the Gardai use their powers under this section of the Child Care Act.

Shannon's report generated considerable public and media interest with many people rightly appalled at some of its findings. Cases of failure to protect children adequately were highlighted in media reports. The detail of the cases reported was distressing and Geoffrey Shannon himself

stated that: "Children are treated like human trash in some of these cases". There were criticisms of lack of training for Gardai in child protection, poor coordination with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and inadequacies in data collection and recording.

Important though it undoubtedly is to highlight failures in our child protection system, a close reading of the report reveals that this is only part of the story. Many of the Gardai who were interviewed for the report spoke about their professional obligations for the protection of the public. They expressed concern that the experience of being in the care of the Gardai would not be traumatising for the children removed from their families. There were numerous instances of individual Gardai staying on when their shifts were over in order to ensure that proper arrangements were



made for the care of a child removed from his or her family under section 12. The report refers to: “compelling evidence that members of An Garda Síochána demonstrate very high levels of commitment to the welfare of children”. The Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon, said that the report “shines a light on many parts of society that maybe Ireland hasn’t thought about; it also shines a light on good work done by Gardai”.

A lot is expected of those who work on the front line of child protection, both Gardai and social workers. They are often dealing with appalling situations and ones where their own safety cannot be taken for granted. Sometimes it is the youngest and least experienced who are asked to deal with the most difficult and dangerous situations. There is no shortage of criticism when things go wrong. What this report demonstrates, as other such reports have done in the past, is a societal failure to put in place the systems needed to support the work of these front line workers.

There have been significant developments in An Garda Síochána in recent years, including the establishment of the Garda National Protective Services Bureau, with which the Child Safeguarding and Protection Service has a close working relationship. The women and men of the Bureau provide an excellent service that is sensitive to the needs of those who experienced child abuse.

It has sometimes been suggested that a pre-occupation with child abuse in the Catholic Church has served to disguise the much greater threat to the safety of children coming from within their own families. There may be some truth in this but it is worth reflecting on what it means for us as a faith community. We cannot be complacent about our own child safeguarding arrangements. Rather we ought to consider what we, given our own painful experiences, can offer to civil society.

As Church and national child protection policies tell us, the protection of children is everyone’s responsibility. We cannot just leave it to the Gardai and social workers to protect those children most at risk. Training helps to equip us to recognise the signs of abuse and neglect and to act on our concerns. In the year to the end of April 2016 over 2,000 people working in the parishes of the Archdiocese of Dublin turned out for information and training sessions on child safeguarding. The numbers for this year, yet to be compiled, are likely to be greater. This is a practical expression of our commitment to the safety and protection of children not just in our Church but in our society. It is vital that we build on this to develop ever closer working relationships with the civil authorities and support them in the work they do to protect children.


PROMOTING RESILIENCE

A young man recently spoke very movingly to a group of young people and parents about his struggle with depression and the support he received from adults and peers involved in a diocesan school based programme. It was a timely reminder of the role of the Church in supporting vulnerable young people who are dealing with adversities such as mental health problems. So much of our attention has focussed – for very good reasons – on preventing harm to children than we are in danger of forgetting that the Church can and must provide positive experiences for children and young people.

Resilience is the capacity to cope with adversity, such as health problems and social disadvantage. Most children learn to deal with such situations from the ‘secure base’ of a loving relationship with parents. However, for a variety of reasons such as abuse and neglect, not all children find a secure base within their own homes. Some, however, can compensate for this if they find an adult or adults they can trust within their extended family or in school or through involvement in

sporting or religious organisations. Even those children and young people who come from secure and loving families are likely to need extra support from outside their family at times of particular difficulty.

The young man who spoke about his mental health problems was involved in a programme for sixth year secondary school pupils called the Meitheal programme. In fifth year pupils apply to become leaders of the programme and go through a selection process. The successful candidates do a residential training programme in the summer between fifth and sixth year. The programme involves a lot of self-awareness and team building, all done in a faith context. At the beginning of the new school year and continuing up until the end of the second term, the leaders make themselves available to the first years who are new to their school. These youngsters are making the difficult transition from primary to secondary school and, often, feeling a bit lonely and lost. The leaders meet up to plan various activities for the first years. The



occasion at which the young man spoke about his mental health problems came at the end of the programme, when certificates were presented to all of those who participated. The young man had gone from being a leader in his own school to a trainer of leaders and had been involved throughout his late teens and early twenties. He said that his capacity to relate to others through the programme helped him through some very dark times.

The event was attended by the local bishop. It was attended by over 200 young leaders and their parents. It took place in a Church. The young people listened attentively while the bishop spoke to them about the importance and meaning of faith.

There are programmes such as this one run in many dioceses around the country. They witness to the interest young people have in faith, especially faith as expressed as helping others. Those who have been on the diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes cannot fail to be moved by the manner in which the young volunteers look after the sick pilgrims. At a time when we are concerned for the mental health of our young people, we should remember that the Church too can be a 'secure base' from which our children and young people can learn to cope with the adversities of life.

FUNDING OF SAFEGUARDING TRAINING

From September those parishes that can afford to do so will be asked to pay for safeguarding training. A fee of €100 per trainee will be charged, subject to a maximum of €500 per parish for any one training session. The trainers will not be collecting these fees. A note of attendees at the one day training sessions will be sent to Finance Secretariat and an invoice will issue from there but, as stated, only to those parishes that can afford it. There will continue to be no charge for information sessions.

The demand for training has been such that it has been difficult to meet it and we have been trying over the past nine months to enhance our training capacity. This is likely to involve extra cost which will be met through the collection of fees.

An easy way to reduce our costs and spread our resources would be to increase the numbers attending each training session. However, feedback from those who attend training indicates that it works best when there are in the region to 20 participants. This allows each person to contribute to small group discussions and these are invariably reported as the most useful part of the training.

The Children Safeguarding and Protection Service is committed to delivering high quality training and we do not wish to compromise the quality of the training by spreading our resources too thinly. Parishes will get better value out of the training by ensuring that they send only those who are required to attend the one day training. That includes all clerics and those with a specific role with children. Others, whose have no direct role with children, can attend the information sessions for which there is no charge.



VETTING APPLICATIONS

At the moment approximately one in every five applications for vetting received by the Child Safeguarding and Protection Service fail for a number of reasons. These include:

- **Not completing the form legibly. The Vetting Administrators have to enter people's information on the vetting system and if, for example, the applicant's email address is entered incorrectly he or she will not receive the on-line application form from the National Vetting Bureau,**
- **Not ticking the box on Section 2 of the Vetting Invitation form. The National Vetting Bureau will not accept forms that have not been ticked,**
- **Not completing the on-line application form within 30 days. The form is emailed by the National Vetting Bureau to the applicant at the address given on the Vetting Invitation form. It is only available to the applicant for 30 days. If the applicant does not complete the form in this time the application lapses and he or she is required to start the application process from the beginning.**

Those processing vetting applications are struggling to keep up with the volume of applications being submitted. Failed applications add to the workload, because the applicant has to submit another application. It is also very frustrating for the applicant to hear that their application has failed.

There are detailed instructions on the application process in the Garda Vetting section of the website:

www.csps.dublindiocese.ie

In addition, advice and assistance is available from this office: **01 836 0314**.

SHARING BEST PRACTICE

We want to use this Newsletter as a means of sharing experiences and learning across our parishes and diocesan agencies. We know that there is a lot of good work being done to ensure that our Diocese is a safe environment for children involved in church activities. We would be delighted if you would share with us examples of useful initiatives that others might want to emulate. If you have an idea for an article for the Newsletter, please contact Andrew at **01 836 0314** or andrew.fagan@dublindiocese.ie.

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