

Fergus Finlay – Saving Childhood Ryan Launch 20th May 2010-05-19
Speaking Notes

Eleven years ago, the then Taoiseach apologised on behalf of the Irish people to the generations of Irish children who had been abused in the care of State. That apology began a process that led, one year ago today, to the publication of the Ryan Report.

The Ryan Report, in its harrowing detail of pain and suffering, in its unsparing recital of corruption and cruelty, shocked us all. We were horrified by the picture it painted of ourselves, a society that allowed shameful things to happen to our own children. We were angered by the stories of indifference and denial by those held positions of great authority and power. We were moved by the courage and dignity of those who had survived.

Above all, perhaps, we resolved – all of us – that nothing like this could ever happen again. When our current Taoiseach spoke in Dáil Eireann in the aftermath of the Ryan Report, he concluded his speech by saying that “Everyone, including the general public, must reflect on what the report has stated about how vulnerable children were treated and resolve that, from this shame and evil, we will make Ireland a model of how to treat children.”

The eight organisations who are hosting this press conference today took that injunction seriously. We came together in the aftermath of the Report because the rights and welfare of children, in one way or another, form a core part of our work. Ever since we have worked to assist the government, by making submissions on necessary changes, and by offering services, with a view to doing whatever we could, together, to deliver on the hope that Ireland could indeed be a model of how to treat children.

In the time since the Report, there has been a great deal of policy development. Significant plans have been drawn up. Additional resources have been promised. New structures have emerged. And yet more reports have been published, to continually remind us of how much has to be done.

In the same period, Danny Talbot died from an overdose of drugs. All that remains of him is a note he wrote about his life, much of which was spent in care. He ended that note by writing “my life has been ruined”. Daniel McAnaspie, a vulnerable boy in need of care and support, has been found murdered in a ditch. We learned about the tragic failures that led to the deaths of Tracey Fay and David Foley.

These are, maybe, some of the extreme cases. But today, a year after Ryan, there remain thousands of children in Ireland at risk. At risk of neglect, of abuse, of homelessness, of hunger, of illiteracy, of violence, of drugs. At risk of betrayal by all of us who promised it would never happen again.

We are here today because there is a harsh reality to be faced. I said earlier that there has been a great deal of policy development. But there has been not nearly enough implementation. Additional resources have been promised. But precious few of them have found their way to where they are needed. New structures have emerged. But they don't have nearly enough authority to drive change, to raise standards, to deliver on promises, or to be held properly accountable. And there have been devastating reports – and more are to come.

In the Report we are publishing today we highlight inadequacy of implementation, of structures and of resources so far. But we also want to take this opportunity to once again call for a commitment by Government to hold a referendum on the rights of children this year. There is no reason why it should not happen – and we can assure the government that there will be no recriminations from our organisations if they decide that this referendum is so vital, so urgent, and so necessary – as it is – that they are going to proceed without regard to any by-elections, mayoral elections, or other distractions.

Paddy Doyle is a man who in his time transcended abuse to write gracefully and movingly about his life. In a recent newspaper article he said, "Apologies have become tedious and meaningless at this point in time and serve only to irritate those of us who were the children who bore the brunt of perverts and deviants into whose care we were placed. Like many reports in the past there is every chance the Ryan report will be just another report on another shelf." We intend to make sure that doesn't happen.