

## **Gov is failing most vulnerable children**

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By Deborah Condon

Inadequacies in the Irish child protection system will persist unless the Office of Ombudsman for Children is established, the chief executive of the ISPCC has said.

According to Paul Gilligan, the current system is in need of radical reform and the Ombudsman is necessary to ensure that inadequacies are corrected.

"The Children First Guidelines launched in 1999 have not been fully implemented, the lack of Garda vetting those seeking to work with children represents a major child protection risk and the 'out of hours' service for children at risk remains totally inadequate. In the absence of the Ombudsman, it is likely that these systemic deficiencies will persist", he said.

Mr Gilligan made his comments at a press conference organised by the Children's Rights Alliance, a coalition of 74 non-governmental organisations concerned with the rights and needs of children.

The alliance has hit out at the Government's failure to establish the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, seven years after it was first promised and more than a year since it was passed into law. The post of Ombudsman remains unadvertised and vacant.

"The current delay is clearly a case of unwarranted stalling. Northern Ireland, which passed its Children's Commissioner legislation only months ago, is already at the interview stage of filling the position", said Noirin Hayes of the DIT School of Social Sciences.

According to the alliance, funds have been included in the Budget for the establishment of this office, however Finance Minister Charlie McCreevy, 'continues to withhold expenditure approval'.

These delays are directly affecting the most vulnerable children in society, including those living in care, those living with disabilities and those living in poverty, the organisation added.

It is envisaged that the Ombudsman for Children will have two main functions; to promote the rights and welfare of children and to examine and investigate complaints against public bodies, such as health boards and schools.