

Covid delays dental checks for 100,000 schoolchildren

By Helen Bruce

ALMOST 100,000 children are waiting for routine dental examinations, which have been delayed due to a series of setbacks, new data shows.

Children have been affected across the country, due to school lockdowns, Covid restrictions, the redeployment of dental staff as vaccinators, the cyberattack and an underlying shortage of dentists.

The pandemic has exacerbated resource problems, which were already denying children their legal right to free dental screening in many primary schools, and some children may never be given their missed appointments, the HSE has conceded.

Even before Covid, the Irish Dental Association (IDA) stated that an increasing number of children were only being offered examination and dental care for the first time at sixth class – instead of at first, second, fourth and sixth classes.

Sinn Féin TD for Dublin Mid-West, Mark Ward, said the HSE needed to make a contingency plan, to catch up on the missed appointments.

In a parliamentary question, he had asked Health Minister Stephen Donnelly how many children were on the

waiting list. The response showed almost 100,000 children nationally, including 29,000 in the Kildare, west Wicklow and parts of Dublin including the west and south, were waiting on routine dental examinations in primary schools.

In other areas like Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) area 9, including Dublin North, North Central and North West, the HSE has reported that some children have not even been placed on waiting lists yet, and it is not planned to offer them an examination.

In its response to his parliamentary question, the HSE report for CHO area 9 stated: 'In line with Government guidelines the HSE limited access to dental services during the pandemic. A number of staff were also redeployed to train as vaccinators in our Covid vaccination centres and this caused further delays in the delivery of routine dental examinations for the majority of children in second class for the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 school year. However, during this period, emergency cases were offered an appointment.'

'Due to the unprecedented pressures on the service and the continued rollout of the vaccination programme, these children have not been placed on waiting lists and it is not planned to offer them an exami-

nation. Those children in sixth class who have not been yet targeted from the 2020/2021 school year will be offered an appointment.'

Mr Ward said: 'Eligibility for dental services is a statutory entitlement under the health acts. Almost one million children aged up to and including 15 years are eligible for HSE dental services. All of the HSE dental services are provided free of charge.'

'The HSE is not providing adequate dental screening to primary school children and are failing children under the Health Act.'

He added: 'The bar was already set low for dental screening in primary schools and a response to a parliamentary question I received shows over 29,000 children are waiting on routine dental examinations in CHO area 7, which includes my own area of Dublin Mid-West.'

He said that across the State, there are almost 100,000 children waiting on an appointment. Some areas offer appointments to sixth classes only and emergency services to other children under 16.

In some areas, such as CHO 1, covering Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan, no children were waiting for their sixth class or first and second class routine check-ups until the pandemic struck. By 2020/2021, 3,975 children



were waiting for sixth class appointments, and 2,951 waiting in the younger classes.

In the Limerick, North Tipperary and Clare area, there are now 10,581 on the waiting list. In Kildare, West Wicklow and Dublin South West, there are now 19,151 sixth and second class pupils waiting for their routine examinations.

In response, the HSE said each of the areas is now tackling the problem by prioritising certain school classes for oral examinations.

The HSE added that the dental service would continue to prioritise treatment for people with special care needs, those who are medically compromised and to provide emergency care for all eligible patients.

‘The bar was already set low’

