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Sunday Independent

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Tusla failures led to death of four-year-old, family claim

● Stepmother to get life in jail for murder

WAYNE O'CONNOR

The family of a four-year-old boy who was murdered by his stepmother believe “systemic Tusla failures”, poor vetting and bad care decisions “contributed to his suffering and death”. They have demanded reforms of the child and family agency and believe “repeated opportunities to protect a vulnerable child were missed”, despite calls to Tusla and gardai.

The boy, who cannot be identified at this time, died in March, 2021, after suffering traumatic head injuries that would typically be associated with car crashes or serious assaults. It was claimed at the time that he had fallen from a bunk bed, but last year his father was sentenced to seven years in prison after he was convicted on four charges, including child cruelty and endangerment.

Last week, his stepmother, aged in her 30s, pleaded guilty on the fourth day of her trial to the child’s murder. She is due to receive the mandatory life sentence on December 1.

The boy was taken into their care about six months before he was killed.

During the hearing, consultant paediatrician Dr Stephen O’Riordan told the court that “the whole theatre gasped” when doctors pulled

back the drapes to review the boy’s injuries after he was brought to hospital.

A relative, who cannot be identified at this time, told the *Sunday Independent* they believe the boy’s life might have been saved had Tusla taken different steps in relation to his care by his biological father and stepmother.

They claim that calls from the boy’s grandmother to a case worker about welfare concerns were not acted upon appropriately.

Doctors later found he was covered in significant bruises, which dated from different periods, and were “from head to toe”.

“If Tusla, the children’s case worker and the gardai had taken the phone calls from his grandmother seriously, he may still be here,” the relative said. “Call it a motherly instinct, a sixth sense, but she knew she was right. Her grandson was suffering and being tortured and they wouldn’t listen to her.”

A family member said the boy’s grandmother previously raised concerns with Tusla after seeing marks on his body during a family visit.

“His grandmother called the gardai several times to raise welfare concerns about him. Those checks often involved quick doorstep

Continued on page 8

TROUBLED WATERS: DENIAL, DOWNFALL AND A BITTER END

‘I was suffering. I felt disrespected as a person and an athlete’

Part two of Paul Kimmage’s investigation into Irish rowing Sport



Monika Dukarska is one of the rowers who spoke to Paul Kimmage. Photo: Don MacMonagle

Gerry Hutch is hit with €790k tax bill

ALI BRACKEN

Gerry “The Monk” Hutch is being pursued by the Criminal Assets Bureau (Cab) for nearly €800,000 in alleged unpaid tax. It is understood he was issued with correspondence from Cab, stating that he owes in the region of €790,000 in unpaid tax to Revenue between 2006 and 2010.

A source close to Hutch said: “There’s no chance he’s paying that.”

The bill was issued following a raid on Hutch’s home in Lanzarote after his arrest in October last year by Spanish police.

Hutch was then one of nine people arrested as part of a joint garda investigation with the Guardia Civil into money laundering by the Hutch organised crime group.

Within days of his release in Spain, he launched a Dáil bid and missed out on a seat, being narrowly beaten in Dublin Central by Labour’s Marie Sherlock. The correspondence from Cab states that he owes the bill due to “miscellaneous income” it claims he failed to declare between 2006 and 2010.

Described in court as the patriarch of the Hutch family, he was operating a limo service “Carry Any Body” (Cab) after securing a taxi licence.

The name was a play on the Criminal Assets Bureau, which is now pursuing him.

► Full story, page 5

Brendan O’Connor

Is it bad luck to say it?
We might be on a roll

It was hard work for sure. And heart, determination, resilience. Plus the talent and skill of Troy Parrott and others. But maybe it’s also OK to be open to the fact that we got lucky. Bounces of the ball could have gone different ways. The ref could have had a different opinion on a billionaire’s elbows. Sure, you

make your own luck. But sometimes, the randomness of the universe also comes along to give you a little helping hand.

It’s not defeatist to admit that you got lucky. In fact, it might be a perfectly constructive way to think. It’s hard to beat someone who is convinced they’re on a roll. Are they making

their own luck, or is their own luck making them feel more unbeatable? Who knows? It’s probably circular.

Not to lose the run of ourselves, but older people in Ireland remember what it feels like to be on a roll.

People make various wild claims for Italia ’90, but there’s no doubt it shifted something in our mindset.

A nation suddenly knew what winning felt like, what it felt like to be lucky. And some will argue we rode our luck into an economic and cultural revival.

Despite what they say about the luck of the Irish, we don’t tend to see ourselves as lucky. The narrative these days is very much that we are the most unfortunate, put-upon, rained-on, badly managed country in the

world, scarred by famine, religion and colonialism. Whatever can go wrong goes wrong for poor, old Ireland.

Another housing plan comes out, and we look back dolefully at all the other plans that didn’t work. Before the plan is even published, it’s dismissed as a failure.

The truth is that while the plan is what it is, the one factor that can’t be planned for is luck. Whether this plan works or not will be down to whether we get lucky or not. This will depend on a near-infinite number of factors from silicon chips, to weight-loss drugs, to how long Vladimir Putin lives, to what someone did or didn’t write in emails about Donald Trump 20 years ago.

Indeed, Trump is in a liminal

space now where his future depends completely on luck. He was arguably unlucky that Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor amplified the Epstein scandal. He arguably got unlucky, too, with the result of the Arizona 7th congressional district special election which elected Adelita Grijalva, the final signature needed for a vote on the Epstein files. Will he get lucky now by virtue of no smoking gun in the millions of documents?

If a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon, it can change the weather half a world away. Equally we could all have to learn Irish now because a woman was good with keepee-uppies.

We can put Thursday night at the Aviva down to all kinds of deliberate factors. But maybe the most helpful

way to look at it is to decide that actually we are lucky. And we might get lucky again this afternoon.

Maybe we’re on a roll. Maybe it’s time to decide that everything is going our way, that we’ll solve the housing crisis, that this is the beginning of everything starting to come together, a golden period for us.

We gotta ask ourselves one question: do we feel lucky? Well, do we?

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Picture posed by model

Stepmother tortured us by what she did, say boy’s family

Continued from page 1

conversations and did not include private, thorough examinations of the child. We believe a more rigorous approach to welfare checks is needed.

“Family placements should be properly assessed and monitored closely, especially where there have been prior concerns. “These reforms might not have changed the outcome for the victim, but we believe they would help prevent similar tragedies in other families.”

They said the grandmother had continuously raised concerns from Christmas 2020 to March 2021 that the couple kept refusing her video calls and visits with the child.

The boy’s family have now written to the DPP to request a review of the sentence handed down to his father. He had pleaded guilty to all charges, preventing the need for a trial.

The man was given a seven-year sentence last year, backdated to March 2024, for assisting an offender, and another seven years for endangerment of the child, to run concurrently.

He was given two additional five-year sentences for counts of child cruelty, which again are to run concurrently.

The boy’s father and stepmother said he was injured after falling from a bunk bed before they called an ambulance, but a doctor who assessed him did not believe his brain injuries could have been caused by a such a fall.

The boy survived in hospital for three days before he died.

His family said they have been traumatised by the stepmother’s decision to contest the murder charge against her, necessitating a trial.

“She tortured us by what she did to the victim and she tortured us by going to trial,” a relative said. “It’s as if she has a vendetta against us and she wants to cause as much pain as she could. And I suppose that’s what she’s done, because she took a child from us. She dragged it out as long as she could, she’s afflicted the maximum amount of damage she could.”

The boy’s family said this trial was when they first heard of the severity of many of the injuries inflicted on the child.

Dr O’Riordan documented 17 areas of bruising or injury to the boy’s eyes, ears, arms, legs and back.

“Black eyes” combined with bruises around both ears are “classic signs of physical abuse”, he told the court.

X-rays showed the boy had previously suffered a fractured rib that was starting to heal.

The stepmother had told gardaí he was a “bold, cheeky child”, which his family strongly deny.

Evidence was also given about the boy being “kept out of sight” from his family to hide bruising on his face after a series of assaults before he died.

“I get a phone call from my nan every evening and she updated me on what happened in the court, and I read the articles. I had my cry in the evening time, as I have the last five or six days,” a family member said of hearing court evidence.

“She [the stepmother] attempted to paint him as a bad boy. There’s no excuse for what she did, and that excuse died with her pleading guilty.

“He wasn’t a bad boy, he wasn’t bold, he wasn’t mean, he wasn’t harmful. He was exactly what you would expect a four-

year-old boy to be. He was boisterous, energetic. We always called him a water baby because he loved being in water. He was very affectionate, very loving.”

In sentencing the boy’s father, Mr Justice Paul McDermott said the man bore a high level of criminal responsibility for failing to protect his son, but said the sentences were to be served concurrently.

Relatives are unhappy with the concurrent sentences and that the potential for remission means he could be freed early.

In a letter sent to the DPP this weekend, signed by 11 of the boy’s relatives, they have pleaded for the sentence to be reviewed.

“This sentencing does not reflect his involvement and what he did. Even more so now that the full facts of the investigation have been released during

the trial of the stepmother,” they said.

“Given the devastating outcome of this prolonged abuse, and the new information that has now emerged, we believe the original sentence was unduly lenient and did not serve justice.”

They have asked for the chance of remission to be removed and the sentences be served consecutively.

“It wasn’t just the isolated incident that led to his death. There was plenty

of injuries noted during testimonies by doctors and nurses that were present and ignored before the day he died. For example, a broken rib that had begun to heal and many, many bruises. All of these were ignored and he was never brought to a healthcare professional,” they said.

State pathologist Dr Heidi Okkers told the trial the head injuries the child suffered were the result of shaking and being struck off a hard surface, such as a floor or wall.

She also noted lacerations to the child’s liver that she said were likely to have been caused by punching, kicking or striking the abdomen with a blunt object.

A spokeswoman for Tusla said the agency does not comment on individual cases to protect the privacy of those it works with, but when a child who has availed of its services dies, it conducts a review of its engagements. She said there is unprecedented demand for Tusla placements for vulnerable young people.

“We continue to invest in the provision of additional registered and regulated placements to scale our capacity to meet this demand,” she said. “Ensuring children and young people in the care of Tusla are in the appropriate care placement, with the appropriate support services, is a priority for the agency, to enable the best possible outcomes for every child.”

A garda spokesman said the organisation does not comment on remarks made by third parties, but added that gardaí collaborate closely with Tusla to ensure the safety and protection of children.

“An Garda Síochána has a duty of positive action where concerns are reported in respect of any child and all such concerns are fully assessed,” he added.

“**She also noted lacerations to the child’s liver**



Whistleblower welcomes inquiry into spinal surgery issues



● Harvey Morrison Sherratt died in July, aged nine.

MAEVE SHEEHAN

The whistleblower who claimed that nine-year-old Harvey Morrison Sherratt was removed from a spinal surgical wait list, allegedly because he was listed as a “palliative” patient, has welcomed the Government’s proposed statutory inquiry into the care of children with scoliosis.

Caoimhe Haughey, of CM Haughey Solicitors, who is representing the whistleblower, said her client must be included in the inquiry and will cooperate with it.

“My client has been raising waiting list and other patient safety issues over many months as part of a process that she was going through. We are not aware if CHI [Children’s Health Ireland] has taken any steps to address those matters,” Ms Haughey said.

“The statutory inquiry must have the power to compel witnesses to attend to give evidence, and my client should be included the process.”

The whistleblower cannot be named as their identity is protected by law.

The individual made a protected dis-

closure to the Health Minister in August that alleged Harvey was removed from the waiting list.

It is understood CHI, which received a copy of the protected disclosure last Monday, is investigating the allegations and is likely to challenge some of its contents.

The Government is expected to support a statutory inquiry into spinal care for children with scoliosis and spina bifida at a Cabinet meeting on Tuesday.

A memo will be brought to Cabinet by the Health Minister Jennifer Carroll MacNeill and Tánaiste Simon Harris, who met with Harvey’s parents, Gillian Sherratt and Stephen Morrison, and advocacy groups last week.

A Government source said the proposed inquiry will have the power to compel witnesses as this is a “key ask” of families and advocacy groups.

Harvey, who died aged nine in July, was born with spina bifida and scoliosis.

His parents have said their son, who had complex health needs, waited three years for spinal surgery.

He was taken off the waitlist in August last year without their knowledge

and, by the time he was operated on, the curvature of his spine had worsened.

Ms Sherratt told RTÉ last week that it was a “gut punch” and “disgusting” to read details from a protected disclosure that alleges her son had been taken off the waitlist accidentally. The protected disclosure was first published last weekend.

The document, which was also seen by the Sunday Independent, sets out alleged inaccuracies in clinical updates on the child’s condition.

The child, referred to as Patient X, was reviewed at CHI Crumlin and was deemed “palliative” and not fit for surgery.

The child was then reviewed last year by a specialist from London’s Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital, who found the child was “suitable for surgery” once bone density improved, according to the protected disclosure.

The whistleblower claims they were wrongly told, verbally, that the UK specialist agreed that the patient was “not fit or ready for surgery”.

On checking the patient’s file, the whistleblower read the Great Ormond

FF and FG are ‘relics of a bygone era’, says Ivana Bacik

CÓNAL THOMAS

The parties of the left can “break the mould” of the “two-and-a-half party system” of government after Catherine Connolly’s presidential victory, Labour leader Ivana Bacik told her party conference yesterday.

Addressing members in Limerick, Ms Bacik said her party now has a chance to “build on the momentum” of the Independent TD’s campaign and on a “common cause” platform with other parties of the left.

But she notably told members that her party still held “significant differences” with Sinn Féin and the government parties.

Calling for an “end to the politics of the past, represented by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry lackeys”, Ms Bacik said hope in the face of the housing crisis and cost of living pressures was badly needed.

Criticising Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as “relics of a bygone era”, the Labour leader said the Government had introduced “reckless tax cuts and massive giveaways to corporate chains” in the budget with “nothing for working families”.

Representing the “constructive left”, Ms Bacik also called for greater action on climate change, disability, housing and care.

“Over the coming Dáil term, we have key priorities. As proud Europeans, we stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine as they endure Russia’s brutal war. And we stand with the people of Palestine, as we have always done,” she said.

She added that the State “must pass the Occupied Territories Bill on trade in goods and, crucially, in services” and called on Tánaiste Simon Harris to pass it in full by Christmas.

Confirming Labour would contest the Galway by-election next year, Ms Bacik name-checked Labour councillors Niall McNelis, John McDonagh and Helen Ogbu as po-

“**Practical, progressive centre-left politics is winning through**

tential candidates in the five-seater, adding: “It’s vitally important that we put forward a strong case for greater security.”

In reference to New York mayor Zohran Mamdani’s recent election, the Labour leader said “practical and progressive centre-left politics is winning through with communities” and called for a start to the “process of preparation towards a united Ireland”.

“That’s why we need a dedicated government department, to carry out the necessary work of reconciliation and unity planning,” she said.

In a veiled reference to recent comments on immigration made by Mr Harris, Ms Bacik dismissed the “dog-whistle rhetoric on migration”.

While she welcomed the unity of the so-called left parties in the Dáil during the Connolly campaign, she said Labour had “significant differences with each of those” three bigger parties.

“But we are closely aligned in our values with the Green Party and Social Democrats,” she added.

“The election of Catherine Connolly as president has offered hope for an alternative future. It gives the chance for us to build on the momentum of Catherine’s campaign, to unite and win, to break the old mould.”



Divorce diaries 'I told him I didn't love him and he threw a cup of tea against the wall'

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FREED BURKE VOWS TO SHOW UP FOR WORK AT SCHOOL



● A judge freed Enoch Burke to allow him to prepare an appeal over his sacking, despite the teacher failing to purge his contempt. He vowed to turn up for work today at Wilson's Hospital School in defiance of court orders. *Photo: Collins Report: Page 6*



Indo Money Seven easy ways to pay less tax

BUSINESSWEEK

Teacher faked two pregnancies in €60,000 maternity fraud

● A primary-school teacher faked two pregnancies and wore a false bump to school in an "extraordinary" fraud that cost the State almost €60,000.

Eimear Carroll (43), of Hillside, Seffin, Birr, Co Offaly, pleaded guilty in court. *Report: Page 8*

Family ask why murdered boy was put in care of killer

WAYNE O'CONNOR

● The family of murdered Mason O'Connell-Conway (4) have questioned why he was in the care of his father John Paul O'Connell and killer stepmother Tegan McGhee despite concerns being raised



with Tusla before he died. Reporting restrictions in place meant Mason (inset) and those charged in relation to his death could not be identified, until a successful application by *Irish Independent* publishers Mediahuis Ireland, and RTÉ. *Reports: Pages 4-5*

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Left: Elizabeth Conway and her father Tony speak outside court while holding a photo of Mason O'Connell-Conway after the boy's stepmother Tegan McGhee (above) was sentenced. Photo: Collins

Grandmother raised concerns about care of boy (4) in weeks before murder

Child killer Tegan McGhee named after reporting restrictions lifted

WAYNE O'CONNOR

The family of a four-year-old boy who was murdered have questioned why he was in the care of his father John Paul O'Connell and killer stepmother Tegan McGhee despite concerns being raised with Tusla before he died.

Reporting restrictions were in place while the trial was ongoing, which meant that victim Mason O'Connell-Conway and those charged in relation to his death could not be identified until now.

It follows an application by Mediahuis Ireland, publishers of the *Irish Independent* and *Sunday Independent*, and RTE to lift the reporting restrictions to allow the boy's family to remember him publicly.

His family said they wanted Mason to be remembered as the happy boy they loved dearly, but believed "systemic Tusla failures", poor vetting and bad care decisions "contributed to the child's suffering and death".

Mason was placed in the care of his father and stepmother about six months before he was killed.

His family have demanded reforms

of the child and family agency in the wake of his killing.

McGhee received the mandatory life sentence at the Central Criminal Court yesterday afternoon, after pleading guilty to Mason's murder on the fourth day of her trial in November.

Judge Paul McDermott said McGhee had committed "an appalling breach of trust".

The judge said Mason was the victim of "damaging, disproportionate and excessive" punishments after the court heard evidence of physical abuse inflicted on him.

Mason was isolated in his bedroom and kept away from relatives in the weeks before his death.

Mr Justice McDermott also imposed sentences of four-and-a-half years for two counts of child cruelty, backdated to October 2024, which are to be served concurrently.

In a victim-impact statement delivered on Monday, Mason's biological mother Elizabeth 'Lizzie' Conway said her son's life had been taken at "the hands of pure evil".

She described having to make "the hardest decision a mother could make, to turn off his life-support machine" after McGhee inflicted catastrophic injuries typically associated with car crashes.

McGhee (32), formerly of Sycamore Avenue, Limerick, assaulted Mason on March 13, 2021, at her home.

But Mason's family believe the child was being physically abused for weeks before he was killed.

Mason's cousin Jordan Hurley, speaking on behalf of the family, said they believed that Mason's life could have been saved had steps been taken in the months before McGhee murdered him.

"Mason was something special. There was a buzz about him," Mr Hurley said.

"When things were good and he was around the people he felt safe with, he loved life. He'd smile all day long, laughing, giggling.

"He just had so much potential. He loved living, he loved fun, he loved being around people. He wasn't a bold child by any means. He was sweet, compassionate and empathetic.

"If he thought something was wrong with someone, he'd stick to them, hugging them.

"He never caused any harm or hurt

anyone. He was polite and friendly. He was honestly a little gem of a child."

Mr Hurley said Mason's grandmother Breda Coffey made repeated calls to Tusla expressing concern for the child in the months before his death.

"If they had taken the phone calls from his grandmother seriously, he may still be here," Mr Hurley said.

"Call it a motherly instinct, a sixth sense, but she knew she was right. Her grandson was suffering and being tortured and they wouldn't listen to her."

Mr Hurley said Mason's case should lead to Tusla reforms and stronger vetting of potential guardians when children were placed in care settings.

"These reforms might not have changed the outcome for Mason, but we believe they would help prevent similar tragedies in other families," he said.

Tusla conducts reviews when a child who availed of its services dies, but said it did not comment on individual cases.

A Tusla spokeswoman said the agency was experiencing unprecedented demand for its services.

"Ensuring children and young people in the care of Tusla are in the appropriate care placement, with the appropriate support services, is a priority for the agency, to enable the best possible outcomes for every child," a statement said.

Meanwhile, Mr Hurley said the family would remember Mason as happy child. "Mason was a light shining in the darkness that was his unfortunate existence. The family around him that loved him did everything they could

to help, but it wasn't enough," he said.

McGhee had claimed Mason was a "bold, cheeky child" and said she "snapped" on the day she assaulted him.

She told gardaí she remembered shaking Mason and screaming at him to behave, before he fell on the floor.

Mason died three days later in hospital, on March 16, 2021.

The court heard evidence that McGhee had googled "Why is it bad if you bang your head and go to sleep?" and sent frantic texts and calls to her then-partner, the boy's father John Paul O'Connell, before they called the emergency services claiming the child fell from a bunk bed. They claimed to have heard a bang after O'Connell returned from work and Mason had fallen from the bed.

O'Connell was previously sentenced to seven years in prison in October 2024, convicted on four charges including child cruelty, endangerment and impeding the apprehension of the person who he knew or believed to have murdered Mason.

A doctor who treated Mason said the whole operating theatre gasped when drapes were pulled back to review his injuries. They said bruising to his head and body, including black eyes and a cracked rib which was starting to heal, were classic signs of abuse.

Ms Conway told the court her son's head was so swollen that it was "10 times bigger than normal" when she saw him in hospital after the assault. "I asked how could he be like that over a small fall?" Ms Conway said.

"Call it a motherly instinct, a sixth sense, but she knew she was right. Her grandson was suffering"

THE SHORT LIFE AND TRAGIC DEATH OF MASON O'CONNELL-CONWAY



Family of four-year-old whose stepmother was handed a life sentence last week for his murder tell **Wayne O'Connor** how the 'bright, shining' little boy touched all of their lives – and how they hope his case might bring positive change

When Breda Coffey held the wake for her four-year-old grandson, she had her suspicions that his father and stepmother had been lying about how he died. Mason O'Connell-Conway, they claimed, fell from a bunk bed. But having previously seen scratches on his body, Ms Coffey feared the worst – that her dear boy had been murdered. The Central Criminal Court heard evidence during the murder trial of his stepmother that Mason had suffered traumatic injuries typically associated with car crashes. They were so severe and so extensive that when doctors pulled back the drapes surrounding his little body, everyone present gasped. There was no way he had died after falling from a bunk bed. His grandmother, who is the mother of Mason's birth mother, was right to be suspicious of those who were trusted to care for Mason – his stepmother Tegan McGhee and his father, John Paul O'Connell. "They were standing at the end of the coffin, looking in. I knew they'd done it," Ms Coffey told the *Sunday Independent*. "He was such a happy little child. They took away his communion. They took away his chance at going to school, finishing school, going to big school. She took all this away from him when she murdered him, and I don't forget that. I have never stopped thinking about him." McGhee (32), of Sycamore Avenue, Limerick, pleaded guilty in November on the fourth day of her trial to murdering Mason at the same address in March, 2021. She has received the mandatory life sentence. Mason's biological father, John Paul O'Connell, was sentenced to seven years in prison in October, 2024, after being convicted on four charges – two counts of child cruelty, endangerment, and impeding the apprehension of the person he knew or believed to have murdered Mason. It was a "shameful betrayal" of the child, said Mr Justice Paul McDermott, who added that O'Connell bore a very high level of criminal responsibility for failing to nurture and protect his son.

SO MUCH POTENTIAL
Born on September 29, 2016, Mason had just celebrated his fourth birthday when he was placed in the care of McGhee and O'Connell in October, 2020. He died just five months later, on March 16, 2021 – two dates for ever seared into the minds of his family. Gardai later found there were no sheets or a duvet on Mason's steel-framed bunk bed. "This should have been a place of safety and comfort," the judge said. But little comfort was seemingly afforded to the child, though he was dearly loved by others. Mason's biological mother, Elizabeth 'Lizzie' Conway, has detailed through her victim impact statement the tragic turn in events of her child's life. Her own struggles meant he was taken into the care of McGhee and O'Connell, with fatal consequences she could not have foreseen. When Ms Conway held Mason in her arms in Temple Street Hospital in March, 2021, he was "black and blue", she said. The moment then came when she had to make the decision to turn off the life-support machine. "They told me there was nothing they could do. My whole world ended when I heard those words," she said. "My beautiful brown-eyed baby." His grandmother Breda (73), from Castleconnell, Co Limerick, spoke of how Mason shone, in spite of all the pain

she now suffers. She remembers him as a boy who loved visiting her and eating "spuddies" at dinner. "A beautiful, loveable child," Ms Coffey said. "He was such a happy little child. Not bold, like she [McGhee] said. Not cheeky. He was full of imagination. Never stopped asking questions, very inquisitive. "I'd hide there, behind the pier," she said, pointing out to her garden, "and he'd run up. He was as clever as a fox, he'd know I'd be there – and I'd put the two arms out and he'd run right into them. He was always running, flying, full of life. The family called him their "water baby" because he loved paddling and swimming. Now Mason lies not far from her home, in St Joseph's Cemetery. On the fifth anniversary of his death this March, they will again gather at the graveside and remember him privately. At his final resting place there is a Sonic the Hedgehog figurine, toy cars and an aeroplane. He always had a car or a toy in his hand. On Mason's birthday, a family member will write his age on a balloon with a message for him, and they will release it into the sky. **His cousin, Jordan Hurley, told the *Sunday Independent*** they have a video of Mason dressed as Spider-Man. It has become dear to them – a symbol of all he lived for. "Any time of the year, he wanted to be playing in water or with water," Mr Hurley said. "I remember in the summer, my grandmother would buy him a paddling pool. It would be almost dark out and he'd be shrivelled up like a periwinkle and he still wouldn't get out of the pool. His teeth would be chattering, but no way would he get out. "He had so much potential. He loved living, he loved fun, he loved being around people. If he thought something was wrong with someone, he'd stick to them, hugging them. He was a little gem of a child." Mason loved superheroes, he said, especially Spider-Man and Batman. "He was our superhero," he added.

"The little light we couldn't protect. "You often hear of people talking in a positive light about those that have passed, but Mason was something special, he really was. There was a buzz about him. When things were good and he was around the people he felt safe with, he loved life. He'd smile all day long, laughing, giggling. He was polite and friendly." Mr Hurley said Mason was most content when visiting his maternal grandmother. "Mason never really asked to see anyone else. Nanny was his person, where he felt at peace and safest," he said. However, in the months before he died, Ms Coffey worried that the light within Mason was dimming while he was in the care of O'Connell and McGhee. **Mr Hurley said he felt compelled to call Tusla** and the gardai about Mason's welfare in October 2020. It was a Friday night when he called the child and family agency, but was told it did not operate local services in Limerick at weekends, so he only had access to an emergency line in Dublin through the gardai. "It felt surreal, as if children couldn't be at risk at weekends," he said. Tusla did intervene. A care plan was set out a few days later, and this put Mason in the care of O'Connell and McGhee. At the time, Mr Hurley said he had no reason to be concerned about this arrangement, but his view soon changed. He now questions if Tusla appropriately vets guardians in cases such as Mason's. Part of the care plan granted relatives access to organised visits or video calls with Mason. It was the first year of the pandemic, so the video calls were important during spells when travel restrictions were imposed. But even when Covid-19 restrictions eased, access for visits remained limited. Mr Hurley recalls Mason's cries when it was time to leave his grandmother's house and go back to McGhee and O'Connell. "These cries are for ever burnt into our memory, his little face and what he was actually trying to tell us. "We didn't know, Mason. We're so sorry. If we knew, we would've never brought you back to them."

Mason – Our little man, our little light

*Mason, if love alone could keep you near,
You'd still be laughing with us here.*

*If love could call you back again,
We'd hold you close and ease your pain.*

*We miss you more than words can say,
But truth stood firm in court today.*

*Your stolen voice was heard at last.
No shadow could conceal your past.*

*The wrongs you suffered met the light,
Your story rose and claimed what's right.*

*And though our hearts are torn in two,
Justice finally stood for you...*

*Rest easy now, our little man,
Your peace is here, as best it can.*

*We'll take it from this moment on,
Your strength remains though you've moved on.*

*You were, you are, our shining light,
Our superhero through the night.*

*Until the day we meet again,
We'll love you fiercely, little friend*

Sections of a poem written by a family member



“We didn’t know, Mason. We’re so sorry. If we knew, we would’ve never brought you back to them

CHRISTMAS 2020 – THREE MONTHS BEFORE HE DIED

Mason was brought to visit his grandmother on Christmas night, 2020. She did not know then, but it was the last time she would see him. "There was no life in him," she said. "I was getting him ready for bed. I was putting on the pyjamas and I saw scratches on him. Oh, God, they were like you got your hands and reefed them down his little chest and neck." She planned to confront O'Connell and McGhee about the marks the following day when they came to collect Mason, but it was St Stephen's Day, the house was busy and a private moment to discuss the marks never came. Mr Hurley remembers Mason was not himself that Christmas. "He was distant, a shell of himself. Now I believe he was upset with us, he must have felt abandoned," he said. Over the following weeks, Ms Coffey was worried about being unable to see Mason. She said the video calls they had were difficult. She got a sense Mason was being distracted, and that McGhee or O'Connell would limit his interactions. Her concerns led to calls being made to Tusla and the gardai. "My grandmother called the gardai several times to raise welfare concerns about Mason," Mr Hurley said. "Those checks often involved quick doorstep conversations and did not include private, thorough examinations." Ms Coffey now knows her instincts were right. "In the beginning, I might ring Tusla maybe once a week, but in the end, I was ringing every day," she said.

PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE
On March 13, 2021, John Paul O'Connell called 999, saying his son had fallen from his bunk bed. He was taken to hospital with catastrophic head injuries. Gardai examined CCTV footage from a neighbour's house, which showed McGhee going up and down the stairs of her home that morning, every 10 to 15 minutes until 10.50am. This time corresponds with a Google search on her phone, asking: "Why is it bad if you bang your head and go to sleep?" It was followed by 10 calls from McGhee's phone to O'Connell, who had gone to work that morning. At 11.06am, McGhee searched "concussion" on Google. Over the next 90 minutes, she sent texts to Mason's father, saying "Why did you leave", "I need you home" and "You shouldn't have left and you know that". McGhee later withheld her phone from gardai, and only handed it over after deleting text messages she claimed related to drug use. O'Connell returned home at 12.35pm. He called the emergency



“Mason was distant – a shell of himself. I now believe he must have felt abandoned

services eight minutes later and described a "large bump" on the back of Mason's head, slightly smaller than a golf ball. Mason was unconscious, but breathing. **Ms Coffey said a relative had been denied access to Mason the day before.** His family feel this was because of harm being caused to the child. McGhee's trial heard evidence that when Mason was taken to hospital, X-rays showed he had suffered a fractured rib that was starting to heal, suggesting the injury was a week to 10 days old. It was the State's case that O'Connell and McGhee kept Mason out of sight of other family members for several days due to bruises he had suffered from a series of assaults. An emergency crew found him on the floor of a bedroom, unconscious and displaying signs of a brain injury. He was rushed to University Hospital Limerick. Seventeen areas of bruising were found on his head and body, including two black eyes and "classic signs of physical abuse". Mr Hurley said he will never forget the phone calls from the hospital, with everyone praying for a miracle. "He lasted a little while without the machines. In those situations, you ignore the science and pray for a miracle, like something you see on television," he said. "I remember my un-

cle ringing me and through tears and crying he told me, 'He's gone now, buddy, he's gone'. I can still hear that sentence in my head as clear as day, like a living nightmare. I'll never forget that sentence. He was four years old. A child." **THE WAKE**
The level of cruelty inflicted on Mason only fully emerged in the months after his death as gardai carried out their inquiries. In the meantime, there was a funeral to organise. A wake was held in Ms Coffey's sitting room. It is poignant that this is where she shared her last words with Mason. She now spends the majority of her time there. Just over a year ago, she was diagnosed with cancer and given weeks to live. She is now bed-bound and has transformed the sitting room into a bedroom. Her bed is surrounded by pictures of her grandchildren, but a picture of Mason takes pride of place. "I remember the undertaker coming with him. I remember they – McGhee and O'Connell – were in here. I didn't want them here," she said. "I got up, left the kitchen and I came in here to talk to my little man, Mason. The two were standing at end of the coffin, looking in. I knew they'd done it." Mr Hurley said: "How they [McGhee and O'Connell] cried and mourned with us. We consoled them, listened to them crying and apologising for an accident that never actually happened. We forgave, advising them that it was just an accident that could have happened to anyone. Little did we know at that stage what had actually happened." At the funeral mass, O'Connell spoke about how "our little superhero fought until his last breath". He thanked the medical crews in Limerick, Cork and Temple Street who fought to save him. **LEGACY**
The family now hope Mason's case can influence positive change. They want to see reforms at Tusla to ensure issues they saw concerning his care do not occur in other cases. "There's a million things we'd like to do differently," Mr Hurley said. "Nothing will bring him back, no amount of life sentences for those that hurt him. While we want to see it happening, no amount of revenge or justice will bring him back. "Mason did have happy moments, and our family made sure of this. Mason was a light shining in the darkness that was his unfortunate existence. "In the end, his life was short and sad. He was let down by the people that brought him into this world and were meant to protect and nurture him. He was let down by the governmental bodies put in place to protect him. "The family around him that loved him did everything they could legally to help, but it wasn't enough."



Mason's biological mother Elizabeth 'Lizzie' Conway



Mason 'loved living, he loved fun, he loved being around people', his family said

Boy’s family call on minister to introduce ‘Mason’s Law’

WAYNE O’CONNOR

The family of murdered four-year-old Mason O’Connell-Conway have called on Justice Minister Jim O’Callaghan to introduce a “Mason’s Law” to protect children in care.

Relatives of the young boy, who was killed by his stepmother, believe new laws are needed to compel gardaí and social workers to carry out physical checks on children in cases where serious care issues arise.

His family have written to the minister and the DPP, complaining that the sentence imposed on Mason’s father John Paul O’Connell for child cruelty, endangerment and aiding murderer Tegan McGhee was “unduly lenient”.

They told the minister that Mason’s death is “emblematic of systemic failure” and have called for greater protection of the “most vulnerable children”.

O’Connell received a seven-year sentence after pleading guilty to four offences — but Mason’s family want him to spend at least 24 years in jail, the term he would serve if the sentences for each of the charges were to run consecutively, rather than concurrently.

In a letter sent to the DPP, Mason’s family urged prosecutors to remove O’Connell’s chances of remission and not allow the sentences to run concurrently.

After pleading guilty and being jailed in 2024, O’Connell is due for release in 2031 — or as early as 2029 if granted remission for good behaviour. But the family want to see him behind bars until 2048.

“Given the devastating outcome of this prolonged abuse, and the new information that has now emerged, we believe the original sentence was unduly lenient and did not serve justice for Mason,” the family told the DPP in a letter seen by the *Sunday Independent*.

“We feel this is more than warranted, given the information about the level of cruelty Mason experienced. It wasn’t just the one isolated incident that led to his death.”

The letter to Mr O’Callaghan was signed by 11 of Mason’s relatives, including his grandmother, aunts and uncles.

Mason’s cousin, Jordan Hurley,

told the *Sunday Independent*: “You are telling a family that they may have to deal with the idea of passing him on the road again within a short period of time.

“We understand the need to work within the parameters of the law and society, but why can’t the full weight of the law come down on a person like this? Why should they be allowed be part of society when they are a risk to society?”

“There was plenty of injuries noted during testimonies by doctors and nurses who were present but were ignored before the day he died. For example, a broken rib that had begun to heal and many, many bruises. All of these were ignored and he was never brought to a healthcare professional.”

A spokeswoman for Mr O’Callaghan said “a comprehensive response” to Mason’s family’s correspondence is being drafted.

McGhee’s murder trial was the first time the family heard the full extent of Mason’s injuries and the suffering he endured for weeks before he was killed.

The family grew concerned about Mason’s welfare on Christmas Day 2020, three months before he died, when they saw scratches on his body.

McGhee (32), formerly of Sycamore Drive, Limerick, was sentenced to life in prison last week for murdering Mason.

Sources familiar with Mason’s care arrangements said his case was complex.

The *Sunday Independent* is aware that Tusla files show there were 13 referrals to the agency regarding Mason’s immediate family during the child’s life.

Tusla did intervene in Mason’s care in October 2020 — leading to him being placed in the care

of O’Connell and McGhee as part of a private family arrangement.

A source said one of the Tusla referrals came after this date and relates to John Paul O’Connell during the time he was Mason’s primary carer. This related to an alleged altercation with an adult. However, Mason’s family feel the State could have done more to protect the child.

“Repeated opportunities to protect a vulnerable child were missed,” Mr Hurley said. “In the aftermath, a number of systemic issues appear clear to us.”

He said these relate to decision-making around care placements, how welfare checks are managed and poor vetting practices. A letter to the Justice Minister signed by Mason’s relatives calls for these to be enhanced.

“We believe that your engagement could not only bring renewed scrutiny to the proportionality of the sentence imposed, but also highlight wider structural issues in how Ireland protects its most vulnerable children,” they wrote.

Mason’s grandmother, Breda Coffey (73), said she tried to alert Tusla staff to difficulties in gaining access to Mason, physically and for agreed video calls, in the months before he died.

Sources said Tusla were restrained from carrying out house visits during this period because of lockdown restrictions, but said there were remote meetings with O’Connell.

Mason’s pre-school was closed in January and February 2021 because of Covid-19, further limiting his interactions with people outside the home.

Mr Hurley said better checks and procedures are needed in cases where Tusla has a history with a child.

He said the “Mason’s Law” the family is proposing would give powers to social workers and gardaí to meet one-to-one with children and carry out basic checks for bruising or signs of injury when they are alerted to concerns about a child.

“My grandmother called the gardaí several times to raise welfare concerns about Mason while he was in placement [with O’Connell and McGhee]. Those checks often involved quick

doorstep conversations and did not include private, thorough examinations of the child. We believe a more rigorous approach to welfare checks is needed,” Mr Hurley added.

He said the family were happy to see a mandatory life sentence imposed on McGhee after she changed her plea to guilty on the fourth day of her trial. They hope she will not be given the chance of receiving parole.

“You don’t want to share the world with someone who does that to your family,” Mr Hurley said.

In correspondence with Mason’s family, the DPP said “what happened to Mason was incredibly tragic and of the utmost seriousness.”

The DPP told the family its role is to bring an appeal in cases where it sees an identifiable error in applying the law — but no such error was seen in the sentence imposed on O’Connell.

They said this “does not in any way diminish the seriousness of what happened to Mason”.

Tusla’s spokeswoman said Mason was not in the agency’s care when he died but was being cared for by his father “pending private family-law proceedings in respect of guardianship and custody”. She said Tusla has shared details of its engagements around Mason’s care and his family with the National Review Panel for an objective review.

“Our thoughts continue to be with Mason’s mother, siblings, extended family and all those who knew him, at this difficult time,” she said.

“We fully accept that child protection work carries a significant duty of care, and that does not diminish simply because the work is complex and difficult and conducted in an environment of inherent risk.

“We also know from previous tragic events that there can be circumstances where, despite the best efforts of state agencies, family members and communities that children can be harmed.

“Anticipating future risk to children can be very complex and multidimensional — but as state agencies, we must never stop seeking to learn from past events to better protect children.”

Tegan McGhee became ultimate ‘wicked stepmum’

● Deceitful child-killer was adept at concealing her cruel, murderous nature — even at victim’s funeral



Maeve Sheehan

With her dark blonde hair, a shy smile and a face bare of make-up, the teenage Tegan McGhee sits on a sofa surrounded by relatives, a baby perched contentedly on her lap.

It is one of many images posted on social media by her family over more than a decade, documenting her transformation from a fresh-faced teenager into a young woman, typically photographed in the company of children at various family celebrations.

In these mundane scenes of family life, she betrayed not a hint of the murderous cruelty she proved herself capable of a few short years later.

Her smiling face is in stark contrast to the felon in gym gear and pink nail varnish who was denounced on the steps of the Criminal Courts of Justice last week as an “evil child-killer”.

How she reached such depths of depravity is a mystery.

Few details of McGhee’s life were aired during her trial for the murder of four-year-old Mason O’Connell-Conway, the son of her partner.

The 32-year-old appeared before a jury for just four days before changing her plea to guilty in the face of overwhelming and damning evidence. That decision brought a sudden end to the proceedings, cutting short both the trial and any further testimony the public might have heard about her background or inner life.

According to sources in Limerick, McGhee was born in Scotland to a Scottish father and a mother originally from Hospital, Co Limerick. In 2005, her mother returned to Ireland with her children. Two years later, Hazel McGhee died tragically, plunging the family into crisis. Tegan was just 14 years old.

Following her mother’s death, she was placed in foster care with a Limerick couple, Mary O’Sullivan and Gearóid Bolger. A source described her as a troubled teenager. She frequently ran away from home and was often found spending time in Limerick city centre.

“She was reported missing on numerous occasions when she was in foster care,” the source said. “Gardaí would usually find her and bring her home.”

That was the extent of her interaction with the authorities. She was not known for criminal behaviour and was not considered particularly wild. It remains unclear whether McGhee completed her education or if she ever had steady employment.

In her mid-20s, she met John Paul O’Connell from Murroe, Co Limerick. By 2019, they were in a serious relationship. The following year, the couple moved into a rented house on Sycamore Avenue in the Rathbane area of Limerick city. O’Connell had separated from his former partner, Elizabeth Conway, not long after the birth of their son, Mason, in early 2016.

Following the split, Mason lived with his mother. One source told the *Sunday Independent*



John Paul O’Connell and Tegan McGhee

ent that O’Connell’s family appeared relieved that he had found a new partner and happy that he seemed settled.

Nor was there any tension on Elizabeth’s part when she learnt of the new relationship. In her victim-impact statement, Elizabeth recalled hugging McGhee when they first met. She assured her she had “no problem” with the relationship and said she only wanted her to care for Mason when he was in her home.

McGhee gave no one reason to worry. Visitors to the couple’s rented house described it as neat and well-kept. Later, when it became a crime scene, investigators also noted how orderly and ordinary it appeared. Homes that conceal sustained violence often show signs of chaos or neglect; this one did not.

The jury never heard how McGhee felt about assuming responsibility for her partner’s child, nor whether her suitability as a carer for Mason was ever assessed.

A source familiar with the case said it later became clear that Mason was viewed as a “hindrance” to McGhee as she embarked on a new phase of her life, with her partner, in their new home.

But McGhee presented a convincing front to Mason’s wider family.

Relatives called to the house to collect Mason for visits and return him afterwards. During these encounters, McGhee was described as friendly and welcoming, while O’Connell appeared distant, often avoiding inviting visitors inside. McGhee, however, overruled him and brought people into their home.

“They played a blinder,” the source said.



Tegan McGhee, who has been described as an ‘evil monster’ by her own sister

“They appeared open and friendly. There was nothing for a long time to suggest they were treating Mason the way they were.”

On one occasion, when Mason was being dropped home, he was reluctant to go inside. McGhee would distract him with promises of new pyjamas or socks laid out on his bed, encouraging him to run upstairs to look.

In hindsight, relatives believe this was an elaborate charade designed to conceal the cruelty inflicted on the four-year-old behind closed doors.

Gardaí were later struck by the pair’s extraordinary capacity for deceit.

When it became clear Mason would not survive after the fatal injuries inflicted on him by McGhee, gardaí believe McGhee and O’Connell conspired to get time alone with him in hospital to co-ordinate their stories, away from the presence of his family.

It was when Ms Conway had to make the decision to turn off the life-support machine that McGhee and O’Connell asked for time with Mason. “That was the only point that they got to meet alone and gardaí suspected that was when they started putting their story together, inside that room,” said the source.

In the days and months that followed his death on March 16, 2021, McGhee and O’Connell behaved with breathtaking hypocrisy. O’Connell delivered a eulogy at his son’s funeral, while McGhee offered comfort to grieving relatives.

According to McGhee’s sister, Shannon, the

No amount of words can describe how cruel she is

family was deceived for more than a year until her arrest in 2022. Following McGhee’s conviction last week, Shannon wrote on Facebook: “My sister Tegan is an evil monster. No amount of words can describe how cold and cruel she is.”

No one in her family knew of the “horrific things that happened to Mason”, she said. The family believed Mason had fallen from a bunk bed, as everyone else had been told. “I couldn’t understand how the person I knew and loved my whole life was someone I didn’t even know.”

It is notable that McGhee has never accepted responsibility for what happened to Mason.

In garda interviews, she claimed Mason was “bold” and bruised easily. Initially, she blamed O’Connell for the injuries to his son, portraying him as controlling, a source said. Later, she admitted shaking Mason on the morning he was taken to hospital, but claimed she “blanked out” and could provide no further details.

O’Connell, meanwhile, maintained the lies, denying in five of his six garda interviews that he witnessed abuse. In his final interview, he admitted seeing McGhee kick Mason with full force the night before his collapse.

Though she had admitted herself to a psychiatric facility after her arrest, mental health issues did not form part of her defence and she stood trial as a person of sound mind.

In her Facebook post, Shannon McGhee said she watched her sister in court show “not even a flicker of emotion”, while Mason’s mother has said her son’s life was taken by “pure evil”.

According to Dr Kevin Lambe, a clinical and forensic psychologist, McGhee fulfils society’s expectations of the “wicked stepmother”.

“This sounds like a stepmother who was not coping well in her role, suffering from what psychologists call ‘role strain’,” he said.

“As the substitute mother, she was probably unsure of her role concerning expectations for her behaviour, discipline and affection with the child.

“She fulfils all the expectations we have of the ‘wicked stepmother’. Stepmothers often have little experience in a parenting role.”

But the role of John Paul O’Connell cannot be overlooked either.

“In my own family systems work, I meet with stepmothers who experience helplessness and frustration in their new role, often because the child’s father is out working long hours and she is left at home to mind his children,” Dr Lambe said.

“I have to say I am left with the words of the trial judge, Mr Justice Paul McDermott, who named the father’s actions as shameful for his treatment of his son and for his failure to nurture and protect him.”

McGhee began her life sentence last week, estranged from her family and isolated in prison, where she is known as “the child-killer”, a source said. “She is completely alone.”

Additional reporting by Wayne O’Connor