

Good morning

A few months ago I would not have imagined myself addressing an audience such as this – but the persuasive powers of Claire Missen plus the support and encouragement of my colleagues in Ireland combined to convince me that I should go ahead.

As you will have seen from your programme, I do not claim to be an expert in the area of Family Support but I do believe that the story of the Family Resource Centres in Ireland is worth telling.

In order to understand our present position and our views on “Family Support using Community Strengths”, it is important to give you a definition and some background.

“Family support is generally seen as a way of promoting healthy relationships in families and preventing dysfunctional relationships from getting worse. As such it can be a form of either primary, secondary or tertiary prevention, a trilogy of interventions which have been cryptically defined as addressing problems either before they happen (primary prevention), before they get worse (secondary prevention) or before it is too late (tertiary prevention). (Professor Kieran McKeown)”

“Family support is empowering of individuals, builds on family strengths, enhances self esteem and engenders a sense of being able to influence ones life’s, has significant potential as a primary preventive strategy for all families facing the ordinary challenges of day to day living and has particular relevance to communities that are coping in a stressful environment” (Commission on the Family 1998)

Background to the Programme

In 1994, to mark the International Year of the Family, the then Department of Social Welfare granted nearly 320,000 pounds in funding to 10 Family Resource Centres on a three year pilot basis. When the work of these centres was evaluated in 1997, the main recommendation was that their funding should continue under a dedicated Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme (FRC Programme) within the Department.

In 1995, the Government had established the Commission on the Family. This Commission on the Family met for three years with substantial input from experts in the field. The Commission reported in 1998. The Commission recommended that the FRC Programme be extended throughout Ireland and the Government committed to 100 Family Resource Centres by 2006. This was built into the National Development Plan and the target was met in 2006. Since that time a further 7 FRC’s have been established. The Family Resource Centres Programme was included in a new state agency Family Support Agency which was established in 2003.

The Agency also is responsible for Family Mediation Services and funds a range of counselling activities including Marriage and Relationship Counselling, Marriage Preparation, Bereavement and Child Counselling.

The 1998 Commission on the Family report, entitled 'Strengthening Families for Life', the most detailed policy resource we have on the area of families in Irish society in the 21st century, informs the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme.

This programme aims to combat disadvantage by supporting the function of the family unit and by utilizing a family support approach in a community development setting. All work upholds the community development ethos and the principle of inclusiveness meaning that it works with people in a meaningful way to create change in their lives.

Community Development is concerned both with building resilience in communities and with empowering people to lead their own communities. It is a specific approach to tackling poverty, exclusion and disadvantage.

The strategy of the Programme is to establish a network of family resource centres in communities affected by high unemployment, poverty and disadvantage. Projects all have an anti-poverty, anti-exclusion focus and work using community development principles and methods. Projects are concerned with the needs of

- men, women and children,
- those with disabilities,

- the homeless,
- lone parent families,
- the elderly,
- the unemployed,
- young people at risk,
- Travellers,
- and other disadvantaged groups.

Projects adopt a holistic approach embracing the needs of individuals, the family unit and the community.

FRCs encourage the participation of people and groups in society by building their capacity to identify and realize solutions for themselves and their communities. The work of projects is people centred, aiming to enhance the skill and self-confidence of people to allow them to work collectively and influence issues of importance to their families and communities.

The model of family support delivered through the FRC Programme recognizes informal and formal support sources and emphasizes that families, friends and personal networks are traditionally the foundations of a rich and valued life in the community. The principles of the family support approach are family focused, with participation of the families in all aspects of the work using community development methodology to empower family members to take control of their situation.

Thus all work is service-user led and needs-led as opposed to service led.

All activities supported by the Family Resource Centres are designed to respond to the needs of the local community. These activities include

- information,
- advice and support to target groups and families in the area (including parenting, counselling and specialized intensive interventions such as play therapy).

Additional services provided include

- advice and administrative facilities for community groups;
- courses and training opportunities;
- child-care provision, ranging from full day care to sessional care
- facilities for those attending courses provided by the project;
- after-school clubs.

Many FRCs offer counselling services, both individual and couple counselling.

It is important to note that FRC's work with the whole community in a non-stigmatising manner while targeting those most in need.

At the beginning of 2009 the Irish Government commissioned an Economic Report from the eminent Irish economist Dr. Colm McCarthy. The report entitled '*The Report of the Special Groups on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programme*' was released on 16th July 2009. The purpose of the Report was inter-alia to 'see where expenditure savings might be made'.

The Report made the controversial recommendation that funding to the FRCs should be severely cut as 'the funding stream for community organizations overlap in some cases with other State funded community and voluntary programmes'.

This is simply not the case. FRC's are engaged in the development and delivery of family support programmes at the community level. They do this by using a community development approach which entails working with families experiencing disadvantage to create change and meet needs. No other community organization uniquely offers family support models of service delivery through community development activity.

These support models clearly achieve a number of outcomes identified in '*The Agenda for Children's Services*' – '*connecting families and community strengths*'

- by supporting community organizations;
- 'opening access to services' in local communities where they are needed; and
- 'delivering integrated services' by working in partnership with other organizations, sharing resources and, in fact, minimizing expenditure.

We will return to this policy document further in this presentation.

The debate generated by the McCarthy recommendation has forced the Family Support Agency and the 107 Family Resource Centres organized through their national body – the Family Resource Centres National Forum (The Forum) – to consider the nature and quality of their work, particularly in Family Support.

Whilst we were all aware of the scope of support given to families and communities across the country, we felt it necessary to articulate this in a way that was meaningful to our politicians and also charted the way ahead for FRC's.

The policy document 'Agenda for Children's Services' was launched in 2007. This is a key document and informs the future plans for the Programme. The Minister for Children states in the Foreword (Page 5)

"An important aspect of this policy document, *The Agenda for Children's Services*, is the emphasis placed on the role of families and communities in the lives of our children. Too often in the past, services were provided to our children and young people in isolation from their families and communities. This was, and is, to the detriment of all concerned. The inclusion of families, extended families and local communities, where possible, in services for children goes a long way to ensuring that these services are actually responding to the needs of the child and ensures that they continue to be effective in the long term, even when direct intervention from State or voluntary agencies has ceased."

The document further states (page 17 and 18)

"ensuring that children and young people receive the support they need when they need it is the central challenge for children's services. This requires that formal services connect with and promote the networks of informal support that surround children and young people. Supporting and complementing the many ways in which the immediate family protects and cares for children is the central function of child health and child welfare services.

This is easier to achieve with some families than others. Social exclusion is a major barrier to effective support and needs to be directly addressed through targeting need and developing and delivering culturally competent services. Effective protection of children and young people at risk or in crisis, as well as the promotion of all children's well-being, requires working in partnership with families. Retaining the trust of families is the key.

The support that children receive from other informal sources beyond their immediate family also needs to be recognized – the wider family, friends and community. There is strong evidence that for children in adversity it is these informal networks that are the key sources of help and yet they are often overlooked by professionals. Help from these networks can be available on a 24 hour basis in a less stigmatizing fashion and can be very cost-effective. They operate in the immediate world of the children and young people.

The Agenda for children's services identifies five characteristics of a service which should be in place to achieve the best outcomes. The Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme excels in each of these domains and clearly highlights the effectiveness of services provided by the FRC Programme.

(i) Connecting services with families and community strengths.

Since the commencement of the programme in 1994, the number of core funded Centres has increased from 10 to 107. This demonstrates that FRCs are popular in local communities and that there is a need on the ground for community-based approaches to family support.

FRCs work within the cupped model of family support, locating the children and family within their immediate community and the wider context of local services and national policy. The cupped model of family support places the child or young person at the centre of the intervention. Beyond the nuclear family there are extended family and friends, then the school and community, then wider organizational networks and finally national policy and legislation. The cupped model of family support is based on the ecological approach which focuses on the various contexts at play in any situation. FRC's are managed in such a way that there are high levels of community ownership of centres in local areas and high levels of community participation in all their processes thus linking all elements of this ecological approach.

(ii) Ensuring quality services.

As advocated in the Commission on the Family (1998) report '*Strengthening Families for Life*', FRC's work from an approach of building strengths in families which is:

- Preventive
- Empowering
- Building on family strengths
- Enhancing self esteem and
- A sense of being able to influence events in ones life

and draws on community-based responses. Utilizing this approach and the ecological model, the services offered through FRC's are varied and address a number of levels of outcomes.

Services available in the FRC's can be located within a number of levels on the Hardiker Model (1991). The Hardiker model conceptualizes four levels of service provision.

- Level 1 provides open access support to families (such as public health nurse and medical services) and health promotion and information services. It is provided to families generally and at their request. An example of a service in St Brigid's is our Parent and Toddler Group which offers a universal service to all parents promoting social interaction and good parenting skills.
- Level 2 is provided to families at their request, and is targeted support by assessment of need. An example here is our Parenting Courses which include one-to-one assessment sessions.
- Level 3 is a prescribed intervention for families in difficulty and children at risk. The voluntary dimension may be no longer present and work with the family is in many cases mandated by law. We would deal with mandatory attendance by parents (especially fathers) at parenting courses.
- Level 4 refers to work with families where the need is so acute that the children have been placed in out of home care.

As outlined in more detail below, the majority of services in FRCs can be located at levels 1 and 2 with an emphasis on level 2, however, some services can be located in level 3.

Each of these service types is as important as the other. As FRCs are locally based and work on the ground with families and children on a daily basis, they can facilitate early intervention. They are in

touch with communities and therefore act as part of a Child Protection support system whereby support and services are provided to prevent re-entry into the child protection system, highlighting the importance of the gate-keeping role of FRCs.

(iii) Open access to services.

FRCs are based in local communities and are part of local communities. Having the remit to provide universal services mean that they are ideally located to provide easy accessibility to a range of services. Their presence in the local community is non-stigmatizing. Work in FRCs is also targeted at vulnerable and hard to reach groups in the community. As I mentioned earlier, target groups include:

- youth,
- lone parents,
- unemployed people,
- disabled people,
- members of new communities,
- older people and
- isolated and older men.

FRCs provide a social network which would otherwise not be available in isolated areas and areas of disadvantage.

Around the country these services receive one million visits on a yearly basis to access essential services and facilities. In 2008, other community and voluntary groups used FRCs over 16,000 times to host meetings, and over 41,000 times to use project facilities. Over 10,000 adults have chances of returning to employment or gaining higher-skilled work.

Furthermore by providing accessible affordable childcare services throughout the country, (over 60 FRCs have childcare attached to them), FRCs also enable parents to become part of the workforce or engage in training courses with a view to updating their skills. The sheer volume of visitors to FRCs demonstrates the demand on the ground and the willingness of communities to engage with this type of service.

(iv) Delivering integrated services.

FRCs are part of range of family support services and support infrastructure. This is beneficial in a number of ways.

- Firstly FRCs are integrated into both the local community and the local service community. The emphasis in the projects is on the involvement of local communities and on creating successful partnerships between the voluntary and statutory agencies in the area of family support. FRCs work in partnership with other agencies working on the ground within communities. Thus, there is an established system of collaborative work and systems of referral where necessary and appropriate, and FRCs service users are linked into a range of social services.
- Secondly integrated services are cost efficient. The FRC model encourages the sharing of resources, thereby reducing the need for the Government to provide individual supports to various organizations and community groups. In addition, having core funding, granted by the

Family Support Agency, FRCs are supported to generate further income from other sources. Family Support Agency support to the 83 FRCs that contributed to the SPEAK FRC database during 2007 amounted to just over 13.2 million. These FRCs generated a further 19.2 million from other sources during the same year. (SPEAK means Strategic Planning and Self Evaluation System).

(v) Planning, monitoring and evaluating services.

All FRC's use a strategic planning approach to their activities. All FRC's take part in the SPEAK self appraisal and reporting tool. These monitoring and evaluation tools clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the Programme. They demonstrate that the Programme is delivering a much-needed public service in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Additionally, Centres have their own formal and informal methods of evaluation. Services and programmes are delivered after a rigorous consultation process.

Strategic Partnership and alliance building

The development of effective partnerships between the Health Services Executive and FRCs can greatly enhance the delivery of, and expand, family support services at local level. There is a huge need for FRCs and the HSE Community Care and Social Work Teams to develop protocols for working together, particularly for families who are at risk and in relation to child protection policies. Child Protection and protection of vulnerable adults is critical to our work. A practical example of such collaboration would be the opportunity for FRCs to provide the HSE with additional supervised access visits (Child Contact Centres) in both child and family friendly environments. This need has been identified in the recent One Family report '*Supporting Child Contact – The Need for Child Contact Centres in Ireland*'.

FRCs play a key role in inter-agency planning and consultation regarding local needs, in particular in the area of family support. Care must be taken to avoid an overload of intervention in families.

Many FRCs actively engage at local government level participating in social inclusion measures groups and with other local development agencies.

This is reflected in the high level of family focused programmes and initiatives provided through FRCs in partnership with various agencies, including

- Adult Education
- Drugs Awareness
- Youth Services
- Sports Partnerships
- Local Government etc.

Continued development of family support services and supports

FRCs also play a key role in the provision of parenting supports and childcare supports.

In an opinion piece in the Irish Times in March 2009, a leading expert Prof. Pat Dolan of the Child and Family Research Centre in Galway University stated

“While many young people thrive during childhood, others do not experience life as good or safe. Rightfully, in recent years, much attention has focused on how best to support vulnerable children and youth.

With the inevitable incoming tide of ‘cutbacks’ in services in Ireland (and elsewhere) a decrease in vital and relatively low cost preventive services and supports to young people may actually increase their risk of harm. Clearly, the harsh experience of many children often demands remedial interventions that sometimes culminate in their removal from their families and communities. However, there is growing international research evidence that early interventions delivered through inclusive family support programmes for all types of family structures, particularly in disadvantaged communities, can work.

In times of limited resources for children and families in need, we must not overlook this.

Furthermore, even before any professional intervention, family, friends, school and community resources are the proven primary sources of help for children and are often the unsung heroes in the lives of young people.”

There is huge potential for FRCs to target families experiencing particular disadvantage such as drug addiction and in developing innovative pilot programmes and in being the vehicle for rolling out new government parenting/family initiatives.

Targeting and working with parents and siblings of families who are living with drug and alcohol addictions is urgently required. This is one of the fastest growing and endemic issues of many communities, with parent and siblings themselves highly stressed and many coping with prescription medication. Weekly facilitated support meetings that are educational based i.e. personal development, parenting skills, communication, drug and alcohol awareness training would support the family unit in dealing with these issues.

The Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin recently launched “The Role of Grandparents in divorced and separated families”, a research report funded by the Family Support Agency. They recommend that there should be

1. “Greater recognition by family resource centres of the important role grandparents can play in the post-separation family. Information and counselling should be available to grandparents who are heavily involved in the care and support of their adult children and grandchildren, and also for grandparents who experience their contact with grandchildren as inadequate. The creation of peer-support groups within these centres should be piloted and if successful, rolled out around the country.
2. More information (through information packs and relevant websites) for grandparents on how they can help and support grandchildren in the early years of their parents’ divorce or separation.

3. More information (through information packs and relevant websites) for grandparents on legislation governing their right to apply for access to grandchildren following their son's or daughter's divorce or separation."

This is a challenge which we will take up in 2010.

A potential area for future development is one parent family programmes in the local community that also target fathers to engage with their children on a regular basis. This type of support develops confidence, alleviates stress and mental health illnesses through developing social networks and friendships. The programme would provide appropriate information, develop life plans for the individual, link with education and training opportunities, provide child care and child development.

FRCs presently deliver work outside their named target areas and people who live outside the named target areas access services and supports of FRCs. FRCs refuse support or access to no one.

St Brigids Family and Community Centre

The Project was founded in 1984 by the Irish Sisters of Mercy, based on a charitable model where well-meaning people were harnessed to deliver services identified by the Sisters as needed in the community.

In 2000 the Centre joined the FRC Programme. This presented a number of challenges to the Centre in terms of its Board of Management, its culture and ethos. As the FRC Programme is rooted in community development, change was needed. Like any project, there has been a resistance to change but slowly we have shifted our emphasis and ethos from a charity based model to a community development model.

All the activities in our Centre are informed by the consultation process carried out in recent years and particularly by the Inner City Integrated Strategic Plan 2008-2010. We have a range of programmes and services for all age groups and our Centre is seen as a focal point for advice and support as well as being a drop-in Centre for our catchment area.

Examples of services and programmes delivered at St Brigids include:-

- Couple and Relationship Counselling
- Adult Counselling
- Child Counselling and Play Therapy
- Full range of child-care activities allowing us to also provide one-to-one parenting advice and tailored parenting courses and workshops
- Parent and Toddler groups
- Family and Community Services i.e.
 - Drop-in Centre with a programme of activities including cookery, art and craft classes, computer classes
 - Weekly coffee mornings

- Capacity Building Workshops to increase peoples awareness of local structures and how to engage and participate in local decision-making processes
- Befriending Projects.

But, to really know what we are doing and the contribution we make to the inner city, you must come to Waterford and visit us.

Thank you for your interest in our work and a sincere thank you to the organizers for inviting me here to address you.

Ends.