

**Submission to Department of Social & Family Affairs
on the Proposed
'Strategy for Strengthening Families'**

September 2004

The Family Diversity Initiative (FDI) is a coalition of organisations working with and representing the interests of diverse families in Ireland. This coalition recognises that the family exists in different structures and circumstances and challenges discrimination. Our vision is to achieve an Ireland in which people define their own families and which all these families are treated equally. Our mission is to promote equality, acceptance and understanding in Ireland for all families.

Profile of Family Diversity Initiative

The objectives of the FDI are to:

- Co-ordinate and develop effective partnership working between NGO's who promote and represent diverse families, including the sharing of relevant resources.
- Identify key knowledge gaps in the experience of diverse families and seek to address these by research or other appropriate means.
- Support and co-ordinate policy interventions that address the institutional and social barriers to equality and social inclusion faced by diverse family groups.
- Co-ordinate an effective public awareness campaign on family diversity in Ireland.
- On achievement of the above objectives the Family diversity Initiative will re-assess its future.

FDI underpinning principles

- An understanding of "family life" that derives from our Vision Statement that people define their own families.
- Promoting equality of opportunity and social justice in its work and within the operating policies/ practices of the initiative.
- Acknowledging the right of people and families facing discrimination/ inequality to participate in solutions to redress that inequality.
- Partnership working with relevant external people/organisations which furthers the mission/aims of FDI.

The FDI currently includes membership from a range of organisations working with and representing families with varying structures and those who live in varying social situations. Current members of the steering group include, Age Action Ireland, Children's Rights Alliance, Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN), Focus Ireland, Forum of People with Disabilities, National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), One Family – Voice, Support, Action for One-Parent Families (formerly Cherish), OPEN - the national network of lone parent groups, Treoir- National Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children.

The FDI would like to congratulate the Minister and her Department on the success of the consultation process involving a number of fora around the country last year. We welcome the opportunity to make the following final submission in the process.

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- The report 'Families and Family Life in Ireland' demonstrates that there are many diverse families in Ireland that are not recognised as a family in their own right. The Strategy should begin by developing a clear definition that can be used across the board in the Department in developing family policy.
 - 'Families and Family Life in Ireland' also identifies the reality among families that services are not accessible and available to all. The Strategy should include a clear framework of how this is to be addressed in the Department, and a plan to promote services among all families. An example of this is the availability and eligibility of the carers' allowance. There are many carers who are not being recognised financially for their work within the family.

- In our submission to the Family Support Agency strategic plan last year, the FDI stated that there is a need to collect quantitative data on the composition of family situations in Ireland. This recommendation extends to the department as a whole, to ensure effective family policy to strengthen existing families.
- The FDI recommend the strategy include training of all frontline staff in understanding diversity and anti-discriminatory practice. This would be a beneficial step toward achieving equality of service provision.
- Current progress to amend the law in relation to co-habiting couples (Law Reform Commission – consultation paper on the Rights and Duties of Cohabitees) will have an impact on families in the future. The Strategy should recognise this precedent as an influencing factor and proactively look to serving non –marital families in Ireland.
- As previously stated, the FDI appreciate the process of consultation undertaken by the Minister and her Department. The Strategy should develop from this point by including a process of consultation on an ongoing basis. The FDI would welcome the opportunity to consult further with the department on any aspect of family diversity. The steering group members of the FDI have a wealth of valuable experience and knowledge of a range of families experiencing discrimination and inequalities, to further inform the proposed strategy.

Compiled by Niamh Byrne, Family Diversity Initiative

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