

Submission to Family Support Agency Strategic Plan by the Family Diversity Initiative

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.

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 reassess 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 representing families with varying structures and those who live in varying social situations. Current members include, Age Action Ireland, Cherish - The National Association of Single Parent Families, 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), Older Women's Network, One Parent Exchange and Network (OPEN), Treoir - National Federation of Services for Unmarried Parents and their Children.

Relationship with the Family Support Agency

The Family Diversity Initiative (FDI) welcomes the establishment of the Family Support Agency (FSA) is delighted to have the opportunity to put forward a submission to the Agency's first strategic plan.

The FDI sees the following items as key priorities that the Family Support Agency should address in its strategic plan:

1. To develop a clear definition of what is meant by ‘family’

The FSA should set out a clear, inclusive definition of ‘family’ to guide its work. This definition would help ensure the FSA services are relevant, accessible and available to all families, irrespective of the structure or social situation of the family. It is imperative that the language used in all FSA literature is inclusive and welcoming of all families.

Given current trends, such as the increase of co-habiting couples and children born outside marriage, it is important that the definition of the ‘family’ is broader than the constitutional definition of the family, as one based on marriage.

Such a definition would be in line with the recommendation of the Commission on the Family that Article 41 of the Constitution should be revised to give constitutional recognition to all family units, including families not based on marriage. (National Report of Ireland, Dept. Justice, Equality & Law Reform Jan 2000).

2. To prioritise research into family life

The FSA has a unique remit to ‘*undertake or commission research into matters relating to its functions or such other matters as the Minister may request*’ (Family Support Agency Act 2001).

The FDI recommends that research be of primary importance in the FSA’s strategic plan. There is a need to collect quantitative data on the composition of family situations in Ireland and data on what supports vulnerable families are most in need of. This research would help improve the provision of support services to all families and help target those families most in need. Despite the availability of census data, many information gaps remain such as the number of families headed by a same sex couple or single unmarried parent.

3. To actively promote equality of access to services & to equality proof the strategic plan

The FSA should actively promote respect for the rights of all family forms and work to promote equality of access to services in line with the Equal Status Act 2000, which prohibits discrimination by gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, race, sexual orientation, religious belief, and membership of the Traveller Community.

The training of all frontline staff in understanding diversity and anti-discriminatory practice would be a beneficial step toward achieving equality of services. There is a need to re-examine the understanding and definition of ‘family’ among FSA funded organisations to ensure they promote an inclusive service and equality of access to services.

4. To Provide for broader & ongoing consultation on the work of the FSA among external organisations

The Family Diversity Initiative would welcome the opportunity to be involved with the FSA in a consultative and advisory capacity. Within our members there is a wealth of expertise and experience covering many areas of family and child policy.

An underlying principle of the FDI is that people and families facing discrimination and inequality have a right to participate in solutions to redress that inequality. Any FSA organised or funded consultative fora should be required to proactively facilitate the inclusion of individuals experiencing discrimination and inequality. The fora preparing for the tenth anniversary of the UN International Year of the family next year will offer the first test of this principle.

The role of the FSA in Ireland

The FSA has a unique opportunity in its first year to lead the way in progressive family policy development in Ireland.

We encourage the FSA to embrace the broad role outlined for the Agency in the Family Support Agency Act 2001 including the advising of the Minister in all aspects of family policy.

The FSA should promote the development of inclusive, flexible, anti-discriminatory and high quality family and relationship services in Ireland. It should break with the historical provision of services to married couples and ensure that services provide for all families, regardless of family type or social situation.

The services provided by the Family Support Agency:

The FSA must examine the provision and funding of services to ensure that services exist to meet the needs of all families in Ireland. Inequalities and inadequacies in the design and delivery of services may discourage participation by particular families.

Some marriage counselling services provide services based on a particular denominational view of the family. Although these services provide an important service to many families, given their denominational nature they are unable to meet the demand of all families in Ireland.

The Family Mediation Service offers services in relation to separation and divorce. Although the Service caters for non-married couples as well as married couples, this needs to be more explicit in their literature to encourage take up of the service by non-married couples.

The FDI applauds the Family Support Agency in funding the work of the community-based family resource centres, in that this structure allows service user participation in decision-making. As they are client focused, community based and relevant to diverse families they are making an impact on families represented by the Family Diversity Initiative.

The FDI recommends that a commitment be given in the strategic plan to supporting services for excluded groups and investment be given to innovative pilot projects to address the emerging needs of diverse families.