

# Ireland: strengthening families for life

*Catherine Hazlett*

*Catherine Hazlett was Secretary to the Irish Government appointed independent Commission on the Family from 1995 to 1998. She is now a Principal Officer with responsibility for the newly established Family Affairs Unit in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs of the Irish Government in Dublin.*

*This article highlights the work of the Commission on the Family that the Irish government entrusted with the task of producing a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the issues affecting families in Ireland; and with making wide-ranging recommendations across several different policy areas. The point is to make a positive contribution to developing coherent, progressive and effective policies for*

*Strengthening Families for Life – the report of the Commission on the Family, published by the Irish Government in July 1998, is the outcome of a three year in-depth analysis of the situation of families in Ireland as we approach the new century. The work was undertaken by the Commission on the Family, an independent commission of family experts, established to recommend to the Government how families could be strengthened in carrying out their caring and nurturing roles for children in a rapidly changing social and economic environment.*

The Commission's work was completed in the context of a new Programme for Government committed to a 'families first' approach to the development of policies and services. This included:

- a broadening of the remit of the Irish Government's Department of Social Welfare to include new responsibilities in family policy and services;
- the establishment of a Family Affairs Unit in the Department to coordinate family policy; and
- new investment for the development of a range of family services and support initiatives.

*families. The article is a celebration of processes of consultation and reflection that goes on to review some of the first results of implementation. It also includes boxes about two successful Foundation-supported projects. These illustrate effective work to benefit young children, their families and their communities: the Community Mothers Programme; and the Togher Family Centre.*

*The article is based on a presentation made at 'Supporting Families – A Consultation Conference' that was organised by the Family Policy Studies Centre in London in January 1999.*

## **Family concerns – what families and others had to say**

Early on, the Commission adopted an open and inclusive approach to carrying out its task. The objective was to encourage participation by all those who had an interest in families and the challenges they are facing today. The Commission received some 540 submissions from individuals, and families; from national organisations that work with families and children; and from voluntary and community groups. Leading experts in the fields of family law, the Constitution, childcare and services for children, employment

and workplace policies, parenting and healthcare also offered their advice and expertise.

Contributors wanted to promote family life and family well-being, and tackle the problems that families encounter while trying to carry out their functions. Children, their education, physical and emotional health and well-being, and the financial circumstances of their families were priorities. This was coupled with support for parents in providing for their families, in parenting and in meeting their childcare needs. The most prominent themes included:

*Education* – equipping young people for life; partnership with parents in educating children; the effects of educational disadvantage on children from poorer families.

*Childcare* – optimally developing children, particularly those in families with low incomes.

*Child income payments* – improving income support payments for families with children depending on social welfare.

*Family in society* – focusing on children, especially those living in poverty or with disabilities, and improving their health and well-being as societies change.

*The role of the state* – supporting families; funding services adequately; ensuring access to services for all; and putting in place the framework for the well-being of families and society.

*The media* – supporting values important to families such as stability and dependence on each other.

### Family policy – a focus on support

The Commission concludes that policy needs to focus on supportive measures to strengthen families in carrying out

their functions and prevent difficulties arising for them; and sets out its views on the policy approaches that therefore should be pursued. As it does so, it makes wide ranging recommendations across several different policy areas.

*Family well-being.* Affirming parents as the primary carers of their children, the Commission sets out a number of essential principles that are fundamental to the development of a coherent, progressive and effective family policy. These are that:

- the family unit is a fundamental unit providing stability and well-being in our society;
- the unique and essential family function is that of caring and nurturing for all its members;
- continuity and stability are major requirements in family relationships – especially for children;
- equality of well-being between individual family members should be recognised;
- family membership confers rights, duties and responsibilities;
- a diversity of family forms and relationships should be recognised.

*A strong institutional framework for family policy.* The Commission seeks a radical new approach to the coordination of family policy and the delivery of family services built on these principles. Crucial to success is a strong institutional framework within which the State's response to families can be developed and delivered.

Recommendations include:

- singling out family well-being as a matter of critical importance in the Government programme and in the Houses of the Oireachtas (the Irish Parliament); and
- the adoption by Government of a Family Impact Statement which would set out clearly the consequences of policies, programmes and services for families in all major fields of Government activity, central and local.



# Togher Family Centre

Togher is a housing estate in Cork City, Ireland, comprising housing rented from the local authority. In 1988 the unemployment rate was 50 per cent, there was a high concentration of single parent families and a wide range of social problems. A Foundation-supported project was operated from 1989 to 1996, by Togher Preschool and Family Centre, that had been established in 1986 as an informal educational and development centre for the area. The premises were provided by the City Council and the Centre was run by the local residents. The project involved children ranging from zero to twelve years; their parents; community members; workers from various local and national services; and primary school teachers.

A range of formal and informal activities were run for adults and children, including a crèche for zero to three year olds; preschool for three to four year olds; after-school activities for four to twelve year olds; parenting and vocational activities for adults – including life skills, languages, sports, and crafts; forging links with relevant agencies; a home-school link programme; a primary school preparation programme for children, their mothers and their teachers; and annual Action Weeks on topics such as health, children's play and toys, partnership in education, and community involvement in management and all activities of the Centre.

The Centre operated with a strong sense of local identification and became a focal point for community life in the area. By mid-1992, parents were taking total responsibility for several programmes and were also closely involved in running other activities as well as the Centre itself. Over the following years, several new initiatives were undertaken including a mother and toddler group; a self-help community group to address the needs of families facing the increasing violence and vandalism in the area, and drama and storytelling. In July 1996, the Centre organised a men-only conference, the first of its kind, and built up a strong men's network.

Encouraged by courses run at the Centre, many members enrolled in further education. The Centre worked to establish a certificate course for childminders at University College Cork – the first in the country. It also maintained strong links with the five other family centres in Cork and played important roles in various advocacy groups in the city and nationally. It established relationships with a wide variety of statutory and other agencies and institutions and was able to secure funding commitments for its future existence. The Centre continues to thrive as an example of a community-based organisation, operated by local people, that is finding locally appropriate ways to meet the needs they determine for themselves.

*Prioritising the most vulnerable families and their children.* Within a policy approach that is empowering and builds on family and community strengths, the Commission makes a series of recommendations prioritising the needs of families who are trying to do the best they can for their children in difficult circumstances. These include:

- the development, with State support, of a nationwide network of Family and Community Resource Centres. The target is 100 centres over the next 4 to 5 years. The centres have their origins in community-based initiatives (see box). To this is coupled the transformation of local offices of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs into local 'one-stop shops' that provide a gateway to a range of services for families.
- Greater investment in family support work at a preventive level, including: the introduction in all areas of Family Support Workers to assist families who are experiencing difficulty in caring for children from toddlers to teens at times of crisis or

stress; and the extension of the Community Mothers concept (see box on page 11).

- Consistent support for families when a problem arises with a child's development, including better information and a single contact point with professional services.
- Close cooperative links between all local agencies, health boards, other state agencies and community-based services, in pursuit of shared family and community objectives.
- Exploring the potential of school settings for the delivery of health and social services to children and their families.

## *Preschool and primary school children.*

The Commission recommends a substantial investment package for preschool and primary school children, including:

- an Early Years Opportunities Subsidy for three year olds, to be used in a wide range of high quality preschool settings. This is coupled to financial support for parents caring for their own children in their own home.

- A child-centred approach to the exploration of early years education issues.
- The development of quality standards in services for children, more support for community-based childcare and for childcare services for children with special needs.
- Further support for parents about parenting and family living through an accessible programme of parenting information.
- A recognition of a wide range of qualifications in relation to early years services to provide more choice for parents and increase opportunities for people to take up work with children.
- Greater investment in primary level education.

*Educating young people for life.* The report stresses the importance of the education system in preparing young people for family life and for parenthood, recommending a radical approach to the introduction of family life education throughout the school curriculum. The Commission also prioritises extra resources for the day to day running costs of schools in disadvantaged communities; action to

improve the educational facilities for children with disabilities; and action to help Traveller children to stay in education and to complete second-level studies.

*Lone and teenaged parents.* The Commission recognised the importance of supporting lone parents' participation in the workforce. It recommends increased access to education and training; one to one advice and assistance in finding a placement in training, education or a job; and help in arranging childcare. For teenaged parents it recommended a comprehensive policy response, involving:

- prioritising support services for teenage mothers; and more initiatives to keep them in school.
- Encouraging young people to defer parenthood by improving life choices through training and education, and by offering young women realistic hopes of success in education and in securing employment.
- Providing information to young people to influence their behaviour and their future choices.

- Strengthening and expanding the role of youth services.
- Providing greater resources for social, personal and health education programmes to reach young people who are out of school, including programmes for young men about sexuality and parenthood.

*Promoting continuity and stability in family life.* The Commission recommends that policy objectives should recognise the value of stability and continuity in family relationships, especially for children. Income support policies should contain no unnecessary obstacles to children having the advantages of the stability and security of a loving family. Also, family incentives to marry or to form long-term, stable relationships need more prominence. Joint parenting should be encouraged; and there should be better and more effective education and preparation for relationships, marriage and family life. Resources should also be invested in marriage and relationship counselling services to support marriage, provide family mediation and guarantee continuing parenting relationships for children.

### Making progress

The Family Affairs Unit of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs started operations in July 1998. It has responsibility for pursuing the findings in the report of the Commission on the Family, following their consideration by the Government. The functions of the Unit also include coordinating family policy in cooperation with other Departments of State, undertaking research and promoting awareness about family issues. The Unit also has responsibility for the development of a number of family services and considerable extra resources have been allocated by the Government for the development of these services. Key developments include:

- a major programme of support for the provision of marriage counselling and child counselling. Several innovative programmes are being funded which provide bereavement support to children on the loss of a parent through death or through marital separation.

- The framework for a nationwide Family Mediation Service is now in place. The service is free and available to all couples who have decided to separate.
- This year, some 50 Family and Community Resource Centres throughout the country will be funded.
- A Families Research Programme has been launched to support independent research into family issues.

A parenting information programme is planned for later this year and a pilot programme to provide a local family information service through 'one-stop shops' is being developed.

The Unit has a series of family fora currently underway throughout the country, where voluntary and community groups get the opportunity to discuss the new services, and issues and concerns that they encounter in their work in support of families, with the Government Minister and with senior officials. The outcome of these discussions is proving to be of valuable

assistance in identifying priorities for family support developments.

Initiatives are underway in relation to early education and a White Paper (a statement of future government policy) is promised, addressing issues such as curriculum, catering for disadvantage, essential structures, and qualifications for teachers and childcare assistants. This will draw on the experiences and ideas that emerged from a specially convened National Forum on Early Education. The Forum took the form of multi-lateral discussions between representatives of major agencies involved in early childhood education. Investment in primary level education and in measures to tackle educational disadvantage has also been increased; while progress has been made in relation to the introduction of parental leave and investment in childcare projects in disadvantaged communities. A Working Group established to consider a strategy for childcare is expected to report in the middle of this year. This follows on from the publication in January 1999 of a report of an Expert Working Group on

Childcare under Partnership 2000 – a national agreement between Government and Social Partners. Work is underway on the development of a Children Strategy and extra resources have been allocated to family support services.

### Conclusion

The report of the Commission on the Family sets out an ambitious agenda for policy makers and those who deliver family services. The publication of the report was widely welcomed by Government, social partners and family interests. Key priorities in the Government's pro-families programme cover areas highlighted by the Commission. The Commission's approach to some issues, as might be expected, continues to give rise to further analysis and discussion. This is a welcome development. In the words of the Chairman of the Commission, 'it would be presumptuous to assume that this report, though labelled 'final', is anything but a beginning ...'

### References

- Strengthening Families for Life: Commission on the Family Interim Report to the Minister for Social Welfare*; (November 1996) Department of Social Welfare, Dublin, Ireland.
- Strengthening Families for Life: Commission on the Family Final Report to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs*; (1998) Government of Ireland; Available from Government Publications Sales Office, Sun Alliance House, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.
- Family Policy in Ireland: A Strategic Overview by Fahey T*; in the report of the Commission on the Family (1998).
- Family Resource Centres: A Report commissioned by the Department of Social Welfare*; (June 1997) Stationery Office, Dublin, Ireland.
- Fathers: Irish Experience in an International Context: An abstract of a report by Kieran McKeown, Harry Ferguson and Dermot Rooney*; in the report of the Commission on the Family (1998).
- National Childcare Strategy: Report of an Expert Working Group on Childcare under Partnership 2000*; (January 1999) Stationery Office, Dublin, Ireland.



# Community Mothers

The first Community Mothers programme in Ireland started in 1980 with Foundation support. It was operated by the Eastern Health Board (EHB) in partnership with the University of Bristol, England; and concentrated on an area of Greater Dublin in which families had been rehoused from inner city slums to new housing estates on the outskirts of the city, resulting in isolation of young families from wider family and friends. Many of the families were single parents, many of the mothers were still in their teens. Existing health services found great difficulty in reaching these parents and were alarmed by poor and unstimulating home environments, the poor health of children, their poor nutritional status and their poor school performance. The programme targeted infants and their parents; and the overall objectives were to establish and implement a home visiting programme to first time mothers in their homes, and institutionalise the programme in the EHB.

The programme retrained health nurses as Family Development Nurses (FDNs) to reorient them from routine medically-oriented short home visits towards longer monthly visits in which nurse and parents became partners in their efforts to benefit the child. From 1983 the programme focused on the training of mothers from local communities, by specially

recruited and trained FDNs, to be Community Mothers to new mothers. The Community Mothers made home visits monthly during the first 12 months of the child's life, using cartoon sequences to explain aspects of child development. Mother and toddler groups were also set up, as were breastfeeding groups and parenting courses. Complementing these were antenatal packs aimed at pregnant teenagers, and a regular newsletter for the Community Mothers – a forum for exchange of experiences, views and ideas among visited and visiting mothers.

During the 1990s the Community Mothers approach spread to other Health Boards across Ireland and, as a programme to benefit the very young children of families in disadvantaged areas, has proved extremely successful. Its methods, evolved over a number of years, ensured a peer-to-peer approach that was more appropriate and more acceptable to the target families than a medically-oriented professional approach. The women who became Community Mothers made many personal gains in self-confidence, skills and experience and, as time went on, most new Community Mothers were recruited from mothers who had been visited themselves. They formed and ran groups in their own areas, took advantage of further training

opportunities and initiated new activities such as a newsletter, antenatal care, breastfeeding and mother and toddler groups.

Effects on children were positive and mothers reported more knowledge of child development, nutrition and stimulation. Research showed that the beneficiaries of the Community Mothers programme were significantly advantaged compared with controls as regards parameters such as immunisation, nutrition of both child and mother, developmental stimulation, and mother's self-esteem and morale.

