



PRESS RELEASE

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Small Interventions are Giving Families a Lifeline During Recession

– Family Resource Centres Publish Annual Report –

After-school clubs, arts programmes, and parent and toddler groups are proving to be critical initiatives in helping to ease pressures on families as the recession deepens. That's according to the Family Resource Centre National Forum (FRCNF), which today (26.10.11) launched its annual report for 2010. The report details the work of the 106 Family Resource Centres (FRCs) located in disadvantaged areas throughout Ireland.

The Family Resource Centre programme is funded primarily by the Family Support Agency, which operates out of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The FRCNF annual report was officially launched by the Minister for Children, Frances Fitzgerald TD.

Speaking at the launch, the Chairperson of the FRCNF, Packie Kelly, said: "The loss of employment or reductions in household incomes is a very isolating experience for families. Outings and social occasions are often the first cutbacks for people experiencing income loss. Over a period of time, this can result in poor social contact, which is vital for self-esteem and family support.

"Ireland's network of Family Resource Centres has been actively building up a range of initiatives that enable families to stay in touch and feel supported through difficult periods. We have found that after-school clubs and arts programmes, for instance, are excellent ways of reaching out to families who are not otherwise engaged in community activity.

"Through homework clubs, or indeed our parent and toddler groups, we offer direct support to the young person, but we also get to interact with their parents. Where we identify a family in distress, we can offer advice or services – such as a programme of counselling or a training opportunity – or refer them on to a specific agency that can help navigate them through their problem.

"Arts projects are important in getting people to re-engage if they have been out of work and feel isolated. Apart from acting as a welcome respite from the pressures of everyday life, it is our experience that people open up and regain their confidence very quickly if they are involved in an arts or craft project.

"These interventions might seem quite trivial but they allow us to connect with families and build trust. Through such interventions, we can help prevent some of the crisis scenarios that break families down and leave them without coping mechanisms," said Mr Kelly.

In 2010, the range and level of arts projects and youth initiatives on offer grew considerably amongst Family Resource Centres.

The FRCNF annual report highlighted some changes in the individuals and groups that typically access services.

"We are now seeing more men at our centres; a growing proportion of older people and a notable increase in the number of two-parent families that are using our services. While we continue to see lots of lone parents and women, as a proportion, attendance for services by these groups is dropping," said Packie Kelly.

The range and level of services available at each of the 106 FRCs varies, depending on funding levels and location. However, all centres have an advice and sign-posting function and 136,675 people were assisted with information queries in 2010, while a further 56,030 were referred on to another agency.

Most FRCs offer courses and programmes, varying from parent and toddler groups to holistic health courses. Last year, over 30,000 courses were delivered by FRCs.

Professional counselling services are available at most of the centres and are accessed by people experiencing relationship difficulties, bereavement or other personal and family difficulties. In 2010, a total of 20,000 individual counselling sessions were delivered by FRCs. The largest bulk of these concerned relationship issues (9,337 sessions).

Many FRCs house crèches, which can be accessed on a flexible basis by disadvantaged families, as well as offering – in some cases – full-time or part-time childcare for working parents. A critical function of FRCs is to act as a ‘home’ for hundreds of community and voluntary groups, which use rooms at their local FRCs to meet or undertake activities. Groups vary from AA meetings to active retirement and women’s networks. Most FRCs offer administrative assistance, such as photocopying services and grant application support to such groups.

While all FRCs employ some paid staff, they rely heavily on voluntary engagement to ensure the delivery of services. In 2010, a total of 2,783 volunteers were involved in the delivery of tasks ranging from renovating community facilities to supervising youth groups. Their work input – if compensated for at the minimum wage – would amount to €5.7 million.

According to Packie Kelly: “As the demand for services and supports from FRCs increases, we depend hugely on the goodwill of people to allow us to deliver for the communities in which we serve. We are indebted to the hundreds of people who give of their time to benefit others in their communities. The level of volunteer engagement in the FRC programme means we remain genuinely community-based and volunteer-driven and led.

“While the role of the volunteer becomes more crucial, many FRCs are reporting increased waiting times to secure Garda clearance for volunteers. While such clearance is absolutely required before we can engage a volunteer or staff member, the waiting time can be frustrating and does lead to volunteers moving on to other positions that don’t require clearance,” added Mr Kelly.

During her address at the launch of the FRC Annual Report, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald TD, said: “Families in Ireland today have wide ranging and diverse needs. But supporting families at all stages of their lives, particularly during any difficult stages which may occur, is at the core of the work of Family Resource Centres. Since my appointment as Minister I have had the great pleasure of visiting many Family Resource Centres, from West Clare to Donegal to Wexford and I have always been impressed with what I saw. It is my determined objective to oversee the transformation of our country’s Child and Family Services and the nationwide network of Family Resource Centres will have an integral role to play in this.”

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Notes:

About the Family Resource Centre Programme

The aim of the Family Resource Centre (FRC) programme is to combat disadvantage and improve the functioning of the family unit. The programme emphasises involving local communities in tackling the problems they face, and creating successful partnerships between voluntary and statutory agencies at community level. FRCs involve people from marginalised groups and areas of disadvantage at all levels, including on their Voluntary Management Committees. Since the FRC programme began in 1994, the number of core-funded FRCs has increased from 10 to 106.

The **Family Resource Centre National Forum** is the support network for FRCs throughout Ireland. The **Family Support Agency** is the government agency with responsibility for providing core funding and support to FRCs.