



**family resource centre**  
**national forum**

# FRCs: Supporting Families During the Covid-19 Crisis

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The national Family Resource Centre programme is delivered by 121 Family Resource Centres (FRCs) across Ireland, supporting families in communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage. The national representative body for FRCs is the Family Resource Centre National Forum (FRCNF).

With the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, and subsequent economic and societal restrictions, FRCs moved quickly to adapt their services in response.

Over the past 10 weeks, all FRCs – like thousands of organisations nationwide – have moved to remote working and online service delivery. Over the same period, demand for support from FRCs has significantly increased, and new needs are emerging on a day-to-day basis.

The FRCNF conducted a survey over the first two weeks of May to capture the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on Family Resource Centres nationwide; and to get deeper insights into the new needs that are emerging in relation to family and community supports. Seventy-five FRCs responded, representing 62% of all FRCs.

The survey findings are summarised in the following section.

## Summary of Survey Findings

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In summary, the survey findings show that FRCs nationwide are experiencing significantly increased demand for their services and supports, at the same time as experiencing a decrease in income.

FRCs have adapted quickly in response to Covid-19 restrictions and to meet emerging needs within their local communities.

There has been a sharp rise in demand for mental health supports, food and essential home supplies, activity packs for families, and check-in calls for vulnerable and isolated members of local communities.

In relation to re-opening, FRCs are concerned about the suitability of their existing premises to ensure staff and service-users can attend safely; ICT capacity and access amongst their staff and service-users; and the increased costs and reduced income arising from the changed circumstances brought about by Covid-19.

The experience of FRCs in responding to Covid-19 is well summarised in this survey comment from one Centre:

*“We have experienced: (1) A high rate of mental health issues, loneliness and isolation. We responded with additional counselling, daily personal calls, and deliveries to clients. (2) Higher incidents of domestic violence – we responded with support, advice and referral to local services. (3) Increased drug use – we responded with contacting local Gardaí and Drug Counsellor and organising one-to-one meetings. (4) Increase in behavioural challenges in children – we responded with one-to-one support and advice. (5) Food poverty – we responded with increased collection and deliveries from FoodCloud and Foodshare. (6) Marriage and relationship breakdown – we increased counselling and support. (7) Lack of technology – we responded by printing material and facilitating use of computers for our service-users.”*

FRCs are playing a central role in the local community response, and the Covid-19 pandemic has copper-fastened their significance as a source of essential support to thousands of families nationwide. In the months to come, as the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic becomes more apparent, FRCs must be adequately funded and resourced to meet the demand for their services.

## Detailed Survey Findings

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### Increased Demand for Services and Support from FRCs

- Since the onset of Covid-19 restrictions, 83% of FRCs have experienced an increase in demand for their services.
- Of those, a significant majority (62%) say demand has increased by more than 25%.
- Increased demand is most evident for the following types of services and supports:
  - Parent and family supports (71% of FRCs selected this as one of the top three types of support for which they have experienced increased demand).
  - Food parcels / food provision (selected by 69% of FRCs).
  - Counselling and mental health supports (selected by 51% of FRCs).
- Other services and supports for which FRCs are experiencing increased demand include:
  - Meals on wheels (selected by 25% of FRCs).
  - Advice on, and access to, IT, printing or office facilities (selected by 24%).
  - Activity packs for children (referenced by 12% of respondents).

FRCs pointed to the demand from families for activity packs to keep children “entertained” and “occupied”, in addition to having an educational dimension. A small number of FRCs referenced lack of WiFi access as an issue impacting on some of the supports being offered by local schools.

Increased demand for one-to-one information and support – delivered by telephone and email – was also evident. One FRC mentioned: “There are over 160 people getting weekly support over the phone from Centre staff. This is a new initiative”.

A small number of FRCs referenced increased demand for support from vulnerable members of migrant communities, including people in Direct Provision.

### Decreased Income

To supplement their core funding, FRCs typically generate additional income through activities such as room hire of facilities for local community groups; and fees to cover the delivery of education and training courses.

In responding to the FRCNF survey, almost all FRCs said they had experienced a decrease in income as a result of the Covid-19 crisis:

- Over 93% of FRCs have experienced a decrease in income as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.
- Of those, 74% have seen their income decrease by 25% or more.

## FRCs Introducing New Measures to Meet Changing Needs

In their survey responses, FRCs described the new measures and work processes they have put in place in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

The top three trends in this regard were:

1. FRCs playing a key role in collecting, preparing and providing **food for families and individuals in need**. Almost all FRCs are now providing food packages, food vouchers or cooked meals to families in their local area, with some providing food for hundreds of families on a weekly basis.
2. FRCs providing **activity packs for families** – with a focus on home-schooling and entertainment for children.
3. FRCs undertaking regular **check-in calls** with vulnerable members of their local communities, with many FRCs contacting hundreds of people each week.

Other common areas highlighted by FRCs included the provision of online counselling, play therapy and other mental health supports; helplines for parents; coordinating 'Meals on Wheels'; and providing a range of supports for those who are 'cocooning'.

When asked how they have adapted their service provision in response to Covid-19, the answers given by FRCs included:

*"We set up a support service for young people experiencing grief or loss during COVID 19, and a support service for the community to support mental health and wellbeing. These are both free services provided by professional volunteers."*

*"We have changed how we work and we have added new services. Groups, social and support, take place on-line. Anyone we engaged with before gets regular check-in calls and everyone gets group texts. We have taken on more people for counselling / therapy and for family support. We coordinate a general food provision project, a children and young people's activity pack project, and a food and essential items project for families with small children. We have recruited and support more volunteers."*

*"[We provide] Timed use of play areas for families with no gardens or play areas."*

*"Prior to Covid-19, we received our food [for donation to local families] from Trinity College. With the closure of Trinity kitchens, we were very fortunate to source meals from a local company who are now providing up to 175 meals per day – a 600% increase in the demand for daily meals. Another local supplier provides us with up to 100 meals weekly and Brennan's Bread provided pans for all our families and Lucozade drinks for our front-line workers. We have distributed 100 packs per week to children, books and activities. We distributed 225 packs with crafts and colours at Easter, with an Easter egg to all children. We supply bingo books to all the flat complexes for the community bingo and support with our bingo machines. Our youth service has gone online, with all groups zooming and doing all kinds of online activities. Our counselling is on Facetime, and we are using WhatsApp groups to contact parent groups and manager groups to share resources. We have had to collect pensions, prescriptions and provide food for all those cocooning in our community, and provide printing for all those who require it."*

*“One of our Board Members has a dedicated phone and email address to provide support for Portuguese speakers.” (This response is from an FRC in an area with a high population of migrant workers from Brazil.)*

*“Remote counselling; art packs for children aged 2 to 12 years, suitable for living in small spaces; Covid-19 unemployment forms made available; Facebook page posts daily on up-to-date information and mental health supports; telephone supports to those cocooning, who are immune-compromised; regular check-in calls with groups and individuals that use the Centre, distribution of ‘comfort packs’ (duvet, pillow covers, sheets, cushion, towel and facecloths, courtesy of IKEA); vouchers for local supermarket to purchase food online and have delivered; Local Covid-19 Supports Directory available on FRC website and Facebook and distributed widely to other organisations. Many new partnerships made during this time also.”*

*“Community Response Volunteer Team: we are coordinating a group of our Garda-vetted volunteers to help people who are isolating or cocooning to access food, medicine and essential items. Befriending Telephone Support: a friendly check-in call to anyone who wants it 3 times per week (previously for over 55s, but now offered universally). Online Youth projects: at-home activities and projects are being sent out twice a week and the results are showcased on our Facebook page, organised in partnership with parents and volunteers. Community Youth Work Team: A team of youth leaders from within the community to engage in community mapping and a set of conversations / engagements with young people which will explore with them how they are feeling about the situation, and if they understand what’s going on, and trying to get them to a space where they can take steps to ensure they are safe... Our adult and adolescent counselling services are continuing through phone and video calls. We have started a FoodCloud programme and are delivering food parcels to families and individuals identified through our own connections and through the local family support worker, schools, and parish centre.”*

*“We have adjusted our service by providing additional supports for our community, vulnerable families and elderly individuals by providing home-cooked, healthy, nutritious meals three times weekly, prepared by our volunteer chefs. We are offering an online wellbeing parental support programme, while also providing the same to adolescents who are finding these times tough. Online services include play therapy, music classes and we are due to start other online activities, including knitting and art classes. We have also increased our befriending phone service significantly. We are providing adults and young people with packs daily through our outreach service and by post. Our counselling service been provided online and by phone.”*

## Impact of Covid-19 Over the Next 6 to 12 Months

In relation to the longer-term impact of Covid-19, the top concerns raised by FRCs were as follows:

1. How FRCs can continue to provide **group activities**, such as Parent and Toddler Groups, alcohol and addition support groups, summer camps, etc. This was raised as a concern by over 37% of FRCs.
2. **Loss of income and increased costs** (due to the need to change ways of working in the aftermath of the crisis). This was raised by one-third of FRCs.
3. **Changes required to physical premises** to ensure they comply with all health and safety guidelines post-Covid-19. 21% of FRCs pointed to the need for more space, new signage, etc.
4. **Staff / volunteer safety and mental health**. This was raised by 15% of FRCs.
5. **Ongoing increased demand for services** was raised by 11% of FRCs.
6. **Reduction in childcare services provided by FRCs**. This was highlighted by just over 9% of survey respondents.

Other issues commonly mentioned include:

- The lack of ICT equipment and expertise amongst staff and / or service-users – and how this will impact on FRCs' capacity to move to more online ways of working.
- The childcare needs of staff (while staff continue to work remotely).
- Service-users' safety – and the potential reluctance of people in 'at-risk' groups to come to their local FRC for services and support in the aftermath of Covid-19.
- Difficulties in retaining and recruiting new volunteers (particularly as many FRC volunteers are older people, and may feel more at-risk in relation to Covid-19).
- Eradication or limiting of FRCs' usual 'drop-in' service.

When asked how the longer-term impact of Covid-19 will affect their team and their ability to continue to delivering services to their local community, answers given by FRCs included the following:

*“There will be a major reduction in the number of children we can take in on our services: estimated cutting numbers from approximately 164 to 70 or 80.”*

*“Preparing for reopening of premises and childcare service will have a significant financial impact on the service going forward. The cost of signage, PPE equipment and sanitising of the premises is going to have a significant financial impact on the service if we can't secure funding to cover these costs. Providing childcare at a reduced ratio will be another financial burden. The take-up of summer camps is doubtful. Staff safety and service-users' safety is a real concern if there is a second wave of Covid-19.”*

*“The biggest loss in the community is our drop-in service and, although we ring people 2-3 times weekly, they really miss the physical contact and it is impacting on their already comprised mental health. We have a large team, so physical team meetings won't be possible. It is difficult to see how our young services will work and our afterschool services. We [have] some staff with underlying conditions so this will also be a challenge. Childcare will be a challenge for workers.”*

*“Our large family groups will not be able to take place. There will be a shortage of preschool spaces in the north inner city. Parenting supports will continue, but on a one-to-one basis. Social distancing will be a challenge for parents, our 'supporting social integration for migrant families' programme will be hugely challenging.”*

*“Returning to work as we knew it will be very difficult. The offices are small and it will be very hard to social distance. In addition, the needs of the community are going to completely surpass the capacity of the centre. The months of no rental income is going to affect the yearly accounts drastically. The next 12 months in an FRC is going to be even more difficult.”*

*“We will lose the informal dropping into the centre. We will have to make appointments only due to social distance. This can be a barrier for people who are vulnerable at this crucial time.”*

*“We are expecting an increase in demand for counselling and mental health initiatives. Due to limited space and social distancing, our groups and activities will have lower numbers attend than usual. We will have to run additional sessions for some activities, as room will not facilitate 18 to 20 people at a session. Being social with each other with lunches, etc. will stop. Some activities that have the need for touching items – such as food for “healthy food made easy” courses – will have to change delivery methods. We can only use one of our three counselling rooms, due to lack of space for social distancing. Our staff team have restructured how they work and worked collectively to manage how we work and I know this will continue.”*

*"Like everyone, our services and supports are limited due to the current restrictions, but we are also encumbered by our premises as it is completely unsuitable for social distancing or meeting the requirements for government recommendations on reopening. The building is poorly ventilated and lacks space for zoning or a one-way traffic system, while our communal areas are small and sometimes shared with other organisations within the building. Even with the purchase of PPE, cleaning supplies, and Perspex screens, there will still be a considerable risk of viral spread should someone who is infected be in our premises for a length of time. All of this affects our room rental income and our ability to provide spaces for community members and outreach. We are doing our best to facilitate our programmes and groups online and in innovative ways. While this is working for some, there is a noticeable decrease in engagement for a variety of reasons, whether individuals and families lack the resources, knowledge, or will, to engage using telecommunication technology... A key component of our youth and other groups is to create a sense of connection and social cohesion which is not the same without face to face contact. So even when we are facilitating groups in some form, they are missing core attributes and the associated outcomes."*

*"With the developments of remote working, the issue of proficient technical equipment and office equipment is of concern. The cost of upgrading and providing same for staff will have a big effect on our ability to continue to deliver services to the local community."*

*"Our centre is a small council house with four core staff, one CE [Community Employment] worker and two additional staff members. We do not have the space to run programmes and courses with social distancing in place and do not have funding to rent an alternative space. We also require funding to make the current space safe for staff re. Covid-19 (regular deep cleaning / perspex dividers / new phone system that staff are not sharing phones / sanitisation stations etc)... We are unable to proceed with our summer trips, which – for many families – are their only opportunity to engage in affordable, fun, community and family-focused trips outside of the county. There needs to be training made available to staff re. Covid-19 and working remotely with families. Some staff members are vulnerable themselves and have huge anxiety about how they can return to centre-based work safely. There is increased anxiety and also pressure to continue to deliver, when many are impacted with lack of childcare and direct access to family members for support."*

*"The work we do is personal and confidential, working behind screens, etc. loses that personal element and is a worry. Fear of Covid may also have an impact, in that those who need help and support may not reach out because of fear of Covid. The cancelling of summer camps and community events which bring the community together, particularly in our rural area, could severely impact residents in respect of social / rural isolation."*

*"Restrictions will have had a huge impact on our ability to offer support to groups. Many of the groups that we support through the Centre comprise of older, and therefore more vulnerable, people – we don't expect to be able to have groups in the Centre for the remainder of 2020. We are also going to have to make significant changes to how we work with individuals and with the public at large, given that we have had an annual footfall to the Centre of over 15,000 per annum."*

*"It has become apparent that a lot of people do not have WiFi or access to technology. This is something we are currently looking at. Our Family Support worker is carrying out phone support and given tablets to families that she is working with if they have WiFi. Some of our major concerns are: (1) The lack of childcare for staff. Staff are working remotely as best as possible in these circumstances; (2) The increased standard and regularity of cleaning services that will be necessary; (3) The level of personal interaction between staff and centre-users will be impacted; (4) The cost associated with PPE and hygiene products, etc; (5) Some activities and groups will not be able to continue as they were, as the spaces available in the centre will not allow sufficient social distancing; (6) Demand on service.*

*"It must be highlighted here that we are already under-resourced having only 2 full-time posts and yet established in 2003! We would expect numbers of people seeking information, supports and services, to increase in a variety of ways and we have to adapt to a 'new normal' which, being an FRC, we are confident that we will achieve this. However, the following issues will arise and are only some of what we envisage. Mental health issues will present in different ways, and being unable to form groups will mean more one-to-one support. As a first port of call for many in our community, providing that listening service and 'cup of tea' approach will take more time. Financial stress and food poverty will increase and we are concerned that FEAD [the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived] have not yet extended their operation to additional frontline charities; we cannot expect to keep sourcing funding to cover the gaps in food supplies. Additionally, we lost our outreach MABS [Money Advice and Budgeting Service] as an effect of the last recession; supports like this would greatly support our community and our work. Likewise, we are concerned about domestic abuse and disclosures which will inevitably be made. Therefore, we have to find a safe method for delivering outreach services in agreement with external organisations. Issues such as funding for the Homework Club are a concern if we cannot open the doors and yet the visits to homes are not recognised as an essential part of our work. There will be a fall-off in volunteer support, as people go back to work or suffer 'fatigue'. Not everyone has access to the internet and we need to examine the provision of supports using technology."*

*"Our charity shop funds all our youth services in the Youth Café. This costs €14k per year, but the shop account is now empty. I have had to ask the owners of the shop and youth café premises for rent freezes. I am concerned about being able to continue delivery of services. The shop also funds our counselling service. We spend about €20-22k per annum and we only receive €12.5k from Tusla."*

## Impact on Local Communities

When asked how Covid-19 restrictions have been impacting on their local community, FRCs identified a number of key trends, as follows:

- A negative **impact on poverty, unemployment and social exclusion**. Comments from individual FRCs included:
  - "A lot of the impact will only become apparent when income supports for those that lost employment start falling away / gets reduced."
  - "Covid-19 has ripped through my local community. There has been a massive amount of positive cases in this area and this has impacted everyone. This is already a disadvantaged area; however, now the area is in complete depression. All businesses shut, many will never reopen. Many of the teenagers may not return to school again and we could have a massive increase in early school drop-outs."
  - "Increase in demand for debt-related counselling requests."
  - "A lot of concern for children in very vulnerable situations and those experiencing domestic abuse. Concern about the long-term impact this will have on individuals and families."
  - "Food poverty is a big issue and also issues in relation to migrant families, especially vulnerable groups, such as those who have an irregular immigration status. Food demand has increased, so we've increased supplies by local donations and entering into ordering from the local Food Hub. Our homework and after school is a targeted service, so it has been important to maintain positive links with the children, which has been done by regular dropping-off of activities, etc. The migrant community has been supported by a dedicated phone-line operational on two mornings a week and a dedicated email."
  - South Donegal is a major tourist destination and unemployment has escalated since Covid-19 with no resolution in sight.
- **Increased demand for support, including from new service-users:**
  - "Families who would not have engaged with the service prior to Covid-19 are coming forward. We are engaging and supporting the elderly who are cocooning."
  - "The impact on the local community has been huge. We have people accessing our services now that never did before – for food bags, referrals to other agencies, e.g. Mayo Women's Support Services, Accord, Alone, Aware, to name a few. We set up a mobile phone service that is contactable seven days per week, operated by FRC staff only – this has been a great support to the community."

- Serious concerns about the current increase – and anticipated ongoing increases into the future – in **demand for mental health supports**:
  - “Mental health implications are of a big concern. We will only see the full impact of it in time. An affordable, local, professional and no-wait-list counselling service for adults and children (play therapy included) needs funding.”
  - “While there is concern for the economic impact of Covid on our community, over the last two weeks, we have seen a sharp increase of mental health issues. This is a concerning , if somewhat predictable, development.”
  - “Covid-19 has impacted the local community in terms of financial stress, increased mental health issues and pressures on families, as well as those socially isolated in our community.”
  - “We can already see an increase in the demand for mental health supports; currently, we do not have enough resources to meet that demand.”
  - “We believe that people’s mental health has been affected by Covid-19. Many local people feel very isolated, with no contact with their neighbours, friends, etc. We believe this will have a huge impact on the counselling service we provide when the Covid-19 pandemic is over and we try to get back to some sort of normality.”
  - “We have experienced an increase in requests for supports around domestic violence and mental health issues. We continue to support people via phone and FaceTime and our counselling service has increased notably.”
  
- **Greater collaboration between diverse agencies and support groups; and a strong community spirit** evident in response to Covid-19:
  - “Being out there on the ground supporting the local community really shows the community spirit and strength of the community and how the FRC programme supports that vital link in times of crisis. People were so thankful for the FRC supports they received.”
  - “The response in the Kenmare area has been fantastic. All groups are working together. Some staff working from home volunteer in their own community with meal delivery, etc. People are so grateful if you stop and talk to them over the wall, drop in a jigsaw or a book to read, and say ‘hope we remember this kindness and thoughtfulness in the future’.”
  - “Our FRC has become the hub in the community to a wider group of society than before the pandemic... Our community has come together really well and are providing excellent community supports and liaising with us where needs arise. We have taken on extra staff to meet the needs of our home-care staff, providing services to over 100 clients in their homes. We have received excellent corporate support for foods as required.”
  - “In Claremorris there is a community response to Covid-19 and we are liaising with groups locally such as Garda, Red Cross, SVDP, GAA, to name but a few.”
  - “It is noticeable how strong the community spirit is with neighbours looking out for each other constantly.”
  - “I am amazed at the level of community support and connectivity that is evident since the outbreak... The response to the community call has been amazing.”

## About the Family Resource Centre Programme

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The national Family Resource Centre programme is the largest community-based family support programme in Ireland. Through a network of 121 Family Resource Centres (FRCs), it supports families in communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

The main focus of FRCs is on early intervention and prevention, with the aim of promoting and protecting the health, wellbeing and rights of young people and their families.

In addition to family supports, FRCs have important wider functions for communities experiencing marginalisation: they promote the integration of minority groups, provide meeting spaces for activities such as Men's Sheds and Active Retirement Associations, offer education and training opportunities, provide childcare, and serve as an information hub through which local people can access the supports they need.

The Family Resource Centre programme has been in operation for over 25 years, and is currently housed within Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

The national representative body for FRCs is the Family Resource Centre National Forum (FRCNF).

### Further Information

[www.familyresource.ie](http://www.familyresource.ie)

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