
SUBMISSION

TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL
AND FAMILY AFFAIRS

ON

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

The national federation of services for
unmarried parents and their children



OCTOBER 2004

Introduction

Treoir, the national federation of services for unmarried parents and their children, welcomes the opportunity of making this submission to the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

The main aim of Treoir is to promote the rights and welfare of unmarried parents and their children. The development of a family strategy which would recognise and accord rights to unmarried families on an equal basis as other families would be a major achievement. The recognition of unmarried families, and especially young unmarried families, as particularly vulnerable families who need additional supports in order not only to lift them out of poverty, but to help them to achieve their full potential, would also be most beneficial. Given that births outside marriage now constitute more than a third of all births, the benefit to Irish society as a whole of supporting these families would be enormous.

1. What is a family?

There have been significant changes in Irish family life over the last decades and these changes need to be recognised and accepted and policies need to be adapted to take account of these changes. This is indeed a challenge as it requires the official recognition of family types heretofore not recognised by the State in Ireland. There is therefore a difficulty with the definition of what constitutes a family in Ireland in the twenty first century as *any move forward must be inclusive of all families and all families must be treated equally.*

2. Coherent policy development

With the piecemeal development of policy and services over the last number of years and from a variety of government departments, it is now necessary to bring together all the developments into a coherent policy for families. This is essential to ensure coherent development of strategies which serve families as a whole as well as the individuals who live within them.

3. Principles underpinning family policy development

While many submissions on the development of a strategy for families will contain details of specific policy measures, in order to bring the strategy together in a coherent way it will be necessary to develop a set of principles which will underpin any development in family policy. The Commission on the Family laid out six principles to underpin the development of family policy in Ireland, the Family Support Agency has stated values which shape its service, the Commission on Social Welfare also outlined principles in the provision of Social Welfare. Treoir, too, has fundamental principles underpinning its work:

- Treoir recognises the diversity of family life in Ireland
- Treoir recognises that all families, including unmarried families have the same rights to respect, care, support, protection and recognition
- Treoir supports and promotes the rights of all children as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Treoir believes that all children have a right to know, be loved and cared for by both parents.

In order to develop a coherent strategy a set of principles need to be developed which will inform the work. Such principles should include the recognition of the diversity of family life, the equality of rights and treatment of all families, special recognition of particularly vulnerable families, the support for all families to individuals within families to achieve their potential, whatever their status or age.

4. Research

The development of the National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland is a very welcome development. The Family Affairs Unit of the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, among other government agencies, are contributing to research development. It is essential that such development continues and expands to constantly inform policy development.

5. Public commitment

When the Strategy for Strengthening Families is finalised, it will be necessary for the funds to be made available for its implementation, including the development of an institutional framework. Otherwise it will achieve the status of many previous reports and strategies – a valuable document left gathering dust on all our shelves.

6. Specific recommendations

Treoir made 14 specific recommendations to the Commission on the Family in 1996, only two of which has been implemented (the initiation of a national longitudinal study of children in Ireland, and the development of the mediation services).

We re-iterate the remaining recommendations:

- Article 41 of the Irish Constitution be amended to include recognition of the diversity of family forms which exist in Ireland today.
- The Social Welfare system be redesigned in order to introduce an adequate, individualised social welfare payment to those in need while ensuring there are no built in employment disincentives
- Co-habiting parents be treated for income tax and social welfare purposes in the same way as married parents
- As regards employment the State should-
 1. lead the way in providing a legislative framework for more family friendly work places
 2. develop an overall policy in relation to childcare for working parents in consultation with the social partners
 3. simplify the various back to work initiatives currently available from the Department of Social Welfare (as it was then)
 4. review the current unemployment / poverty traps which are the outcome of the current structure of the SWA payment
 5. address the current unemployment crisis more creatively.
- There should be a significant increase in local authority housing provision.
- Sufficient resources should be made available to fully develop supportive services for all families, recognising the wide diversity of family forms and their wide-ranging needs.
- There should be a significant increase in the number of day care places available, the cost must be reasonable and there should also be a range of day care types – child minders, day nurseries etc.

- Adoptees on reaching the age of 18 years should have access to their original birth certificates.
- Mechanisms should be put in place to facilitate contact between adoptees and their birth parents – i.e. Adoption Contact Register.
- A new procedure be introduced whereby a mother's husband, who is not the child's biological father, could be appointed a custodian / guardian of the child jointly with the mother, rather than the mother adoption her own child with her husband as at present.
- An accessible, adequate and speedy family court system be put in place.
- Sufficient legal aid services be available to those who need it.

Conclusion

Treoir looks forward to the development of this strategy for strengthening families and hope that once and for all services will be streamlined and expanded with the well-being of families held at the centre of this policy.

Treoir
October 2004.