

Families and Family Life in Ireland

Challenges for the Future



Report of Public Consultation Fora

Mary Daly

February 2004

Department of Social & Family Affairs



“All over the world, families are as different and diversified as they are alike.

Vital, productive families are essential to the world's future; they are the cradle of the generations to come. Their strengths and weaknesses largely reflect the societal fabric of every country. As the world's oldest form of expression of human relationship, the family has survived thousands of years, adapting itself constantly to changing socio-economic conditions and the progress of humanity.

The family, as a living, evolving social institution, faces what may be its most difficult challenge in the history of the human species.

Many societies are changing so rapidly that the speed of change alone is a major factor of stress in families.

Families everywhere are in need of support to adapt to and meet the demands of change.”

FAMILY – Challenges for the Future – UN Publication, 1996

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In Memory of Dr. Michael Dunne,
Chairperson of the Commission
on the Family, 1995-1998

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Mary Daly
Olivia O'Leary
February 2004

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Foreword



*Ms. Mary Coughlan T.D.,
Minister for Social and Family Affairs*

This year we celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family. This will stimulate a worldwide focus on families and family life and especially on developments over the past 10 years.

The greatest challenge families face then and now is change and, if anything, the pace of change has accelerated over the past 10 years. This is particularly true of Ireland, where the changes include growing female participation in the workforce, increasing separation and divorce, declining birth rates, and more cohabiting couples, lone parents, migrant families, and older people living alone.

As Minister with responsibility for family affairs, I see it is my task to bring forward a strategy for strengthening families during this period of profound and rapid change. Before doing so, however, I considered it important to consult the real experts in this area – family members in all the regions of Ireland.

Real effective consultation was achieved in regional fora over the past year starting in Donegal and then moving to Kilkenny, Cork, Galway, and finishing in Dublin. The well known journalist and broadcaster, Olivia O’Leary, expertly

chaired the plenary sessions managing to ensure wide ranging and very productive discussions. Olivia gives her impressions of the fora in an excellent piece in this publication.

Participants then chose topics they wished to discuss in more depth in workshops, These were facilitated by locally based facilitators, with my own Departmental staff acting as rapporteurs.

Professor Mary Daly, Queen's University, was the main rapporteur. She gave excellent summary analyses of the discussions at each of the fora. She has now produced this superb thematic report and individual reports on each of the fora. The aim has been to capture the main views, comments, criticisms, and suggestions of the cross section of the public who attended the fora. I believe Professor Daly's report succeeds admirably in meeting this aim.

This Report has two objectives. The first is to stimulate a nation wide debate in Ireland on families and family life in this 10th Anniversary Year among all interested groups and individuals who were unable to attend the fora. A description of how the fora were conducted is set out in the Appendix and this could serve as a guide for group

discussions. Should you wish to add to or take issue with the views expressed in the report, I would encourage you to send in these views to the Family Affairs Unit of my Department.

The Report and the views received subsequently will, secondly, be fully taken into account in drawing up a clear, comprehensive, integrated, strategy for strengthening families. It is my intention to have this strategy ready for issue by the end of this Anniversary year.

I wish to thank all those who made the fora such a success, Olivia O'Leary, Professor Mary Daly, the staff of the Family Affairs Unit – Gerry Mangan, Heber McMahon, Denise Tully, Lorcan Hanly, the staff of my Department in each of the local areas who gave such assistance in organising the fora, the excellent teams of facilitators and above all the hundreds of family members who gave up their time to attend, and to participate with such commitment.

Ireland, of course, also holds the Presidency of the European Union for the first half of the year, which includes the International Day of the Family on 15th May. The Irish Presidency has

taken the opportunity this presents to host a major international Conference entitled “Families, Change and European Social Policy” in Dublin Castle on 13-14 May in the run up to the International Day. This is intended to stimulate an EU wide exchange of knowledge, experiences and ideas on the new realities in relation to families and family life common to all countries in the Enlarged Union.

A key theme of the Irish Presidency is achieving greater social cohesion in an Enlarged Union and strengthening families can make a major contribution to this.

Last year, 2003, was the 5th Anniversary of the submission of the seminal final report of the Commission of the Family entitled “Strengthening Families for Life.” Sadly, its Chairman, Dr Michael Dunne, passed away on October 20th, 2003. He was a deeply committed, hardworking and wise person who guided the Commission to producing an excellent and balanced report, which will have a major continuing influence, not least in developing the upcoming strategy. Our deepest sympathy is extended to his wife Ann and to his children Michael, Elizabeth, and Deborah on their great loss.

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Dr Michael Dunne.



*Mary Coughlan T.D.,
Minister for Social and Family Affairs*
February 2004

Chairperson's Introduction



*Olivia O'Leary,
Broadcaster and Journalist*

Families

I came from a family of eight children and I thought for years that that was how families had to be: large, rumbustious, noisy. So at Christmastime, I'd fuss about setting a long table, preparing an epic meal and then wonder why my own small household with our only child didn't quite fill the space. Then, one Christmas, because I was ill, dinner was served in front of the fire at a table just big enough for us: intimate, simple, and lovely – the right-sized Christmas for our family.

And that's how it's stayed, because I had discovered something important: each family is different. Each family has to establish its own traditions, be a family in its own way. Too often, we assume that we have to do things as our parents did, that we are failing in some way if we don't measure up to some traditional picture of family. That sense of family tradition weighed heavily in Ireland, perhaps, because of the emphasis placed on a particular notion of family in the Constitution, and because for so long the state stood back from interfering with the family. This has resulted in a country where, as John McGahern puts it, there was very

little notion of civic society but a country which instead consisted of 'hundreds of little republics called families' which ruled supreme within their own borders.

Ireland has changed, however. Irish families have always been more diverse than the traditional mother/father/children model, but in the last decade alone, they have changed even more. We have many single parent families. We have families brought up by grandparents. We have separated families who may live in two different households but who are still families.

Indeed, in travelling around the country to chair these five consultation sessions, I was struck by the overwhelming wish of people to give as wide a definition as possible of family. In Donegal, someone went as far as to suggest 'a community of caring people' and it was interesting how often the word 'community' arose in efforts properly to define family. For many people, it was impossible to consider the state of the family without considering the state of the community in which that family was based.

What came across in the Family Fora was an extraordinarily rich mixture of personal experience, social comment

and sheer wisdom. We heard about the poverty which undermines families – the financial and housing and health problems which place unbearable strain on a family struggling to stay together. We also heard about the time poverty imposed on families where both parents work and where commuting takes up so much of the working day. We heard the anger of those who have sacrificed careers to care for children or disabled or ageing relations, and who go unrecognised and unrewarded by a society which has benefited so much from their work. One woman felt that as a result, she was 'nobody' in the eyes of the state. Another young woman wondered about an education system which taught her to value skills which would make her economically successful, but not the skills which would make her a good parent. 'Have I been educated beyond caring?' she asked.

We heard of increasing marital breakdown and the challenges posed to family relations when mother and father live in separate households. But we heard too from those who pointed out that people can learn lessons from the traumatic experience of break-up and can mature and develop as a result.

We heard how every government policy, from housing to transport to employment to education to health, affects the family and heard that too often government policy-making is not family-proofed.

Most important of all, though, we heard people talking about what they know best – their own experience of their own families. It was an extraordinary privilege to be allowed listen as people drew lessons from their own lives which they felt would improve the government's approach to family life generally. Sometimes stories were told with wry humour, like the woman who because of housing prices, has her grown-up children still living with her. Sometimes, they were told with deep emotion, like the many people who spoke of the relations whom they cared for and protected every day of their lives.

There was one contributor, however, who said what we had perhaps forgotten in our attempts to address structures, and services and family support systems. She said it with such feeling that the whole room burst into spontaneous applause so I'll take it that she speaks for all of us.

In the end, families, she said, should be about warmth. Families, she said, should be about love.

Olivia O'Leary

Families, Change, Challenges for the Future*

*Ms. Mary Coughlan T.D.,
Minister for Social and Family Affairs*

This forum is part of a nation wide consultation on family life in today's Ireland. The aim is to give family members – parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins and those who work with them, including public representatives, an opportunity to air their views on family issues of importance and concern to them. I also wish to hear the views of participants on how best the State can support and strengthen families through the services it provides.

Through these fora we will be taking the pulse and listening to the heartbeat of the Irish nation on the state of its family life, as well as examining how we can work to strengthen families in the face of all the modern day challenges. It is my intention, as Minister with responsibility for Family Affairs, to attend all the fora and hear at first hand the views expressed. I am arranging to have a full record made of the proceedings of each forum meeting. I am also arranging for a thematic study to be compiled at the end of the consultation on the issues that arise. The fruits of your discussions will thus be generally available.

*Basic text of the opening speeches delivered by Minister Coughlan

It is also my intention that this thematic study will have a major influence on the development of a strategy for family policy, which I am currently developing and intend to finalise and issue before end 2004.

I am delighted that Olivia O'Leary, the well-known broadcaster and journalist, has agreed to join us as Chairperson of the fora. Olivia, who needs no introduction, is one of our most talented and popular media people both at home and abroad. I know she will bring an important extra dimension to our deliberations.

Mary Daly, Professor of Social Policy, Queen's University, Belfast, an internationally recognised expert on family policy, has undertaken to compile the reports.

Gerry Mangan and his colleagues in the Family Affairs Unit together with locally based officials of my Department are organising the fora. They will also be involved as rapporteurs' in the Workshops. These workshops will be facilitated by teams from locally based community and voluntary agencies. I would like to thank them for all their help.

A UN publication entitled *Family: Challenges for the Future*, has described the family as the world's oldest form of expression of human relationship, which has survived thousands of years, adapting itself to changing socio-economic conditions and the progress of humanity. However, the scale and pace of change affecting the family in recent decades has been unprecedented. The UN publication points out that these changes include demographic trends, social and cultural changes, economic developments, technological innovation, changing employment patterns, migration, the quest for equality between men and women, widening opportunities for women, and so on. Shifts in values, particularly towards those supporting individualism, have also had a major impact.

Here in Ireland one of the most significant recent changes affecting family life has been the substantial growth in female employment. Over the past 20 years it has more than doubled among women in the younger age groups, to reach a stage where it is now above the EU average.

These developments are to be very much welcomed. They provide many women with equal opportunities to men in all spheres of life and especially greater economic independence. The income generated also contributes significantly to improving the overall standard of living of families.

A major challenge, however, is how best can we support women and men in these situations to reconcile work and family life especially where they have caring responsibilities for children and other dependent family members. This is one of the Workshop themes.

The changes in employment participation and changing values have also had a direct impact on family formation and stability. Young people are postponing marriage and parenthood. There are fewer marriages and there is a greater risk of marital breakdown. The birth rate in Ireland has halved since the early 70s, one of the most rapid declines in Europe, although it still remains higher than the average for the European Union.

Further key challenges include how can we avoid employment and other pressures preventing people having the number of children they desire, putting

strains on parental relationships, and on parent child relationships. A workshop is devoted to the theme of parenting taking account of these aspects.

One long-term consequence of the fall in the birth rate will be an ageing population. Currently there are 5 persons in the active age groups for every person over age 65, but this ratio is set to decline to just 2 to one over the next 50 years, placing a growing burden of care on families.

We need to see how we can support families in meeting their caring responsibilities for dependent family members. These will include children, the elderly and those with disabilities. Families generally, however, are now becoming much smaller, with all their adult members in employment, so there will be greater burdens of care on individual family members. A third workshop will discuss supports for the caring functions of families.

Our concern for family life embraces all family formations. These include two parent families, one-parent families and reconstituted families following death, separation or divorce. There has been a significant increase in one-parent families, which is in part due to

the increase in births out side marriage, which almost doubled to 32% in the past 10 years, and an increasing incidence of separation and divorce. Lone parents have to carry the double burden of being sole breadwinner and providing on their own for the care of their children. This contributes to less than half of lone parents being in employment and a high proportion being at risk of poverty.

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy wrote that

“Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

We are unable to tailor policies and services to meet the particular difficulties of each individual ‘unhappy family’, but we must provide extra supports for families experiencing particular difficulties.

Marital and relationship distress can have very negative effects on both parties in the relationship. Research shows that marital distress is particularly associated with depression in women and poor physical health in men. Helping families whose relationships are in difficulty towards a level of well being that the majority of families take for granted requires not

only considerable resources but also the right mix of services and the best use of the resources available. We would very much welcome your views on how we can achieve these goals, particularly in the workshop on relationships in difficulty.

Much of course is already being done by the State to support families, particularly in the areas of social welfare, education, childcare, health, and housing. The Family Support Agency, established in May, 2003, is now making a major contribution to family well-being through its family mediation services, its support for organisations providing marriage, relationship and child counselling and support for Family Resource Centres. Other Agencies include the National Children’s Office, which has a major role in ensuring the integration of activities on children’s issues and focusing on children’s lives.

Major commitments to further supports have been made in the recent partnership agreement, *Sustaining Progress*. This sets out a range of actions, for example, to improve support for childcare, care for people with disabilities and care

for our older people. There are special initiatives provided for under the Agreement on care, on child poverty and on educational disadvantage.

These are key commitments, which will ensure that family friendly policies continue to be at the top of the social partnership agenda in the coming period.

The outcome of this public consultation is also important in the context of the Irish Presidency of the EU. This coincides with the celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family. The Irish Presidency is hosting a major international Conference entitled *Families, Change and European Social Policy* in Dublin Castle, with the support of the EU Commission. This will take place in May in the run up to the International Day of the Family on 15th May. It will provide participants from up to 30 countries with an opportunity to exchange views and experiences on changes affecting families, and on the policies to address these changes, as well as the fruits of the research of leading international experts on the subject.

Families still remain the basic units in our society forming a crucial social safety net

for improving the well being of individual family members and promoting social cohesion more widely. It must also be stressed that families make a major contribution to economic development through their support of family members in the workforce, their contribution to the nurture and education of the next generation, and their care of other dependent family members.

At this time of major change for families it is in all our interests that we ensure they receive effective support to carry out these responsibilities. I aim through this consultation to obtain at least some of the advice I need for developing the strategy to ensure effective support is provided.

I wish to conclude with a quotation from the UN Report I mentioned earlier, which reads:

“We stand at a crossroads between the conception of the family which prevailed in the past and that of the future. We must take account of the past, we must work in the present, and we must look towards the future.”

Over the next year I will be standing at that crossroads, as Minister with responsibility for Family Affairs, and

listening to you and groups like you throughout the country, as we work to develop a policy that effectively supports, amidst all the changes, the most basic and the most cherished units of our society – families.

Thematic Report



Mary Daly
School of Sociology and Social Policy,
Queen's University Belfast

“Someone needs to bring the story to government”

Between May and December 2003, the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Mary Coughlan TD, hosted a series of five public consultations around the country. Under the heading of ‘Strengthening Families’, the purpose of the Family Fora was to gain fuller understanding about how families are experiencing life in Ireland today and how public policies can better support families. Designed as a listening exercise, the Minister described the Fora as *“taking the pulse of the Irish nation on the state of the family.”*

The ultimate goal was to examine and provide evidence for how policies can strengthen family life in face of the challenges of modern living.

Upwards of 700 people attended the five Fora which were held in Cork, Donegal, Dublin, Galway and Kilkenny. Those attending represented a wide range of individuals and organisations. There were representatives present from both the statutory and voluntary sectors as well as a host of people who attended out of personal or professional interest. People travelled quite long distances to be present and

some people attended more than one Forum. Chaired by broadcaster Olivia O’Leary, the Fora were organised in a way that gave maximum time to discussion and debate. The floor was thrown open to participants almost from the start. Following a brief introduction and opening speech by the Minister, participants were invited first to contribute to a plenary discussion and then to participate in one of four thematic workshops. To conclude the meeting, the rapporteur, Professor Mary Daly from Queen’s University Belfast, gave a summary and overview of the main points made during the discussions.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the various themes, concerns and issues raised by participants at the Fora. The success of the consultation – in terms of both the high attendance and active participation and debate - highlights the immense benefits that are to be gained by directly consulting with people for the purposes of policy formulation and service

delivery. This innovative initiative brings many new insights to the attention of government, in terms of the situation facing real-life families, how family life has changed in Ireland and the exigencies that need to be addressed by policy. Throughout, there was unanimous agreement on the importance of the family in Irish society and that the state has a vital role and function in meeting the needs of families.

Discussions at the different Fora were wide-ranging and touched upon a broad sweep of aspects of family life in Ireland. It is clear that there is a persistent set of issues around the support of the family; many issues identified by the Commission on the Family in its 1998 report¹ came up again for instance.

As well as summarising the main points made at the meetings, this report also takes into account the submissions made in writing to the Fora.² The report is organised in six chapters. The opening chapter focuses on the points made in regard to the broadest issue of

1 Commission on the Family (1998), *Strengthening Families for Life*, Dublin: Stationery Office.

2 Submissions were received from the following: Clann Resource Centre (Oughterard, Co. Galway), Family Resource Centre National Fourm, Katherine Howard Foundation, Little Sisters of the Assumption, Men’s Development Network, National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), Mr. Shane O’Connor (Newbridge, Co. Kildare) and Mr. Edward Winter (Ballbrittas Co. Laois).

all: how to define family. While this was not one of the specific themes that people were asked to discuss, it came up time and again at the different meetings. Clearly people felt that the definition of family is an issue that not only requires clarification and discussion but is fundamental to family policy. The next four chapters focus on the four main organising themes of the Fora: parenting and childhood, reconciling employment and family life, relationship difficulties, the family as carer. The final chapter turns to policy and details the main recommendations made in regard to policy reform and innovation across the different areas considered. For the purposes of this report, every effort is made to reproduce the spirit of discussions at the Fora. In particular, points made by people are quoted in their own words as much as possible. The main details of each of the five Fora are summarised in the Appendix.

As well as this thematic report, an individual report has been prepared on each of the five Fora. These reports contain an overview of the discussions at the plenary, a summary of the main points made at each of the four

workshops as well as the feedback given on the day by the rapporteur. It is intended that each participant will receive a copy of the report of the Forum which they attended as well as this report.

1. Definition of Family in Irish Society

“Who speaks for the family?”

What constitutes family in Ireland today? The question of how we should define the family came up time and again at the different Fora. It was raised from a number of departure points.

For some people this is a philosophical issue, highlighted especially by the recent changes in Irish society. Family life in Ireland is becoming diversified in a number of respects: the variety of family types is growing; the nature of family life itself is changing; there are more families from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These and other developments prompted some people attending the Fora to question what constitutes family life nowadays and

whether our definition of family is too narrow. *“Perhaps we need to revisit our understanding of family as resting upon relationships based on blood?”*

The view of a family as all living at the same address also seems outmoded in light of increasing mobility and family breakdown, both of which scatter people to different locations and separate them from members of their family. In this regard, the need to differentiate between families and households and to recognise that families may cross several households

was stressed. The idea of the family as predominantly nuclear – consisting only of parents and children – was also questioned, especially against a backdrop where today’s parents rely very much on their own parents (for minding the children or for financial support for example) and on other relatives. So is it really true to say that the extended family is less important in Ireland nowadays as compared with the past?

Most people raising the matter of the definition of family did so from a particular standpoint or what might be said to be ‘political interest’. In other words, they were not so much interested in the philosophical aspects of the question as the implications and consequences of particular approaches. There were two distinct positions represented here. The first was a concern that the place of the traditional Irish family based on marriage was being undermined. It was pointed out on a number of occasions, although only by a small number of participants in all, that the Constitutional understanding of the family – as consisting of children who live with their married parents and in a family situation where the mother is based in the home – is still the official

definition of the family in Ireland for legal purposes. This view received its most explicit airing at the Dublin Forum where an underlying concern was expressed by a small number of people that the definition of the family was being changed by stealth. For example, one participant questioned the authority under the Constitution of a former Government to accept the UN definition of the family (for the purposes of the International Year of the Family in 1994). In the UN definition, the family is defined very broadly, as: *“any combination of two or more persons who are bound together by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibility for, inter alia, the care and maintenance of group members, the addition of new members through procreation or adoption, the socialisation of children and the social control of members.”* In further defence of the traditional family, the example was cited of how recent changes in taxation and other areas of policy in the UK have moved that country away from supporting marriage in the direction of offering support to all families regardless of the adults’ marital status. The question was put to the Minister of

whether that could happen in Ireland. With marriage seen as integral to the stability of society, the underlying fear is that recent changes in policy, such as moves to individualise the tax system, serve to dismantle the protected status of the family based on marriage.

“We as a society have to decide what we value and allocate our resources accordingly”

Support for such a traditional view was much less widespread than for that calling for change, however. The view that Ireland is changing and therefore that we need to recognise this and plan our policies around it emerged spontaneously at every Forum and also in response to calls for the preservation of the more traditional view where they occurred. The main point being made here was that, in the context of increasing diversity in Irish society, we need an inclusive definition of family, one that can encompass all types of families. To be inclusive a definition should be capable of embracing such diverse family forms as those made up of grandparents and children, those consisting of foster parents and children, those of lone parent and children, those of unmarried partners and children as well as same sex parents and children.

Diversity was usually conceived in structural terms in that it related to what one might call the packaging or structure of the family – such as the number of parents in a family, the marital status of the adults vis-à-vis each other and the identity of the adults vis-à-vis the children. Cultural diversity, in terms of different beliefs, values and practices as they relate to parenting, caring for elderly or ill family members and so forth, was much less often referred to. Hence, for example, the possibility that Ireland now contains people with quite different ideas about what is good family behaviour and the appropriate way to conduct family life was not that widely referred to. Some points about ethnic diversity were mentioned, however, at a number of Fora and in some of the submissions. In general, Irish society is seen to be exclusionary of these families and groups. *“Asylum seekers and refugees are at the margins in Ireland.”* It was also pointed out that services which have a Christian ethos may be exclusionary of people of other religions. This is quite a fundamental point given that many services in relation to family, care and the community are, although state funded, delivered by organisations that have a connection to or a history of being associated with the Catholic Church.

“Family support is not reducible to questions about childcare or getting women back to work. It’s about giving adults and children the choice and chance to have the best life they can”

The issue of the definition of family came up in other ways as well. The question was asked at the Cork Forum for example of whether households which do not contain children, such as those comprising a brother and sister or a number of co-resident family members above a certain age, should be defined as a family. Another relevant point made at this particular Forum was that there are different definitions of family in operation in Ireland. Those mentioned include a cultural definition, a political definition, a constitutional definition and also a historical definition. Given this, we need to be conscious that different definitions or understandings of the family might be in use in different quarters at different times and that Irish society may lack a consensus on what constitutes family. It is also the case that if one definition of family is used and if that definition is exclusive, such as that in the Constitution, it acts to endorse and perpetuate a hierarchy among different kinds of families. Planning becomes

focused around this core family which is for all intents and purposes privileged for policy purposes. In this context, the needs and circumstances of lone-parent families, lesbian families, families with unmarried parents as well as other ‘minority’ family types, to name just some, are less readily taken into account. Diversity, it was pointed out, is the reality of contemporary Irish society and it would be remiss of policy makers not to take account of it. One of the submissions stated, for example, that there are people from 160 different nationalities now living in Ireland. In this kind of context, as one speaker suggested, it might even be left up to people themselves whether they define themselves as a family or not.

There was quite a lot of discussion on whether we should continue to see the family as a structure, existing only when it conforms to a certain formula and consists of a certain number of people who are in a recognised legal relationship to one another. Some participants at the Dublin Forum, for example, pointed out the need to differentiate between households and families. They are not the same thing, because families cross different households. And as pointed out by one

submission, recent pressure in the housing market in Ireland acts to increase the number of households that contain more than one family. Another speaker emphasised the need to think of family not as a structure or place or even a definition but, rather, as a set of values, activities and relationships. Such values and activities include nurturing, caring, loving, steadfastness, permanency and consistency. In her view *“family is the warm feeling you have when you know that someone cares and appreciates you just as childhood is an opportunity to grow and develop in a time of innocence.”*

“Society has changed so much that parents and families don’t know where they fit in anymore”

The changing nature of Irish society and the place of family in it were the root of considerable concern. A key theme here was the value placed on family in Celtic Tiger Ireland. In current times, competitiveness is almost a national slogan and economic independence has never been more highly prized as people are urged to become self-sufficient and productive as workers. Values associated with family – such as caring, kinship and

altruism – seem somehow at odds with the dominant economic thrust of policy. An opinion underlying much of what was said at the Fora is that policy has cut the family adrift in terms of support, expecting it to fulfill certain key tasks but leaving it more or less to its own resources in doing so. Among the key tasks of the family are raising children, caring for them and ill or elderly family members and, increasingly, providing adult children with assistance which includes helping them to raise their own family. People read current policy, and recent changes to it, to signify that in the eyes of the government and the powers that be economic activity is more highly valued than family-related forms of activity such as caring for children and other family members. As evidence of this, people cited the recent changes in the tax code (which favour couples where both are employed) and the representation of childcare as an issue mainly for two-earner families. The absence of complementary measures for families where one parent is based full-time in the home was decried as was the lack of emphasis placed on matters of quality in relation to childcare.

“Childcare and family are not seen to be as valuable as work”

Some people felt that policy is one-sided, with too much focus on developing incentives aimed at encouraging parents to take up paid work. One workshop participant in Donegal suggested that *“women are now being educated beyond caring.”* This might not be problematic were it not for the perceived downgrading of those who are or were in the past involved in caring. There are a number of aspects to this. The fact that caring in the home continues to be unpaid (and hence in people’s view unrecognised) is seen as testimony of its low value, especially now that we have become a society which is quick to equate value with money. Secondly, there is the vulnerability or, in the words of one participant “non-personhood”, of those who care. Another participant at the Donegal Forum put this very graphically: recounting how she had looked after her disabled child for all of her married life she remarked: *“As a result I am not a person outside the family. I cannot apply for a credit card. You are a nobody if you just look after your children.”*

Some participants offered their own definitions of family. For one person at the Donegal Forum family is

“a community of significant relationships” while another defined family as a *“consistent and persistent group that nurtures the young.”* Participants at some of the other Fora also offered a definition. The tendency was to go broad: *“The family is a community that cares.”* There was talk also of kinship at some Fora, and of the need to resurrect it or at least to recognise it as a feature of Irish society. Neighbourliness was also mentioned. Overall, there are two notable tendencies underlying the alternative definitions of family offered. The first is to view the family in terms of what it does – caring – and the kinds of relationships and values that comprise it rather than just seeing the family in terms of a structure or a group of people who are defined by a legal relationship. The second tendency was for ‘family’ and ‘community’ to be used together. So family is imbued with a sense of belonging to a larger group and also a sense of localness, both features that are associated with community. There is a sense here that the family has to be thought of in larger terms and in a context of community and locality. The question for policy in this understanding is: how can family be supported as a community that cares?

By way of summary, we can say that there were three main points made about how family should be defined in today's Ireland. First, people seem to be anxious to reclaim the family and to reclaim a space for what they understand family to be. Overall, the texture of the discussion was of concern about changes in society and individual values and the impact of these on contemporary and future family life. There is a sense in which the reality of family life in Ireland today is quite different to what people desire it to be. The role of the family in Irish society is what is being questioned here, with an underlying concern to value the family while recognising that it is changing. The extent to which people feel in control of what is happening, even in their very own families, is limited. Secondly, people want to reclaim the family by refocusing on the values that they associate with family – the sense of altruism, caring and nurturing that mark family life at its best. This is seen as the true fabric of family life. So participants at the different Fora not only acknowledge that the debate we need to have in Ireland is about values but they want to critically engage with the values of

contemporary life. These are seen as having changed substantially and people have a questioning attitude as to whether the changes have been for good or ill. A third theme focused on the substance and boundaries of family. Is family to be seen only as the nuclear family (consisting of parents and children) or should we take a more extended view of family and include other relatives, and indeed non relatives? Certainly, most people who spoke at the Fora on the issue are in favour of seeing the family in a broad way and endorse the idea of family relations as stretching beyond particular households. Diversity is a term that readily came up in the discussions. In addition, when people think of family, the child-parent relationship is seen to be vitally important especially in a context where the relationship or marriage of the parents has broken down. Increasingly, people are turning their minds to how the child-parent relationship can and does outlive the breakdown of the relationship between parents. For this and other reasons, a broad understanding of family is necessary.

2. Parenting and Childhood

“Agencies need to get away from nice images of how the family should be and present parenting as a difficult and challenging process”

There were four main themes raised under this heading: parents’ need for support with parenting, the nature and quality of childhood, the important but under-developed role of fathers and fatherhood, and the needs of particular types of families, those of lone parents especially.

Issues about parenting dominated the discussion. One of the most consistent themes in relation to parenting and childhood was the pressures felt by parents today. Parents all over the country voiced a need for support in the context of a society and a family role that are changing rapidly. Parents spoke eloquently of the difficulties of on the one hand guiding their children and on the other hand controlling them. Guiding children is difficult in a society where the rules seem to be changing all the time. So parents themselves are often not sure about what is appropriate behaviour nowadays for, say, a 10 year old or a 13 year old. *“Just how young should they be allowed to go to discos? And what*

about clothes – how skimpy should a ten-year old’s clothes be?” As well as the challenges of guiding their children, parents feel that their authority is being undermined continuously in today’s society. Children nowadays have so many other sources of influence – many of which are oppositional if not hostile to parental authority – that it is difficult for parents to find the right balance between control and consultation. Laying down the law seems to be out of the question and it is certainly the case that parents feel that they have to put effort into establishing an authority that was in the past more or less taken for granted. It seems that a more self-conscious, reflective and restrained form of parenting is called for nowadays. For some, however, things can easily get out of control. One woman gave the example of ringing the Gardaí in an effort to gain control of her children’s behaviour. She knew that it was a desperate act, especially as there was nothing the Gardaí could do, but she simply had to be seen to call on an external authority to get her children’s attention and obeisance. Some participants pointed out that parenting was a much more difficult job compared to paid employment yet

policy focuses on paid employment to the neglect of parenting.

“Parents do not know where to go for advice on many issues affecting their children. What people need most is a sense of security around their family life”

Change in parental authority and in the extent to which the parental role is supported by society seems to be part of the modern condition. As tends to happen, discussion of the present led to some comparisons with the past. The past was usually seen in nostalgic terms. There is quite a strong view that the family was a much more stable institution in the past. Some people compared their parents with this generation of parents and felt that some parents nowadays lack the skills needed to bring children up properly. There was an acknowledgement that parents adopt different parenting styles with some parents being less authoritarian than others. However, there was an underlying vein of criticism of other parents who were sometimes portrayed in a negative light, suggesting that people feel that there is or should be only one model of parenting in Ireland. It was felt that

having 'different' parents among one's acquaintances makes it more difficult for other parents to maintain authority in the home. As one person put it *"the hardest thing about parenting today is other people's parenting."* The implication here was that some parents are lax about their parenting role and responsibilities and this makes it difficult for others to practise 'proper parenting' given close interaction between their children and those from other families. Participants were much more likely to blame 'outside influences' than they were other parents, however. A large number of participants who spoke at the Fora felt that parents receive little outside support in maintaining authority in the home. Many pubs and clubs admit children under age for example and the media is blatant in targeting children with what parents consider inappropriate images and ideas. There is a sense in which parents regard quite a lot as being out of their control. There is also a sense in which they feel undermined by some of the institutions dealing with family members, such as schools for example. And yet as pointed out, schools and parents have a shared mission.

"Fear of failure is a huge pressure on parents. There is a great fear that you will fail as a parent – that your child will get into trouble or become involved in drugs for example"

Other 'external' factors that are acting to change parenthood were identified as well. Parenthood is more and more demanding now because the standards set by society are higher than ever before. Moreover, there seems to be a new readiness in society to blame parents if things go wrong. The whole idea of 'bad parenting', for example, is a relatively recent development. Another set of pressures on parents is coming from the demands of children themselves. Key here is the effect of advertising and their peers in fuelling children's demands for consumer goods, demands that have to be met by their parents. Children's standards and expectations have never been higher. Another change that has taken place in parenting is that it now goes on for much longer than was true in the past. The costs of housing and education among other things mean that parents still have to if not provide for them at least help their children financially well into their adulthood. The Fora heard instances of parents having to

remortgage their house or even in extreme cases to work beyond their planned time of retirement so that they could assist their children. One woman told the Dublin Forum: *"We are tired of rearing our adult children."* Of course, as well as financial assistance, parents are called on more than ever before to help rear the next generation. In other words, grandparenting can be very active and 'hands-on' nowadays. We all know of instances where grandparents mind their grandchildren, not just on a babysitting basis but indeed as a form of childcare so that the child's parents can work. It was for this and other reasons that many participants at the Fora called for our understanding of family to be broadened beyond the nuclear family.

"When the parents are coming home they are meeting their children heading out to their part-time jobs"

Another dominant, although less widespread, theme was the nature and quality of childhood today. A widespread view here is that: *"children are being robbed of their childhood."* Expected to grow up very fast and at a young age, their time of being a child is becoming more and more compressed. Children

are taking on adult-type roles (such as paid worker, parent even) at a younger and younger age. Some participants expressed the view that children are bearing the brunt of changes in the family. One aspect of the quality of children's lives that may be endangered nowadays is their chances to be close to members of their extended family. Migration of families and the fact that parents have generally less time today may mean that children see less of their relatives. Even 'a community of other children' may be denied them since children nowadays spend so much time indoors or closeted in cars or supervised by adults. This was mentioned quite a lot at the different Fora. While it is for understandable reasons – it is increasingly difficult to find spaces where children can play safely – whether it spells an improvement in the quality of children's lives or not is open to question. Among other things, there is a 'closing in' of the child's circle and children come to rely mainly on their immediate family and peer group. There was a general consensus that Irish children are growing up in very different family types compared with the past. More and more children grow up in lone-parent households, others are affected

by divorce, and many grow up in what we might call 'reconstituted' families. As a result "children may have conflicting images of what parenting involves."

The fact that children too need to be educated on parenting, even when they are at school, was quite a strong opinion expressed at the different Fora.

The issue of citizen children and the rights of their foreign-born parents is also relevant to the question of the quality of childhood in today's Ireland. This is a matter affecting asylum seekers especially, in that the ruling by the Supreme Court (23 January 2003) reverses previous legislation permitting the parents of Irish-born children to seek leave to remain in Ireland on the basis of their Irish-born child. As a consequence of this change in legislation, over 10,000 cases are under consideration with deportation notices and orders being issued to some families. While the Irish citizenship of the children is acknowledged, it would appear that their family rights are not absolute and may be restricted. Many families apparently dropped their asylum applications in the belief that pursuit of 'Leave to Remain' on the basis of an Irish-born child was a better option than the asylum procedure.

"The children have emotional problems, wondering where their daddy is and why he doesn't come to see them"

A third theme was the role and rights of fathers. The point was made that Irish society is not receptive to the needs and potential contribution of absent fathers. "The legal framework in relation to the family is archaic. We need to look especially at the whole concept of access and parental responsibility." Fathers are often denied rights of access to their children and may be relatively powerless vis-à-vis the custodial parent (who is usually the mother). Reference was made at a number of Fora to parental alienation syndrome whereby one parent acts to turn the child against the other.³ While there is no evidence of how often this occurs in Ireland, it is clear that where it does occur the child's relationship with the second parent is damaged as is his/her closeness to the relatives of the estranged parent. Indeed, the child's capacity to form healthy relationships in later life may itself be impaired. It was pointed out that those involved in providing social services in Ireland seem to be either unaware or uncaring of the existence of this kind of behaviour, that the system as such has not taken it on board and so in effect condones it.

3 Background information on this was provided in a submission by Edward Winter.

“As a working mother, I feel guilty every single day I work”

The role of mothers is also far from settled. It was pointed out that the current thrust of government policy, to encourage if not push mothers into employment, can create a lot of difficulties for mothers. These are not just material or logistical in nature (especially in the sense of managing childcare); they are also emotional. Ambivalence, it seems, is the lot of many mothers. Many women feel torn between children and work. One of the most strongly and consistently expressed views was that mothers must have more options or choice around whether they want to take up paid employment.

Gender differences in parenting (and in expectations around parenting) were another widespread theme. *“Where the relationship breaks down, a man can walk away. There is a need to make men more responsible.”* For men the main pressures are probably still around being a good (if not optimum) economic provider. Men are brought up to see themselves as the primary economic providers in the family. Not alone does this hinder the development and expression of the more emotional side of their personalities but it places

pressure on men and in circumstances where they cannot provide (such as unemployment, for example) heightens their sense of failure. *“Boys should be brought up to put family first.”* A uni-dimensional view of fatherhood still prevails in Ireland. This may act to marginalise fathers from the family. One separated father who was present at the Dublin Forum said: *“my role is now viewed entirely as that of maintenance provider.”* He felt that his rights to see and care for his children, and indeed the children’s rights to see him and his relatives, were considered as secondary to his economic provider role.

The variety of family types that exist in Ireland today was another major theme in the discussions of parenting and childhood. It was noted at the Donegal and Cork Fora, for example, that same-sex families were not mentioned in the Minister’s speech. Nor indeed did the speech make reference to families with a multitude of adults in different relationships to each other. The issue of mixed race families was another matter seen to be in need of discussion and consideration by policy. One participant, married to someone from a different ethnic background, pointed out that children of mixed race are

rarely covered in any policies on the family. Yet, one of the main problems facing her and her three children was the racism encountered in the community. While mixed race families are statistically small in number, given the current level of immigration this is likely to increase and both the pressure placed on children and the community's general receptivity to them are issues that need to be addressed by policy.

“It is especially difficult for lone parents. There is no one to share the responsibility with and many do not have a wider network to rely on”

One type of family that was mentioned consistently was that of lone parents. In the light of the recommendation in the recent OECD report (*Babies and Bosses*⁴) to the effect that more lone parents should be in employment, one contributor to the Galway Forum, herself a female lone parent, was concerned about whether this would lead to a change in existing policy towards lone mothers. She pointed out that under existing policy lone mothers in receipt of social welfare benefits have a degree of choice about whether they

can be employed or not. In the current climate, it is not easy for lone mothers to get employment. One very large barrier is childcare. This participant pointed out how she had had to bring her son to the Forum because of the lack of after-school childcare in her hometown. The scarcity of flexible working arrangements is another barrier which for lone parents creates special difficulties. Other urgent policy issues that need to be addressed through the lens of the needs of lone parents (as well as from other perspectives) identified at the Fora include housing (suitability and quality), transport (availability and cost) and income support. Apart from material difficulties, policy should recognise that the problems and pressures encountered by many if not all parents bear especially heavily on lone parents. *“As a lone mother I feel an additional responsibility to be there for my children and to rear them properly.”* If there is only one parent present in the family, then that parent has to weigh up considerations around employment or staying at home in a somewhat different calculus than where there are two parents.

4 OECD (2003), *Babies and Bosses Reconciling Work and Family Life*, Paris: OECD.

Other issues raised on the theme of parenting and childhood include the costs of schooling and education for children. As different participants pointed out, the provisions to help parents with the costs of educating their children – such as the allowances available under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance – while helpful do not meet all or even the major portion of the costs incurred in children’s schooling. This tended to lead on to discussion of poverty and inadequate income and how hard family life is when money is scarce. One example given was the limited chances that people living on a low income have to come to a meeting such as the Forum.

It was continually pointed out that difficulties which are a normal part of family life can be much more severe when there is a shortage of money. *“Poverty can break the family.”*

“A person can get only two jobs with no training in this country – T.D. and parent”

Not alone were participants able to identify difficulties in relation to parenting and childhood but they had many suggestions for how these could be addressed. These will be set out in

chapter six below. For now let us note that three main needs were voiced. The first was for education (training even) and support for parents. There is a widespread recognition that parenting has become more challenging and therefore that parents need to be better equipped. Given this parents seem to be open to receiving help and assistance, especially in the form of education and information. The second big need was for more childcare and crèche facilities. A third need voiced consistently and more or less universally was for parents who work full-time in the home to have their work recognised and valued. While participants varied in their views of how policy could address this, there is a strong sense that the activity of caring for one’s family has been devalued in Ireland in recent years (by changes in social values and public policy).

3. Reconciliation of Employment and Family Life

“It is as if there is a tiredness in the family now”

There was a general consensus at all the Fora that in Ireland today more and more parents need to work for financial reasons. Hence, reconciling work and family life is a challenge experienced by growing numbers of families. The costs of housing were cited as being particularly instrumental in driving the trend towards two-earner households. While it might be accepted that parents are having to work outside the home in larger numbers than ever before, there is no agreement or settlement around whether this is a good thing or not. First, the whole issue of the quality of family life is questioned. *“For many*

people the model of commute, work, home and sleep dominates and there is little time for much else. Family members – husband wife, sons, and daughters – meet only fleetingly during the week.

Families are seen more as a collection of individuals than a unit.” A related issue is the welfare of individual family members and in particular the well-being of mothers and children.

Whether the employment of the mother is good for women and children is something about which people at the

Fora disagreed. Some people did not see mothers' employment per se as a negative development (even though it was more or less agreed that it can be difficult for mothers to manage employment and family because of an insufficiency of support services). But there were many others who did regard it negatively. These people felt either that it is best for children to be minded by their parents at least for a period of time or that having to be employed creates difficulties, especially of a psychological nature, for parents and so leads to bad parenting. *“One of the main dangers in parents working outside the home is that they try to compensate by throwing money at their children.”*

It is against a background of serious questions, or tension even, around mothers working that the discussions about reconciling employment and family life should be set.

“Women and women’s lives have changed dramatically but men have not been asked to change at all”

One view that seems to be quite pervasive is that the reconciliation of work and family life is an issue more for women than for men. While it is portrayed in public policy as a

collective matter – with the state taking the onus to provide some incentives and support services – some participants at the Fora were of the view that within the family it is left to the woman to make the necessary care arrangements should she wish to take up employment. It is not that men are unsupportive exactly but that decisions around who cares for the children are left mainly to women. This people attributed to the gendered value system that prevails in Ireland and unless there is a fundamental change in values then it will continue to be the case that managing the reconciliation of work and family life primarily falls to the woman. The gendered view of family life that exists in Ireland has another consequence as well. This is in the extent to which women are forced to make a difficult choice between earning and caring for their families. This was raised repeatedly. Full-time motherhood is still highly valued in Ireland and yet mothers are under pressure to be employed as well. The extent to which this impacts on women's self-esteem was also raised. At the Cork Forum reference was made to research carried out at University College Cork (UCC) among working

mothers which indicated that these women felt that they were not fulfilling their caring responsibilities because they were employed.⁵ However they also felt that they were denied the opportunity to fulfill such caring responsibilities because they were more or less forced to seek paid work. They felt caught in a bind. Another point is that women's double burden – in terms of they're continuing to be mainly responsible for home and family even when they are working – is now a feature of Irish society as well (just as it is elsewhere). In other words, it is women who bear the brunt of changes in the family caused by their own employment.

“Women are now ashamed to say that they stay at home rather than going out to work”

A further and very big theme raised in the context of reconciling employment and family life was what we might call the parity between work in the home and work outside of it. People feel quite strongly that the balance has shifted towards paid work. One speaker at the Dublin Forum who has done both pointed out how little recognition she got for her work in the home as

compared with her paid work. It is, she said: *“as if women doing housework had been sitting on their hands for all those years.”* Future policy simply has to find some way of valuing work in the home and of rewarding or compensating those who do it. There is a level of quality in home care which, while it could never be adequately paid for, does need to be recognised and rewarded. Certainly, there is a feeling that people should not be penalised for staying at home as is seen to be the case in Ireland since the recent tax reform. One woman at the Dublin Forum put it quite strikingly: *“at the present time if neighbours decide to swap the care of their children then they would be recognised economically but if they care for their own children they are penalised.”* The choice to care for one's own family needs to be one that is financially viable as well as socially valued. The status of carer and the value placed on care were related themes raised. It is vital that those who work in the home are recognised and compensated in some way.

It is relevant to mention solidarity among women at this point. This was brought up especially at the Cork Forum where the view was expressed

5 O'Hagan, C. (2003), *Sacrificing or Sacrificed? Working Mothers in Ireland*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, UCC.

that: *“Women have always relied on other women and it is important that female solidarity continue, although it should not be exploited.”* The underlying point here is that women helping other women, whether as relative, neighbour or friend, has been one of the foundations of family life in Ireland. The challenge for policy is to avoid putting in place measures which separate women into different categories and which hinder or undermine female solidarity and networking among women.

There was quite a lot of discussion also about the treatment of women as employees. The view seems to be quite widespread that women are secondary workers. The gaps in earnings' levels between women and men was given as evidence of this. The point was also made that inequalities between women and men as paid workers have an effect on relations within the household, to the relative disbenefit of women. Women become minor contributors to the household and at the same time risk losing their status as carer within the family. As for employers, the women in the UCC study referred to above reported a seemingly instantaneous change in their attitudes

when their female workers became pregnant or had a child. The women were made to feel as if they were suspect workers, as if by becoming pregnant they had shown that they were not fully committed to their paid work.

“There is an explosion of women wanting to get out into the workplace and progress themselves but the supports are not there for them”

The discussion of reconciling economic and family life focused also on the services and supports needed for two parents to be able to be in employment. Childcare came up especially in this context. Issues of supply and quality of childcare were raised time and again. Some people felt that the main aim behind current policy seemed to be to increase the amount of places available rather than to improve the quality of childcare. A number of participants suggested that formal childcare is still unaffordable for many people. This is one reason for why informal childcare is still the norm. It is clear that one of the biggest issues in relation to childcare is the costs associated with it for parents. As was pointed out, there are no tax reliefs or subsidies, no capitation grants and no benefit in kind.

“Employers are the sleeping partner in regard to easing the relationship between the family and work”

Another dominant theme in the discussion of the reconciliation of work and family life was family-friendly work practices. A number of relevant issues were raised. In the first instance, the question was asked of whether employers invest sufficient resources in family-friendly policies and provisions. While most subscribe nominally to such a policy, in practice many do little or nothing to take account of the family lives of their workers. There are hardly any workplace crèches available in Ireland for example and part-time work, flexi-time and arrangements such as term-time working are very scarce. Participants also questioned the practices engaged in by employers – instances were cited of where there is nobody to replace a worker who is absent from work for family reasons. Not alone does this lead to gaps in the employer’s services but it can engender resentment towards the worker by other staff whose workload is usually increased in such circumstances. The lack of employer support for family-friendly work practices is felt to be

unacceptable. *“Businesses must give something back – they have a corporate responsibility.”* In the context of a general scarcity of such practices and measures, employers were said to be quite unaware of the fact that they too benefit from putting in place family-friendly practices. The benefits to employers include less absenteeism and higher productivity. Another pertinent issue raised was the need to extend the definition of ‘family friendly’. Usually this is conceived of in relation to childcare. However, it was pointed out that workers have other family-related care obligations, such as those associated with the care of elderly and ill relatives. The view was expressed that it should be possible for such family-related needs to be incorporated into the understanding of ‘family friendly’.

There is also the matter of the gender bias in the organisation and take-up of family-friendly provisions. The lack of paid paternal leave was mentioned in this context. One woman’s graphic account at the Galway Forum of the difficulties her husband experienced in taking leave during a period in which she was suffering from ill-health associated with childbirth underlined

the general lack of recognition that is a necessity for fathers to care on some occasions. *“It was not so bad on the first occasion that he had to take leave but when he had to take leave on two other occasions, the level of tolerance and understanding dwindled away. He was seen almost as a pariah.”*

The needs of lone parents were also raised in the context of reconciling employment and family life. They have a definite need of childcare for instance if they are to participate in activities outside the home. Moreover, often the bulk of the money they earn goes on the costs of childcare. The significance of FÁS and community employment schemes in enabling

people, and women especially, to return to or enter employment was underlined time and again. One participant described the discovery of the community employment scheme in terms of ‘finding a lifeline’. It was clear from hers and a number of other personal accounts that the planned cutbacks in community employment schemes will leave sections of the community without a significant bridge to employment.

“The rights of children should also be part of the discussions on reconciling work and family life”

The rights and best interests of children were raised in the context of reconciling employment and family life also. Children’s right to be cared for by their parents is relevant here, for example. One speaker at the Dublin Forum was of the view that the first three years are critical in respect of parental care and that more efforts should be made to enable parents to stay longer out of the workforce so as to personally care for their children for this period. It was suggested that there should be guarantees for their jobs during this time.

The matter of the lack of after-school services for children was also raised. As is well known, the school day is too short for many parents who have to work full-time. The suggestion was made that it should be possible for primary schools to offer the facility of after-school care to parents and children who need it. This would benefit the children especially in that it would mean that they could remain with their friends and do not have to undergo the inconvenient and sometimes disturbing

experience of moving to another location. In terms of how this could be organised, it was suggested that the school could arrange for one of the junior staff to supervise the children and that, in terms of funding, it could be jointly paid for by parents and the state. A voluntary committee, consisting of staff and parents, could be set up to manage it.

The influence of economics on childcare and on family life in general was also raised. With the emphasis on both parents being employed, childcare in Ireland seems to be more and more defined not just as a good for parents but as an activity that should take place outside the home. It is worth pointing out that in Continental Europe childcare is conceived mainly as a good for children. Childcare there is focused on the quality of children's early years and is concerned especially that they have the opportunity to and if necessary learn how to interact with other children and be prepared for entry into the formal education system.

Community employment schemes were seen as being highly relevant in the context of reconciling work and family life. The pathway or bridge idea

inherent in such schemes is especially valued: "*They are a springboard to something better.*" They have the potential to serve a series of important functions in regard to employment especially, enabling mothers to ease themselves into employment and to gain experience that can be reinforcing and ultimately empowering. Another positive aspect of the community employment schemes is that they start with people's real situation and are generally sensitive to the constraints or difficulties that people might be experiencing. But there is some ambivalence in the way that they are organised. As voiced at the Kilkenny Forum, the fact that the community employment schemes are under the auspices of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment indicates a 'bias' in policy. The underlying point is that the schemes have become something quite different to what they were intended to be. Whereas they were initially directed at employment creation and work experience objectives, their title suggests that they are intended also as community development measures. As they have expanded and developed, they have responded to local needs

and in terms of substance they have in some locations anyway come to resemble a form of family support (by providing home help and other care-related services for example). People around the country voiced strong support for this development and at most Fora participants were quick to criticise the planned cut-backs in the schemes. But people are also anxious that any developments around the support of the family be part of a planned and integrated policy. In this regard people feel that the community employment schemes are a useful model.

4. Relationship Difficulties

“There are no winners when a family breaks up”

When participants turned their minds to why there seemed to be more relationships in difficulty nowadays, one primary point of comment was that family members devote less time to family relationships. The fact that more and more parents are having to be employed was identified as a possible source of stress in families, affecting especially parents' relationships with their children. Time poverty can be a root cause here. *“People seem to just run out of time in their day-to-day lives.”* A number of reasons for problems were listed, including the increasing involvement of parents in the workforce, the impact of television and technology on family members' ability and willingness to communicate with each other (especially young people) and all the challenges there are to family values. While they are not always attributable to a lack of time investment, the fact that parents and children experience difficulties in communicating with each other seems to be accepted as a feature of modern life. It was pointed out that parents today often end up making deals with their children as a last resort in trying

to retain some influence over their behaviour. Participants at the Fora wondered whether this is a good thing.

“There are families that have extra problems and sometimes these problems are hidden”

As well as changes in values and life styles, a number of other factors leading to relationship difficulties were identified and underlined at the Fora. They are like an additional layer of problems in some families. Alcohol addiction is seen to play a critical role in many cases of relationship difficulty and breakdown. So also are other addictions (such as to drugs and gambling) major causal factors in placing family relationships in jeopardy. A general lack of support for families affected by psychiatric difficulties was adverted to also on a number of occasions as was the fact that psychiatric problems may often be the root cause of marital breakdown or relationship difficulties. Another factor that creates strain in a marriage or partnership is when the child has a difficulty of some kind. These include autism, attention deficit disorder, and a range of learning and behavioural disorders and problems. Decent housing

is crucial because the home is the vital focal point of family life. Living in unsuitable, overcrowded housing, as many people do in Ireland, can by itself lead to the breakdown of family relationships.

The different Fora heard much evidence and many stories and accounts of personal situations of how people were coping under difficult circumstances. One woman at the Galway Forum, for example, told of the strain of caring for an autistic son and how this, difficult enough in itself, affected every other relationship in the family. The other children seemed to feel that their mother neglected them. It is also the case that some families have more than one member who has a special need or difficulty of some kind. Economic shortages and poverty were also identified as factors exacerbating family relations. *“Poverty can break the family.”* The use of violence in the home was another factor mentioned. In this regard it was pointed out that one of the challenges of future family policy will be to keep people safe within their own homes (women and children especially) while empowering those affected to deal with violence.

A second major theme in the discussion was the consequence of relationship difficulties. These were felt to fall unevenly on different family members. Women and men, for example, are felt to be differentially influenced by breakdown in relationships. It seems to be the general view that women bear the brunt of problems associated with the collapse of marital and other relationships. Such problems are mainly emotional and financial. In relation to emotional problems, it was felt that women need particular support and counselling when experiencing difficulties in relationships. While some level of counselling is available, this is unaffordable for or unavailable to many people. The impact of divorce and separation on grandparents and the grandparent role was also raised. Some grandparents are denied access to grandchildren in the aftermath of a breakup and they have few rights in this area. This is true also for other members of the wider family and it is especially easy for the family of the non-custodial parent to become estranged from the children. Given the increase in the number of divorces and separations in Irish society, it was felt that this was a neglected issue that needs to be addressed by public policy.

“The extent to which children try to compensate their parents for their difficulties or unhappiness should not be underestimated”

The impact of divorce and separation on children was the subject of considerable discussion. Children were seen to be marginalised in the separation process, their voices not always heard. Despite recent policy developments such as the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child and the National Children’s Strategy, children have few rights in making their views known to the various adults involved in the breakup process. The behavioural consequences for children following a family break-up were also adverted to. Some, for example, take on the role of mini-parent, with boys especially feeling the need to take on a replacement role of father. Others become carers, sometimes because of a shortage of caring resources in the family. If the parent in a lone parent family falls ill for example, there may be no other choice but for children to take on at least some of the carer role.

“We have to become more of a Tír na nÓg”

It was very much the consensus opinion at the Fora that *“children need contact and good relations with both parents.”*

The legal process associated with marital breakdown was cited as particularly problematic for children, placing them in the uncomfortable situation of having to specify which of their parents they would like to live with. It was felt that the UK system for processing divorce was better than the Irish one, especially in that it is more sensitive to the needs and rights of children. The importance for the children of the parents being able to communicate effectively and reasonably with each other was underlined again and again. It was suggested that when couples are separating some of the key questions should centre on children: how can children maintain the relationship with parents? How do we ensure that the voices and wishes of children are heard? Under the current legal system, it is difficult but vitally important for children to have a continuing relationship with the non-custodial parent.

“There needs to be more investment in the role of father in the family”

The issue of men’s role was raised time and again. There was a general sense that the male role has changed utterly, leaving many men floundering. *“The male role is lost. Men don’t know what their role is anymore.”* While there is no doubt but that some problems originate in social structures, such as the view of the male role as being primarily that of economic provider, the opinion was widely expressed at the Fora that men’s own behaviour or the behaviour of couples before and after separation also needs to change. Men may be alienated or they may alienate themselves from the family. One participant at the Dublin Forum spoke of the developmental work that his project does with men. In his view men are seen as part of the problem but not part of the solution. His project seeks a more inclusive attitude towards the role and place of men and tries to change male conditioning such that men are better able to care and mediate.

“You need to change what goes on within homes and unless you do that little or nothing will change”

Many people spoke in favour of mediation. They found it more supportive than the legal approach to marital breakup. It was felt that the process of ending a relationship was less traumatic for users of mediation services compared with those who use the legal system. One advantage of mediation is that it is seen to be less damaging in its impact on children. Another is that mediation involves both partners, and in some cases all those affected, and that the focus is on ameliorating and improving family relationships. In this and other ways, mediation is not just about coming to terms with the past but building bridges to the future. It was pointed out that mediation services should start as close as possible to the beginning of the difficulty/break-up period and should be inclusive of men as well as women. Reference was made on a number of occasions to the difficulty of securing the involvement of fathers and husbands in counselling and developmental activities more widely. The comment was made at the Kilkenny Forum for example that: *“fathers prefer to stay outside the realm of growth.”* For this and other reasons, services need to be geared more to the needs of men as

fathers, especially when they are parenting alone. In addition, young men need to be targeted.

It was also pointed out that separated fathers may not actually have a place in which to get together to meet and interact with their former partner or children. Accommodation is at a premium in Ireland today. The Galway Forum was told that in England and Wales there are contact centres, which are open at the week-ends and available for, say, parents to meet each other or separated fathers to see their children. Housing is an important constraint for separated families. Usually one partner leaves the family home but s/he is typically not in a position to buy another house and so may live in accommodation which is unsuitable for meeting with her/his children. The phenomenon of parental alienation was also raised, especially in the context of child well-being. If one parent seeks to turn the children against the other, it is difficult for children themselves to be able to form stable relationships.

“We have to accept marital and relationship breakdown as a feature of modern life”

There seems to be a general acceptance of the need for and importance of counselling and other assistance to help couples and families to move forward after a divorce or separation. Hence, services to deal with such occurrences have to be put in place. The growing number of people from different ethnic backgrounds is seen to require a readiness on the part of service providers to be non-judgemental and value neutral. This could be a major challenge given that many of the services available for families in Ireland are Christian in origin and orientation.

5. Family as Carer

“As well as work, caring is about communication, respecting differences within the family. It is about responsibility and setting limits”

In general the needs of carers, rather than those of people requiring care, dominated the discussion. The personal situations recounted by carers were very touching as well as providing valuable information for policy makers. It is important to know, for example, that some people are caring for more than one person, that only a minority of those involved in caring receive the Carer's Allowance, that many people feel that they had no choice but to care and that many carers feel isolated and alone. It was also notable that this theme tended to provoke much more discussion of caring for the elderly and other adults than care for children. It seems that there is some kind of division in the public mind to the effect that 'care' is a word or concept that applies to the elderly and ill or disabled adults whereas 'childcare' or 'childrearing' are the terms used to evoke the care of children. As we shall see though, there are some people who regard this as a false division.

“Family members, especially daughters, are more or less on their own with the choice to care or not”

One major point of discussion was the choice to care and whether people really have a choice in this regard or not. Some people clearly felt under a lot of pressure to care. In some cases this pressure came from their own beliefs and values about what is appropriate and the general expectation in society that, given their circumstances, it is their duty to provide the care. This is an opinion voiced especially by and about daughters. In other cases lack of choice arose because there was no alternative. The facilities to access non-family care simply did not exist or were too expensive or too distant or in some other way inaccessible. However there is another side to this as well. The Fora were told of families who want to care but cannot. This may be because of a lack of services which allow shared caring or because so few services seem to take as their departure point the support needs of the family if it is to continue to care. Family members may lack the necessary training as well. In fact there is a host of factors which as well as depriving the person of a longer time at home reduce the family's

chances to offer care. The current policy constellation is said to force too drastic choices on people and their families. Either people go to an institution or they stay at home (being cared for by their family, friends or neighbours).

“I know of people applying for services being asked: ‘Haven’t you any daughters?’”

The gendered nature of caring was also highlighted. In today's Ireland women continue to be still primarily responsible for caring. Daughters, and to a lesser extent daughters-in-law, are the first to be turned to when the question of caring comes up. This is true not just in relation to the care of children but is also the case when it comes to the care needs of elderly family members. While they may be critical of this, at the end of the day women themselves have absorbed these values as well and so may feel a compulsion to care. This is not just a matter of fairness and equity. It also raises issues of quality. If people feel compelled to care, this can lead to resentment and the relationship between the carer and the cared-for person may be negatively affected.

“Having cared for her for 30 years, upon my mother’s death I lost not only a loved one but also a status and occupation as well as a means of livelihood”

One of the points made most consistently is the enormous strain on people who undertake caring activities. Caring is seen as an all-absorbing and highly demanding activity which leaves carers with almost no time free from work and responsibility. Despite this however, the general consensus was that home care is the preferred option for elderly people. The point was made that Irish people still value the family unit and that the government should give much greater support to those families who choose to manage care within the family unit. Changes taking place in the structure of the family and the general pattern of life in Ireland were said to present particular problems for families wishing to manage home care. The increasing need for more and more adult members of households to enter employment impacts on the availability of home carers. Many adult children work away from where they were brought up and this makes the provision of care for their elderly parents difficult if

not impossible. Finally, reduced family size means that the burden of elder care is falling on the shoulders of a much smaller group of children. Whereas in the past, caring could be spread among siblings, this is no longer the norm. Such changes must be recognised as part of the backdrop against which future services are planned.

There was also some discussion of the identity of other carers. In this context attention was drawn to at least one group of hidden carers – children. While we have no exact figures on this as yet, the service providers know of many instances where children help with the care of an adult. This is an inappropriate role for children. This too can be gendered and it is far more likely that caring tasks will fall on female children. Quite often there is a double jeopardy for these children because they also tend to come from low-income families. So not only do they experience the hardships associated with care but they may also be vulnerable to the general lack of resources, chances and opportunities that can be part and parcel of being from a low-income background.

The community and wider kinship networks also came up as significant in the provision of care. Despite this, the meaning and significance of community is overlooked by policy. And yet, there is an enormous amount of voluntary activity, perhaps nowhere more so than in relation to care and family matters. But people are becoming burnt out. Their need for support has never been greater. It was pointed out on a number of occasions that a considerable amount of the support for family caring today is dependent on community employment schemes. If the promised cut-backs take place, they will leave a big service gap. The opinion was expressed at the Galway Forum for instance that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment as the department that funds the schemes, refuses to recognise this as a legitimate role for community employment schemes, preferring to emphasise their role in getting people back into the labour market.

“There is no follow-up. You get little or nothing when they are alive and you certainly get nothing when they are dead”

Associated with this is the perceived undervaluing of caring activity by the wider society. Many women spoke of

devoting their lives to caring for others and felt that rather than being rewarded they had been penalised. They referred to a lack of pension rights, lack of financial security in general and the difficulty of getting any kind of training or skill for return to the labour market. The point was fairly consistently made at every Forum that there was insufficient support for women who spent time rearing children or caring for elderly people and subsequently wished to return to education or the workforce. While FÁS courses were highlighted as providing women with training opportunities, it was felt that more such opportunities could be made available with specific emphasis on the needs of former carers.

“Home care provides the government with a cheap option”

The seemingly casual treatment of carers by the state was another dominant theme. While childcare was mentioned in this context, care of elderly and ill relatives was cause for most comment. *“The comparative lack of services and the attitudes of some GPs demonstrate how little the elderly are valued.”* It was pointed out that care is often left to one person, usually a female family member, and that that

person was often left bereft and without an occupation when the caring situation ended. One woman told the Cork Forum, for example, of how she had been left to look after her mother for 30 years (receiving the Carer's Allowance for only five years of this period). She graphically illustrated how, upon her mother's death she lost not only a loved one, but also a status and occupation as well as a means of livelihood. It was pointed out that the benefit rate paid to recipients of Carer's Allowance and Benefit is remarkably low given the potential costs to the state if the people involved were to be cared for in an institutional setting.

A strong underlying, and unifying, theme at the Cork and Dublin Fora was the universal nature of care. Care is and should be seen as a generic activity, pertaining to young children, teenagers, the sick, those with disabilities and the elderly. It is an essential service and government needs to recognise that these categories of the population need to receive care and that in fact care is an integral and continuous part of human life. It will always need to be provided and provided for. The point was made on a number of occasions that it should not be necessary for carers to expend

their energies on fighting for what they should be entitled to.

There were many suggestions made for policy reform and these will be detailed in the next chapter. For now it is important to note that three general issues dominated. The first was the availability of facilities for the care of elderly people. Here participants referred especially to the shortage of good quality, accessible and affordable nursing homes. Secondly, people were critical of the lack of support for carers in general and also the underprovision for their needs. The Carer's Allowance is relevant here as is the shortage of training, general support and respite facilities. One important policy suggestion was for a strategy for home carers which would provide in an integrated fashion for the development, support and other needs of carers. The third issue is a related one, centring on how family care can be both made possible and better supported. There was quite a strong feeling at many of the Fora that families are sometimes prevented from caring and that a partnership ethos, between the family and the state especially, would increase the chances of families being able to care for their loved ones.

6. Addressing and Changing Policy

“When was the last time we heard the government refer to Ireland as a society and not an economy – ‘Ireland Inc’?”

The discussions and reflections on policy at the Fora were broad-ranging. In terms of the nature of change, people spoke about the structure of families, family processes and relationships and the circumstances in which families in Ireland live. In terms of policy, discussion focused on the values and models that should inform policy, how family policy should be organised and what its priorities should be and the role of the state and how far public policies should intervene in the family. Sometimes people did not have specific recommendations to make – they knew that there was something wrong or missing but they could not pinpoint exactly how this could be rectified. The extent to which there are specific recommendations for policy change varies across themes. When put together, a coherent model of family policy does emerge from the discussions at the different Fora.

There is a growing acceptance, as evidenced by discussions at the Fora, of the need to have an inclusive definition

of the family (one that recognises and gives value to different types of families). The country is seen to be undergoing a process of transition from the type of family norm envisaged in the Constitution to a society where more mothers are employed, families are smaller, marital breakdown is more frequent and ethnic diversity more widespread. It is because of these and other changes that the state has to modernise its social systems. People identify the following as core functions of a revamped and more developed family policy: support of and assistance with parenting, active involvement in the development and welfare of children, supporting active fatherhood, investing in family relations, investing in and supporting caring, reconciling family activities with the demands of modern life and a changing Irish society. The key aspects of the model of future family policy to come out of the discussions will now be elaborated.

Values that Should Underlie Future Family Policy

As will be clear from the report to date, participants at the different Fora saw family policy as having a fundamental role in expressing and affirming societal

values. They were, moreover, comfortable and forthcoming in discussing the values that should underlie family policy. Among those mentioned most consistently as underpinning future policy on the family were: respect, choice, balance between work and family, equality, diversity, prevention and early intervention and kinship.

- *Respect for family work:* There is a sense in which Irish society has lost respect for the work carried out in and by the family. It is not seen any more as a valued sphere of life. Given this, respect for family and family activities was suggested as a fundamental principle of future policy.
- *Choice:* Even though it is a widely-used word, participants felt that the extent to which people have a real choice around family and work is limited. There is, first of all, a pressure on mothers and fathers to be workers. Policy in the current climate gives little support or encouragement for people to ‘choose’ to be involved in home and family on a full-time basis. There is also the fact that, depending on your gender, your ‘choice’ is seriously curtailed. So if you are a man, it is

almost impossible for you to ‘choose’ to be a full-time father and if you are a woman the parameters of your choices around home, family and work are delimited also. In fact when it comes to family, a man and a woman are almost never seen to be in the same set of circumstances. Hence they are not seen to have the same set of choices.

- *Balance:* The discussions at the Fora suggested that balance between employment and family life should be another principle underlying future family policy in Ireland. There is a feeling that the family has been pushed to the sidelines. Employment is so emphasised now that it seems to dominate public policy and where ‘reconciliation’ is an objective of policy it seems to be conceived of in terms of ensuring that people’s family life does not get in the way of their being active in the labour market. People want to reclaim an independent place for the family and want family in its own right to be a concern of policy.
- *Equality:* Among the questions raised about current policy was whether it does enough to address gaps

between women and men in relation to family roles, the disadvantages experienced by low-income families and the opportunities for families from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds to gain access to services that respect their beliefs and meet their needs. A key challenge will be to organise family policy in a manner that has equality, in all its forms, as an end goal and an operating principle.

- *Diversity:* Existing family policy has over time been forced to become more receptive to the fact that the identity and practices of families in Ireland are changing. The extent to which the existence of difference and diversity has been absorbed by policy remains limited however. As pointed out earlier, diversity tends to be seen in terms of structure (the fact that Ireland now has families of different types) rather than in terms of culture (people having different values and practices around childrearing and other aspects of family life). The spirit of discussion at many of the Fora was that future policy should embrace diversity in all its forms and make it one of its guiding principles. This means especially taking account of

the voices and needs of families that are culturally and socially in a minority (refugees, asylum seekers, travellers among others).

- *Prevention/early intervention*: As a principle, prevention and its action counterpart early intervention were widely supported. There was a strong feeling that it is normal for families to experience difficulties or problems at particular stages of family development (the start of a marriage or partnership for example or the birth of the first child). Were families to receive support and assistance at such junctures, then some problems or difficulties can be averted.
- *Kinship*: Understood to refer to emotional and supportive bonds that exist among family members within and beyond the nuclear family, kinship is seen to be neglected by policy. The focus is too narrowly on the nuclear family (parents and children) to the relative neglect of wider family relations and activities.

The Approach to Policy on the Family

In the view of the Fora, family policy is transversal in nature. That is, family crosses policy domains and is not

sectoral. Hence, rather than being confined to one department or domain of policy, a concern about the family should inform the work of all government departments. The role and significance of the Department of Social and Family Affairs for family policy was not disputed at the Fora, however. People see that there is a need for the Department to be a key voice and supporter of the family. One submission suggested for example that the Department should ‘act as an advocate for families’. There is another reason why the Department of Social and Family Affairs is an appropriate ‘home’ for family policy: because the provision of an adequate income, one of the key concerns of the Department, is central to improving the quality of family life in Ireland. The relationship between poverty, low income and family life was raised again and again at the Fora and it was generally accepted that income adequacy is fundamental to good family policy.

Another point of general consensus was that family policy needs to be both multi-layered and multi-dimensional. The differentiation made by the Commission on the Family between the developmental, protective and

compensatory functions of family support is one way of adding the necessary complexity to family policy. Public opinion, as it was voiced at the Fora, seems to consider that future family policy should consist of (at least) two layers. The first is a general layer of support and assistance that would be available to all families, especially at critical junctures such as the birth of the first child. The second layer is more specialist in that it would address the added needs of particular families (e.g., those going through relationship breakdown, families facing traumatic situations occasioned by bereavement, illness, violence, addiction, families where a family member has a disability or disorder, families on low income). The idea was widely expressed that it is normal for all families to have needs but that we need to think in terms of packages of support, intervention and assistance for some families.

Issues about how policy is made and functions in general were also raised. The point was consistently made that the 'client' or recipient should be the central consideration of services and service providers. Not just this but people need to be actively consulted and to have a say in how policy is

made. The Forum itself was pointed out as a model of good practice in this regard. It was reiterated over and over that the current organisation of some services can make it difficult for people to gain access to them, especially when there is an overlap between different agencies or indeed a huge gap between them or when there is no communication among providers. The lack of co-ordination across government departments and agencies was also commented upon.

Another matter raised was the limits of family policy. A sense of enterprise and a wish for self-sufficiency underlay many of the discussions at the Fora. People wished for support from the state but were clear that this should not be at the exclusion of or detriment to families' and communities' own energy and initiative. People want to be active in their own families and communities. One proposal made, for example, was that networking among families who are experiencing a similar problem or situation should be developed. The range of actors who are or should be involved in family provision and policy is a related issue. As well as families themselves, the voluntary and community sector is seen to have an

important role in a comprehensive family support programme. These sectors have played a key role in pioneering services for families and communities in Ireland. It would be a great loss if they were not key players in the next generation of supports and services. And yet they are often the first casualties of government cutbacks. As pointed out in one of the submissions, community programmes are not expensive when compared to the costs (social and financial) of the problems that they are seeking to address. In this context the decision to move community development funding from the Department of Social and Family Affairs to the (renamed) Department of Community, Gaeltacht and Rural Affairs was raised and questioned. From the perspective of family policy and family well-being, more direct funding and resourcing of community groups and community development is needed and the Department of Social and Family Affairs is seen to have the lead role in this.

What is Working Well

Before we go into the detailed policy recommendations, it is important to point out that existing policy is seen to have considerable success. In particular people are able and willing to identify

what works well in the current system. Here they tended to concentrate on recently developed supports. The main programmes or policies identified as examples of good practice include the following:

- *Family Resource Centres:* These, where they exist, are seen to provide a wide range of services for family needs in their own locality. Not only is the model good but the embeddedness of the centres locally and the way they utilise and add to local resources is seen as a very positive feature.
- *Community Employment Schemes:* These have assumed an important place in the community psyche as well as filling gaps in social provision. *“The community employment scheme is a win win situation – what was a social welfare payment becomes a productive activity. People lift themselves up.”* As well as serving a host of employment-related functions, including acting as a bridge to paid work, the community employment schemes are seen to have provided a set of needed services in relation to care, the family and community development more widely.

- *Mediation*: Mediation is very widely praised as a model for how to deal with relationship breakdown. Its non-adversarial nature is lauded, for example, as is the fact that it concentrates on communication and generally does so in a fashion that is inclusive of all parties.

It follows that, identified as good practice, there is strong support for retention and further development of each of these services and programmes.

Recommendations on Parenting and Childhood

“Many parents are isolated with their problems and there is a need for more courses and support generally”

Parenting today is a different endeavour to what it was in the past. The new reality of parenting includes less parental time for children due to the demands of employment, and children with less time for meaningful family interaction due to television, mobile phones, video, computer games and so forth. In effect, parents today have to compete with a whole host of other factors for the attention of and influence over their children.

Against this background, one pressing need is for parents to have access to quality education on and general support with parenting. There are many challenges to parents in today's world which not only make it hard to do the work of parenting but render it difficult for parents to feel good about themselves in their parenting role. Parents, therefore, feel the need for some 'professional' help. Some parenting courses already exist. There are shortcomings however. As regards accessibility, for example, the lack of any central organisation of courses and more formalised application procedures was cause for comment. Current arrangements appear to be quite ad hoc, in terms of where and by which agency courses are offered, their content and operation and who is accepted for participation. As a result of supply problems, many parents find it difficult to get access to such parenting courses. The question of stigma was also raised. When courses or programmes are targeted on or exist only for 'parents with difficulties', they acquire a certain reputation locally and so parents are put off from attending. Apart from the supply and how access is governed, the content and objectives of the courses

were also discussed. Questions were raised for example about the models of parenting that inform such courses. In relation to the content, it was pointed out that many of the educational materials come from other countries and may not be appropriate to the Irish situation. The stage at which people get education on parenting was also raised. One of the relevant points made in this regard was for the education system to provide some training and preparation for parenthood while children are still at school.

The extent to which behaviour change rather than just education is necessary to improve family well-being is another crucial issue. Problems in families may go deeper than education. Problems can be due to dysfunctional parenting models, often transmitted from generation to generation. For such behaviours to be supplanted, there needs to be intervention in families. The spotlight therefore has to be turned on services and the fact that so few supportive services are available for families in general. Ireland does not at the present time have a family service infrastructure. Attention was also drawn to the need for better integration of services and greater inter-connectedness among them.

“Children often fall through the cracks”

While people expressed great concern about children and the quality of their lives, they did not have many child-specific recommendations to make. One point that was quite widely seen as important was that children and their needs should be at the centre of any services that deal with them. The example most often given in this regard was the post-divorce or separation situation in which the voices of children are not heard and so their needs go unfulfilled. Another area where there is identified under-provision for children is general play and leisure facilities.

The situation of lone mothers and their special needs was the third general theme here. The opinion was strongly expressed that, despite improvement, the situation of lone mothers remains difficult in Ireland and so their need for support and other kinds of services remains pressing. The matter of supporting lone parenting is larger than the issue of income support for lone parents, which has been a concern of social welfare policy in Ireland since the 1970s. Supporting lone parenting should be seen in terms of the general process of parenting alone rather than the needs of distinct groups of lone

parents. Lone-parent families are not a homogeneous group. A key underlying issue for policy is the need to recognise (and plan for) family diversity. Unless and until social policy in Ireland recognises that the traditional family model (of two parents) is no longer the only type of family, then Irish social policy remains outmoded.

The role of fathers was also raised. One concern is whether public policy undermines the involvement of fathers in family life. The whole question of custody needs to be looked at from this perspective. Social welfare provisions, such as the One Parent Family Payment, are also important in this respect. Most social welfare payments through their conditions of entitlement have the effect of reinforcing some practices and behaviours. An underlying concern should be fathers' capacity, especially when they are separated, to play a significant role in their children's lives. Particular programmes and additional resources are needed for this purpose.

Recommendations on Reconciling Employment and Family Life

“A strong political will must exist to support and promote work/life balances for working parents”

The fact that both parents, or in the case of lone-parent families the custodial parent, are working results in less time being available for family responsibilities. The state therefore needs to recognise this and provide more widely for child and elder care. This should be facilitated also by employers. There is a need also for greater balance between the responsibilities of fathers and mothers

The availability and quality of childcare and crèche facilities was a major pre-occupation. Right around the country people identified a general scarcity of such facilities in their own and adjoining areas. Indeed, some participants pointed out that they could attend the Forum only because they had access to childcare facilities and that there were many others who could not be present because of a lack of childcare. More childcare services are needed to address the shortage in supply and also to ensure that quality childcare is available to parents on an equal basis

(i.e., regardless of where they live or how they are situated financially). Childcare should also be available on a full-day basis. Furthermore, the need for pre-school (such as breakfast clubs) and after-school services was voiced widely. Other points made in relation to childcare was the need to address its informal nature – which means not just that much of it is in the black economy but that there is little or no regulation of standards. The matter of the quality of childcare came up again and again. So also did the range of childcare.

“Future policy simply has to find some way of valuing work in the home and of rewarding or compensating those who do it”

A second major issue under this heading is the situation of women who are based full-time in the home. At the moment these women receive no financial recompense for their contribution to family life. They feel very under-valued. It was pointed out time and again that these women often have to make very difficult choices (in a context where employment for mothers is strongly promoted by the government and state agencies more broadly). Reference was made to how

isolated many of these women feel and how they feel undervalued by state and society. One suggestion is that the work of women based in the home should be paid. Another is that child benefit should be regarded as a payment for the care of children and be reformed from that vantage point. What people seemed to be asking for is the choice, for women especially, to engage in combinations of home and employment activities. The idea of balance came up consistently in this context.

The third big issue was the provision of family-friendly work practices. The lack of action by employers was quite widely criticised. They were said to be the sleeping partner in efforts to reconcile work and family life. Hence, provisions such as part-time work and flexi-time work are only available on a limited basis in Ireland and there are few workplace crèches. The good example set by the civil service as an employer (in terms of introducing flexi time, school holiday and other care leaves) was emphasised as a model that could be adopted by other employers.

Recommendations on Relationship Difficulties

“What we want to see is the rolling out of a plan for families”

In general, people at the Fora made a distinction between the ‘general’ problems of family life, which are part and parcel of family life, and the specific or additional difficulties experienced by some families. The feeling was that a comprehensive family policy should deal with both.

The different Fora were offered a very good analysis of the factors or problems that make family life difficult. Those mentioned include addiction, low income, physical and mental health problems, a child or adult with learning, behavioural or other kinds of difficulties, violence. Policies to provide the family with services and supports in these situations are essential. In addition to these specific problems, there is the exigency of relationship breakdown, separation and divorce. While some of the services that exist in this regard, such as mediation, were praised, there was the general feeling that such exigencies are still insufficiently provided for. The idea of greater assistance to help people

in families to develop their relationship skills had wide support.

As well as paying attention to the special circumstances that make families vulnerable, policies must treat as normal the existence of problems in families, recognising that having problems is a normal part of family life. Far from being a sign of breakdown or family dysfunction, experiencing problems might well be taken as a sign of family normality.

Prevention has a big role to play. Two main forms of support or intervention were emphasised in this context. The first is the need to prepare people for marriage. One participant at the Dublin Forum, who has been involved for thirty years, noted that it is the better-off couples who are undertaking preparation for marriage. In her view the question has to be asked of why people in the lower income groups are not able to access such marital preparation or choose not to do so. The second point of intervention mentioned was the birth of the first child. Young couples have a huge need of support at this time. The birth of the first child is a critical junction in the relationship, a time when each partner is called on to

develop a much deeper understanding of the other's needs. Apart from these particular interventions around critical junctions, policy also needs to be prepared to offer early intervention. Perhaps all of this is best understood in terms of a comprehensive policy which means, among other things, an integrated approach across government departments. The underlying need is for planned and progressive services.

Recommendations on Family as Carer

“The extent to which the family has a voice and is heard, in the same way that employers and trade unions can secure a public platform for their interests and opinions, has to be questioned”

There was a strong consensus at all Fora that care and those who provide it are not sufficiently catered for at present. Only a relatively small proportion of people currently involved in providing care receive any recompense for it from the state, for example. Moreover, there is a strong feeling that when assessing eligibility for Carer's Allowance, decision makers need to look beyond narrow eligibility criteria and take a broader view of the consequences of decisions. Making provision for care is

larger than just giving carers an adequate income, however. The reality is of a general lack of appropriate supports and services. These include respite facilities for ill and elderly people, home help and other community services and training for family members in catering for the needs of ill or elderly relatives. There is also the huge issue of childcare – the lack of locally available, accessible and affordable services is highlighted as an over-arching problem across the country. One could sum up by saying that the challenge for policy today is to respond to the reality of caring in contemporary Ireland in terms of providing a diverse range of supports and services which add quality to the lives of both the person receiving care and the person providing it.

One dominant issue was the availability of facilities. The lack of affordable, accessible and high quality nursing homes for the elderly is one identified shortage. The supply of a range of facilities appears to be especially critical also. At the Kilkenny Forum for example, the scarcity of 'step down' places from hospitals was highlighted as was the availability of two-bedroom as against one-bedroom unit housing

for the elderly. A scarcity of two-bedroom units makes it difficult for a family member to stay overnight in the accommodation and hence increases the likelihood that the elderly person will have to move to an institution when their care need intensifies.

The shortage of respite care facilities was seen as an additional problem. Respite for elderly people tends to be limited to periodic weekend or weekly breaks whereas it was felt that daily respite for one or two hours would provide a much more effective relief model. Many people pointed out that help is often given only when a crisis emerges, yet earlier intervention would prevent many crises from arising in the first place. So the flexibility of services is an important matter as well.

The Home Help service is seen as a very positive additional layer of assistance. However, the system and its resourcing were criticised both for the low level of resources made available to it and for delays in accessing need. In the instances recounted to the Fora, it was not unusual for people to have had to wait nine weeks to receive help, by which time, the crisis had passed. The role of the community employment

schemes in augmenting the available pool of services was pointed out continuously. Cutbacks in these and other services can have the effect of compelling people to leave employment so as to take care of family members. They also have the effect of reducing the range of community-based supports for elderly people in general.

The issue of training for carers was also raised and it was generally felt that this was inadequately funded. Moreover, the range of courses available was considered too limited. Some people were unable to take part in any training because there was no one to release them from their on-going care duties. Another related issue raised was that carers do not just need practical training but also emotional support. There was a call for more carers' groups to be set up whereby carers could meet and talk to each other and draw on each others' support. The isolation facing carers in rural areas in particular was noted.

Reform of the Carer's Allowance was another point raised consistently. The conditions governing it, for example, are seen to be exclusionary. Many Fora participants told how their

circumstances prevented them from receiving the Allowance: perhaps they were already in receipt of another benefit or as a relative they were excluded from the Allowance. Criticism was also levelled at the fact that the Carer's Allowance is taken into account when eligibility for the Back to School allowance and for other social welfare payments is being assessed. The backdrop to all of this is that only relatively small numbers of carers actually receive the Allowance. While it is recognised that benefits for caring must like other benefits have some conditions attached, the highly conditional nature of the Carer's Allowance seems to be read as a general lack of support for caring. The suggestion was made that Child Benefit and Carer's Allowance should both be seen as payments for care. Carer's Allowance in particular should be seen as a payment for work done.

Another suggestion is that there be an allotment of money for each person in the state. Its dispersal should depend on the person's situation but it should allow for the possibility that more than one person or agency is involved in their care. Participants at the Fora

expressed the opinion that home carers should be able to access some of the money that would have to be spent on people if they were not being cared for at home.

Another suggested innovation is a National Strategy for Family Carers. This would require putting in place supports and services such as counselling, training, better respite, and employment-friendly policies. The ideal would be a care-led system rather than one where money is the primary issue. A care-led system would, among other things, be characterised by a balance between the needs of the carer and those of the person receiving care in an ethos of partnership.

Finally, it is not only childcare and general family support services that were identified as inadequate but a whole range of services from health to education, to housing. The inadequacy of public transport provision and of housing provision and how this affects families was underlined time and again. The regional spread of services came in for special criticism. People spoke time and again of how difficult it is to get a service if you live in a rural part of Ireland. An insufficiency of services may

mean that people in rural and outlying areas have to travel long distances to access services. People in rural areas and even those in regions removed from Dublin are also sometimes faced with the unavailability of a specialised service since the more specialised services are only available in Dublin. The point was made that the rights of people in rural areas to have services available locally should be recognised and enshrined in law. At the moment the quantitative principle prevails whereby the feasibility of services is assessed in terms of whether they serve a sufficiently large catchment area. Such a principle undermines service provision in rural areas and should be replaced by that of equal access regardless of area of residence. The importance of the local was also emphasised consistently. What people seem to want are services that either grow from or are sensitive to local needs and that are embedded locally. One need and aspiration consistently voiced at the Fora was for services to reflect the involvement, representation and needs of people at local level.

APPENDIX

Organisation of the Fora

Five Fora were held in all between May and December 2003. The locations and dates were: Donegal (May 1); Kilkenny (September 25); Cork (October 9), Galway (November 6) and Dublin (December 4). The Fora followed a similar organisational format. Following a brief introduction by the chairperson, Olivia O'Leary, Minister Coughlan delivered a brief speech. The floor was then thrown open for a plenary discussion. This lasted for an hour and it was followed by a coffee break after which participants took part in a workshop of their choice. The themes of the four workshops, which lasted for an hour and a quarter, were as follows: parenting and childhood, reconciling employment and family life, relationship difficulties and family as carer. The workshops were facilitated by staff from the Community Development Support Agency. Each workshop also had a rapporteur (usually a staff member of the Department of Social and Family Affairs). Following the workshops, the Forum reconvened in a general session at which Professor Mary Daly, the rapporteur of the conference and author of this thematic report, gave feedback on the main themes and issues raised. Each Forum ended with a light lunch.

An individual report has been prepared and is available on each of the five Fora. Readers interested in the proceedings of each Forum should consult this report (available from the Department of Social and Family Affairs). Here we present a brief overview of each Forum.

Donegal Forum:

Held on May 1st this was attended by almost 100 people. The participants represented a wide range of organisations and interest groups associated with the family active in the Donegal and Sligo areas. Among the main issues raised in the plenary discussion were the following: the need to rethink the meaning of and redefine the family in the context of a rapidly changing Ireland; the fact that there is ambiguity around the family today, especially in terms of whether family activities are sufficiently valued vis-à-vis economic activity; the lack of an integrated approach to policy on the family; scarcity of funding for family-related programmes and services. In terms of suggested policy reform, participants at the Donegal Forum emphasised the following: support structures and training courses for parents of teenagers; educational

courses to transmit parenting skills to the young and educate them about relationships; more formal and informal childcare; more part-time employment opportunities for mothers; provision of affordable counselling service for people experiencing relationship difficulties; more support and services for families affected by suicide and dependency on alcohol and other drugs; more training and services for carers.

Kilkenny Forum:

Held on September 25, this was attended by around 80 people. The geographical spread was notable with participants from as far afield as Portlaoise, Wexford, Carlow and Waterford. Among the main issues raised in the plenary discussion were the following: changing value systems (and in this context whether the family is sufficiently valued); a lack of recognition of family diversity; the fact that parenthood is becoming ever more demanding, professional even; the existence of inequality and poverty and how they act to undermine family life; continuing gender inequalities. Participants suggested a wide range of issues that should be considered by future policy on the family, including the following: an improvement of

childcare in terms of range, availability, affordability and accessibility; an improvement in parenting-related services; better services for lone parents; an expansion of parental leaves; an expansion of community-based services for the elderly; the retention and even expansion of community employment schemes; and expansion of alcohol and addiction related services. This Forum also focused attention on how services and public provisions in general should operate and function. Existing services were criticised for operating in relative isolation from other services and for failing to place the client/recipient at the centre of their activities. The range of actors involved in service provision was also discussed. While a lot of attention was focused on the role of the government and state providers – a natural tendency perhaps – the thrust of discussion indicates that it would be wrong to see the state as the only provider. The significance of employers was highlighted, for example, as was the role of the voluntary and community sector.

Cork Forum:

Held on October 9, this was attended by over 100 people. Participants came from as far afield as Killarney, West Cork and Tipperary. Among the main issues raised in the plenary discussion were the following: the definition of the family; Irish society's attitude towards the family; the quality and healthiness of relations inside the family; how external factors affect the family; care and caring. Participants suggested a wide range of issues that should be considered by future policy on the family, including the following: the range, availability, affordability and accessibility of childcare services; the availability of parenting-related services; the availability of services for the elderly and those needing care; the availability of services and supports for those affected by alcohol and other addictions. The Forum also focused attention on how services and public provisions in general should function. Existing services were criticised for operating in relative isolation from other services and for failing to place the client/recipient (especially children) at the centre of their operations. The availability of resources was also raised and the general

consensus was that the family was a domain which required a greater share of resources than it was being accorded at present. The level at which decisions are made and resources dispersed was also discussed. The need for a decentralisation of resources, decision making and services was frequently adverted to at the Cork Forum.

Galway Forum:

Held on November 6, this was attended by around 100 people. The regional spread was notable, with participants from as far afield as Limerick, Carrick-on-Shannon, Longford, Connemara, Claremorris and Athlone. Among the main issues raised in the plenary discussion were the following: what we expect of the family and the state's attitude; the values that should inform family policy; the situations that need to be addressed and covered by family policy; specific needs in the Western region. Participants identified a wide range of issues that should be addressed by future policy on the family, including: better childcare services in terms of range, availability, affordability and accessibility; an improvement in the level and availability of the Carer's Allowance;

more respite facilities; greater assistance to families with the costs of schooling and educating their children; an expansion of family-friendly work practices; policies to encourage and enable greater involvement of fathers in family life; better services to deal with alcohol and other addictions.

Dublin Forum:

Held on December 4, this was attended by around 160 people. The regional spread was considerable, with participants from Wicklow, Meath, Tipperary and Cavan as well as many parts of Dublin city and the greater Dublin area. Some key challenges were identified for family policy at the plenary discussion including the following: changing value systems in Ireland as they affect how we think about the family; dealing with family diversity; the professionalisation of parenthood; continuing gender divisions. It was recognised that family policy must effect a series of balances: between the interests of different family members; in catering for the general needs of all families as well as the specific needs of some families; in managing the appropriate degree of intervention; in achieving an integrated

approach to the family. Participants also identified a wide range of issues that should be addressed by future policy on the family, including: improving the range, availability, affordability and accessibility of childcare services; improving the services and supports available for the care of adults; improving the services and supports for family breakdown: normalising and generalising support for families.

10th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family – 2004



A heart sheltered by a roof, linked by another, to symbolise life and love in a home where one finds warmth, caring, security, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance – that is the symbolism that is conveyed by the emblem of the International Year of the Family 1994.

The open design is meant to indicate continuity with a hint of uncertainty. The brush stroke, with its open line roof completes an abstract symbol representing the complexity of the family.



International Year of the Family,
10th Anniversary 2004