



**Minister Says Incisive Research Vital
In Ensuring Targeted Responses To Issues
In Rapidly Changing Society**

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., said today that to understand and adequately respond to Ireland's rapidly changing and evolving social landscape it is important that we continue to have incisive research to inform and influence debate and decisions.

The Families Research Programme was set up in 1998 to promote innovative research on many of the major issues faced by families. It has resulted in 15 separate research projects that have covered themes such as family formation, marriage, relationship difficulties, the effects of separation on children, supporting parenting, balancing work and family life and grandparenting in modern Ireland.

The Review of the Research Programme by Mel Cousins, a barrister-at-law who has written extensively on social welfare and issues, draws together the main findings and recommends specific areas for future analysis and research.

Minister Brennan said that the review helped to highlight a wide range of key issues affecting many different types of families in modern Ireland.

Minister Brennan said: "Irish society is changing quite rapidly and the result is people in the many family formations having to cope with new layers of pressures, demands and anxieties.

It is important that we respond to these new demands by continuously updating and transforming social policies so that they are shaped to offer the support the families need at times of particular pressures".

The Minister said the last decade has seen major changes and developments in family policy in Ireland. The traditional family model cannot be taken as the only point of reference any more.

"There are many different family types in today's modern society. While marriage is the experience of the majority of people, many are choosing to live together and others find themselves parenting alone. There are increasing numbers of couples separating and divorcing and as I have often said, it is important to support families through all of these times. It is particularly important to focus support on and to prioritise children".

Minister Brennan said the Families Research Programme has provided policy makers with a wealth of crucial information in a number of key policy areas. It has also highlighted a number of recommendations on specific areas for possible future



Department of Social and Family Affairs

research including the whole area of marriage and relationship stability and breakdown. Not only do we need more research into the positive factors that keep couples together but also what supports and services are available to families in difficulty.

He added: "Research internationally has shown the benefits of family mediation in helping couples who have agreed to separate to reach agreement on issues related to their separation. It assists couples to address the issues on which they need to make decisions including post-separation living arrangements, finances and parenting arrangements to enable children to have an on-going relationship with each parent. Given the expansion of the Family Mediation Service here over the past 10 years - from 2 centres in 1997 to 19 centres today - I think it is appropriate that similar research should now be conducted here".

Minister Brennan said he noted that the review pointed out that none of the projects in the first families research programme looked at issues specifically from the perspective of women.

"Given the obvious importance of this issue, I fully support the recommendation that any further research should ensure a woman's perspective is fully taken into account. I also agree completely that we need to commission quality research into the issue of lone parenthood. This is particularly relevant in the light of the number of lone parents in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment, which currently stands at over 80,000. Again, statistics have shown that families headed by lone parents are at a greater risk of poverty. I recently published a Government discussion paper, "Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents", which proposes a number of radical reforms. I am in the process of consulting with groups representing lone parents on how best to proceed with implementing these proposals and I hope to be in a position to bring forward proposals for legislation in the course of this year".

Minister Brennan added that lone parents are not a homogeneous group; they include parents who are single, separated, divorced or widowed. For this reason the causes and effects of lone parenthood needed to be looked at in a different way to what has been done up to now.

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