

**Ministers Speeches**



**Speech By**

**The Minister For Social And Family Affairs**

**Séamus Brennan TD**

**at the**

**ONE FAMILY Conference**

**“Child of our time: Mapping the future of policy development &  
one parent families”**

**Chief O’Neill’s Hotel**

**Smithfield**

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NB: Check against delivery

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I am delighted to be here today to open the first biennial conference since the evolution of One Family earlier this year. I say evolution because of course One Family has evolved from Cherish which provided welcome support, advice and empowerment for one-parent families for over thirty years.

As you all know, the overall aim of One Family is to affect positive change and achieve equality and social inclusion for all one parent families in Ireland.

Change in Ireland is a theme which most of us will have discussed over the past few years. As the conference theme suggests, Ireland in 2004 is a completely different place to the country that existed in 1972 when Cherish came into existence.

One of the greatest challenges currently facing families is the pace and scale of change evident in Ireland today. When we look at the huge increase in female participation in the work place, the increasing numbers of cohabiting couples, the higher prevalence of separation and the introduction of divorce, the declining birth rate and an ageing population, we see a much more complex Ireland to the one that existed ten years ago, let alone the Ireland of 1972.

One of the most significant recent changes affecting family life has been the substantial increase in women's participation in the workforce. 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. While these developments are to be very much welcomed in that they provide many women with equal opportunities to men in all spheres of life and especially greater economic independence, it does provide a major challenge in terms of how best we can support both women and men in these situations to reconcile work and family life especially where they have caring responsibilities for children, for older family members and for relatives with disabilities.

The issue is even more challenging for those who are parenting alone and it has become clear that we need to take another look at available supports and whether they are appropriate for today's family needs.

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Last year, Minister Mary Coughlan undertook a nation-wide process of public consultation during which family fora were held throughout the country. The final report of this process entitled "Families and Family Life in Ireland: Challenges for the future" was published earlier this year and highlighted a number of key issues which needed to be addressed in developing an overall strategy with regard to families.

One of the key issues raised during the fora was the significant increase in the number of one-parent families. It is a well publicised fact that one third of all births currently occur outside marriage. Lone parents have to carry the double burden of providing for the care of their children and being the sole family breadwinner. As a result, fewer than half of lone parents are in employment and as we all know, a high percentage of lone parent families are categorised as 'at risk of poverty'.

I firmly believe that one of the most effective routes out of poverty for lone parents is through paid employment. Indeed, one of the objectives of the one parent family payment is to encourage lone parents to consider employment as an alternative to welfare dependency.

Of course, access to employment brings its own difficulties. Reconciling work and family life is a major problem for One Parent families.

It is therefore crucial that priority is given to further developing the supports available to lone parents who opt to work outside the home in enabling them to meet both the demands of work and care for family.

The theme of parenting alone will be one of the issues addressed by the development of a clear, coherent, comprehensive and integrated strategy on supports for families across all relevant policy areas.

The findings from the public consultation process will, of course, form one of the key sources for the strategy. I am also pleased that a number of key organisations representing the interests of one parent families have taken the time to meet with my officials and make detailed submissions as to the proposed content of the strategic document. I would like in particular to thank the team at One Family for

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their tremendous work in putting together an excellent submission covering many of the issues which the Strategy will need to address.

An Inter-Departmental Committee of senior civil servants has been working on the strategy since July and the aim is to have it completed before the end of this year, the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Year of the Family.

What are the aims of the strategic process being developed? The first aim is to have families and family life recognised as a distinct policy area in its own right, and not just a focus of policy for a range of other areas such as income support, health etc. This will have a number of consequences.

In the first instance there will be an analysis of the trends in the development of families and family life, and the major challenges these pose for policies to support and strengthen families.

The strategy will be developed to meet these challenges taking full account of the key trends. The strategy will comprise objectives and targets and will be structured from a family perspective.

This will include the following main elements:

Continuity and stability in family life - relating to preparation for marriage, supporting the maintenance of continuous and stable relationships, and assisting couples who experience relationship difficulties via counselling, family mediation etc., particularly the type of services provided by the Family Support Agency.

Parenting - relating to supports needed by couples to have the desired number of children, and in rearing and educating their children to adulthood. This will cover such areas as family friendly employment, income support, child care, health care, housing and accommodation.

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Care for other family members - this will mainly deal with the supports to be provided to families in caring for family members other than children, mainly older people and people with disabilities.

As I mentioned earlier, the Strategy will also cover an analysis of the additional needs particular to one parent families.

The strategy will start with an outline of the major trends and challenges. A strategic framework will then be outlined, incorporating the key objectives and targets to meet the challenges. Details of the measures to achieve the objectives over the period of application of the strategy will be given, together with the institutional arrangements to ensure implementation.

I am sure that the inclusive, integrated and cross cutting approach will be of benefit to all families in Ireland today not least the increasing number of lone parent families in Ireland today.

The Strategy document will also provide an important starting point to the review of the income support arrangements for lone parents that my Department is committed to undertaking under its Statement of Strategy. While some preliminary meetings have already taken place, the review itself is scheduled to commence early in the New Year. I am sure that all here today will follow the review's progress with interest.

Finally, I am delighted that my Department was able to support this important conference through the special awards scheme to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the UN International Year of the Family. I thank you for your kind invitation to be here today and I look forward to working closely with One Family in the ongoing development of policies to assist those parenting alone.

I would like now to formally open the conference.

ENDS