



**SPEECH ON
THE LAUNCH OF THE
FAMILY SUPPORT AGENCY
ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2003**

BY

**SÉAMUS BRENNAN T.D.
MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY AFFAIRS**

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N.B.: CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ministers Speeches



Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

I am particularly pleased to be here today to launch the first Annual Report of the Family Support Agency.

The Family Support Agency was established to bring together the main programmes and pro-family services introduced by the Government in recent years.

In establishing the Agency the Government sought to provide a comprehensive and coherent approach to the future development and delivery of essential supports to families, to promote continuity and stability in family life, and to foster a supportive community for families at local level - key objectives of the Government.

The publication of this report so soon after the launch of the Agency's first Strategic Plan is a testament to the dedication of all those involved with the Agency.

I would like to thank the Chairperson, the Board members, the Chief Executive and the staff of the Agency for the way in which they took the vision of the Government and brought it to life in the Family Support Agency.

Their Commitment ensured that the new Agency was able to accept the challenges it faced to integrate the functions formerly under the remit of my Department and to continue to develop its services to a consistently high standard.

Annual report – findings

I am pleased to note from the Annual Report that the three key services provided by the Family Support Agency have made significant progress since the inception of the Agency.

These services are the provision of the Family Mediation Service, the support for the counselling sector and the ongoing development of the Family Resource Centre Programme.

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Family Mediation Service

Family Mediation, where it works for a couple, can be an important mechanism for safeguarding continuity and stability in a relationship, particularly for children.

It is important that when a couple have decided to separate, they have a service which facilitates them in negotiating their separation without acrimony and allows them to retain control over the context of their own agreements. This type of approach encourages co-operation and has recognised advantages for children.

The ongoing development of The Family Mediation Service has seen the opening of two new centres in Sligo and Waterford. A record number of couples – over 1400 – were helped by the Service in 2003.

It is vital that this important service continues to be developed. I know that the Family Support Agency is in the process of seeking accommodation for an additional two mediation centres in Letterkenny and Portlaoise and that the Family Mediation Service is continuing to assist in the provision of specialist family mediation training. These ongoing developments must be welcomed and have my full support.

Supporting relationships - promoting the counselling sector

Supporting and strengthening family relationships and preventing marital breakdown where this is possible are important objectives for the Government's family policy.

Increasingly, research evidence from both at home and abroad is highlighting the potential of marriage and relationships counselling services in assisting couples coping with difficulties and in helping them to build better relationships.

The Family Support Agency has continued to develop the key counselling sector by providing funding direct to groups providing professional counselling services to support families and enhance family life.

Over €7million was allocated in 2003 to a record 460 groups covering every area of the country. Another important step undertaken in 2003 was the publication of a directory of all organisations providing counselling.

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The "Support for Families Directory" provides details of services being provided county by county together with contact details and opening hours and is an invaluable resource for families and those who support families in Ireland.

Family Resource Centre Programme

Family Resource Centres are an important resource to the work of the Family Support Agency in responding to families at neighbourhood level. The Centres play a central role in providing support for marginalised families and in combating poverty and social exclusion. They act as a first step to community participation and social inclusion for the most vulnerable in our society.

Since the commencement of the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme in the International Year of the Family - 1994, the number of core funded centres has increased from 10 to 72 in this the 10th Anniversary Year.

Funding has increased from just over €300,000 in 1994 to €6.98 million in 2003. A further increase of €1.4million this year sees €8.39 million allocated to the programme for 2004. Since its establishment, the Family Support Agency has approved core funding to an additional 18 centres and the Government is well on the way to achieving the target of 100 centres that it is committed to by the end of 2006.

Building on Families First

The Family Support Agency is a key element in the Government's Families First approach to policy and services development.

The overall policy objective is to protect the family, support the stability of family life, develop supportive communities and address the effects of divorce on families.

The ongoing development of the Agency's three key services as outlined recently in its Strategic Plan for 2004/2006, reflect that continuing commitment.

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The sustained development of the Family Support Agency will be informed by the Government's social inclusion priorities. The Government programme mentions, in particular, the need to include all communities in the benefits of recent progress. All state agencies are being asked specifically to prioritise integrated work in areas of significant disadvantage.

The partnership approach of the Family Support Agency in working with the community and voluntary sector, which is already evident in the composition of membership of the Agency will be a distinct strength for the Agency in developing this remit.

I know that through this partnership approach, the Family Support Agency can continue to build on its impressive list of achievements to date.

In conclusion, the Government established the Family Support Agency to provide a comprehensive and coherent response for families in need of these support services and for families generally. I have no doubt that the Agency is taking this onerous responsibility seriously – this is borne out by the Annual Report which we are here to launch today.

I wish the board, the CEO and the staff of the Agency every future success and assure them of my continued support and the support of my Department.

ENDS