



Address by the Minister for Social and Family Affairs

Mr Martin Cullen TD

at the opening of the

Family Mediation Service - Raheny Office

and launch of the 2006 Annual Report of the Family Support Agency

11 October 2007

Check against delivery

Michael O' Kennedy, SC, Chairperson of the Family Support Agency; Pat Bennett, CEO, Family Support Agency; Sheila Healy, Eastern Area Co-Ordinator; Polly Phillimore, Family Mediation Services Co-Ordinator; Raheny staff; officials from my own Department; ladies and Gentlemen:

I am particularly pleased to be here today in Raheny to open this new office of the Family Mediation Service and launch the Family Support Agency's Annual Report for 2006. I would like to begin by congratulating everyone involved in today's opening. Raheny and its surrounding area has experienced immense growth and development in recent years and this new Family Mediation Service office will have an important function serving a catchment area that includes Coolock and Santry, stretching as far as Donabate and Balbriggan - the latter two being rapidly growing areas.

Family Mediation Service

I had the pleasure of meeting many of you in Croke Park on the 11th September last, when we came together to mark the 21st birthday of the **Family Mediation Service**. Your Service is a sensitive, yet vital conduit, in helping couples who have decided to divorce or separate to reach agreement on central issues such as post separation living arrangements and finances.

But most important of all is the critical role you as mediators can play in the working out of agreed parenting arrangements that allow the children involved to retain close bonds with both parents.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

The benefits of family mediation as a non-adversarial approach to resolving issues that arise on separation are increasingly being recognised worldwide.

Your Service was originally a three-year pilot programme set up in 1986 by Government and it has now become a core part of the work of the **Family Support Agency** - which aims to promote family and community well-being through the provision of supports and services.

Your Family Mediation Service is a free, professional, confidential support that enables couples who have decided to separate to reach agreement on all 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.

Over the past number of years, the Family Mediation Service has radically expanded to meet a growing need for its empathic approach and with the opening of this centre here today, mediation is now available in 16 centres throughout the country. This compares to only two centres in Dublin and Limerick, when this Government came into office in 1997. The mediation service in Raheny will be working with many different kinds of couples including never married parents, couples of different nationalities as well as those in second and subsequent relationships.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of couples seeking mediation as the benefits of mediation become more widely known. Last year the Service helped more than 1,500 couples - which compares with the figure of 250 a year who used the Service from 1986 up to the end of 1997 before its nationwide expansion.

Family Support Agency

The Family Mediation Service as I have said is now a key part of the Family Support Agency. Over the last three years we have seen the Agency go from strength to strength under its first strategic plan. This success is reflected in the publication of the Agency's 2006 Annual Report.

Awards by the Agency to voluntary groups providing marriage, child and bereavement counselling extended from just over €1 million in 1997 to just over €9 million in 2006 and the number of groups funded under the '*Scheme of Grants*' expanded from less than 100 to some 541 over the same period.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

We have seen the Family Resource Centre programme expand from 10 centres in 1994 to 100 centres nationwide by the end of 2006 - meeting the target under the last *National Development Plan*.

And we have witnessed a growing awareness of the supports that are out there for families; a growing acceptance that in a rapidly changing society such as we have in Ireland today such supports are necessary and the services they provide are invaluable.

All of this has not happened by accident. It is because of the dedicated work of the staff of the Agency headed by the Chief Executive Officer **Pat Bennett**. I also have to mention the work of the Board, chaired by **Michael O'Kennedy**.

The Agency Board members have expertise and experience in the fields of family and community services, counselling, family mediation, research and family law. They are, I believe, eminently suited to their role.

The Chairperson, Board members, Chief Executive and staff of the Family Support Agency have taken the vision of the Government and brought it to life in the Agency.

Their commitment has ensured that the 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.

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 continuing to develop its overall policy objective of protecting the family, supporting the stability of family life, developing supportive communities and addressing the effect of divorce on families.

The Government is committed to supporting the important work undertaken by the Agency. As can be seen from the Annual Report, this commitment is reflected in the substantial increases in year-on-year funding awarded.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

This year, funding to the Agency from my Department has increased to over **€35 million** – which represents an increase of over 40% in just two years and a doubling in funding in the four years since the Agency was established. I have every confidence that this investment will continue to pay dividends in the wide range of family services being delivered by the Agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to the professionalism and hard work of not only the family mediators, but all the staff of the Family Support Agency who have made a significant contribution to the promotion of state supports to families.

I would like to congratulate the FMS service co-ordinator **Polly Phillimore**, its Eastern area co-ordinator, **Sheila Healy** and the team for Raheny, - **Fiona McAuslan**, mediator and **Mairín Úi Fhaolain**, administrator - every success in their provision of this important family support for the people of Raheny and the northside of the capital.

I have every confidence that the commitment and dedication of the staff will be a major asset to the continued development of the Service under the expert management of the CEO and Board of the Family Support Agency.

I am delighted to be able to launch the 2006 Annual Report of the Family Support Agency and I now declare this new Family Mediation Service office open.

Thank you all very much.

ENDS