**Family Support Agency (FSA) – Comhairle Submission to FSA Strategy for 2007-2009**

Comhairle welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the second Strategic Plan for the FSA having submitted to the Agency's first strategic plan in 2003.

In responding to the questions circulated by Goodbody Consultants, we have drawn mainly on a range of family related queries presented to the network of Citizens Information Services (CIS) supported by Comhairle and research published by Comhairle on 'Family Matters'[1]. The countrywide network of Citizens Information Services with over 200 information outlets and the Citizens information Phone Services dealt with 800,000 queries from members of the public in 2005 on all aspects of rights and entitlements to social services.

Family matters research was undertaken by Comhairle and published in 2005 to mark the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family. A copy of this research report is attached as background material. A summary of some of the main themes emerging from the research and analysis of family related queries to CIS are set out under the suggested headings below.

Information and advice queries to CIS's are an important source of feedback to Comhairle which can be used to advise government on aspects of policy and on the development of social services. Through its social policy work Comhairle identifies issues relating to the impact of policies on people seeking information on rights and entitlements. In 2005, family related queries counted for 8% of the overall total to CIS's, that is in the region of 64,000 queries annually and cover broadly income supports for low income families, marital breakdown and lone parent families, related legal and support issues and housing and accommodation needs.

Comhairle is very aware of the complexity of family related issues and the difficulties of providing adequately in policy terms for all eventualities. The ability of families to function effectively is affected by their level of access to income, employment, housing and health and community care services. Addressing issues of inequality in these domains is a central element in enhancing family life. There is a need to promote family and work balance, support caring in the home and develop an ethos of joint parenting in policy and legislation.

## Key environmental issues

### Economic/ Demographic

The position of low income and welfare dependent households who are at a particular disadvantage needs to be addressed in a policy context. Despite increases in numbers employed and in welfare provision, child poverty continues to be an issue. The much greater prevalence of two-earner families will have far reaching effects. This presents

[1] Family Matters – Ten Years On" A Comhairle Social Policy Report (March 2005) prepared to mark the tenth anniversary of the International year of the Family.

the double challenge of reconciling work and family life and providing adequately for the care of dependents.

Demographic trends include the substantial population growth of 2% or 87,000 people per annum and the rise in the number of older people with the consequent impact on family needs. Additional supports for families facing potentially more demanding caring roles will be required. The impact of immigration and addressing the needs of families adjusting to new environments is a challenge.

**Social**

Factors which need to be taken into account in the social context when considering family policy in Ireland include trends in family formation and the increasing labour force participation among women, the role of the family as a caring unit and the interface between public/private caring, reconciliation of work and family life, social inclusion measures in relation to income support, housing and accommodation needs and access to health and personal social services.

Arising from Comhairle's research into family matters presented to CIS's, a number of challenges facing family policy were identified. Issues highlighted in the analysis of feedback from CIS's included the plight of low income families, poor or inadequate housing and the need to significantly expand social housing provisions, greater recognition in policy responses of the care needs of families and stronger family friendly work policies and practices supported by appropriate regulation and welfare provision. Affordable and accessible high quality childcare should become the norm. There is a need for a further significant shift towards mediation as a way of resolving family difficulties.

**Technological**

There is a need to ensure that the benefits of technology and egovernment policy impact positively on families experiencing social exclusion. Comhairle's own policy is to develop multiple channels for access to information, including online information resources, such as Oasis.gov.ie, telephone services and a national network of information outlets. Usage of these channels needs to be maximised by families seeking information across the range of public services.

Emphasis on electronic means of engaging with public agencies and doing business should provide real benefits for people who are heavily dependent on interactions with this sector.

Utilisation of community networks and infrastructure to improve access points for families to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) needs to be developed further.

**Policy and legislation**

Notwithstanding the setting up of co-ordinating structures at various levels and new initiatives, a fully collaborative approach to family issues needs further development. Community based services and voluntary provision often operate in a separate domain from mainstream provision and public providers. Historically support services for families have been slow to develop other than crisis interventions. Much of mainstream provision is still crisis oriented. While there are positive developments

with resources going into family resource initiatives at community level a robust system of core social services is required for families experiencing difficulty. The fragmentation of service provision and relatively little integrated planning is a feature of social provisions for families. The number of central government departments involved in service provision makes service co-ordination at a local level very difficult.

## FSA's strategic priorities

A wide range of public policies and programmes impact on families and a number of government departments and agencies have responsibilities which touch on families directly or indirectly. It is not clear how these differing functional responsibilities, such as income support, child protection, education, housing and labour market measures work together to contribute to an overall integrated family policy.

More joint working at central and local level and a greater sharing of information and services underpinned by resource allocation systems is required and a focus on integrated planning across the various departments and bodies at national and local level to promote joined up thinking on family related matters.

Whilst the FSA has a defined role in the area of family support services and policy an enhanced role is required in influencing and impacting on mainstream provisions for families and addressing cross cutting issues.

This enhanced role could include the facilitation of partnerships and linkages with key agencies delivering services to families to develop initiatives that can be replicated in mainstream provision. Geographical accessibility and access to services to marginalised groups should be a priority. Core supports for families should come through a range of needs based personal social services in addition to enhanced community provision.

**Developing relations between FSA and Comhairle**

As outlined in Comhairle's previous submission to the FSA Strategic plan 2003, Comhairle and the Agency have comparable roles in terms of their statutory function regarding an advisory role to the Minister for Social & Family Affairs. Both agencies support national networks of locally based information and resource agencies.

Comparative data capture and collection mechanisms across these networks and joint initiatives to develop a social policy feedback process are possible areas for collaborative work. Citizens Information Services report queries with a social policy dimension to Comhairle– these are analysed and used as the basis for policy submissions and reports to highlight the impact of policy and services on recipients. Family related matters feature significantly in the policy returns made from the network.

Possible areas for cooperation between the FSA and Comhairle include information provision, data capture on needs and related social policy and advocacy work. Comhairle and the FSA might explore targeted information campaigns aimed at ensuring that families have access to whatever supports are available during key life cycle episodes. Establish linkages at local level with Citizens Information Services and Family Resource Centres to ensure information delivery on social services and

social and civil rights and entitlements reaches families in need. Staff and volunteers in FRC's would need access to Comhairle information resources in delivering supports to families. In addition to its information advice function, Comhairle has a remit to support advocacy work to assist people secure rights and entitlements and a specific remit in relation to the advocacy needs of people with disabilities. Possible linkages to be made with the FSA and FRC's through Comhairle's advocacy support programme for the community and voluntary sector.

At an organisational level, Comhairle welcomes ongoing liaison with the FSA to develop the respective strategic responses of both agencies particularly in the context of the commonality of issues both agencies are addressing.

We look forward to developing joint initiatives and wish the Agency well in developing its forthcoming strategy.