

IRELAND

NATIONAL POLICY BRIEF

The objective of this policy brief is to present the current situation and progress made in family support on behalf of the children's rights in Ireland towards achieving quality standards using the quality assurance protocol for family support services developed by the 19 countries participating in the COST Innovators Grant IG18123, QA[4]EuroFam. The aim is to provide key messages on current strengths as well as recommendations to key audiences, bringing relevant views and appraisals from the group of interdisciplinary experts, representatives of various sectors in the field at national level.



National Working Group

Consensual responses were provided by members of Irish National Working Group made up of 12 researchers and coordinators of services and social entities at national, regional and local levels in social, education, health, and community sectors.

1. Contextualization and characterization of family support in Ireland

Q Definition and understanding of family support: Family support as a concept was articulated first in Ireland in 2007 in Family Support in Ireland: Definition and Strategic Intent. This and subsequent definitions regard family support as a style of work and set of activities, with particular attention to reinforcing informal networks, towards the rights and wellbeing of children and young people. Informed by concepts of social ecology, social support, resilience, reflective practice and attachment, a set of principles for practice often accompanies the definition. Family support is more likely to be understood in this way by child protection and related services than other sectors / disciplines.

Q Family support services in context: Families are supported by universal (e.g. Child Benefit) or means-tested payments. Various forms of leave for parents exist, e.g. maternity, paternity and parental leave. All children are entitled to two free preschool-years, while subsidised universal and targeted childcare places are available. Core universal intervention support for families includes the Public Health Nurse service for mothers of new babies, and free General Practitioner care for all children under the age of six. Family related provision exists across child protection, youth work, mental health, community development, addiction / drugs and alcohol prevention, and juvenile justice service delivery sectors. among others.

Q Political perspective on family support: Historically family held enormous significance in Irish society and politics, but only in recent history has family received more explicit attention. The Commission on the Family from 1998, reflected societal and political concern with family, and resulted in the creation of the national Family Resource Centres network and a Family Mediation service. In this century, attention to family and parenting is framed by a key policy focus on children, informed by commitments under the UNCRC. Since 2000, three overarching children strategies have been operated, with other family support related strategies developed on parenting support, early years and children's participation.

2. Key messages from the National Strengths and Recommendations Report



Families and Children

STRENGTHS

1. Reflecting the individual needs and capacities of children, young people and families, a strengths-based approach is adopted in many of the services and sectors. In some cases, this is a formalized, expected part of practice.
2. Supported by sector specific guidance, a focus on partnership working and participation is a feature of many services. This results in more targeted and responsive interventions, in turn realizing the rights of children, young people and parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Because it is not applied consistently across services and sectors, there is a need for a wider application for a strengths-based approach. This will necessitate a comprehensive interdisciplinary training to ensure effective, context specific application of this approach, taking account of the its limitations.
2. There is a need for greater consistency of the application of partnership and participation principles in services which nominally commit to them, and monitoring of same. To be effective, these principles need to be adopted by all sectors and services working with families, supported by policy mandate and practitioner training.



Professionals

STRENGTHS

1. At an overall level, those providing services to children and families are well educated and trained, and work in organizational contexts where a positive work environment is promoted, with attention to continuous professional development.
2. Professionals consistently deliver appropriate and feasible intervention plans, which are guided by best ethical principles and practices. The adoption of case and programme level intervention plans is common practice across all sectors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In order to be more effective in supporting children, young people and parents, a more consistent, cross-sectoral approach to the provision of quality supervision and support for practitioners is recommended.
2. There is scope for increased adoption of high-quality, evidence-informed intervention models and approaches across all sectors and service, and concomitant monitoring and evaluation processes.



Policymakers

STRENGTHS

1. The significance of the role of the family unit and parenting in supporting child development and wellbeing is strongly endorsed in state policy.
2. There is a strong commitment to the adoption of evidence in the development and implementation of policy, across most sectors. This is reflected in continuous commissioning of scientific research across the policy cycle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Despite a longstanding policy commitment to interdepartmental and intersectoral working and the operation of a single department with overall responsibility for children, there is room for improvement in service coordination and integration.
2. Scope remains to increase the use of evidence to inform policy development and implementation and in ways that include all stakeholders, children, young people and parents, practitioners and service leaders, and key policy actors.



Academics

STRENGTHS

1. The value of collaboration between academics, policy makers and practitioners is recognized, with strong examples of such practices. This is reflected in opportunities for academics to work closely with policy makers and practice leaders on topical research studies, informing service developments.
2. The increased emphasis on the value of evidence for policy and practice affords academics opportunities to respond to societal needs while meeting the requirements of their academic roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. While maintaining the independence and objectivity of the academic role, there is scope to create more formalized, stable partnerships to support the delivery of highly quality research, in a timely, responsive fashion to meet the needs of policymakers.
2. There is scope for academics to adopt a stronger lead role in providing training and education in high quality family support, reflecting themes of strengths based and partnership working, participative approaches and accessing and utilizing evidence effectively.

3. Insights and lessons learned regarding the quality of family support

1 There is a cross sectoral constituency of senior leaders who are committed to family support as a way of working and who are open to future collaboration in developing the field in Ireland.

2 There are many strengths in each of the practice, provision and evidence systems, operating at a cross sectoral and interdisciplinary level.

3 Reflecting the research evidence on their role in achieving the rights and wellbeing of children and young people, supporting families and parenting is strongly inscribed in policy and reflected in many practice contexts.

4 Children, young people and families are served by a highly qualified workforce, supported by embedded commitments to continuing professional development.

5 Opportunities remain to achieve high quality family support provision on a consistent, comprehensive and integrated, cross-sectoral basis.

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