

Introduction

Services for children and families in Ireland have long been divided across political Department lines, particularly at the national level. On the ground, services have developed in an ad hoc manner, responding to local needs without a comprehensive national framework that helps to join the dots between the myriad services children and families engage with across Ireland. The division of services which often target many of the same children has led to fragmented service provision which fails to put the child at the centre of its work. Resolving this fractured approach to children and family services is the key to developing services which will deliver better outcomes for vulnerable children across Ireland. We must move beyond bureaucratic silos and reconsider how we deliver services based on the needs of the children and families we aim to support.

The establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the appointment of a full Cabinet Minister marked the first step towards real change in this area. Placing full responsibility with one Ministry is fundamental to any reform. The development of a Child and Family Support Services Agency also marks a significant step forward in the complete restructuring of services for children and families. In particular the incorporation services currently run by the Family Support Agency, the Irish Youth Justice Service, the National Education Welfare Board and the HSE marks a significant move towards the integration of a range of services for children at all levels of need. The successful coordination of this complex field of services will depend on the State's ability to create a bedrock of solid national policy, integrate State's bodies statutory and non-statutory functions, foster strong interagency cooperation between service providers on the ground and allow flexible service development that responds to local need while maintaining national practice standards.

Rationale

Establishing a Child and Family Support Services Agency provides an opportunity to streamline services for children and families. Traditionally, services that tackle child poverty and disadvantage and child welfare and protection services have been approached as separate initiatives. It is crucial that any reform begin with an understanding of child welfare in its broadest sense to allow for a national framework that encompasses a range of interventions that move across a continuum of care from prevention and early intervention to targeted support and protection services including youth justice services and State care.

One of the key challenges in the development of holistic children and family services is getting the right balance between universal and targeted services. This is particularly difficult when trying to restructure such services across education, family support and child welfare and protection lines. Specific education and family support services largely target communities experiencing disadvantage to offset the impact of that disadvantage on children. While child welfare and protection services often work in the same communities, the remit is also necessarily broader in recognition of the fact that child neglect and abuse can happen in any family regardless of region or socioeconomic background. Addressing the balance between universal and targeted services in a national policy framework will be crucial to ensuring that service providers are clear on the remit of services for children and families.

Children and Family Services: Learning from the past

In framing the national policy for children and family services it is useful to look at the systemic problems that have caused ongoing failures in the current provision of such services in Ireland.

Five key fundamental systemic problems can help to consider the implementation difficulties in the current system:

1. There is no reference model for the development of children services- the basis for how services should be planned, organised and delivered. Although there is a widespread acceptance of whole-child approaches, there is a lack of agreement on key fundamental issues, such as appropriate staffing levels for social workers, out-of-hours services, assessment frameworks and service responses to tackling poverty.
2. There is a weak information base, with no common system for assessing the needs of children or reporting on outcomes.
3. There is no resource allocation model for children's services and the proposals tabled make little reference to how children's services should be determined. There is no 'input model', making it impossible to assess or measure outcomes.
4. Structural problems- significant variation in services and standards delivered by local services, this being most evident in assessment systems, conferencing, relationships with voluntary organisations, proportions of children in care and the structuring of services.
5. Historically, a closed and centralised political culture was not prepared to allow external participation in the implementation of policy. Although there is abundant advice available to Government departments and the HSE from NGOs, civil society, the practitioner and the academic community, there has been limited demonstrative interest to take such advice in a whole-hearted way.

Guiding Principles

A meeting of leading international child protection professionals in 2004 outlined six key principles that should underpin the philosophy and work of children and family services¹. These principles should be considered central to the formation and management of the structures for the delivery of services to children and families.

1. Children should be regarded holistically, in both developmental and ecological perspectives.
2. Children should not be regarded as a homogenous, undifferentiated group but as a highly diverse category of beings with an extraordinary range of competencies, perspectives, status attributes, aspirations and societal roles.
3. Protective action needs to mobilise cultural and community assets - emphasizing the need to invest in young people's assets and protective factors rather than focusing solely on specific problems. Building on children's assets while promoting protective factors are more effective in addressing local threats than focusing solely on risk reduction. It is increasingly clear that mobilisation of community and cultural assets can offer an important basis and complement government child protection initiatives making them more effective and beneficial for children.
4. Children themselves must be given an opportunity to have their voices and wishes heard. Many children can play an active role in shaping their own development and the environment in which they live and can bring their own insights, experiences and creativity to bear to ameliorate their difficulties.
5. Interventions should be empirically based to reflect the realities of the situation. Presently, there is a lack of empirical evidence and knowledge on the impact of the interventions provided. Knowing what works in terms of successful interventions is more effective for successful outcomes i.e. benefit of evidence based information. Clear outcomes and a sound knowledge base are essential. Linked to this is the necessity of continuous monitoring of interventions to assess their effectiveness and feed into the process of setting evidence based clear outcomes.
6. Interagency cooperation must underpin the work of child welfare and protection services.

¹ Susan Bissell et al (2006) Rethinking Child Protection from a Rights Perspective: Some Observations for Discussion, University of Victoria, Canada

These core principles complement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) principles of the best interest of the child, the voice of the child and respect for the responsibilities, duties and rights of the parents of the child and should form the basis of the development of policy and practice in relation to all services for children and families.

National Structure

All children and family services must be underpinned by policies that establish clear national standards for service provision, needs assessment frameworks for local areas and coordination of good practice across services, including coordination of research, training, service design and dissemination of information. Leadership and co-ordination roles and structures must be put in place through an effective governance and monitoring function. At the national level, the Child and Family Support Services Agency must carry adequate authority and be accountable for success, reflecting the connection between national programmes / policy and effective implementation. Clear lines of accountability, responsibility and reporting must be developed to link practice work on the ground to the agency.

The ethos, structure, and work of children and family services should be characterised by the following components as it will help foster consistency, accountability and coordination of delivery of services. Without these nuts and bolts at management level services will remain fragmented and varied. These features must be accompanied by independent monitoring and assessment.

1. A reference model – stating the principles and values which should underpin services (e.g. Hardiker², Bronfenbrenner³). National performance standards for children in care as well as clear performance measures for all services (delivered through statutory or voluntary sector) should be set. It should instil consistency through establishing standards for assessment and setting thresholds at which point services will be accessed. For example the Assessment Framework introduced in the UK provides a systematic approach to analysing information about children and families. The framework has a number of dimensions that are explored during an assessment relating to the child's developmental needs including the ability of caregivers to respond to those needs and the impact of external factors on the parent's abilities and the child's wellbeing. The use of this Assessment Framework is influencing the ways in which families are responded to in the UK⁴.
2. A new design reference architecture – outlining the mission, objectives and parameters of services for children and families and how they should be delivered. It should create systems for identifying, assessing and responding to emerging needs. Construct an organigram for services for children and families with links to adjoining services e.g. Department of Health, Department of Education and Skills and the community and voluntary sector.
3. An input model – detailing the level of investment, staff and services including indicators and a directory of services (statutory and voluntary) and ensure complementary rather than duplication of services. It should also identify the amount and percentage spent on children in care, child protection and family support.
4. A Resource Allocation Model – determining how and where resources should be allocated, including the complement of social workers/ family support workers and other services with a weighting toward early intervention and prevention. The present absence of such a model means resources are frequently allocated based on historic geographic areas rather than on population need.
5. A radically improved knowledge base – presently there are critical information deficits with no common data collection point so the establishment of a central unified information systems to analyse need, assess risk, track outcomes and measure performance is crucial. A single common accessible universal information database showing good practice and policy developments across

² Hardiker, P; Exton, K; & Barker, N: *Policies and practices in preventative child care*. Aldershot, Avebury, 1991.

³ The approach of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) is described most succinctly in Smith, Mary & Davis, John M: *Constructions of family support - lessons from the field*. Administration, vol 58, §2, 2010. as one based on the child as 'at the centre of a complex, interconnected system that includes immediate friends, school and neighbours, wider structures such as school policies and local services and macro structures of culture, government and media'. Bronfenbrenner's approaches recognise the systems around the child and family and seek to build on their strengths rather than their deficits.

⁴ Ibid

the range of services hosted by an agency delivering services or independently is required. This would draw on innovative practices in the community e.g. the Children's Services Committees (as they should be) as well practitioner forums.

To establish a clear national structure from which all services for children and families can flow, the Child and Family Support Services Agency must develop clear models for assessment and referral that mean all staff are on the same page when it comes to how they assess and meet the needs of children and families. In addition to establishing the practice frameworks to ensure compliance with the Children First Guidance, the Child and Family Support Services Agency must establish which assessment models should be used i.e. the Identification of Need (ION) Model of assessment⁵, the referral pathways that should be followed i.e. the Differential Response Model and the timeframes staff should follow for assessment and referral. In essence, the Agency must provide the structure around which the architecture of local child and family support services can be developed.

Local Architecture

One of the key goals of Government, and the Child and Family Support Services Agency, is to protect the most vulnerable children. While the national framework must underpin the development of local services to implement this goal, it should not be too prescriptive. The benefits of locally developed initiatives are that they are sector-led, with increased buy-in and cooperation between communities and the agencies that work with them. Local level initiatives should link with Children's Services Committees so that these initiatives can become part of the area based plan for children.

The evolution and experience of the Young Ballymun initiative can provide guidance for possible models. Their services are underpinned by the following principles.

1. Lifecycle response
2. Integration – intelligent cross community planning and delivery
3. Innovation - a creative process, rooted in science, focused on outcomes
4. Evaluation - accountability and results
5. Capacity building - investment in sharing knowledge and best practice
6. Sustainability – ensuring that key services are locally embedded and secure

The development of holistic children and family services must be child centred, designed to meet the needs of the children and families they seek to serve, culturally reflective and evidence based. Services should be delivered in the home, school or in purpose built services. They need to be flexible, available and delivered through a co-ordinated response from inter-disciplinary statutory and non-statutory agencies working together with families.

The first step in mapping out a robust profile for service delivery is to recognise that services do not operate in isolation. Services must be able to meet child and family needs across the age continuum and level of need. Below is an outline of the continuum in terms of 'level of need' across three categories of intervention, depending on need:

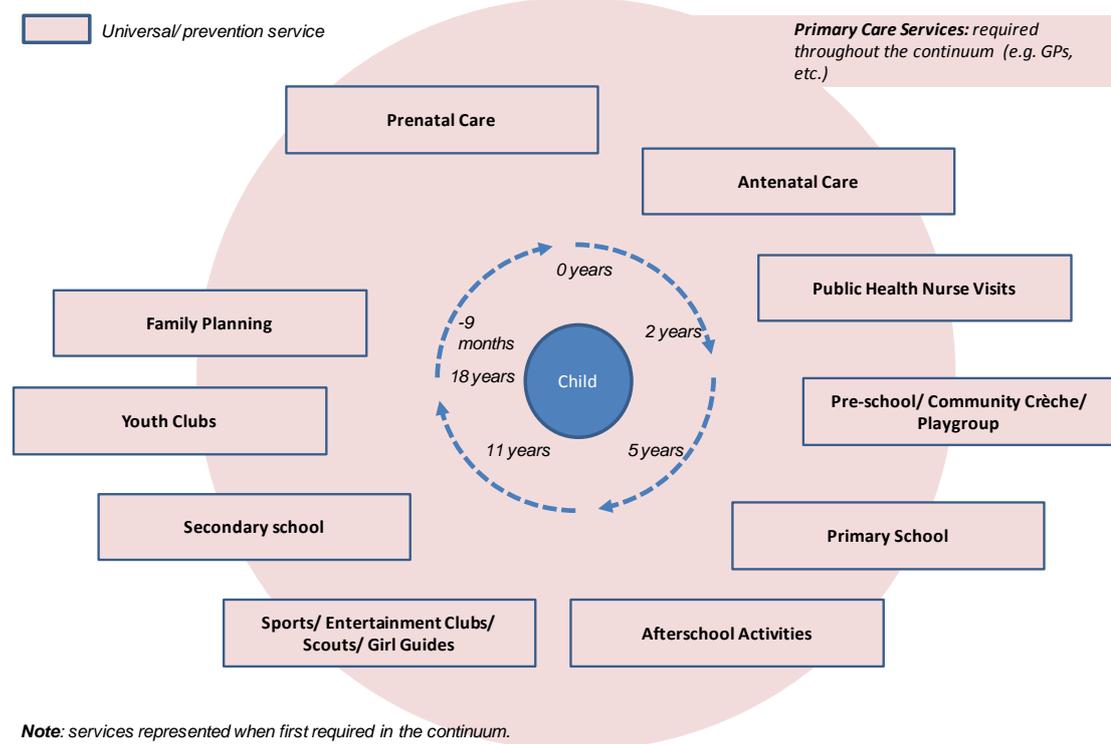
- **Universal / prevention** interventions: these would be available to all children and families within the community and are analogous to Hardiker level 1 services.
- **Early interventions**: as defined in the previous section, these would be available for parents and their children to opt-in, delivered through universal channels and via referral from other agencies. These services would map to Hardiker levels 2 and 3 services.
- **High risk interventions**: these would be mainly accessed via referral from another agency or statutory sources. These services would map to Hardiker levels 3 and 4 services.

Barnardos has developed a community hub model approach to children and family services to assist the debate regarding the development of comprehensive services. These hubs are designed to provide an

⁵ Forkan, Dr. C, Landy, F. (2011); *An Evaluation of the Identification of Need (ION) Process in Sligo/Leitrim and Donegal* Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland: Galway

architecture and method of work which can be used to underpin the delivery of child and family services in areas of disadvantage, where the highest level of need is often found at all levels of risk and intervention.

Community hub – Universal / prevention services

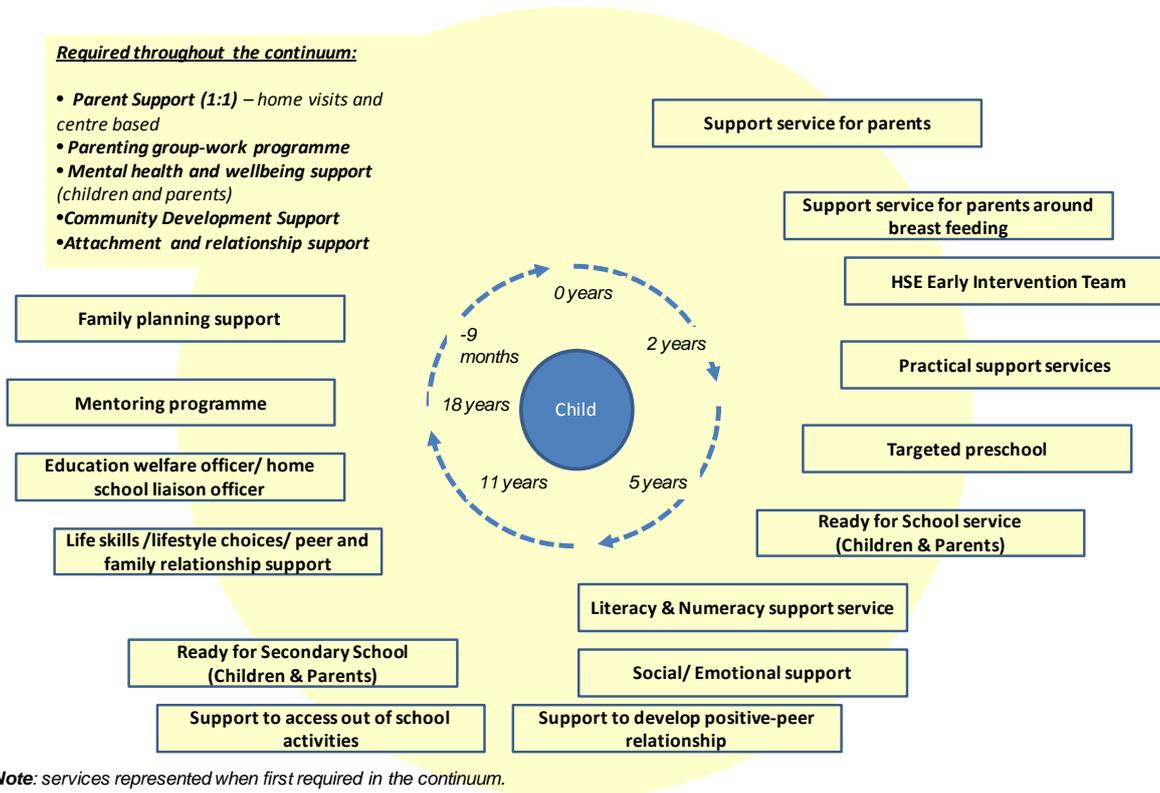


The provision of **universal services** should be a key feature of child and family support work. Universal services, whilst fulfilling an important function, also provide important access and exit points for families who may require additional supports. Universal services that are well connected and have established relationships with early intervention service providers provide a non-stigmatised and easily accessible entry and / or ‘step up’ point for families in need of some additional supports. Furthermore, these universal services can help to:

- Promote the acceptability of other early intervention or intensive services in a community
- Identify the needs of children in a local area through engagement with children and families and local community leaders and activists
- Advocate for and promote the overall development and welfare of children and families at a local and/or regional level

Universal services can also act as ‘step down’ services where they can provide some ongoing support to children and their parents who have availed of an early intervention or high risk service and who still require some support albeit at a lower level.

Community hub – Early intervention services

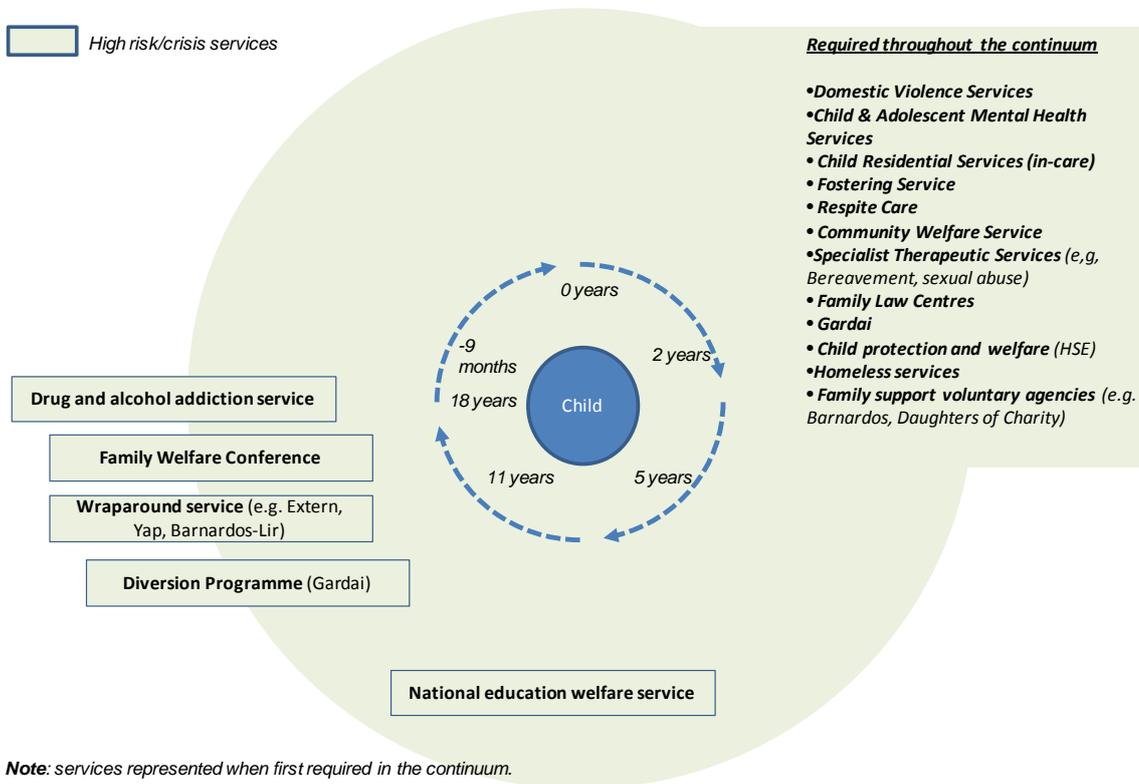


Early intervention approaches are those that prevent or arrest problems early in a child’s life (early childhood interventions) or at the early stages in the development of difficulties. Research from the implementation of early childhood interventions have been shown to generate benefits in academic achievement, behaviour, educational progression and attainment, delinquency and crime and later labour market participation. Cost-benefit analysis of such programmes has shown that the investment made in the health and development of young children not only produces social benefits but also produces economic benefits, particularly associated with decreased needs for service later in life (Karoly et al, 2005).

Barnardos believes that early intervention, implemented as part of a holistic service model is critical in terms of delivering effective support for children, particularly those living in disadvantaged communities.

Community hub – High risk / crisis services

High risk/crisis services



Note: services represented when first required in the continuum.

The moving of children and family services to a Child and Family Support Services Agency is a crucial step towards integrating prevention and early intervention services and high risk/ crisis services. High risk/ crisis services are a crucial piece in the delivery of services to children. When prevention or early intervention cannot ensure the safety of children it is imperative that there is a robust system in place for protecting and supporting children in highly vulnerable situations. The successful marrying of services under one agency will rely on the successful breakdown of duties within the Agency and its ability to establish a clear assessment framework which supports the timely assessment of children's needs and their referral to appropriate services. To provide a holistic, seamless service to children and families the Agency must ensure that everyone within the new Agency and in services work together to ensure that children moving between services can access supports across a continuum that meets their needs without undue delay as they move between levels of need.

Interagency Coordination

Interagency working means more than one agency working together in a planned and formal way, rather than simply through informal networking (although the latter may support and develop the former). This can be at the strategic or operational level⁶.

Effective interagency working is dependant on all agencies and professionals striving toward the same end goal, namely to improve the lives of children and families. Interagency cooperation must be emphasised and encouraged at management and strategic levels because presently much interagency cooperation is reliant on personal relationships that can cease with any staff changeover.

The aim should be to develop an articulated system of services for children and families with clear links between each stage and level of service. There is significant potential for shared roles within and between both statutory and voluntary and community agencies.

The ability to share information between agencies and professionals and to engage with the community through streamlined services will improve the effectiveness of any intervention.

⁶ Learning in and for interagency working, An ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme (TLRP) Phase III funded project (2004-2007), <http://www.bath.ac.uk/research/liw/litreview.html>

Conclusion

Recent developments mean that there is huge potential for the vast improvement of these services and the outcomes they can deliver for Ireland's most vulnerable children and families. The aim must be to create streamlined policy and practice in the system underpinning services to prioritise efficiency and professionalisation, improvement in supervision and quality control, investment in partnerships and a community approach and perspective. If we are to learn from the mistakes of the past the balance between universal, prevention and early intervention services must be fine tuned. The balance between national standards and local, needs-led service delivery must also be clarified. Most crucially services must be sufficiently resourced to avoid continually 'fire fighting' crisis after crisis and allow investment in prevention and early intervention services which will have a longer term positive impact on children and families. Ireland stands on the precipice of monumental change in relation to how we work with children. We must not lose the momentum that has developed in relation to child and family services but rather use the shared enthusiasm for lasting change to put in place solid structures, standards and practice frameworks that will improve the outcomes for current and future generations of children in Ireland.