

Supporting Families experiencing Disability: A Social Inclusion Strategy

Introduction

DESSA, the Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency, is a national community development organisation whose aim is to support the inclusion and active participation of disabled people in Irish life through community development methodologies. DESSA is contracted by the Department of Community, Equality & Gaeltacht Affairs to support the FRCs in meeting their social inclusion function vis a vis disabled community members. DESSA regards the FRC Programme as having the potential to play a key role in implementing strategies to support pathways into work, education, social integration and mainstreaming of services for people with disabilities.

One of DESSA's key objectives is supporting families who experience disadvantage and exclusion as a result of disability.¹ The purpose of this discussion document is to outline the role of the FRCs in implementing strategies to support families who experience such disadvantage.

It is DESSA's aim to develop a coherent strategic approach to supporting families in the region in partnership with the FRC Regional Fora and in collaboration with other identified stakeholders.

This work builds on DESSA's Childcare Inclusion Programme and the Community Inclusion Initiative. The Childcare Inclusion Programme was a social inclusion initiative which aimed to promote the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream childcare and play settings in the eastern region from 2006 to 2008 and was funded by the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform.² The Community Inclusion Initiative was also a two-year social inclusion strategy in the South Kerry and West Cork region, funded by the Family Support Agency, which entailed the establishment of a peer support structure for parents of disabled children and the development of an inclusive childcare model of good practice.³

The Supporting Families Social Inclusion Strategy will entail the implementation of four discrete programmes:

- The Parent Advocacy Programme
- The Parent Advocacy Programme: Training the Trainer
- Community Development & Advocacy
- Childcare Inclusive Policy & Practice

It is intended that these programmes be delivered in conjunction with the FRC Regional Fora through locally based Family Resource Centres, the Local & Community Development Programme, Children Services Committees, County & City childcare committees and other relevant agencies. To date the strategy has been implemented in the south east and southern regions.

¹ *Promoting the equality & social inclusion of disabled people in Ireland: DESSA, Disability & Community Development, Submission to the Dept of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs, DESSA (2009)*

² *External Evaluation of DESSA's Childcare Inclusion Programme 2006-2007, Partas (2007)*

³ *Community Inclusion Initiative Evaluation (DESSA 2009)*

Rationale

The learning from the Childcare Inclusion Programme and the Community Inclusion Initiative has established for DESSA that there is an ongoing need for

- (i) direct provision of support to parents empowering them to act as advocates
- (ii) such supports should be located in their community and in collaboration with community services and
- (iii) that community organisations need specialist training and resources to increase their capacity to engage with families of disabled children and to offer childcare and play services which are inclusive of all children.

It is apparent to DESSA that there is no cohesive or strategic approach to the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream childcare settings. Inclusion tends to happen on an ad hoc basis depending on a number of factors: the policies of individual childcare services, the ethos of community and disability organisations and the resources available through statutory agencies.

While research has shown that participating in mainstream childcare settings benefits disabled children enormously, only a limited number of children have experience of accessing and participating in play and childcare services on the same basis as their non-disabled peers. Many disabled children continue to attend specialist support services which can reinforce marginalisation from their communities.

The need to work towards the inclusion of all children in mainstream settings is supported by the provisions of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) and while the Act relates primarily to children's participation in education, DESSA believes in the practical application of this model to Early Years settings. The National Children's Strategy⁴ supports the rationale for increasing disabled children's access to childcare and play settings and the new Programme for Government aims to increase pre-school places for children with intellectual disabilities.

The FRC programme can play a vital role in creating opportunities for disabled children and their families to participate in their communities and the increased engagement of these families with local services will help to address their risk of exclusion and disadvantage, a core element of the social inclusion agenda as set out in 'Towards 2016'⁵.

The Supporting Families Social Inclusion Strategy meets a core objective of the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP), which is 'the development of quality childcare supports and services delivered at local level'. The type of training supports and resources offered to services to stakeholders will support the implementation of the 'Whole Child Perspective' policy.⁶

⁴ 'Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development': Goal 3, National Children's Strategy, 2000

⁵ Towards 2016, Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015

⁶ The Whole Child Perspective was first set out in the National Children's Strategy, The perspective is informed and underpinned by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Ward (1995) and it is in keeping with the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Core Values

The core values of the Supporting Families Social Inclusion Strategy are:

- Inclusion benefits all children and families
- Access to a childcare or play setting is a right for all children
- Each child's individuality and integrity should be valued
- Expectations should be high for every child
- Parents of children with impairments are the natural advocates for their children

Anticipated Outcomes

Parents will acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to develop effective strategies to engage constructively on behalf of their children, in order to promote their equal and positive participation in society.

Participation in mainstream childcare settings will provide opportunities for disabled children to be part of their communities.

Working in partnership will promote an exchange of good practice, value for money and will ensure effective operational procedures.

The Strategy will promote increased mainstreaming within community childcare settings in that the FRC Programme and other stakeholders will have the skills and confidence to actively include disabled children in their services.

Inclusion of disabled children in mainstream childcare settings is of benefit to non-disabled children as they develop an awareness of difference and learn to respect diversity from a young age.

Proposed Strategy

Overall Aim of the Supporting Families Social Inclusion Strategy

To deliver a series of community based supports to families who experience disability enabling them have equal access to community supports and services.

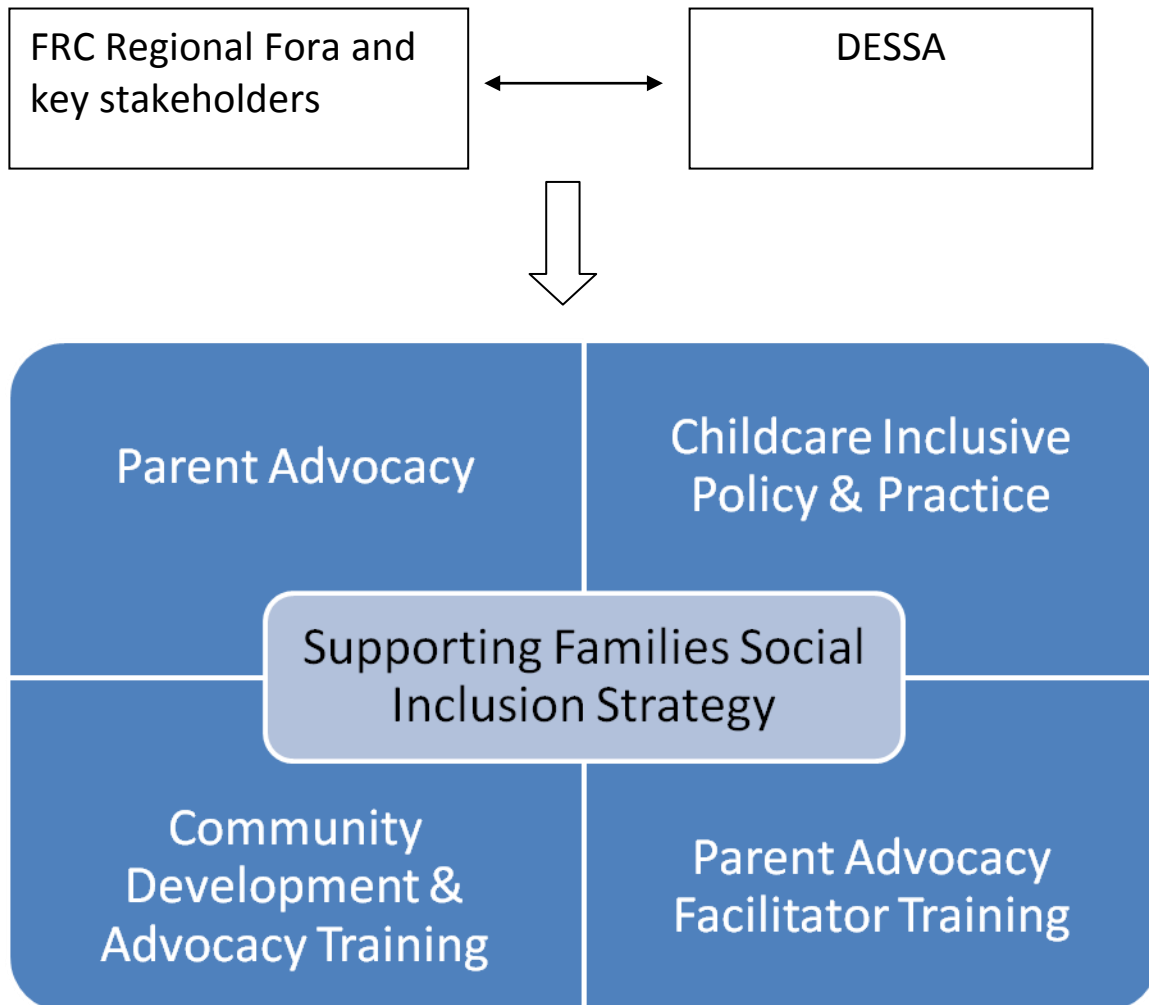
Specific Objectives

- Engagement with regional statutory and voluntary organisations through policy development, resource allocation and implementation of programmes.
- Delivery of the Empowering Parents Programme
To facilitate parents to acquire skills and knowledge to develop effective strategies to engage constructively on behalf of their children.
- Delivery of the Parent Advocacy Programme: Training the Trainers

To provide guidance and information to experienced facilitators to enable them to support existing groups of parents of disabled children or individual parents who opt to participate in DESSA's Parent Advocacy Programme.

- Delivery of the Community Development & Advocacy Programme
A six day accredited training course for voluntary sector staff and volunteers to gain an understanding of community development, disability equality and advocacy practice.
- Delivery of Childcare Inclusive Policy & Practice
Taster workshops for childcare and play providers to support the development of services that are inclusive of all children, irrespective of ability.

Proposed Strategy



Appendix 1

Progress to date

Implementation of the strategy began in 2011 in the south east and southern regions. While most of the funding came from the FSA, DESSA also secured funding support from the Genio Trust⁷. As stated earlier, the aim of this strategy is to develop a coherent approach to supporting families who experience disability through the delivery of a series of Training Supports to the key stakeholders within the community & voluntary sector.

In 2011 the Supporting Families Social Inclusion Strategy successfully delivered training supports to

- 57 parents via the Empowering Parents Programme delivered through 4 FRCs⁸
- 22 facilitators/trainers via the Empowering Parents Programme: Training the Trainer
- 60 community staff and volunteers via Community Development & Advocacy (FETAC Level 6) and
- 30 childcare providers via the Childcare Inclusive Policy & Practice

10 FRC staff have been trained to deliver the Empowering Parents Programme in their communities and 23 FRC staff and volunteers successfully completed FETAC Level 6 training in Community Development & Advocacy. The strategy has been hugely successful in enabling FRCs to proactively include and support parents of children with disabilities through their local Family Resource Centres.

In 2012 DESSA aims to consolidate this strategy in the south east region and to expand the work in Kerry and Cork.

⁷ *The Genio Trust was established in 2010 to support innovative projects that positively impact on the lives of people at risk of social exclusion. Currently they are working in the disability and mental health sector supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies and in collaboration with the Office for Disability and Mental Health, the HSE, and non-governmental advocacy and service-providing organisations.*

⁸ *Newpark Close FRC, Kilkenny, St. Brigid's FRC, Waterford, Raheen FRC, Wexford and Killorglin FRC, Kerry*