

COMMUNITY INCLUSION INITIATIVE



Executive Summary

Foreword

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For further copies please contact:

Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency (DESSA)

Fumbally Court, Fumbally Lane, Dublin 8

Tel: (01) 416 3548

Fax: (01) 453 6861

Email: info@dessa.ie

Evaluation Conducted by:

JL Consultancy

12 Farm Cottages, Kelly's Heights, Castlegregory, Co. Kerry

Email: info@jlconsultancy.net

Web: www.jlconsultancy.net

It gives me great pleasure to welcome the publication of this evaluation report on the Community Inclusion Initiative.

This publication provides us with a review of the work of the Community Inclusion Initiative, which sought to support families experiencing disability by providing a range of supports to both parents and children. It identifies the valuable role Family Resource Centres play in providing community-based supports in meeting the particular needs of disabled children and their families. It also highlights the effectiveness of collaboration and partnership at local and regional level.

The central vision of the Community Inclusion Initiative is that individuals and families will have greater opportunity to participate in and contribute to the life of their community. The evaluation has shown that the Initiative has greatly enhanced the active participation and inclusion of families experiencing disability.

Social participation has come to the fore in international and national discussions on promoting the rights of people with disabilities to participate in all aspects of mainstream society. The UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force in 2008, reflects the growing significance of social participation in society and is based on the principles of non-discrimination, participation and inclusion in society, equal opportunities and accessibility.

I would like to congratulate both DESSA and the Caha Centre in supporting families in the South Kerry and West Cork region and wish them continued success in their social inclusion work.

Brian Crowley

MEP

Introduction

In March 2007, DESSA and the Caha Centre, Adrigole, met with a group of parents of disabled children from the Beara Peninsula to discuss their support needs as parents and explore the possibility of establishing a parent's support forum. As a result of this meeting DESSA and the Caha Centre worked together in facilitating this group of parents to establish a peer support structure. The Community Inclusion Initiative was developed as a result of this work and was financially supported by the Family Support Agency.

Working as a national organisation, DESSA's mission is to support the inclusion and active participation of disabled people in Irish life through community development methodologies. DESSA works with organisations like the Caha Centre which provides essential social services and supports to people living on the Beara Peninsula.

The overall focus for the Community Inclusion Initiative is that all children, irrespective of ability, have a right to access the same opportunities in life. The reality, however, is that disabled children have limited opportunities in accessing and participating in mainstream childcare, play and community settings. Family Resource Centres can play a role in opening up such opportunities for disabled children and their families to participate in a more inclusive way within their communities.

We are delighted with the outcomes of this Initiative: the establishment of the parent's peer support called Family Support & Inclusion Network; the delivery of Childcare Inclusive Policy & Practice training to staff and volunteers of FRCs; and the promotion and awareness-raising of the rights of families experiencing disability to have equal standing in their communities.

We would like to acknowledge the work of John Loughrey, Clive Barton and Rory Kirby.

We would like to sincerely thank the Family Support Agency for their financial assistance and support in the development of this project.

Most of all we would like to thank the parents who make up the Family Support & Inclusion Network for their commitment and contribution to this work.

Alice Griffin, DESSA and Helen Quinn, The Caha Centre

Background

DESSA, the Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency, was established in 2001 to work within the Community & Voluntary Sector in the area of disability rights. Working as a national organisation, DESSA's mission is to support the inclusion and active participation of people with disabilities in Irish life through community development methodologies.

Prior to June 2007 the Caha Centre identified the need for specialist support for parents of children with disabilities on the Beara Peninsula. It is well recognised that living on the Beara Peninsula is difficult in itself due to isolation and the lack of local infrastructure and statutory support services. It follows therefore that parenting a child with a disability in this setting brings added and more difficult challenges. In recognition of this and of its own in lack of capacity to provide this specialist support, The Caha Centre sought the support the Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency (DESSA).

The resulting meetings between the two led to the development of the Community Inclusion Initiative in West Cork and South Kerry. DESSA and the Caha Centre then met with a group of parents of children with disabilities from the Beara Peninsula to discuss their needs as parents and to explore the possibility of establishing a parents' forum as part of the project. The overall aim of the project was to support the eight FRC's in the West Cork and South Kerry region to take a proactive approach in supporting families of people with disabilities. The Community Inclusion Initiative was funded by the Family Support Agency through the Family & Community Services Resource Centre Programme.

The Community Inclusion Initiative

The Community Inclusion Initiative aims to establish a peer support structure for parents of children with disabilities and to develop a model of good practice for the inclusion of children with disabilities within community-based childcare and play settings which contribute to the overall mainstreaming of children with disabilities within their communities.

Evaluation Aims

1. To review and make recommendations on the overall Community Inclusion Initiative in relation to its potential to become a community development mainstreaming strategy.
2. To review key elements of this work – the Family Support & Inclusion Network and their ongoing needs and the Childcare Inclusion Training Programme.

Methodology

- Assessment of key elements of the Community Inclusion Initiative
- Working in collaboration with the Review Working Group
- Facilitating consultative review meetings with key stakeholders and providing regular updates to the Review Working Group

Training Programme in Inclusive Childcare Policy & Practice

The Childcare Inclusion Training Programme was designed to raise awareness among staff, management committee members and volunteers of Family Resource Centre (FRC) based Childcare Services and South Kerry and West Cork.

Overall, the impact of the training was very evident. The most significant impact of the training seemed to be in the attitudes and approaches of those who attended. The awareness raising aspect of the training has been very significant, with one participant referring to the training as “enlightening”, while another called it a “wake up call”. Others stated that they now realised how easy it is to accommodate children with disabilities in their services, and how important it is for children with disabilities to have a sense of their independence.

Participants also stated that it gave them a renewed confidence in their abilities and made them realise that they were capable and comfortable in their work with children with disabilities.

All participants stated that they really enjoyed the training, that it has had, and will continue to have a big impact on their services, and how they as individuals carry out their work. The services they represent would like all their staff to access the training, as well as receive follow up training which included information on specific disabilities.

Family Support and Inclusion Network (FSIN)

The Family Support and Inclusion Network is a group of parents of children with disabilities in West Cork and South Kerry, and has been established as the Parents Peer Support Network element of the Community Inclusion Initiative.

Overall, the FSIN has been a great success for those for whom the initiative was intended to have an impact, the parents of children with disabilities.

The parents have found the group to be an excellent support mechanism, and this has had a tangible impact on their lives and the lives of their children. The group has given an outlet for the frustrations of parents of children with disabilities, and offered direction in their struggle for the inclusion of their children. The parents attending the group have achieved a great sense of empowerment as a result of their involvement and

achievements, and are more confident about challenging exclusion as a result. The FSIN has a strong sense of its own development and the direction it needs to take in the future. In order to achieve this, continued support is crucial, with resources made available to enable the group to grow, and to have an increasing impact on the inclusion of children with disabilities in their community.

Community Inclusion Initiative

As outlined, the Community Inclusion Initiative aimed to establish a peer support structure for parents of children with disabilities and to develop a model of good practice for the inclusion of children with disabilities within community-based childcare and play settings which contribute to the overall mainstreaming of children with disabilities within their communities.

Overall, the Community Inclusion Initiative has achieved three from four of its key objectives.

- The Family Support and Inclusion Network has been established and is growing in both momentum and potential.
- The Childcare Inclusion Training Programme has delivered challenging and practical training on the inclusion of children with disabilities in childcare services to a number of FRCs.
- The “Five Ways to Empower Your Child” workshops for parents has been delivered to parents, who have used this learning to develop their own resources and impact on the development of their children.
- The Audit of FRC Childcare Provision has not begun, but could form part of an expanded continuation of the Community Inclusion Initiative, engaging with childcare providers outside of FRC provision, with the potential for subsequent training delivery.

A key part of the Community Inclusion Initiative has been the partnership element of the initiative. The drive and commitment of a local community based organisation in partnership with the expertise and resources of a

national agency has been paramount to the initiative's success. This direct support by a specialist agency has allowed a Family Resource Centre to respond to local needs in a specific, relevant and appropriate way. There is little doubt that both the agencies consulted and those who participated in the initiative see it as progressive, and have both a desire and a commitment to see it continue and expand.

The commitment of available resources and expertise from all the agencies in the south west, in a planned and co-ordinated partnership approach, could see the Community Inclusion Initiative become embedded as a community development strategy for the inclusion of people with disabilities in their community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

1. The Childcare Inclusion Training Programme was very successful in challenging the current ways of working within FRC Childcare provision in West Cork and South Kerry in relation to the inclusion of children with disabilities.
 - i. Participants saw the training as progressive and as offering practical solutions to overcoming barriers to inclusion
 - ii. The training raised awareness and effected a significant change in attitude in those who attended towards children with disabilities generally, and their own role in being inclusive specifically
 - iii. The participants all stated that the training has had a significant impact on their services, from the design of buildings and room layout, to the range of resources and activities available in their service
2. The Family Support and Inclusion Network was very success in bringing parents together to impact on the inclusion of their children within their community.
 - i. The FSIN provided an excellent support mechanism for parents of children with disabilities
 - ii. The FSIN has been very empowering for parents and has motivated them to civic activism
 - iii. The work of the parents attending the FSIN has had a significant impact on their children's development
3. The Community Inclusion Initiative has proved itself to be a progressive and successful initiative in establishing models of good practice for the inclusion of children with disabilities in their community.
 - i. The Community Inclusion Initiative has provided tangible and direct outcomes for both children with disabilities and their parents
 - ii. The Community Inclusion Initiative has had a practical and long term impact on childcare provision within FRCs in West Cork and South Kerry

- iii. The Community Inclusion Initiative has used effective partnership working to address local need with the support of national expertise
- iv. As a result of the Community Inclusion Initiative, the lead partner, the Caha Centre, has seen an increase in the number of families of children with disabilities accessing mainstream services within the centre.

Recommendations

1. The Childcare Inclusion Training Programme is offered to all childcare providers in counties Cork and Kerry.
2. The existing FSIN is offered continued support both in financial and human resource terms, while similar groups are established and supported in other geographical areas across the region, with a regional network of FSIN considered.
3. A regional agency partnership is established to design and deliver the roll-out of the Community Inclusion Initiative across counties Cork and Kerry through a mutually agreed Lead Agency.
4. Existing resources under social inclusion headings for the area of disability are committed, including finances, human resource and expertise.