

Annual Report 2013



Helping Families Through Change



Chairperson's Foreword

It is extremely encouraging that demand for the service offered by FMNI continues to increase.

The rise in activity seems to reflect the growing awareness that using family mediation, as a process to reach (or move towards reaching) a jointly negotiated settlement, is preferable to being involved in protracted and expensive litigation.

FMNI believes that not only does the service offered by the organisation address the rights of the child, in particular articles 9 and 12 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child but also that decisions reached by the participant negotiation are more likely to endure, than those reached by adjudication or arbitration. Additionally, they are less costly emotionally and financially.

These factors, together with the improved outcomes for the family, indicate that the service provided by FMNI makes a contribution to the government agendas of family support and in particular early intervention and prevention.

While there may be a perception that family mediation relates only to the former couple, FMNI takes a holistic approach. FMNI's policy is that the whole family should be considered in mediating on separation and divorce. The out-workings of this policy as seen through direct consultation with children is a creative and significant initiative for FMNI. It sends a clear message that the impact of parental breakdown affects others in the wider family circle. Consulting directly with children and young people, means they are enabled to have their say about decisions, which will be made, in the same way as their parents are empowered to do so.

FMNI has always been a passionate promoter of practising within a regulated framework of agreed standards as required by Family Mediation Association and College of Mediators. The organisation believes that as the issues raised by clients within family mediation sessions and the decisions made can have far reaching effects on those involved, practitioners should be trained to the highest standards and the quality of their practice constantly monitored.

FMNI continues to advocate that former partners should avail of family mediation and there is no doubt there has been a rise in those offering mediation services.

Given that upsurge, we would wish to call on those in positions of authority to embed quality assurance into this area of work and establish occupational standards for practice of family mediation in Northern Ireland.

This would bring more clarity to a field, which is becoming quite confusing for the public and would provide clients with reassurance that the practitioners with whom they engage are appropriately qualified and managed.

Within FMNI the Director has ultimate responsibility for standards, and importantly the organisation employs Professional Practice Consultants who work within a framework, recognised by the Family Mediation Council and the Mediators Institute Ireland to ensure the maintenance of standards through the support and supervision of the mediators across jurisdictions. The leading champion for adherence to professional quality standards and for a number of years was the only Professional Practice Consultant is Sheena Bell, whose name is synonymous with family mediation.



Some thirteen years ago, Sheena established the organisation, now known as FMNI. Sheena has dedicated many many years to family mediation practice, the training of family mediators, and overall has made a significant contribution to the furtherance of the profession. As Sheena is retiring, on behalf of the Board, I wish to extend a great debt of gratitude for her immense hard work, energy and passion, which she has devoted to family mediation and FMNI.

During the year the Board has been kept abreast of all activities through the informative reports from the staff. The Board is constantly impressed by the team's efficient management of tasks, whose tenacity and integrity is tested daily by the nature of the work. Equally noteworthy, is the capacity of the mediators to continue to deliver the service to a high standard

with commitment and vigour. The Board recognises that the organisation is fortunate to have in Joan Davis, an extremely competent and inspiring Director, whose management skills has enabled the organisation to continue to progress and expand.

May I take this opportunity to thank the Board members, each of whom have given a great deal of their time and expertise during the year to the task of ensuring that the organisation complies with good governance practice.

I look forward to the incoming year, which I anticipate will see FMNI's profile raised further, as the organisation's reputation for the delivery of high quality and a much needed service is further enhanced.

Pip Jaffa OBE
Chair



Director's Report

The impact of a poorly managed family separation or the total estrangement of a child from a parent can have catastrophic consequences for that child, the parents, the wider family circle and ultimately society as a whole.

The devastation experienced in families is the subject matter family mediators are dealing with on a daily basis. The professionalism of these highly skilled mediators, whose optimism, strength and intellect is brought to the process to enable former parents to negotiate a future co-parenting agreement as separated parents, is to be commended.

FMNI has been supported by funding from HSCB to develop the service offered throughout NI and we appreciate the ongoing support provided. Parents who have not entered the court system may access the service free of charge across NI; this demonstrates 'early intervention' in action producing better outcomes for children. With best outcomes for children at the centre of our work, we remain committed to ensuring that separating parents are empowered to find agreement to co-parent into the future with confidence and with children at the centre of all negotiations.

Strategically, FMNI is the professional family mediation service and family mediator training agency in NI. We continue to work towards awareness raising of family mediation as a process that when fully embraced can either negate the need for court services or reduce the time, expense and emotional impact on the family. The Court system is there to enable the closure of a legal relationship and to protect the vulnerable.

Use of mediation continues to 'play catch up' with the rest of Europe, but we are optimistic

given the greater interest in early intervention mechanisms, particularly within government departments, that additional funds will be directed to capacity building and awareness raising. It is recognised that family breakdown has far reaching implications across all government departmental budgets and therefore funding services that support separated parents and their children is a more effective use of public funds.

The work of the service requires the entire team to approach all daily tasks with extreme sensitivity, patience and diligence and as a service under pressure from increased demand, with over 1000 hours of mediation delivered, their hard work and commitment is to be commended. Particular reference to Diane Hammond, Tracy Cousins and PPC's Sheena Bell and Eimear Hayden, who work tirelessly to ensure access to a high standard of service.

The FMNI Board has experienced some changes during the year and I welcome new enthusiastic members to support me and the team to continue to ensure that FMNI meets all relevant governance obligations and standards. Chairperson Pip Jaffa OBE continues to lead, motivate and champion the work of FMNI and her contribution is immeasurable. Treasurer, Victor Coleman works diligently throughout the year to ensure all financial matters are in order and contributes many voluntary hours to ensure adherence to all financial protocols.

Sadly going into the 2013 year we are losing Sheena Bell, the founder of FMNI and Treasurer, Victor Coleman, both retiring. Their endless energy and professionalism will be greatly missed by all.

Joan Davis

Professional Practice Consultant's (PPC) Report

The PPC team has consisted of Sheena Bell, Eimear Hayden and Margaret Fawcett. Margaret specialising in the support and development of Direct Consultation with Children throughout the service, Eimear providing professional consultancy West of the Bann and Sheena fulfilling this function to those working East of the Bann.

Core Activity:

- Regular 1:1, group and occasional shared supervision sessions of all the practising mediators in order to ensure maintenance of professional standards, support mediators in their management of complex and emotionally charged conflicts, encourage their use of a safe space to explore self awareness and identify areas for development.
- Supervision specific to the Accreditation of experienced mediators. We are pleased to report that our 100% record continues in this regard. Davina Clements, Ken Cathcart and Jacqui Sharkey have all been successful in their submissions.

Contribution to Service Development: Policy development:

Several policy documents have had our attention and along with volunteers from the mediation team and the participation of management and administration a series of papers have been written. These include a revised court referral to mediation policy document which was presented to lawyers and judiciary, draft papers for publication as well as internal protocols and practice notes.

Training:

FMNI has been recognised and approved by the Mediators Institute Ireland in 2012 as a provider of training in mediation. We now have

approved status across the island of Ireland as providers of a Foundation training programme in Family Mediation and throughout the UK as providers of a generic mediation training programme with family mediation specialist module. Training output has been led and delivered by a training team of the PPCs plus experienced "senior" mediators Janni Knox and Aedin Bradley. Each bespoke course delivered has broken new ground e.g. a 32 hour specialist family mediation module in Donegal, an external CPD training on Couples in Transition delivered to solicitors, counsellors and mediators and a Foundation Training programme with UK and RoI internal and external assessment.

Janni and Aedin have successfully completed a distance learning package in Family Mediation Professional Practice Consultancy and we are delighted that they are poised and ready to become fully active FMNI Professional Practice Consultants.

Sheena Bell and Eimear Hayden
PPCs

Mediators

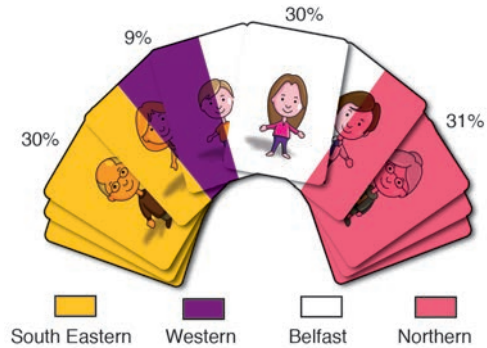
Sheen Bell (PPC)	Janni Knox (PPC)
Aedin Bradley (PPC)	Deborah Macdonald
Christine Carlin	Fionnuala McGrady
Ken Cathcart	Ian McMurray
Davina Clements	John Mullin
Rosalind Dunlop	Eamon O'Connor
Teresa Fallon	Patricia O'Kane
Emma Fox	Carolyn Poots
Louise Goodman	Polly Rowan Hamilton
Malachy Hagan	Jacqueline Sharkey
Eimear Hayden (PPC)	Elizabeth Weir

Overview of Developments

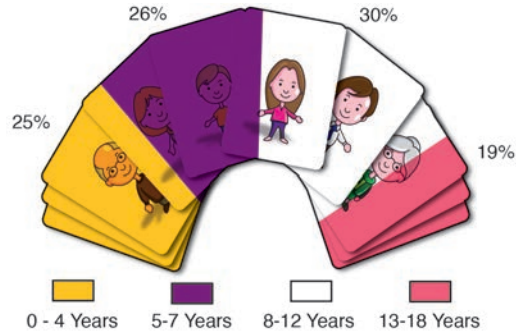
- Findings from an independent evaluation of the three year funded service provided FMNI Board of Trustees, Staff and Mediators with positive feedback on the service and recommendations to help us enhance service delivery and develop new ways of collating outcomes. Parents expressed the view that engagement with FMNI had significantly changed their lives for the better and cited the benefits of the process in which they had engaged – being heard; sorting out contact and other issues; feeling better about themselves and moving forward with their lives. 66% described benefits accruing to their children as an indirect outcome of the process and indicated that their children were less upset and less stressed. While many of the benefits parents claim for themselves and their children relate to soft outcomes there was clear evidence that concrete agreements were reached. All those who responded had reached all or partial agreement with 60% Memorandums of Understanding. Of all the agreements made, 83% were still in place at the time of the survey and all were clearly appreciative of the quality of service they received from the organisation.
- Recommendations from the report include the need to develop a formal research strategy, expand the funding base, develop a bespoke database and continue to lobby for a publically funded awareness campaign
- FMNI believes the qualitative evidence now exists in NI following three years of the funded service to provide evidence for a longitudinal study into the benefits of mediation when parental relationships break down.
- During the year we developed an information leaflet aimed at young people whose parents may be engaged with the process.
- The original FMNI leaflet has been reviewed and redesigned and the Court referral policy and the Supervision policy have been reviewed.
- FMNI continues to offer information sessions to voluntary, statutory agencies on the work of the service. FMNI is represented on various fora, including the Parenting Forum, College of Mediators, Mediators Institute Ireland, The ARC Consortium, NI Child Maintenance Stakeholders Group, Belfast Court Users, CYPSP locality groups, COAC Review Panel & QUB CCR Forum
- FMNI appreciates the effective working relationship with the Family Policy Unit and has contributed to the mapping exercise instigated by the Dept of Justice as part of the ongoing review of access to justice.
- Interest in all aspects of our training resulted in the development of additional bespoke family mediation skills training that may assist Children's Court Officers and others working with families to reduce conflict.
- We have developed working relationships with dedicated ' Homeless Youth' social workers and those charities that support homeless young people. It has been shown in other jurisdictions that early intervention with young people and their estranged family using family mediation can reduce conflict, maintain communication and in some cases reunite the family.

Statistics

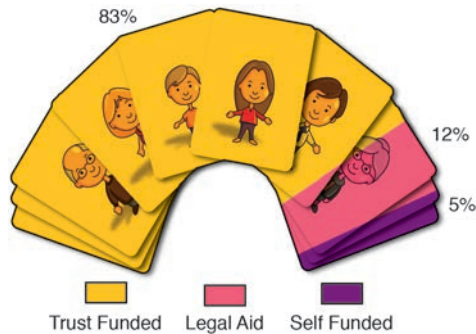
Access to Services Across Trust Areas



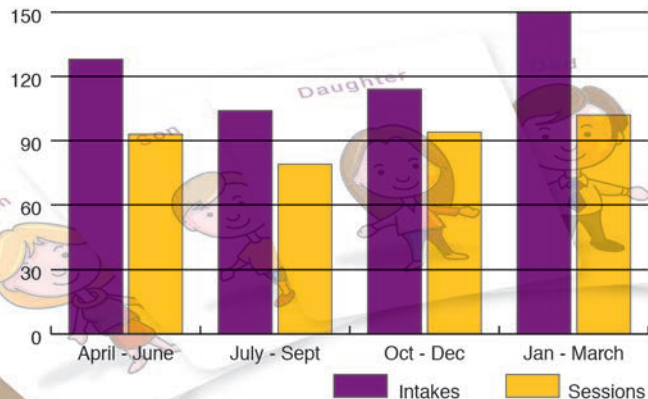
Breakdown by age of Children whose Parents engaged in the process



Breakdown of Funding Source April 2012 - March 2013



Pre-Mediation Intakes & Sessions April 12 - March 2013



Experience of the first Employed mediator 2012-13

Until August 2012, FMNI used only the services of the Panel of sessional mediators. I was fortunate to be selected as the first mediator to work as an employee on a fixed 20 hour per week contract with the intention of providing continuity of service in the Belfast office. Previously, I had been one of those sessional mediators on the FMNI Panel for several years.

Volume of work

The most striking thing about the transition I made is the step change in workload. I have worked out that during my 12 month contract I will have done well over 200 intake sessions with clients and more that 100 joint sessions. Already I have co-mediated with 9 other mediators and 3 trainees and I am hoping to increase these numbers in the next couple of months.

As a sessional mediator I was used to having 3 or 4 cases live at any time. For the past year, the volume has averaged 12.

This increased volume has obvious implications. Is there a danger of becoming stale and adopting a formulaic approach to every case? Fortunately, human beings seem to be infinitely variable and every case presented slightly different challenges and opportunities to develop my skills. However, it quickly became apparent that appropriate writing up of cases was an immediate action to avoid backlog of work.

When managing a small number of cases it is possible to recall minute details from previous sessions upon meeting the clients again, this is less likely with large volume of cases. With the greater workload associated with this role, I realised that I needed to set aside time to review cases, reflect on their

nuances and think about approaches to the next session. It is also important to be able to talk in confidence about cases and clarify ideas and perhaps disperse any emotional stress. Formal supervision is important and I also found it useful just to talk informally to PPC's Sheena & Eimear.

Benefits of the post

It is undoubtedly beneficial to have the guaranteed availability of a mediator for a specific time slot each week. This eases the burden on the Coordinator to some extent, as she tries to organise appointments in a reasonable timescale.

Other benefits of the post gleaned from feedback from staff is that many apparently small operational issues and concerns can be discussed and resolution found quickly when an employed mediator is present in the main office as Supervisors are not always present. I was also able to contribute to the weekly case review meetings and policy discussions during my time in post. It serves to remind mediators in training that a career path is now available within the organisation.

Ken Cathcart

Client Survey Comments

“ It provides a service which proved essential to my avoiding a lengthy and nasty court situation... it calmed all parties, it cleared priorities, it made space for communication, it gave a clear plan and agreement for future. It put my child first and showed us how to do that. It saved the day. ”

“ They made a bad situation good! I really think that if it were not for FMNI I would still be struggling 3 years on... this was definitely the (almost) stress free option. ”

“ I hope that through my answers and comments you can clearly understand how greatly I have benefitted from, and how strongly I appreciate, the work of FMNI. This free service has been a complete 'life-line' to me in enabling me to get my life back on track following my divorce. Words cannot express this enough. ”

“ Creates an environment which makes it easy to communicate. ”

“ FMNI gives people an opportunity to address the most difficult issues in a safe environment. If it had not existed, we would have had to address issues legally, which would have been very difficult for myself and my son. ”

“ Clear guidelines – reinforcement of discussion, help with forward planning. ”

“ Accommodates meetings in a location close to / suitable to the people involved. Provides impartial service. ”

“ It helps you sit down and talk about things and everyone gets their say and deals with what needs to be done without taking sides. It helped me and my ex-wife a lot. ”

“ Allows you to get your point across without getting into a heated argument. ”



FMNI Board Members April 2012 to March 2013

Chairperson: Pip Jaffa OBE
Treasurer: Victor Coleman
Company Secretary: Joan Davis

Board Members: Darren Magee
Clare Bates
Tony Barclay
Liam Mackle
Glynis Mulholland
Fiona O'Donnell
Muriel Orr

FMNI Staff:

Joan Davis: Director
Ken Cathcart: Mediator
Diane Hammond: Coordinator
Tracy Cousins: Administrator



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