

AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN **PUBLIC RELATIONS** **2021**



Best Use of Media Relations



Campaign

FRCs: Supporting Families During the Covid-19 Crisis

Description of Campaign

Ireland's 121 Family Resource Centres (FRCs) support families in communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, their services have been in high demand. This campaign aimed to demonstrate the essential role FRCs played in the initial pandemic response; and to increase political support for their important work.



Public Relations Consultant

Alice PR & Events



Client

Family Resource Centre National Forum

Background to the Campaign

The national Family Resource Centre programme is the largest community-based family support programme in Ireland. Through a network of 121 Family Resource Centres (FRCs), it supports families in communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage. The FRC programme has been in operation for over 25 years, and is housed within Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The national representative body for FRCs is the Family Resource Centre National Forum (FRCNF).

With the onset of the Covid-19 crisis last year, and subsequent economic and societal restrictions, FRCs moved quickly to adapt their services in response, setting up new systems and supports to ensure they could continue to provide crucial services while adhering to all public health guidelines. At the same time as having to adjust to remote working and public health restrictions, FRCs experienced a sharp surge in demand for their services, particularly in relation to food parcels, parenting supports and mental health supports.

One of the key strengths of FRCs is the fact that they are so deeply embedded in local communities: the individuals and families with whom they work know them well, and – prior to Covid-19 – already had a trusting relationship with

them. However, while FRCs were well-respected and well-known at local level, the FRCNF was of the view that their work was not receiving the national profile and recognition it deserved. Furthermore, the Forum recognised that national recognition for FRCs would become more important than ever in the period of post-Covid-19 recovery. In particular, it would be crucial to ensure funding for FRCs was maintained.

With these national profiling goals in mind, the FRCNF contracted Alice PR & Events in May 2020 to profile the key role being played by FRCs in response to Covid-19 and to raise awareness amongst relevant politicians and policymakers of the need to maintain funding for FRCs.

Statement of Objectives

The over-arching objectives for this campaign were to:

1. Profile the key role being played by FRCs in response to Covid-19; and
2. Raise awareness amongst relevant politicians and policymakers of the need to maintain funding for FRCs.

Ultimately, the goal of the FRCNF was to ensure FRCs would be sufficiently resourced throughout 2020 (and beyond) to meet the increased demand for their services as a result of Covid-19.

Specific communications objectives for Alice PR & Events included the following:

- Develop a media relations strategy aimed at profiling the essential Covid-19 supports being delivered by FRCs in communities across Ireland.
- Ensure strong news angles with the potential to achieve not only national coverage, but media coverage in outlets in all constituencies in which an FRC is based.
- Secure media coverage in outlets of significance to policymakers and politicians (including the local media outlets – at constituency level – of key Ministers and Spokespersons).
- Secure the buy-in of local FRCs for the campaign; and make it easy for them to share and amplify key messages at local level.
- Support the FRCNF in disseminating and sharing key campaign messages via their social media channels.

The FRCNF is led by a voluntary Board of Directors, all of whom are involved in the day-to-day operations of FRCs in their local areas. The organisation has very limited staffing and financial resources. As such, a key consideration for this campaign was to ensure Alice PR effectively managed all outputs – from concept development to delivery, reporting and evaluation – without placing significant demands for their time on the Board of the FRCNF.

Programme Planning and Strategy

Our service delivery was comprised of three phases:

1. Preparation;
2. Implementation;
3. Measurement and Insights.

1. Preparation

In our preparation phase, we consulted with the FRCNF to identify clear organisational and communications objectives, as set out above. We also worked closely with the Forum to identify the target audiences for this campaign, namely:

- Politicians and policymakers – particularly those with the authority / influence to ensure funding for the Family Resource Centre programme was maintained in Budget 2021.
- Staff and voluntary Board members of local FRCs. These had a crucial role to play in the campaign in terms of (a) informing the strategy; and (b) ensuring messages were effectively disseminated at local constituency level.
- The general public. While this target audience – because it is so broad – can be problematic, when the FRCNF approached us to develop this campaign, it was clear they wanted to raise general public awareness of the plight

of families being supported by FRCs. The reports from local FRCs – of the destitution and hardship being suffered by many families – were shocking; and there was a sense that this story had not yet been publicly told at this point in the pandemic. The FRCNF was keen to highlight to the general public the extremely negative impact of the pandemic on vulnerable communities – including spiralling unemployment rates; families struggling to pay for food and heat; negative mental health impacts; digital poverty and exclusion; and a range of challenges in relation to home-schooling.

- A final target audience for the campaign was families and individuals in need of support, i.e. existing and potential new service-users of FRCs. While the campaign focused on the extreme challenges brought about by Covid-19, an important message of hope was included – that, if families needed support, their local FRC was there to help.

We were tasked by the FRCNF with coming up with a creative, impactful way to meet their campaign objectives and reach these target audiences. We suggested the development and rollout of a survey of FRCs, aimed at capturing key data about their response to the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. increase in demand for certain services; innovations introduced in response to public health restrictions, etc.).

In consultation with the FRCNF, we drafted the survey questions, administered the survey (via SurveyMonkey), and analysed the responses. We then collated the responses into a briefing paper (authored by our Managing Director, Martina Quinn), which was used as the ‘hook’ for the media relations campaign.

2. Implementation

We used a range of tactics in the Implementation phase of this campaign:

Agreement on Key Messages

Our survey results confirmed the anecdotal evidence: there had been a sharp increase in demand for FRC services since the onset of the pandemic, with particularly high demand for parent and family supports, food parcels, and counselling and mental health services. At the same time, the income generated by FRCs (typically through room rentals for local groups; childcare services; and social enterprise activities) had fallen steeply.

The survey also helped us identify new measures FRCs were putting in place to help their local communities. The top three trends in this regard were:

1. FRCs were playing a key role in collecting, preparing and providing food for families and individuals in need. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all FRCs were providing food packages, food vouchers or cooked meals to families in their local area, with some providing food for hundreds of families on a weekly basis.
2. FRCs were providing activity packs for families – with a focus on home-schooling and entertainment for children.
3. FRCs were undertaking regular check-in calls with vulnerable members of their local communities, with many FRCs contacting hundreds of people each week.

FRCs at the Centre of the Story

While the survey provided ample news angles for the press campaign, Alice PR agreed with the FRCNF that FRCs within local communities needed to be at the centre of this story and their voices needed to be heard. We worked with the FRCNF to identify staff at local FRCs who could speak first-hand about their experiences for the purposes of media interviews. Alice PR provided coaching to these staff-members in advance of any media interviews.

Engagement with National Media

Once the briefing paper had been prepared, Alice PR used its key messages for our press materials and pitches to media.

We issued advance press notification and pitches to relevant target media at a national level, as well as a detailed press release on the day of the launch of the survey findings (the survey report was launched as an online publication – at a time when public gatherings were not feasible).

Press materials were issued to a wide cross-section of national media; and Alice PR also pitched in advance to a number of key targets, including social affairs correspondents, news media, family and health correspondents, and features media to notify them of the upcoming survey launch.

Media coverage was achieved across a range of national news outlets, focusing on the survey findings and all carrying the key messages of the national press release. This included features in: The Irish Times, Irish Independent, Irish Examiner, Irish Mirror, Irish Daily Mail, TheJournal.ie and on Newstalk.

To prolong the impact of the campaign and further highlight the reality for FRCs across the country, Alice PR secured a radio feature on RTÉ Radio One's 'Drivetime' programme. The package included a visit to Hill Street FRC in Dublin; and featured both service-users and staff of the FRC. It ran almost a month after the survey launch, ensuring longevity for the media relations campaign. Throughout that month-long period, local media coverage for the campaign was also sustained.

Local Media Campaign

Given the importance of garnering support for FRCs on a cross-Party basis – not only amongst relevant Ministers, Ministers of State and Oireachtas Committee members, but also amongst backbenchers – local and regional media outlets were an important target. Local media coverage played a crucial role in positioning FRCs as an essential service-provider in communities nationwide. It also increased awareness of the services offered by FRCs, ensuring local families knew FRCs were there to support them during this difficult time.

To coincide with the national launch of the survey findings, we issued local press releases to all regional and local media outlets. These were carefully tailored on a county-by-county basis, referencing local FRCs for each county. There was extensive broadcast and print coverage across local media. Alice PR ensured that, where possible, radio opportunities that were secured were allocated to FRC staff from the local area, so they could share their first-hand experiences of problems specific to that area, as well as inform people about the services they offered. Alice PR worked with the FRCNF to ensure all local spokespeople were fully briefed and prepared in advance of interviews.

Social Media Support

We worked with the FRCNF to ensure key messages from the media relations campaign were amplified on social media. To this end, we drafted content for the Forum's own social media channels, and we also disseminated wording for social media posts to the network of FRCs, making it easy for them to copy and paste key messages for sharing on their own individual social media channels.

Political Engagement

Finally, we advised the FRCNF on how to use the survey findings as a political engagement tool. We developed an advisory outlining key 'next steps' re. same, and identifying members of the (then new) Oireachtas for the FRCNF to target to build alliances.

Measurement

- Survey responses were received from 75 FRCs (62% of all FRCs).
- A comprehensive report was produced by Alice PR on the survey findings. This has subsequently been used by the FRCNF in communications and political engagement activities. It also informed 'Our Story', a milestone publication depicting the historical, current and potential future development of the FRC programme.
- 90 pieces of media coverage (16 national; 74 local) secured, with an audience reach of 7.4 million.
 - > National coverage included: The Irish Times, Irish Independent, Irish Examiner, Irish Mirror, Irish Daily Mail, TheJournal.ie, Newstalk's news bulletins and 'It Says in the Papers' on 'Morning Ireland'.
 - > One month after the launch, RTÉ's 'Drivetime' aired a feature on FRCs.
 - > Sustained local media coverage was also secured – with coverage in 26 counties.
 - > All media reports reflected key messages – with no negative coverage for this campaign.
- The profile of media outlets in which coverage was secured was aligned to the target audiences. In particular, it was significant to achieve coverage in the national broadsheets, on 'Morning Ireland', 'Drivetime' and Newstalk, and in a wide range of local outlets – to ensure the campaign was well on the radar of politicians.
- On the launch date, James Browne TD, Minister of State for Law Reform, raised the survey findings in Dáil Éireann.
- Green Party Spokesperson for Children and Youth Affairs, Patrick Costello TD, issued a press statement in response to the launch.
- There were high levels of social media engagement, with a range of external stakeholders posting about the survey.
- There was a peak in traction on the FRCNF social media profiles during the campaign. On the launch date, Facebook had three times as many profile views than the previous day, with campaign posts reaching 15,000 people in comparison to an average of 500.

Ultimately, since the publication of the report, there has been sustained and cross-party political support for the FRC programme and high levels of political awareness about the important role played by FRCs in the Covid-19 response. Of most significance, funding for the FRC programme was actually increased in Budget 2021.

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