

An architectural rendering of a modern building, likely a children's center, featuring a prominent white canopy structure. The foreground is dominated by a dense field of purple lavender flowers. A paved walkway leads towards the building. In the background, there are lush green trees under a blue sky with light clouds. Two figures are visible near the entrance of the brick building.

A Vision for a Children's Centre

Aoibhneas Women
and Children's
Refuge Coolock

'Aoibhneas wants to pave the way in changing how refugees work with children in Ireland, to become places that truly support children through the traumas of domestic violence.'

Terri Morrissey, Chairperson of Aoibhneas



Why does Aoibhneas need a specialised Children's Centre?

Since its opening in Coolock in 1998 by former President Mary Robinson, 2,000 mothers and almost 5,000 children have sought refuge from domestic violence at the Aoibhneas Women and Children's Refuge.

Having become increasingly concerned about the impact of domestic violence on children and on the relationship between children and their mothers, Aoibhneas commissioned research on the effects of domestic violence and on international best practice in providing specialist supports and facilities for children.

The effects of domestic violence on children

This research clearly showed the profound effect that domestic violence can have on children:¹

- Children exposed to chronic or extreme domestic violence may exhibit symptoms consistent with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Children are more likely to repeat the cycle of victimisation in their adult lives.
- Children are at increased risk of physical, sexual and emotional abuse from perpetrators of domestic violence and may demonstrate poor academic performance and problem-solving skills, as well as low levels of empathy.

1 *Developing World Class Services for Children Affected by Domestic Violence Living in Refuges, Aoibhneas/CMAdvice Ltd, 2008*



'If we had more space we could give families more time to spend on their own and more privacy. Each child could have adequate time and access to the expertise required to get rid of the constant "pain in my tummy", the dull ache they have lived with for so long.'

Manager of Aoi bhneas

This research also shows that children developing such symptoms and coping strategies need specialist help, while their mothers need support to better understand and respond to the effects of these experiences on their children.

The Manager of Aoi bhneas recounts:

'A family arrived in the refuge recently – a mother, a teenage daughter and three younger siblings. The daughter was suicidal. She was worn out trying to protect her mother and her younger brothers from her father's violence and could take no more. There were so few services available for her. It really affected all the staff to see her situation.'

The available research also highlights the type of facilities and services required by children living in refuges, including access to age-appropriate indoor and outdoor play areas, to homework, art and therapy rooms, as well as to adequate space for children to spend time with their families. Specialist staff are also vital to working effectively with children in refuges, and to the provision of aftercare and outreach services to children affected by domestic violence in the local community.

'We urgently require resources to enable us to work more with each child using therapy and play designed to meet the needs of children of different ages, to support the relationship between mother and child, and to advocate for the child in their relationship with the outside world as well as in the unfamiliar world of the refuge.' **Manager of Aoi bhneas**

The current situation

Aoi bhneas currently runs a children's facility within the refuge which provides specialist services and support, including safety planning, interaction with children on a one-to-one basis to make the child feel comfortable and safe, outreach work and some forms of play therapy. However, current supports for children are limited by a lack of adequate facilities and specialist supports.

The beginnings of a specialist Children's Centre at Aoi bhneas

Based on the research and their own experience, Aoi bhneas has decided to build a specialist, state-of-the-art facility and related services for children and their families affected by domestic violence.



The Chairperson of Aoibhneas, Terri Morrissey, explains that:

'A subcommittee of Aoibhneas staff and Board members was set up to find a world-class design and it decided to approach the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland (RIAI) for support and to seek specialist technical expertise from a key employer in the area – Dublin Airport Authority. Both were happy to come on board.'

Paul Keogh, RIAI President commented:

'The RIAI was very happy to work with Aoibhneas and manage and coordinate the competition process, which demonstrated the talent, innovation and creativity of architects, both national and international.'

Declan Collier, CEO of the Dublin Airport Authority said:

'The DAA was delighted to have been able to offer technical expertise to Aoibhneas. ... The creation of a refuge for children is a hugely laudable goal and the company is proud to support this project on the doorstep of Dublin Airport.'

Competition to design a world class Children's Centre for Aoibhneas

The RIAI launched an international competition in February 2010, designed to attract as broad a representation of national and international architects as possible. Entrants were given access to the research on the effects of domestic violence on children and on the type of facilities and services that would be required. They were asked to design a building that linked in with the existing refuge and was suitable for the available site beside the refuge. One hundred and two submissions were received.

Choosing the design

A jury made up of experts on services for those affected by domestic violence (the Manager and Chair of Aoibhneas), two leading architects and a children's services expert (Fergus Finlay), selected 3 entries to be short listed from the initial 102 submissions. The three shortlisted entrants were:

- Burke Culligan Deegan Architects
- Clancy Moore Architects
- Ignacio Vidal / Victor Pujol Architects in association with Cullen Payne Architects

Announcement of the winning design

The winner and runners up of the competition were announced at an event on Friday, 5 November 2010 in Fumbally Square, Dublin 8 at which the winners presented their design. All of the entries were exhibited for a further week.

Next Steps

The Aoibhneas Chairperson Terri Morrissey explains **'We are now announcing the "Aoibhneas Children's Centre Building Appeal" to fund the building of this wonderful children's centre, which will cost in the region of €1 million.'**

For further information or to make a contribution please contact Aoibhneas by email on: childrenscentreattention@aoibhneas.org or phone Julie on +35318489210.



'In the new centre we will be able to deal with the effects of physical and emotional abuse and witness the amazing changes that we know can take place. We will be able to give families the safety and strength to go on and live their lives. This will be the start of a unique way of working with children. We will have the tools to draw out their issues, to relieve their fears and stresses and to really help them to grow.'

Aoibhneas Childcare Leader



'A beautiful uplifting place that could aid the recovery and growth of the children who use the centre' **Burke Culligan Deegan**

Following assessment of the shortlisted entries by the jury, Burke Culligan Deegan Architects were selected as the winners.

For the jury, this design most answered the brief's call to create both private and public spaces, and age-appropriate areas for children.

'The design looks great. The new centre will have lots of space for each family. Children will be better able to open up, to release their feelings, mothers will feel less stressed and kids will find it easier to go to school.'

Aoibhneas client

'There was great excitement among staff about what could be done in such a centre, of how they would be able to provide real help to the growing number of children coming to the refuge and how this could break the cycle of abuse and help build positive lifelong relationships of strength between the mothers and their children.'

Manager of Aoibhneas

