

Good Morning – One Family welcomes the opportunity to present to the Joint Committee on School Costs and Related Matters.

Both our written submission to you and this presentation arise from our work with other organisations in the NGO sector. Our concrete recommendations converge with theirs because they also identify lone parents and their children as among the most vulnerable groups in Irish society.

But our recommendations also arise directly from our primary work in service provision – through our helpline and information service, our counselling and therapy services for those parenting alone, their children and those in crisis pregnancies, and through our personal and professional support and education programmes for lone parents themselves.

Our core work focuses on making one-parent family life fully visible, acknowledged, and supported in Irish society – and to facilitate lone parents particular needs in parenting, and, equally important, to develop their own life-course, as they wish.

Both lone parents themselves and their children are exceptionally vulnerable to educational disadvantage. It is clear to us that this disadvantage arises within an educational infrastructure which has not yet adjusted to the reality that the nuclear family form is simply one among a number of family types in Irish and European society and that parenting alone is something that many parents experience, for many reasons, either temporarily or permanently.

In our written submission we have set out basic data which shows both the position and condition of lone parent families in Ireland.

To summarise:

One-parent families make up 25.4% of all families with children in Ireland, yet have consistent poverty rates at 24.6%. It is 6.4% for two-parent households.

Family homelessness falls disproportionately on lone parents, 60% of whom are headed by females.¹ In April 2018, 3,689 children were homeless.²

While lone parent employment rates stand at 58.4%, the fact that 84% of lone-parent families are headed by females, means that they suffer a 14% gender pay gap.

Further, given the clearly researched (and re-researched) barriers to educational and employment progression experienced by lone parents, it is also clear why lone parents are over-represented in low-paid, unreliable and precariat work, especially in retail and services.

¹ <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Submission-to-the-Oireachtas-Committee-on-Social-Protection-final.pdf>

² <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>

It is common knowledge that the absence of a full-range accessible childcare infrastructure, along with the absence of articulated educational pathways, present almost insurmountable barriers to lone parents.

This description is the context for the children of one quarter of all families in Ireland returning to school in September 2018.

Those figures alone make it absolutely clear that without robust supports linked to commonly accepted standards of living, the children of one-parent families are, from the beginning, set at serious and sustained life-long disadvantage.

Other submissions, along with our own, have outlined in detail the range of issues involved: Hidden fees, Clothing, Books, IT, extra-curricular school projects of all kinds, are only some of the everyday and utterly overwhelming school costs, with which you are already familiar.

We fully appreciate that there is a practical focus to these proceedings and so we make very clear structural recommendations in relation to school costs. We put forward the following issues as everyday and immediate burdens on lone-parents in particular.

- Adjust income thresholds for the *Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance* so that all family types, and those in receipt of the Working Family Payment, are eligible. Restore these rates to 2011 levels so those over 12 years would receive €305, while those under 12 years would receive €200.
- In the immediate term provide €20 to support the Book Rental Scheme. Invest €40 million to provide free school books for all primary and secondary school pupils.
- Restore Capitation Rates to 2010 levels. End the ‘voluntary’ contribution systems in non-fee paying primary and secondary schools.

In closing, we would raise the ‘related matter’ of treating all families, regardless of their marital status or form, with full equality. This does not mean treating all families ‘The Same’ – it means acting on the universal principle of equality and upholding this principle through targeted, flexible services and supports for particularly vulnerable groups.

We close with the clear and present inequality that the income threshold for a couple with one child applying for the *Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance* is €587.80, while it is €425.10 for a lone parent with one child. The *Working Family Payment* eligibility threshold similarly punishes one-parent families. The annual media coverage of back to school costs replays and reflects an ongoing need to attend to both the value and cost of educating all children properly – or not.

Thank you for listening to our statement, our concerns are pressing and immediate for one-parent families, we appreciate your engagement with us on this matter.