

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills | Oral Presentation by One Family | 29 May 2018

One Family was founded in 1972 as Cherish and provides support, information and services to people parenting alone, those sharing parenting of their children, those going through separation; as well as to people experiencing an unplanned or crisis pregnancy.

Lone parents are a group of people who experience multiple disadvantage in Irish society and access to education is part of that. One Family welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Joint Committee on Education & Skills and appreciates your interest in this important issue.

One in five children in Ireland live in a one-parent family while one in four families are headed by a lone parent. Lone parents are in employment – but this is often precarious, low-paid employment linked to the lack of accessible quality childcare.

Lone parent participation in education has decreased by approximately 20% between 2011 and 2016¹. The reasons for this trend can be complex and varied, but One Family consistently hears from parents that barriers to accessing education are significant. Some structural barriers such as homelessness and childcare require cross-departmental funding and exchequer investment to solve, other issues can be more directly addressed.

The educational levels of a mother has a direct impact on the well-being of her children².

In 2017 Maynooth University *Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation*³.

Work Life Balance: Balancing parenting responsibilities and managing finances with accessing education is a difficult task, especially so for lone parents, who often do so with half the resources and double the responsibility.

Income Supports:

Lone parents who have transferred to BTEA were particularly highlighted in Maynooth University's *Independent Review* as the most economically vulnerable group among lone parent welfare recipients⁴. One Family recommends the following changes to income supports to ameliorate some barriers to education for lone parents:

¹ Census 2016. <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/>

² Growing up in Ireland : DYNAMICS OF CHILD ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST TWO WAVES OF THE GROWING UP IN IRELAND STUDY <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/BKMNEXT284.pdf>

³ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/supports-barriers-lone-parents-accessing-HEd.pdf>

⁴ Byrne, D., Murray, C. (2017) An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation. Maynooth University. DSP, DCYA, DES. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/supports-barriers-lone-parents-accessing-HEd.pdf>

- The reinstatement of the student grant scheme (maintenance grant) for BTEA recipients would create a more equitable, less complicated and targeted approach for supporting lone parents in higher education.
- The student grant scheme should be available for part-time and online education.
- The rigidity of how SUSI classifies students as being dependent or independent causes difficulty for people parenting alone who access a different housing tenure and may lead to them losing their grant. Reassessment is only in very restricted circumstances.
- We recommend that SUSI be available to parents engaging in education, regardless of the age of their youngest child (up to a limit of 18). There are several administrative options in how to achieve this. It is important that once a lone parent is in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment/ Jobseeker's Transition and the SUSI maintenance grant has begun that their payment continue until their course is completed.
- In general, the SUSI grant should be reviewed and the levels increased. The maintenance portion of SUSI education grants only provides a contribution towards the costs of participating in education and ignores the reality of caring for children.
- Additional funding for lone parents either in the form of cash transfers or in the form of universal scholarships for lone parents within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should be provided. The Department of Education's 1916 Bursary Fund offered 200 bursaries for an overall target group of lone parents, first-time and mature student entrants, students with a disability, Travellers, Further Education Award holders, and ethnic minorities. Whilst this is a welcome start, this is actually a nominal and piecemeal response to the education needs of such a huge group of marginalised people, especially those of lone parents. Given that 25% of Irish families are one-parent families, 80 Bursaries set aside for lone parents appears as a gesture, rather than a systemic action towards genuine recognition and educational inclusion.

4.1 Complexity of Supports: the complicated nature of the current systems of supports can block access purely on a bureaucratic level. We recommend stronger dissemination of information, guidance, and awareness-raising regarding the 'bundles' of supports offered by different government departments and agencies to parents.

We also concur with Maynooth University's recommendation that there is a persistent need for training and awareness for Intreo case-workers who operate frontline services and supports in the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection⁵.

We are concerned that supports and payments from two government departments interact with each other in a negative way and we strongly recommend that the Department of Education & Science collaborates with the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection in order to ensure that parents can access education irrespective of their housing tenure.

⁵ Ibid (p.13)

4.2 Access Pathways: Taking an education-first approach will result in improved employment rates for one-parent families in the longer term. Jobseeker's Transition (JST) payment recipients are a distinct group with a specific set of needs. The time spent on JST is a unique opportunity to invest in a package of supports and services to ensure that these parents can access education or employment. Broadening access to JST will also allow parents with older children to enhance their employability through further education and training. These recommendations would remove a number of structural barriers which currently prevent lone parents from accessing education.

The provision of specialist bridging programmes such as One Family's *New Futures* and *New Steps* for lone parents⁶, which directly support progression, job-readiness, and incorporate wrap-around parenting and family support services, offer an example of a genuine way into heretofore exclusionary educational institutions.

6.4 Pro-Active Inclusion: Lone parents are a considerable body of potential students who are systematically excluded, since the requirements for their participation are not being met. The profile and needs of this large student cohort should be integrated explicitly into the ethos of each Higher Education Institutions (HEI). This needs to be visibly stated by colleges and universities, who have the responsibility of welcoming people who are parenting alone onto campuses. There is a need to provide lone parents with tutoring that generates both the technical skills and 'cultural' competencies required for higher educational engagement. Like other students, they need the tools to succeed.

While there are established Access to Higher Education programmes available across the networks of further education colleges, Institutes of Technology and Universities, there is a need to meet the specific needs of students, current and potential, who are lone parents.

6.4 Housing Tenure:

The ability to access and stay in education should not be linked to housing tenure, indeed education is a route out of homelessness into independence and security for lone parents. The following recommendations are critical for access to education for lone parents:

- Allow those in receipt of Rent Supplement to engage in full time education. This would remove a number of structural barriers which currently prevent lone parents from accessing education.
- Address the anomaly by which lone parents in receipt of Rent Supplement cannot receive their One-Parent Family Payment or Jobseeker's Transition Payment and the SUSI maintenance grant on taking up an education or training course.
- Ensure all lone parents in receipt of Back to Education Allowance can receive the SUSI maintenance grant to help meet the costs of accessing education.

6.5 Childcare:

The provision of affordable, accessible and quality childcare, including early years and out-of-school care are pre-requisites for lone parents' ability to engage with work or education. Childcare costs in Ireland are the highest in the OECD for lone

⁶ <https://onefamily.ie/how-we-support-families/parenting-supports/for-parents/back-to-work-education/new-futures/>

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parents and the second highest for couples.⁷ One Family makes the following recommendations:

- Increase accessibility so that families in every county can access subsidised and affordable childcare, with particular emphasis on access to out-of-school care.
- Reach the European average of investment in early years education and care so that labour market participation for parents, mothers and lone mothers, can be a reality and their children can benefit from high quality learning. Ireland ranks lowest among 28 EU countries for investment in pre-primary education. Ireland currently invests about 0.1% of GDP, considerably lower than the EU average of 0.8%⁸ Investment is required to address the poor infrastructure of childcare and the crisis in the lack of childcare workers.

⁷ OECD, 'Ireland Economic Survey of Ireland', September 2015

⁸ <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/latest-eu-report-highlights-irelands-embarrassing-track-record-investment-care-young-children/>