

Introduction

One Family is Ireland's leading support organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting, separating, and those in crisis pregnancy. We were established in 1972 as Cherish, and provide specialist educational and support services for lone parents and their families around Ireland. We train professionals on working with one-parent families and we promote policies that actively support diverse families. Children are at the centre of our work.

One Family welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the SOLAS public consultation on the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024*. As a member of AONTAS, One Family supports a focus on the importance of ensuring the long-term viability of the not-for-profit community education sector, as well as the importance of embedding learner voice pedagogy into the teaching, learning, and policy development process within the sector over the next five years.

Social and Economic Context for One-Parent Families

In December 2018, the Labour Force Survey indicated there were 211,900 lone parent family households in Ireland.¹ More broadly, national-level Census 2016 figures shows that 25.4% of all families with children are headed by lone parents, whether they are separated, divorced, single or widowed, while 21.2% of all children live in one-parent family units - approximately 356,203 children.² One-parent families, therefore, are not a minority in Irish society. They exemplify and demonstrate the lives and conditions of increasingly diverse family forms throughout the EU. They make visible the usually invisible daily work of parenting.³

Poverty affects one-parent families disproportionately. From the point of view of wages alone, being 'at risk' of poverty means living on wages which are 60% below the national real equivalised disposable income. In 2016 this 'at risk' poverty threshold meant living on €12,227 per year – approximately €235.00 per week.⁴ Most seriously, one-parent families are particularly at risk of in-work poverty, which doubled for lone parents between 2012 and 2017.⁵ Currently, one-parent families experience high degrees of social marginalisation, with disproportionate representation in homelessness⁶ and child poverty.⁷ To be successful, therefore, the

¹ LFS Households and Family Units Q2 2018:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfshfu/lfshouseholdsandfamilyunitsq22018/>

² Census 2016: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp4hf/cp4hf/>

³ Families Are Changing: OECD. 2011. <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/47701118.pdf>

⁴ CSO SILC 2017

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions2016/>

⁵ Investing in a Just Society: SVP Pre-Budget Submission. (2019) <https://www.svp.ie/home.aspx>

⁶ Homelessness Report: Dublin: Department of Housing Planning and Local Government. April 2019.

⁷ Poverty Explained. CSO SILC 2017

https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/methods/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions/At_Risk_of_Poverty_Explained.pdf

new Strategy needs to focus on those who continue to be marginalised and need direct education and training supports.

One Family Recommendations for the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024*

The *FET Strategy 2020-2024*, as published by SOLAS, focuses on six areas which we welcome.



However, these six areas alone do not capture more nuanced priority areas which are important to one-parent families.

One Family, through our service provision and educational programmes, encounter a clear need for targeted supports for one-parent families. Barriers to education for lone parents have been repeatedly identified, especially identifying the need for flexible, accessible educational supports with wrap-around services.⁸ Additionally, the blocks which arise through incoherent regulations across and between various educational, income and housing supports and grants simply stop lone parents from entering into, and sustaining their educational development.⁹ These blocks to their progression will not be resolved until these overlapping systems are reviewed, rationalised and integrated.

In particular, One Family has identified the need for targeted bridging programmes such a *New Futures* and *New Steps* which directly meet the needs and circumstances of one-parent families in order to enhance their progression personally and professionally.¹⁰

⁸ Byrne, D., Murray, C. An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation. University Maynooth. (2017) <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/supports-barriers-lone-parents-accessing-HEd.pdf>

⁹ The disjointed regulations surrounding the Student Universal Support Ireland grants (SUSI), Back to Education Allowance (BTEA), Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), Rent Supplement (RS) and housing tenure status all intersect to confound the progression of lone parents in education and training.

¹⁰ One Family Parenting Programmes: <https://onefamily.ie/training-programmes/>

Sustainable multi-annual funding model for community education

1 - Strategic Action: Implementation of sustainable multi-annual funding for community education

As a member of AONTAS, One Family understands Community Education as a unique process whereby marginalised groups formulate a process of learner-centred and communal education.¹¹ It is a non-formal system of adult education whose goal is to educate while pursuing social inclusion, equality, diversity, and sustainability across Ireland's towns and cities. The development of community education as a form of education capable of reaching out to the most marginalised people in our society in a non-threatening, transparent, and open way was recognised by Government in its White Paper *Learning for Life: Whitepaper on Adult Education*, published in 2000.¹² Implementation of the White Paper's policy framework was sometimes patchy, especially between 2000 and 2008. However, there was positive and meaningful support to community education providers, for example, the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN). With the economic crash in 2008 things changed for the worse, both for community education provision, but more importantly for the learners accessing education through community providers. One-parent families in particular suffered from main social welfare rate cuts in Budget 2012 which have yet to be fully restored.¹³

Today community education provision is underfunded. Currently, it is funded through a diverse and disorganised mix of funding streams, a small portion of which comes from SOLAS, but much of which does not, with funding coming from other departments, SICAP, and philanthropy.

Community education is about building a supportive education system around an individual; ensuring that the education offered is learner-centred and working to build the learner's capacity to reach their educational goals. The *FET Strategy 2020-2024* must commit to sustainable multi-annual funding for community education so that it covers the full cost of running a robust community education organisation which can sustain the required infrastructure: paying for premises, keeping the lights and heat on, paying for tutors and covering the administration costs required by other regulatory and government agencies.

Community education consistently meets the needs of the most educationally disadvantaged. It empowers communities and contributes to cross-generational educational equality as a home-grown, community-centred model of holistic education provision. Ireland's success in developing effective community education programmes has set standards and led the way in Europe. To realise an equitable vision of adult learning it is time we gave community education the recognition, resources, and respect it deserves amongst adult education options. In 2000 this recognition was given in the *White Paper on Adult Learning*. In 2020, through the

¹¹ *Learning for Life: Whitepaper on Adult Education*. 2000.

https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf, pp 26. [Accessed 23 May 2019].

¹² *Learning for Life: Whitepaper on Adult Education*. https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/fe_aduled_wp.pdf, pp 112. [Accessed 23 May 2019].

¹³ Impacts of Budget 2012 : One Family: <https://onefamily.ie/policy-impacts-of-budget-2012-still-felt-today/>

FET Strategy, we need to see action. Community education is not just about building bridges between education and the community. Community education is of and for the community itself as a provider.

Learner Voice for Teaching, Learning and Policy Development

2 - Strategic Action: Cementing the important role that learner voice must have in the teaching, learning, and policy development process

Learners are experts in their own learning experience and are best placed to identify issues, challenges and effective processes that support learner success. Supporting learner voice at all levels of the learning experience - in the classroom; at institutional level and at national level - is essential to ensuring that learners are able to participate in teaching, learning and policy development processes. Meaningful learner engagement is essential for creating open learning environments where learners, and particularly those learners least likely to speak or respond in formal representative structures like student unions, class representation, and course surveys where they can be identified, are supported to share their learning experience. A particular focus of the next *FET Strategy 2020-2024* should be placed on hearing the voice of those who are educationally disadvantaged, or who are identified as target groups of the FET sector (e.g. in Up-skilling Pathways Recommendation/National Access Plan 2015-2019), as these are the learners least likely to express their positive and negative experiences in education.

One Family provides educational programmes which take the lived experience of lone parents and their children as a starting point. Listening to the everyday struggles of one-parent families and addressing and identifying their education and progression needs lie at the heart of our pedagogical practice.

As part of the *FET Strategy 2020-2024* support needs to be given to providers of SOLAS-funded further education and training (ETBs and community education providers) to support them in the development of learner voice as a policy tool for engaging learners in the teaching, learning and policy development process.

Conclusion

One Family supports AONTAS in its on-going work of developing the power and range of Community Education. In particular we call for targeted support for vulnerable individuals, families and communities.

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