

Introduction:

One Family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration in relation to the General Scheme of the Parent's Leave and Benefit (Amendment) Bill.

We are Ireland's national organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting and separating. We provide a range of specialist family support services which can be reviewed at www.onefamily.ie.

We have been concerned at the lack of fairness in this legislation for lone parents and their children for the past few years and have been advocating directly with relevant departments and Ministers.

Head Three: *'Entitlement to parental leave and criteria governing its taking'*

In November 2019, Government introduced paid parental leave for the first time. The new scheme, called 'Parent's Leave', is paid at the same rate as Maternity and Paternity Benefit and offers two weeks paid leave to each parent, to be taken in the first year a child is born or adopted.

In line with an EU Directive on Work Life Balance which requires all member states to provide two months of paid parental leave for each parent by 2022; Government committed to increasing Parent's Leave in the last Budget to five weeks for each parent of children born or adopted on or after 1 November 2019. The Government also committed to extending the period in which Parent's Leave can be taken up. The period is to be extended until a child turns two or, in the case of an adoption, two years after the adoption placement date of the child. This measure also builds on the commitment made in *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 -2028* that 'Parents will be assisted to balance working and caring to contribute to optimum child development and to best suit their family circumstances'.¹ However, the changes did not take effect following the Budget in October and still remain outstanding. They are now

¹ Government of Ireland, [First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 -2028](#).

urgently required to support parents during this pandemic and every week makes a difference.

Recommendation

- Amend the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act without further delay to give effect to the planned increase from 2 weeks to 5 weeks per parent.

Head Four: 'Non-transferability of parental leave'

Parent's Leave and Benefit currently operates on the basis that it is **not** transferrable between parents so as to support a more equal sharing of care between mothers and fathers, and ultimately, gender equality.

However, the scheme is based on the assumption of a two-parent family as the norm and so lone parents and their children do not have the same level of support under the scheme as two-parent families. A lone parent can currently only access two weeks of Parent's Leave to nurture their child whereas a two-parent family can access four. This means there is less state support for the young children of people parenting alone than those living in two-parent families which is contraindicated by extensive research on the additional barriers faced by one-parent families.

The ESRI looked at mothers return to work using *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) data and found lone parents were more likely to return to work after the birth of their child before 6 months. Most of these parents cited financial reasons as they were more likely to be in low paid work. However, by nine months lone parents were less likely to be in work than women in two-parent households due to childcare issues.² Given the recognition of the importance of a child's first year of life and the Government's stated aim in First 5 to create a system that will allow children to be cared for at home during this first year through the introduction of 'more generous parental leave entitlements',³ it is important

²<https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2015-07/BKMNEXT238.pdf>

³ Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 -2028*.

to ensure that all babies have access to their parents at this critical time and not just those in two-parent families.

Potential Solutions

In response to concerns raised by our organisations about the unequal level of support afforded to lone parents since the scheme's introduction, the Department of Social Protection has noted that a number of issues would have to be considered to provide for an increased provision for an individual parenting alone.

Key among these issues is a “decision as to whether the entitlement to parent's leave of the absent parent would be removed or qualified in some way or whether it would remain unchanged and the parent who is caring would receive an additional leave entitlement”.⁴ Leaving the entitlement of both parents in place but providing an additional entitlement to the parent that is caring would help to support lone parents as well as helping to ensure that Ireland meets its commitments to provide an individual right to two months paid and non-transferable leave.

The Revenue-administered Single Person Child Carer Credit (SPCCC) provides a potential mechanism to identify the parent who is the primary carer or parenting alone thus addressing the Department's concerns regarding the possibility of fraud by two-parent families.

Models from other countries

Other countries have been able to resolve this conundrum of gender equality and one-parent families. Some examples we have found include:

- In Iceland, generally mothers get three months of leave, fathers get three months, and either parent can use an additional three months. Lone parents can use the full nine months.⁵

⁴ DEASP (2019). Written responses to questions. DEASP and CV Pillar bilateral meeting, November 2019

⁵https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2019/Iceland_2019_0824.pdf

- In Norway, Paternity leave is more flexible in a number of ways and can be used by someone else who will assist the mother (i.e. grandparents) if the parents do not live together.⁶

Recommendation:

- Amend the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act to ensure lone parents have the same level of support as two parent families by providing an additional entitlement to the parent that is caring in a one-parent family or by permitting transferability between parents or to another appropriate carer in the case of a one-parent family.

Head Thirty One: 'Parental Benefit'

The amount of Parent's Benefit payable must also be examined and brought more into line with what is paid in other European countries if taking family leave is to be a realistic option for all parents. This is especially so for lone parents since they are dependent on one income.

The value of paid leave in Ireland, across Maternity, Paternity and Parent's leave schemes, is far behind our EU peers. Germany for example, provides paid leave at the equivalent of 73% of the average wage; Ireland compares unfavourably at 27% of the average wage.⁷

A recent review by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform found that uptake of Parent's Leave in Ireland is low among fathers and one of the reasons suggested for this is the low rate of payment.⁸

Recommendation

- Increase the rate of Parent's Benefit to bring more in line with EU norms and ensure it is a realistic option for one-parent families.

⁶https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/country_notes/2018/FINAL.Norway2018.pdf

⁷ OECD (2018). Family database. Parental leave systems. https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf

⁸ DPER (2010). <https://iqees.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Focused-Policy-Assessment-Paid-Parent-Leave-Scheme.pdf>

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