

1. Introduction

Education is the key to unlocking quality employment opportunities for people parenting alone and sharing parenting, which has a crucial part to play in breaking cycles of disadvantage and poverty. One-parent families are consistently among the most disadvantaged groups in Irish society and are at greater risk of living in poverty, deprivation and homelessness than the rest of the population.¹ It is essential that access to higher education is available to individuals regardless of their family type or their caring responsibilities; yet we know this is not the case. Lone parents are consistently under-represented in higher and further education. In the most recent Census just 15% of lone parents reported having a third level qualification and 70% were educated to level 6 or less on NFQ.²

Creating an inclusive higher education system is one of six strategic goals set out in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) Statement of Strategy. The current Programme for Government commits to prioritising and protecting supports for lone parents, specifically referencing recommendations contained in the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection's 2017 *Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland*.³ The Government's Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 states its ambition to reduce the national consistent poverty rate to 2% or less of the population and make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive States in the EU by 2025.⁴ Furthermore, the EU is currently finalising the Child Guarantee, a mechanism to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion by supporting Member States' efforts to guarantee access to quality key services for children in need.⁵ As part of this new EU initiative Ireland will be required to develop a National Action Plan on Child Poverty.

If the Government is to fulfil its national and European targets, it is essential that people in one-parent families are included, supported and prioritised in accessing higher education. One Family welcomes the opportunity to make a

¹ Roantree, B. Et al. (2021) *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland*. Dublin : ESRI & Community Foundation Ireland.

² CSO, Census 2016

³ Government of Ireland, (2020) *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*

⁴ Government of Ireland, (2020) *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*

⁵ European Commission. (2021) *Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee*. Brussels: European Commission.

submission to the Higher Education Authority on the National Access Plan 2022-2026.

2. About One Family

One Family is Ireland's national organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting and separating. We campaign to improve the lives of one-parent families. We offer a range of specialist child and parent focused services that assist families as they seek to support themselves and their children. Children are at the core of our work and we seek to improve their lives by empowering, supporting and up-skilling their parents. We campaign against child poverty, for reform of the family justice system, for improved access to education for people parenting alone and sharing parenting and for the State to recognise and cherish all families equally, regardless of their marital status. More information on One Family can be found at www.onefamily.ie.

2.1. New Futures Employability Programme

One Family's New Futures Employability Programme is a specialist, innovative, motivational, manualised bridging programme based on evidence-informed practice for supporting lone parents distant from the labour market into education and employment.⁶ It is an exceptional programme comprising three central elements- accredited group training delivered two mornings per week; personal, specialist parenting, therapeutic and family support services; and individual 1:1 key-working. On average, 90% of participants progress to education or employment each year. The success of the programme is due to the person centred and individualised support each parent receives. This support is essential for lone parents to both enter and stay in education.

Our role in providing the New Futures Employability Programme, along with our direct work with one-parent families gives us a unique perspective and insight into the experiences and needs of one-parent families.

⁶One Family, (2021) <https://onefamily.ie/education-development/employability-programmes/>

Case Study 1-

Mary applied for the SUSI grant and declared child maintenance as one of her incomes. She was requested by SUSI to provide a court order as formal evidence of the maintenance arrangement. Mary and the other parent had agreed the maintenance amicably and had never been to court. She had evidence of receiving the maintenance payment into her bank account for the previous four years. SUSI still insisted a court order was submitted so Mary had no choice but to pay a solicitor to draft an affidavit declaring the arrangement. This caused Mary a lot of stress in advance of returning to education as she worried going to court would impact on her shared parenting relationship.

3. Data and Research

One in five people in Ireland live in one-parent family, while one in four families is headed by a lone parent. There is a steady increase in diverse family types in Ireland and this is replicated throughout Europe.⁷ There were approximately 218,817 lone parents and 356,203 children in one-parent families in Ireland in 2016.⁸ Almost 90,000 were single; a further 50,496 were widowed, while the remaining 68,378 were separated or divorced. The number of divorced people in Ireland nationally increased from 87,770 in 2011 to 103,895 in 2016. The vast majority (86.4%) of one-parent families are headed by mothers but many families share parenting of their children. Lone parents are among the most socially isolated people in Ireland and particular efforts must be made to recruit and maintain them in education.⁹

3.1. One-parent families and disadvantage

Across the EU one-parent households are among those with the worst material and well-being outcomes.¹⁰ One-parent households in Ireland have amongst the lowest equivalised income in the EU, at fourth from the lowest of all EU countries in 2017.¹¹ One-parent families, 86% of whom are headed by women, are among

⁷ Census 2016

<http://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2017pressreleases/pressstatementcensus2016resultsprofile4-householdsandfamilies/>

⁸Census 2016 <http://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2017/census2016summaryresults-part1/>

⁹Margret Fine-Davis, *Attitudes to Family Formation in Ireland: Findings from the Nationwide Study*, Dublin, Family Support Agency and Social Attitude and Policy Research Group, Trinity College, December, 2011

¹⁰Eurofound, (2019) *Household composition and well-being*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

¹¹Saint Vincent de Paul, (2019), *Working, Parenting and Struggling?*

<file:///C:/Users/One%20Family/Downloads/Working,%20Parenting%20and%20Struggling-%20Full%20Report.pdf>

those most at risk of poverty in Ireland; 34% of one parent families are at risk of poverty compared to 14% of the overall population and they are more likely to live in consistent poverty (19%) or to experience deprivation (43%).¹² In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its deep concern at the 'significant increase in the number of children living in consistent poverty' and in particular referred to one-parent households.¹³

The median net wealth of households with two parents and children (€136,800) is twenty-six times more than the net wealth of households with one parent and children (€5,200).¹⁴ If access to education is anchored to a person's ability to pay, not only in terms of fees but also ability to afford the housing, transport, childcare costs and the lower levels of employment which predicate engaging in higher education, those in one-parent families start off massively disadvantaged.

One-parent families are less likely to own their own home and have significantly lower levels of personal savings and lower net wealth when compared with averages.¹⁵ One-parent households are more than twice as likely to be in rent or mortgage arrears as other households with children and consistently represent the highest proportion of families living in emergency accommodation.¹⁶

3.2. Employment and education

The employment rate of lone parents (aged 15-64) rose from 51.9% in 2014 to 64.3% in 2019, dispelling any myth that people parenting alone are not working.¹⁷ Data from the Central Statistics Office pre-pandemic shows the employment rate of lone parents is directly linked to the age of their youngest child. In Q2 2019 the employment rate of lone parents whose youngest child was aged 0-5 years was 60%, this rose to 70.9% for lone parents whose youngest child was 12-17. Policies designed to increase lone parent participation in employment and education must take the varying caring requirements over the course of a child's life into account.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on employment rates, a downturn which has been more sharply felt in certain sectors. Analysis from the Department of Social Protection shows that households impacted by Covid-19 related job losses are more likely to be working in lower paid sectors of the economy, to be living in private rented accommodation, and to have more debt

¹²CSO, (2020) SILC 2018.

¹³UNCRC 'Concluding Observations: Ireland' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4 para 59.

¹⁴CSO (2019), *Household Finance and Consumption Survey 2018*.

¹⁵https://www.tasc.ie/download/pdf/the_distribution_of_wealth_in_ireland_final.pdf

¹⁶Saint Vincent de Paul (2019).

¹⁷CSO (2020), *Labour Force Survey Households and Families*.

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfshfu/lfshouseholdsandfamilyunitsq22020/>
<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/qnhs/quarterlynationalhouseholdsurveyquarter22017/>

and fewer saving.¹⁸ Recent research from the ESRI and Low Pay Commission demonstrates that minimum wage employees have been particularly hard hit by pandemic job-losses.¹⁹ The higher propensity for lone parents to be employed in low paid or precarious work means they have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 related job losses.

Lone parent participation in education has decreased by approximately 20% between 2011 and 2016.²⁰ The reasons for this trend can be complex and varied, but One Family consistently hears from parents that barriers to accessing education are significant. This is confirmed by a recent survey of mature students who were lone parents by Indecon on behalf of the Higher Education Authority which found 68% of respondents said they find family responsibilities and commitments a barrier to participation in higher education.²¹ Significant financial barriers also exist, one in five lone parents in Ireland unable to access formal education for financial reasons.²²

3.2.1. The SUSI Grant Scheme

As outlined, lone parents face considerable additional obstacles in accessing education. These obstacles can be exacerbated by exclusion from the SUSI scheme because of ineligibility. The SUSI grant should be inclusive of all learners, no matter their family type. Currently, restrictions on the type of course (full-time and in person) and the criteria the lone parent must meet are excluding a significant cohort of lone parents from accessing education. Income thresholds for SUSI should be set so as to include those most in need of support in accessing further education. The impact of any changes to the income thresholds on one-parent families should be thoroughly assessed in advance.

The maintenance grant is insufficient to meet the additional support required by lone parents accessing education. Furthermore, some lone parents are excluded from the grant because they are in receipt of Back to Education Allowance. Lone parents who transferred to BTEA were particularly highlighted in a review carried out by Maynooth University as the most economically vulnerable group among lone parent welfare recipients.²³ A nuanced, less rigid approach needs to be applied to lone parents accessing the scheme. For example, due to the current housing crisis many one-parent families have been forced to live with extended family. In these instances the income of a lone parent's parent may be assessed

¹⁸Coates, Corcoran, Corin and Brosú (2020), *The Initial Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ireland's Labour Market*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/97112d-minister-doherty-announces-the-publication-of-a-working-paper-on-the/>

¹⁹Redmond, Maître, McGuinness and Maragkou (2021), *A Comparative Assessment of Minimum Wage Employment in Europe*. <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS123.pdf>

²⁰ Census 2016. <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/>

²¹ Indecon, (2021) *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

²²Saint Vincent de Paul, (2019).

²³ 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.

as part of the application. This is not the case for other supports such as One-Parent Family Payment or Jobseekers Transitional Payment where the one-parent family is treated as a family unit in its own right. Issues such as these are particularly problematic in the context of one-parent families making up the majority of family homelessness.²⁴

3.3. Links between parent education and children's wellbeing

It is well recognised that the educational levels of parents have direct impact on the lives of their children with the educational level of a mother in particular having a direct impact on the well-being of her child/ren.²⁵

The draining away of lone parents from higher education therefore is of particular concern. The CSO notes that "*higher educational attainment levels are linked with lower unemployment rates. Those with primary education/no formal education were over four times more likely to be unemployed in Q2 2017 (14%) when compared with those who had a third level qualification (3%)*".²⁶

International research similarly shows that despite the complex interactions between parental social, economic and educational positions and conditions, the educational levels of both parents are a significant influence on the life expectations and outcomes of their children. Education is a gateway to more sustainable, quality employment which lifts lone parents out of poverty in the longer term. Educational access enables engagement with society generally, to shared customs, beliefs and behaviours, to marketable skills and professions, and to political engagement. The children of lone parents are entitled to such supports through their parents' access to mainstream social capital.²⁷

3.4. Government Policy and Research

As far back as 2006, a Government Discussion Paper: *Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents*, put forward a number of actions to support lone parents. Among these recommendations there was an express objective to "*Facilitate participation in employment /education and training in a positive and systematic way*"²⁸.

Twelve years later, in 2017, Maynooth University *Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to*

²⁴ Department of Housing, (2021) *Homeless Report April 2021*

²⁵ Growing up in Ireland (2014) *Dynamics of Child Economic Vulnerability and Socio-Emotional Development* <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/BKMNEXT284.pdf>

²⁶ CSO, (2017) *Educational Attainment Thematic Report*.

<http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/eda/educationalattainmentthematicreport2017/>

²⁷ Erola, J et al, (2016), *Parental education, class and income over early life course and children's achievement*, Research in Social Stratification and Mobility. Volume 44, June 2016, Pages 33-43, Elsevier.

²⁸ Government of Ireland, (2006) *Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents*

Examine Measures to Increase Participation arose from a commitment made in the 2016 Programme from Government²⁹ One Family was consulted as part of this review process as a representative stakeholder group. The report notes especially that while lone parents have attracted considerable policy attention in welfare, and education and training and with regard to activation measures. Much less attention has been paid to lone parents in higher education and the report suggests an urgent need to widen access for these families.

The recommendations of the Maynooth Review are wide ranging and include; changes to the SUSI grant scheme to widen eligibility and increase the support offered; harmonising and broadening of social welfare supports; improving access to childcare; and the provision of universal scholarships and other specific supports for lone parents.³⁰ The complexity of the current system of supports was also highlighted in the Review, including the inadequate dissemination of information, guidance and awareness-raising to lone parents regarding the 'bundles' of supports that are offered by different government departments and agencies.

The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection's report on the position of lone parents in Ireland suggests an 'education first', rather than a 'work first', approach to interventions will lift families out of poverty and into employment in the longer term.³¹

Case Study 2

Maria was interested in an education course and asked for information at her local Intreo office. She was told that because she was receiving Rent Supplement and One-Parent Family Payment her only option was to apply for Back to Education (BTEA) Allowance instead. Maria's application for BTEA was approved but she didn't realise until she got the decision letter from SUSI that this meant she wouldn't receive any maintenance grant. Maria needed the additional grant to help with childcare for her two children. Her course director also informed her that she needed to purchase course materials that she couldn't afford. The Cost of Education Allowance she received from Department of Social Protection had already been paid to her children's crèche towards their monthly fees. Maria needed all this information in advance of starting her course but didn't get it.

²⁹Byrne, D.& Murray, C. (2017)

³⁰Ibid

³¹Joint Committee on Social Protection (2017). Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland.

Case Study 3-

Áine was delighted to win a scholarship to study full-time. The scholarship covers her university fees; however, she discovered it is also means tested as income for Job Seekers Transitional Payment and she found she therefore didn't qualify. She tried to claim Working Family Payment but as the scholarship is not taxable income she did not qualify for that either. She doesn't qualify for other support payments such as the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. Her childcare fees have also gone up because she is no longer eligible for an after-school support under the National Childcare Scheme. She has seen her income plummet and is distraught that winning a scholarship has left her financially worse off. Áine has one child and is barely making ends meet for her family. She told One Family:

"This barrier needs to be addressed and removed, it's such an obstacle to single parents (disproportionately female) accessing higher education and traps us in poverty. I'm living month to month; if I had two children and had to pay two lots of childcare, this would be impossible and I wouldn't have been able to continue my studies. I think there are too few of us to make proper noise to get the Government to listen; but government policies are the exact reason there are so few of us." (June, 2021)

4. Barriers to Education for Lone Parents

One-parent families and people parenting alone face additional barriers when accessing education. Below is a detailed but not exhaustive list of the types of obstacles lone parents must overcome if they are to access education in Ireland.

- **Balancing work, parenting and education:** balancing parenting responsibilities and managing finances while accessing education is a difficult task, especially so for lone parents, who often do so with half the resources and double the responsibility.
- **No clear pathway to education:** there are well documented additional challenges for young parents who wish to stay in education as well as older parents who wish to return as mature students. There is no clear pathway of progression for parents who cannot readily move from second level to third level education. The pathways that do exist are complex with long waiting times for decisions and must be made more accessible and easier to navigate.

- **Lack of income to access education:** the income supports that are in place in Ireland are overly complex to access and at insufficient levels to avoid poverty in many cases. One barrier is that income supports are often linked to the age of a parent's youngest child. For example, currently, if a child is over 14 yrs, transfer to BTEA is compulsory when a lone parent has moved onto Jobseeker's Allowance and wants to continue their education course. As a result of this forced transfer, access to a SUSI maintenance grant is denied to these parents.
- **Lack of housing and housing insecurity:** Over the course of most of the last decade, Ireland has been experiencing a housing crisis in which the majority of homeless families are one-parent families. If a family is living in insecure housing they are very unlikely to be able to enter or maintain participation in education. Some financial housing supports are specifically unsupported in conjunction with some educational supports and so access to education depends on housing tenure. This is both unfair and illogical. Such barriers often result from uneven and contradictory systems of support. For example, lone parents in receipt of Rent Supplement are required to transfer to BTEA and are then excluded from the SUSI maintenance grant. This makes no sense and results in lone parents being forced to choose between housing and education supports.
- **Childcare:** the challenges for parents in accessing affordable, high quality childcare for their children are well documented. An additional challenge facing people parenting alone when accessing education is the lack of access to after school care which may be required for their educational participation.

Case Study 4 –

Siobhan was offered a place on a Psychology degree course in March 2019. She contacted the askonefamily helpline for advice on financial supports. Siobhan was advised to apply as early as possible for a SUSI grant which she did. Siobhan was very anxious to find out what level of support she would receive as she needed to make sure she could still pay the bills, rent and childcare while going to university as a lone parent. In August she was informed by SUSI that the supporting documents supplied were not sufficient, so she resubmitted these. By November that year she was still waiting for a final decision. Her course had already started, and she was falling behind with her bills, so she decided to withdraw from her course due to stress and the uncertainty of waiting.

5. Recommendations

The barriers to education for one-parent families are complex but they are not insurmountable. One Family believes a core principle which should be fundamental to the State's efforts to activate lone parents into employment and reduce child poverty should be an 'education first' approach. Without accessible, quality education opportunities with wrap around supports, most lone parents will struggle to break the cycle of welfare dependence, poverty and disadvantage. Below is a list of One Family's recommendations for the National Access Plan 2022-2026.

5.1. SUSI Grant Scheme

The recommendations in this section echo and reflect One Family's submission to the review of the SUSI grant scheme in April 2021.³² The following recommendations should be implemented immediately to facilitate the inclusion of all lone parents in education:

Recommendation 1: The student grant scheme should be expanded to broaden the educational opportunities available to lone parents. Full-time courses are often inaccessible to people parenting alone because of parenting or work commitments. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in increased flexibility in how courses are offered and moved most courses online. The student grant scheme should be available for part-time, online and blended learning courses. In the context of limited resources, this can be targeted to those groups most excluded from education in the first instance.

Recommendation 2: SUSI should 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. This will require cross departmental engagement with the Department of Social Protection.

Recommendation 3: Implement a more flexible and nuanced approach to the assessment of students' dependency on relatives. The current housing crisis and high rents mean many one-parent families live with their extended family. The rigidity of how SUSI classifies students as being dependent or independent causes difficulty for people parenting alone in these circumstances and may lead to them losing their grant. Reassessment is only in very restricted circumstances.

³² One Family, (2021) *Submission to SUSI Grant Scheme Review*. Available at: <https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/One-Family-Submission-to-SUSI-Review.pdf>

Recommendation 4: Ensure income thresholds for access to top-up grants and supports for postgraduate studies are inclusive, maintained at a sufficient level and reviewed regularly.

Recommendation 5: SUSI maintenance grants must be made payable to lone parents in receipt of Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) so the additional costs associated with accessing education can be met. The reinstatement of the maintenance grant for BTEA recipients would create a more equitable, less complicated and targeted approach for supporting lone parents in education.

Recommendation 6: 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.

5.2. Cross-Departmental Harmonisation

There are a number of anomalies, conflicts and discrepancies between various statutory schemes designed to support lone parents in HEI. However, there is also a lack of data, information for students and lack of a joined-up approach across Government to supporting lone parents in higher education. The following recommendations should be implemented to facilitate lone parent participation in higher education:

Recommendation 7: 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. There is a persistent need for training and awareness for Intreo case-officers who operate frontline services and supports in the Department of Social Protection.³³

Recommendation 8: One Family is 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 Further and Higher Education collaborates with the Department of Social Protection in order to ensure that parents can access education irrespective of their housing tenure or other payments they may be receiving.

Recommendation 9: Ensure all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) fulfil their statutory obligation to implement the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

Recommendation 10: Develop data analytics on the access, participation and experience of lone parent students in HEI. Enhance data sharing between the

³³ Byrne, D.& Murray, C. (2017)

HEA, DFHERIS, DSP, DCEDIY, DHPLG and DES to provide a broad evidence base for the effectiveness of policies and the 'bundles' of supports available to lone parents in Ireland.

Recommendation 11: Develop a stream of research projects designed to increase understanding of the experiences of lone parents navigating higher education. Particular attention should be paid to research exploring the effectiveness of social welfare schemes, the benefits, challenges and supports required for blended learning, and the experiences of lone parents who complete, exit early and don't take up a place in a HEI.

5.3. Targeted Supports

As an under-represented group at higher education level, lone parents require additional, targeted supports to facilitate their participation. Lone parents do not enjoy the same opportunities available to students without children or those in two-parent families. Their care responsibilities can impact their ability to study, it can limit their availability to attend courses or sit exams and opportunities to do extracurricular activities or take up internships are often not possible. The financial burden on lone parents can also not be underestimated. Below are One Family's recommendations for some targeted supports for lone parents:

Recommendation 12: We recommend making additional funding for lone parents available, either in the form of cash transfers or in the form of a targeted scheme of universal scholarships within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). 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.

Recommendation 13: Ensure lone parents receive sufficient support by implementing a targeted key-worker support role in all higher and further education institutions. This support service should be on a 1:1 basis and provide academic, practical, emotional support to lone parents. Key workers could also provide support in ensuring lone parents have opportunity to build the technical and 'cultural' competencies required to succeed in their course.

Recommendation 14: Invest in bridging programmes, such as One Family's New Futures Employability Programme, which directly support progression, job-readiness and incorporate wrap-around parenting and family support services as a means to create a pathway to inclusion in HEIs for lone parents.

Recommendation 15: Ensure PhD stipends and other post-graduate scholarships are not assessed as means. This unacceptable anomaly creates a poverty-trap for the few lone parents who currently access post-graduate degrees and doctorates.

Recommendation 16: Ensure there are a range of learning options available to lone parents including online, in-person, blended, full and part time options based on what has been learned during the pandemic.

Recommendation 17: Prevent the practice of child maintenance payments being assessed as means for educational supports and apply this consistently and equitably for all applicants to higher and further education. Child maintenance should be viewed as a ring-fenced support for children and not as income.

5.4. Housing Supports

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:

Recommendation 17: Integrate the SUSI grant and the BTEA with all housing supports to ensure continuous access to education for parents irrespective of what housing supports they receive.

Recommendation 18: Address the anomaly by which lone parents in receipt of Rent Supplement and One-Parent Family or Job Seekers Transitional payments are not eligible for the SUSI grant scheme.

Recommendation 19: 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.

5.5. Childcare Supports

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 among the highest in the OECD for lone parents.³⁴ Ireland also ranks as one of the lowest internationally for investment in pre-primary education. Ireland invests just 0.1% of GDP, which is considerably lower than the EU average of 0.8% and the

³⁴OECD, (2020) *Is Childcare Affordable? Policy Brief on Employment, Labour and Social Affairs*. <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/OECD-Is-Childcare-Affordable.pdf>

1% recommended by UNICEF.³⁵ One Family supports the recommendation of the National Advisory Council for Children to invest in a publicly-funded early years care and education system with a commitment to invest 1% of GDP. One Family makes the following recommendations in relation to lone parents accessing higher education:

Recommendation 20: Guarantee free, quality and accessible childcare for all lone parents in further and higher education in line with the EU Child Guarantee.³⁶

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³⁵ Early Childhood Ireland. (2020) *Rising to the Challenge, Investing in Our Future Budget 2021 Submission*

³⁶ European Commission. (2021) *Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee*. Brussels: European Commission.