



**One Family Submission to the Department of Children,
Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU
Child Guarantee**

January 2022

1. Introduction

One Family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) on the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee and Ireland's National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee. Children in one-parent families are among the most vulnerable to poverty in Europe. In 2020, households composed of a single person with dependent children recorded the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU at 42.1%.¹ In Ireland, one-parent families face a disproportionately high risk of experiencing poverty and deprivation. We know the impact of poverty on the outcomes of children who experience it. Growing up in poverty negatively impacts children's wellbeing, their risk of developmental problems, causes lower educational attainment and poorer physical and mental health, to name just a few outcomes.² Furthermore, we also know that poverty is a cycle creating intergenerational harm, increased risk of poverty and reduced life chances.³

The EU Child Guarantee presents the opportunity for Ireland to leverage support through the ESF+ funds to ensure children at risk of poverty can access key public services, such as health, early childhood education and care, and education. While implementing the EU Child Guarantee at a national level would be a significant step forward in achieving the Government's aims in reducing child poverty, the adoption of the Guarantee should not be seen as a panacea in tackling child poverty. Instead, it should play an important part in a whole of Government, national strategy to reduce child poverty.

2. About One Family

One Family is Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting and separating. We were established in 1972 as Cherish and provide specialist parenting and family support services around Ireland. We train professionals on working with one-parent families and we promote policies that actively support diverse 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 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.

One Family has a long history of campaigning to end child poverty. Our CEO sits on the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Advisory Group and chairs its sub-group on child poverty. It is our view, informed by decades of policy and advocacy work to reduce child poverty and our direct work with families most vulnerable to poverty and deprivation,

¹Eurostat, (2021). *Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion*. [online], Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion#:~:text=types%20of%20households-,Key%20findings,aged%2065%20years%20and%20over](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Children_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion#:~:text=types%20of%20households-,Key%20findings,aged%2065%20years%20and%20over)

² Smyth, E. (2015). *Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9 and 13 year olds: Insights from the Growing up in Ireland Study*. Dublin: ESRI.

³Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*. London: Penguin Books.

that the National Action Plan for the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee must be accompanied by a complimentary National Child Poverty Strategy.

Overarching Recommendation: Develop a National Child Poverty Strategy headed by the DCEDIY with clear goals, roles, responsibilities and timelines, and contains a dedicated strand targeted at reducing poverty in one-parent families.

2.1. Who Do We Mean When We Refer to One-Parent Families?

One Family is committed to achieving equality and respect for all families. We believe that children do best when they have positive relationships with their parents and other adults in their lives. Whatever their family form, it is the quality of the relationships that matter, not the legal structure of the family. While we acknowledge that every family is unique, when we refer to one-parent families we mean families parenting alone, sharing parenting or parenting through or following separation.

3. About One-Parent Families

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.⁴ There were approximately 218,817 lone parents and 356,203 children in one-parent families in Ireland in 2016.⁵ 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.⁶ There is limited demographic data on shared parenting in Ireland; however, many of the families categorised as 'households headed by one adult' likely have some level of shared parenting.

4. A Coordinated, Targeted Response Needed for One-Parent Families

In 2016, the United National Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed deep concern at the 'significant increase in the number of children living in consistent poverty' and specifically referred to one-parent households.⁷ One-parent families are consistently over-represented in measurements indicating poor outcomes and well-being, such as poverty, deprivation, homelessness, fuel poverty, living standards. There have been countless significant independent and Government commissioned research reports published in relation to one-parent families since 2016 alone, including a 2017 Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection report which made wide ranging recommendations.⁸ This report is referenced in the Programme for Government

⁴Central Statistics Office, (2016). *Census 2016 Profile 4 – Households and Families*.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2016). *Concluding Observations: Ireland*. Geneva: United Nations.

⁸Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, (2017). *Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland*. Government Publication Office: Dublin.

commitments towards lone parent families.⁹All indicate that the poorer outcomes experienced by one-parent families urgently need to be addressed.

Across the EU, one-parent households are among those with worst material and well-being outcomes.¹⁰ One-parent households in Ireland have amongst the lowest equivalised income in the EU.¹¹ One-parent families are among those most at risk of poverty in Ireland; 31.8% of one parent families are at risk of poverty compared to 13% of the overall population. The most recent data from the Central Statistics Office shows that the proportion of one-parent households living in consistent poverty rose from 19.2% in 2019 to 21.6% 2020 at a time when the consistent poverty rate for the general population fell from 5.5% to 5%. Similarly, during the same period the proportion of one-parent households experiencing deprivation rose by 2.4% (to 47.8%) at a time when the overall deprivation rate fell by 2.2% (to 15.6%). This demonstrates the need for targeted anti-poverty interventions for one-parent households.

4.1. Reform of the One Parent Family Payment

The Social Welfare and Pensions Act, 2012 introduced substantial changes to the One Parent Family Payment (OFP). These changes applied to both new and existing recipients and the age at which the youngest child ceases eligibility was reduced from 18 to seven years. These changes were made alongside a commitment to reforms of childcare, which were not implemented. As a result of this policy change, thousands of one-parent families were pushed into poverty.¹²

Prior to the One-Parent Family Payment reforms/cuts in Budget 2012, lone parents were disproportionately poor and working in part-time low paid work and 98% of OFP recipients were female. Since the reforms in 2012 these issues have been further exacerbated. Approximately half of all Working Family Payment recipients are lone parents, which indicate how reliant these families are on state income supports to stay in work. Lone parents in Ireland are also now five times more likely to experience in-work poverty than other households with children.¹³

Over time our society has evolved to focus and place value primarily on a person's ability to participate in the labour market. Social welfare is largely conditional on ability and availability to work. Unpaid care work is not only undervalued but largely denigrated in a society where self-worth is tied to employment. For lone parents this approach has completely ignored their caring responsibilities towards their children. The result is the exceptionally high rates of poverty, deprivation and discrimination experienced by one-parent families.

4.2. Access to Education

Access to quality employment opportunities is predicated on being able to access further and higher education, something lone parents are often prevented from doing.

⁹Government of Ireland, (2020).

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

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

¹²Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, (2017).

¹³Society of St Vincent de Paul (2019)

In 2017, an independent review carried out by Maynooth University as part of a Programme of Government commitment recommended an urgent need to widen access for one-parent 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.¹⁴ The complexity of the current system of supports was also criticised 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.

4.3. Child Maintenance

The lack of an independent child maintenance agency in Ireland is something One Family have long campaigned in relation to. In its absence, child maintenance is a largely private arrangement fraught with difficulty. Many parents don't receive child maintenance for their child or don't receive it regularly, even where a court ordered arrangement is in place. Yet, where an agreement is in place child maintenance is means tested even when parents aren't receiving any payment. Oftentimes, parents will avoid seeking a child maintenance agreement for fear of it impacting their access to social protection. In some cases parents will claim they have sought child maintenance and accept a lower means tested social welfare payment to avoid contact with an abuser or simply because they don't have access to the other parent. Ultimately, this inequality directly contributes to child poverty.¹⁵

Recommendation: Establish a high-level, inter-departmental group, reporting regularly to a Government sub-committee; tasked with implementing the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection's Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland (2017) and coordinating policy responses aimed at reducing the poverty, deprivation and inequality experienced by one-parent families.

5. Free Access to Early Childhood Education and Care

Ireland has a high participation rate in early childhood education and care (ECEC). In 2019 nearly all children aged three to five years, who were not in primary education, were enrolled in ECEC and 25 per cent of children under the age of three were enrolled (around the OECD average).¹⁶ However, despite increased investment in ECEC over the last decade, the average state expenditure per child is lower than the OECD average. Critically, Ireland has one of the highest costs of ECEC in the OECD.¹⁷ Historically and presently, lack of access to quality affordable ECEC has been one of the most significant barriers to education and employment for one parent families. As a result it has also been one of the key contributing factors to child poverty among these families.

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵One Family, (2021). *Submission to the Child Maintenance Review Group*. [online] Available at: <https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/One-Family-Submission-to-the-Child-Maintenance-Review-Group-3.21-1.pdf>

¹⁶OECD, (2021). *Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality*. Paris: OECD.

¹⁷Ibid.

As outlined above, cuts implemented to the OPF payment in 2012 were extremely detrimental to the wellbeing and outcomes of one-parent families. These cuts were made alongside the promise of high quality, freely accessible ECEC to support parents' participation in the labour market. While there have been multiple measures to improve quality in recent years, the cost of ECEC remains one of the biggest issues for one-parent families today. Creating high quality childcare has generally been difficult in countries which commodify childcare, whereas childcare quality has been found to be higher where it is publicly provided.¹⁸ The Programme for Government commits to introduce a long-term sustainable model of childcare which promotes quality, better outcomes for children and makes a career in childcare more attractive.¹⁹

One of the developments in recent years has been the establishment of the National Childcare Scheme. The purpose of the Scheme is to provide quality education and care for young children; however, in practice it primarily operates to provide childcare to women to participate in education and employment. While the latter is critically required by people parenting alone, the emphasis should be on a quality educational experience for young children. There is a wealth of evidence of the benefit of early childhood care and education for children's social, cognitive and emotional development; the benefits for children experiencing poverty and disadvantage are even more pronounced.²⁰ It is therefore, imperative that early years care and education is not linked to a parent's participation in education or employment but instead is linked to children's needs and best interests.

The Parents Leave Act was introduced in November 2019 by the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice to provide greater gender equality in the provision of parental leave for parents of newborn babies. Under the legislation leave entitlement follows the parent rather than the child; meaning, children in one-parent families receive half the dedicated time with a caregiver as parents in two-parent families during a vital time in their early development. Mechanisms used in other jurisdictions, such as transferable leave to another caregiver such as a grandparent or permitting one-parent families to access the full leave entitlement should have been incorporated. While One Family is aware the Government must operate within the constraints of relevant EU Directives, given the high rates of poverty in this group and the obvious inequality built in to the current Scheme, reworking the Parent's Benefit Scheme to make it more equitable should be a priority.

¹⁸ Mara A Yerkes and Jana Javornik (2019) 'Creating capabilities: childcare policies in comparative perspective' *Journal of European Social Policy*, Vol 29: 4

¹⁹ Government of Ireland, (2020). *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*.

²⁰ Hayes, N. (2008). *The Role of Early Childhood Care and Education – An Anti-Poverty Perspective*. Combat Poverty Agency: Dublin.

Recommendation: Provide free access to ECEC for low income and one-parent families.

Recommendation: Expand access to the National Childcare Scheme for all families in receipt of the Medical Card. This can be achieved by amending the current IT system to include an additional field for Medical Card holders.

Recommendation: Exclude Child Benefit and child maintenance as reckonable income for the purposes of the National Childcare Scheme.

Recommendation: Prioritise addressing the lack of availability of childcare for low-income families accessing further training and employment opportunities.

Recommendation: Amend the Parents Benefit Scheme to give infants in one-parent families equitable access to time with their care giver as children in two-parent families.

6. Free Access to Education (including school-based activities)

Children have a right to education.²¹ This right is enshrined in the Irish Constitution, which guarantees the State provide for free primary education for all children.²² Education leads children out of poverty and disadvantage. A child whose parent has higher education is more likely to go on to higher education than a child whose parents have lower levels of education. Yet, Primary Caregivers in one-parent families have on average around half the rate of educational qualification above second level as two-parent families.²³

One Family is among a number of organisations who have been calling for the introduction of free primary education. The cost of sending children to school is an issue commonly raised by our frontline service users. Changes in this year's Exchequer Budget to the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance saw one-parent families having equitable access to the scheme for the first time. The expansion of the eligibility threshold for one-parent families to meet that of two-parent families was something One Family has long campaigned for.

Around half of all parents report being concerned about the cost of sending their child to school and around one in five parents take out a loan to pay for their child's school costs.²⁴ School costs are higher for adolescents, as are other costs such as groceries and social costs.²⁵ Research from Barnardos has shown it would cost €103 million to fund free school books, transport, and classroom resources and to end the practice of

²¹United Nations (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

²²Government of Ireland, (1937). *Bunreacht na hEireann: Article 42.4*.

²³Williams, James et al (2013). *Growing Up in Ireland national longitudinal study of children: development from birth to three years infant cohort. Report 5*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

²⁴Barnardos, (2021). *Back to School Survey Report 2021*.

²⁵Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, (2021). *Budget 2022 MESL Impact Briefing*. <https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/budget-2022-1/> [Accessed: 14 December 2021]

voluntary contributions at primary level and €127 million at secondary level.²⁶ In 2019 a free school book pilot scheme was introduced in DEIS schools and recent years have seen a partial restoration of cuts that were made to school capitation grants. However, many children who experience disadvantage and poverty do not attend a DEIS school so it is important supports are made more widely available.²⁷

Recommendation: Expand the Free School Books Pilot Scheme to all primary and secondary schools.

Recommendation: Develop a new model of funding for schools which ends the practice of “voluntary contributions” being sought from families each school year.

7. Free Access to a Healthy Meal Each School Day and Effective Access to Nutrition

The *EU Recommendation on Investing in Children* recommends that states ‘invest in prevention, particularly during early childhood years, by putting in place comprehensive policies that combine nutrition, health, education and social measures’.²⁸ Poor nutrition in children is linked to reduced development, cognitive function, delayed school enrolment, impaired concentration, increased illness, absenteeism and early school leaving.²⁹ Being able to buy nutritious food locally or having access to transport to a local supermarket helps to prevent food poverty.³⁰

The School Meals Programme, funded by the Department of Social Protection (DSP), provides food to 1,506 schools and benefits 230,000 children.³¹ A pilot for hot school meals was launched in 2019, with additional funding made available in 2020 and 2021.³² The universal provision of hot meals through schools counters stigma and provides a social environment where children can access and enjoy food without financial constraints.³³ The evaluation of the pilot Hot Meals Programme was published in March 2021.³⁴ Overall, the findings were very positive and indicated buy-in on the part of schools, parents and suppliers. In particular, the evaluation cited the positive impact felt on children’s attendance, physical health and psychological wellbeing.

The success of the Free School Meals Programme is dependent on the resources available to it. The National Action Plan on the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee should ensure all new primary and secondary schools are designed and built with

²⁶ Barnardos, (2020). *Back to School Briefing Paper 2020: The real cost of school*.

²⁷ Smyth, E. (2017) *Off to a good start? Primary school experiences and the transition to second-level education*. Dublin: ESRI.

²⁸ European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final)

²⁹ Alessandro Rhyll Demaio, Francesco Branca, Decade of action on nutrition: our window to act on the double burden of malnutrition, *BMJ Glob Health* 2017;3

³⁰ Richard Layte and Cathal McCrory, (2011) *Growing up in Ireland Overweight and obesity among 9 year olds*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

³¹ Minister for Social Protection (Heather Humphries TD), Ceisteanna – Questions –Dáil Eireann, 25 November 2021. [57546/21, 57476/21, 58009/21].

Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection School Meals Programme Written Answers 14 July 2020 [15434/20]

³² Ibid.

³³ Healthy Food for All, *A good practice guide to School Food Initiatives* (Healthy Food for All 2009)

³⁴ Ian McShane & Rachael Joyce, Hot School Meals Pilot Project Main Report July 2020, Department of Social Protection 2021 <<https://assets.gov.ie/128275/29e96cca-68fc-4e55-9d3b-8713f0d8bbb7.pdf>> accessed 29 April 2021.

adequate kitchen and cooking facilities and eating spaces so every child can have a hot nutritious meal on-site. Existing schools should be able to access National Development Plan funding to retrofit a space for preparing nutritious food. To really improve children's diets and their health through food provision, school kitchens should be facilitated to integrate food provision and education for children and provide community-based opportunities for food awareness and food skills training for families.

Holiday hunger remains a serious concern for children and young people experiencing poverty who rely on school meals, and calls have been made for meal schemes to be extended through the summer months and other holiday periods.³⁵ Funding to extend the school meals programme over the summer months was made available (to those schools who had availed of the offer at Easter), in recognition of the hardship being experienced by families due to the Covid-19 pandemic,³⁶ however, it is not clear how many children and families were able to benefit from this additional funding.

Recommendation: Expand the Hot School Meals Programme to all primary and secondary school children. Develop and implement a plan which includes annual targets and sub targets for children most vulnerable to food poverty, including children in one-parent families.

Recommendation: Expand access to the Hot School Meals Programme to non-formal education settings incrementally. This should include early years, youth and alternative education settings.

8. Free Access to Healthcare

Access to healthcare is a fundamental right set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.³⁷ Poverty and health are inextricably linked; a child's health is determined by the conditions in which they are born, grow and live. Just as poverty and inequality in early years can have a powerful negative impact on a child's long term health outcomes, providing timely access to health interventions in childhood has an enduring positive effect on their health in later life. The positive effect of intervening early is felt particularly strongly in those children who are most disadvantaged.³⁸

In Ireland, the impacts of social determinants of health are evident, with research showing higher prevalence of chronic disease and other markers of ill-health among deprived sections of the population.³⁹ Research from Growing Up in Ireland found no health differences between children from different social classes at birth or nine months of age. However, by three years old those from least advantaged families are more likely to have behavioural problems, to have a chronic illness, to experience limitations in daily activities, and to have worse respiratory health.⁴⁰

The *EU Recommendation on Investing in Children* recommends improving the responsiveness of the health system to better address the needs of disadvantaged children by dismantling 'the obstacles to accessing healthcare faced by children and

³⁵ Kitty Holland 'Thousands at risk of holiday hunger if school meals dropped' Irish Times, 11 June 2020.

³⁶ Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection School Meals Programme Written Answers 14 July 2020 [15434/20]

³⁷ United Nations, (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

³⁸ Marmot M, Allen J, Boyce T, Goldblatt P and Morrison, J. (2020). *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On*. London: Institute of Health Equity.

³⁹ Committee on the Future of Healthcare, (2017). *Sláintecare Report*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas.

⁴⁰ Williams, James et al (2013).

families in vulnerable situations, including costs' and by investing in prevention.⁴¹The Health Service Executive has identified prevention and early intervention with regard to children's health as a key objective of its current strategy.⁴² Such an approach seeks to 'act early' in order to have the 'greatest impact' in terms of individual health and wellbeing.

The Medical Card Scheme provides eligible households with free access to primary care including GP, oral, opticians and aural services, medicines and prescriptions, in-patient and out-patient services, medical appliances and maternity care.⁴³Medical cards also provide access to a number of associated schemes such as the waiving of exam fees and school transport. Access to a medical card is therefore an important support for low-income households. In most cases if a family's income is derived solely from social welfare they qualify for the medical card, as they have already satisfied a means test. Families in receipt of Working Family Payment typically do not meet this criteria and although allowances can be made for working families, the assessment is complex and may contribute to the lack of take-up by those who are working but still living in poverty.⁴⁴The income thresholds for the medical card have not been revised since 2005. Currently, the medical card income threshold for a family of two adults with two children under 16 is €342.50 per week⁴⁵ while the poverty line for this household in 2021 is €664.63.⁴⁶

In 2016 an all-party committee on the Future of Healthcare published the Sláintecare Report which set out a roadmap for transforming Irish healthcare and investing in a publicly funded, freely accessible health system for all. One of the core strategic actions to be implemented under Sláintecare is to expand eligibility for medical cards on a phased basis to move towards universal healthcare. Removing financial barriers to access to healthcare among children has significant impacts on child health, and later-life outcomes.⁴⁷Since the introduction of free GP care for under 6s in 2014 there have been almost constant announcements of plans to extend free care to higher age groups.

Recommendation: Provide access to GP care to all children under the age of 18. As we transition to a system of universal health care, ensure everyone on a low income can access care by increasing the medical card income thresholds to the equivalent of the highest means-tested welfare payment.

9. Ensuring access to adequate housing

The right to housing is explicitly recognised in Article 31 of the Revised European Social Charter of the Council of Europe (RESC), which provides specific criteria and guidance for the progressive realisation of the right to housing and the reduction and prevention of

⁴¹European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1060&langId=en>

⁴²Health Service Executive (2021)*HSE Corporate Plan 2021 – 2024* <https://bit.ly/3fM0tTs> accessed 26 May 2021.

⁴³Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/health/medical_cards_and_gp_visit_cards/medical_card.html [Accessed 13 December 2021].

⁴⁴Keilthy P, (2006).*Medical Card Eligibility: Profiling People Living in Poverty without a Medical Card using EU-SILC*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

⁴⁵Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/health/medical_cards_and_gp_visit_cards/medical_card.html [Accessed 13 December 2021].

⁴⁶ Social Justice Ireland (2021) *Poverty Focus 2021*. Dublin: Social Justice Ireland.

⁴⁷Nolan A. And Layte R. (2017). *Growing Up in Ireland: Understanding Use of General Practitioner Services among Children in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

homelessness, to the point of its eradication. Housing must be available, affordable and of adequate quality.⁴⁸ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) makes special provision for the State to assist with regard to housing, should a child's parents be unable to fulfil their right to a decent standard of living, sufficient to meet their physical and social needs and support their development.⁴⁹ Child homelessness has increased by over 200 per cent since 2014 and we know a disproportionate number of these children are in one-parent families.⁵⁰

One-parent families consistently represent the highest proportion of families living in emergency accommodation. The proportion of families in emergency accommodation who are one-parent families has remained around 55 per cent consistently since 2018 until June of 2021 when the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage stopped disaggregating its homeless data by family type.⁵¹ Recent research published by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) demonstrated that lone parent households reported some of the worse outcomes across a number of indicators; accessibility, affordability, security of tenure, cultural adequacy, quality and location.⁵²

In 2021 the UN Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, expressed shock at the particular disadvantage faced by one-parent households on nearly all housing rights dimensions assessed in a report published by IHREC and ESRI. The Rapporteur's view was that the findings raised a fundamental question of how society treats one-parent families who are "the most impoverished" and face "significantly more often arrears in paying for their housing costs are among those with lowest security of tenure and highest risk of eviction."⁵³ However, as the report found, homelessness is the acute end of a much broader housing inequality facing one-parent families. Lone parent households have much lower rates of homeownership, are more likely to face affordability issues and more likely to live in poor quality housing, such as dwellings with damp or no central heating.⁵⁴

There is no recognition of the needs of families where parenting is shared; as a result, these families often face unique challenges in relation to housing. We know from the official homelessness statistics, released each month by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, that one-parent families make up the majority of homeless families; however, what is not counted and therefore overlooked is the proportion of fathers counted as a 'single adult'. To maintain functioning shared parenting, fathers need access to safe, suitable accommodation to care for their children. These parents are overlooked in Government housing policy.

⁴⁸Council of Europe, (1996). *European Social Charter (Revised)*. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter> [accessed 13 December 2021]

⁴⁹United Nations, (1989).

⁵⁰ Focus Ireland (2020) *Latest figures on homelessness*. Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/latest-figures/> [accessed 13 December 2021].

⁵¹Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2021). *Homeless Report June*.

⁵²Russell H, Privalko I, McGinnity F & Enright S. (2021). *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland*. IHREC: Dublin.

⁵³ The Irish Times, (2021). *Lone parents and children account for more than half of homeless families*. [Published 14 September 2021]

⁵⁴Russell H, Privalko I, McGinnity F & Enright S. (2021)

The introduction of family hubs in 2017 meant families were no longer housed in hotels and B&B accommodation. While preferable to hotel or B&Bs, family hubs should not be treated as a long or even medium-term housing option for families. Issues such as lack of privacy, lack of space, excessive noise present challenges for families⁵⁵. We are aware of barriers to fathers accessing this type of emergency accommodation with their children as it depends on their legal custody status rather than their day to day caring responsibilities.

There is a strong link between housing and poverty, with the largest increase in deprivation in 2019 observed among households living in the private rented sector.⁵⁶ A recent report published by Social Justice Ireland showed that in 2020 the at risk of poverty rate increased from 31.8% to 50% in one-parent family households, once housing costs (mortgage interest and rent) were accounted for.⁵⁷

The current over-reliance on the private rented sector to meet social housing need via the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) exposes children and families to high rents and insecure tenures. Reliance on HAP can act as a poverty trap for one-parent families, preventing parents from improving their employment circumstances for fear of losing HAP and being unable to afford their rent. There are also a number of technical anomalies in how housing supports interact with other supports, such as the SUSI grant, which can see one-parent families forced to choose between housing and in this case education.⁵⁸ The National Action Plan for the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee should commit to eliminating child and family homelessness and to ensuring there is high quality affordable housing in a variety of tenures in sustainable communities.

Recommendation: Develop a Family Homeless Strategy, which is child-centred, has clear responsibilities, targets and timelines and places a limit of 6 months on families being housed in emergency accommodation. One-parent families should be specifically targeted under this strategy with tailored objectives and goals.

Recommendation: Pursue a housing-first approach by increasing the output of built and acquired Local Authority and Approved Housing Bodies social housing units, addressing the housing needs of one parent families who are more at risk of becoming homeless.

Ends

⁵⁵Ombudsman for Children's Office, (2019). *No Place Like Home: Children's views and experiences of living in family hubs*.

⁵⁶ Central Statistics Office (2020) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) Enforced deprivation 2019* <https://bit.ly/35SnvEP> accessed 20 September 2020.

⁵⁷ Social Justice Ireland. (2022). *Housing and Poverty 2022*.

⁵⁸ One Family, (2021). *Submission to the Higher Education Authority on the National Access Plan 2022-2026*. [online] Available at: https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Access-Plan-Submission-_One-Family_Final.pdf