

Introduction

One Family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the mid-term review of the Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025. Identified within the Strategy as one of the groups under-represented in the labour market, one-parent families face a disproportionately high risk of experiencing poverty and deprivation. The Roadmap for Social Inclusion commits to targeting a reduction in poverty among children and families on low incomes.¹ The Government has also signed up to the European Child Guarantee which aims to reduce child poverty by focusing resources at the groups of children most in need, which includes children in one-parent families.² Yet, access to the labour market and specifically to quality employment opportunities that are compatible with parents' additional caring responsibilities remains a core issue for one-parent families.³

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, therapeutic and family support services around Ireland. 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. This submission is informed by our direct work with one-parent families and our role representing these families at a local and national level over more than 50 years.

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 at the time of available Census data 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

¹ Government of Ireland, (2019). *Roadmap for Social Inclusion*.

² European Commission, (2021), *European Child Guarantee*.

³ Society of St Vincent de Paul. (2019). *Working, Parenting, and Struggling? An analysis of the employment and living conditions of one parent families in Ireland*.

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

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Ireland; however, many of the families categorised as 'households headed by one adult' are likely have some level of shared parenting.

One-parent families are consistently over-represented in measurements indicating poor outcomes and well-being, such as poverty, deprivation, homelessness, fuel poverty, living standards. The most recent data from the Central Statistics Office shows that in 2022 14.1 per cent of households with one adult and children were living in consistent poverty and 23.8 per cent were at risk of poverty. Almost half, 43.5 per cent were living in material deprivation.⁷ These figures are between two and three times higher than the general population on average, a trend which has been consistent over the last decade.

1. What progress do you feel has been made in achieving the aims and commitments set out in Pathways to Work 2021-2025?

Welcome progress has been made in the capacity of Case Officers. Evidence shows there is a need to lower case-officer to client ratios and increase Government investment.⁸ This is particularly true in the case of one-parent families where caseworkers are often the key to lone parents progressing to employment.⁹ The 1-to-1 case officer engagements fell below target. While we recognise the challenges imposed by health restrictions during the lifetime of the Strategy, the importance of such engagements to people in one-parent families cannot be underestimated.

Increases in the number of places in further and higher education are very welcome; however, the barriers for accessing places for lone parents, such as access to childcare and the SUSI grant being restricted to in-person and full-time courses, remain. There have been overall gains in reducing long-term unemployment.

The Working Age Payment/ Basic Income Guarantee proposals have yet to be published; however, we have some concern that proposals on pay related social protection will create a two-tier system which could place lone parents at the bottom. One area of particular concern in the proposals related to ending the Increase for a Qualified Child. This payment directly targets children most at risk of poverty and must be maintained and built upon as a priority.

Most importantly, it remains to be seen whether measures put in place to support the employment rates of lone parents via the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 and Pathways to Work have been a success. We await the results of Census 2022 results but note the timing of this review and the Progress Report are unfortunately lacking the insight the results will provide.

2. What are the key challenges facing the Irish labour market that Pathways to Work 2021 – 2025 will need to address over the remaining lifetime of the strategy?

For one-parent families the key challenge relating to the labour market is access to quality, sustainable employment opportunities, which recognise and are compatible with their caring responsibilities. We know that parents in one-parent families are more likely to be

⁷ Central Statistics Office (2023), *Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2022*.

⁸ Roantree, B. Et al (2021) *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland*.

⁹ Millar, M and Crosse, R. (2016) *Lone Parents and Activation, What Works and Why: A Review of the International Evidence in the Irish Context*

in low-paying, insecure jobs and are five times more likely to experience in-work poverty than two-parent households.¹⁰ Everyone should be able to reach a decent standard of living. Supporting parents to access and stay in work, making sure employment pays an adequate amount to meet families' needs and providing in-work income supports are all crucial tools in supporting one-parent families and are also recommended by the European Commission as a means of reducing child poverty.¹¹

Access to affordable, quality, sustainable, flexible early years care and education and school aged care remains a significant barrier for one-parent families. While the Labour Market Advisory Council Progress Report notes developments in the National Childcare Scheme, these have not been significant to provide financially viable or logistically suitable route to childcare for many parents. As previously noted, lone parents often work in low-paid, precarious jobs that require shift work or flexibility. The National Childcare Scheme is often not suitable for parents working outside regular daytime working hours or who rely on unregistered childminding to care for their children.

3. Are there any changes that you would suggest to the current ambitions and commitments in Pathways to Work 2021 – 2025, in light of the changed economic circumstances? This can include suggestions to change the high level ambitions, strands of action or specific commitments.

It is positive that the Progress Report identifies ongoing progress on the commitment to embed continuous professional development as a core feature of Case Officers within Intreo. One Family recommends that representative organisations working directly with groups who are under-represented in the labour market are included as providers in the schedule of training and development provided to Case Officers. Such organisations, whether they represent lone parents, people with disabilities, younger or older people etc., can offer a unique insight and expertise into how best to support their target group into employment. Indeed, such training and professional development should not be limited to Case Officers but required for wider departmental staff. Regarding lone parents, One Family would welcome the opportunity to deliver training and professional development modules to Intreo Case Officers, and other Department of Social Protection staff, to share our practice-based expertise and experience and to ensure the parents we represent are best supported to find quality employment. We also recommend that case officer numbers are increased beyond the ambition of the Strategy in order to move towards a 1: 100-150 ratio in line with international best practice standards.¹²

The Labour Market Advisory Council Progress Report marks the commitment to increase the number of children in receipt of State supports provided under Early Learning and Care and School-Aged Childcare Funding Programmes as 'achieved with ongoing delivery'; however, this target has no metrics attached to it nor does it identify to what extent specific target groups who face disadvantage in the labour market have benefitted. One Family recommends a specific target is included to increase access to early years care and education and school aged childcare for children in one-parent families. For example, the European Child Guarantee, which Ireland has adopted, recommends free early years care

¹⁰ Society of St Vincent de Paul, (2019).

¹¹ European Commission, (2021).

¹² Millar, M and Crosse, R. (2016)

and education for children from groups more likely to experience poverty, including children in one-parent families.¹³

As previously mentioned, access to the SUSI Grant Scheme is limited to full-time and in person courses, which poses a significant barrier to lone parents wishing to participate in the Scheme. In 2022 the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science commissioned Indecon to compile a comprehensive review of SUSI, which included a recommendation to “*extend supports to more flexible forms of learning including blended /online learning and part-time.*” It also recommends adjusting income thresholds to account for inflation and that the maintenance grant is increased to target those most in need or experiencing deprivation.¹⁴ One Family recommends the actions contained in this review are implemented as part of the Pathways to Work Strategy, particular extending eligibility for SUSI to part-time and blended learning.

4. Do you have any suggested actions to help improve the employment prospects and outcomes of people underrepresented in the labour market? This can include, for example, actions in relation to the Public Employment Services, training and employment supports, the social welfare system, and/or engagement with employers.

It is important that policies designed to support one-parent families recognise and cater for the additional caring needs lone parents have. Research suggests only full-time employment is sufficient to lift one-parent families out of poverty.¹⁵ This underlines the need for robust in-work social protection to bridge the gap between poverty and full-time work that being the sole carer and breadwinner can create. It is important that access to in-work supports is equitable for people regardless of family type.

Despite positive budgetary measures in recent years, there remain several steep inclines in withdrawal of supports when one-parent families move around the system due to change in employment status or change in a child’s age. Parents moving from Jobseekers Transitional Payment to Jobseekers Allowance when their youngest child turns 14 are particularly vulnerable. We know caring responsibilities do not end when a child is fourteen and this move comes at a time when the cost of raising a child increases steeply.¹⁶ One Family recommends that as a targeted commitment under Pathways to Work, Jobseekers Transition Payment is extended to parents in work, education or training until their youngest child reaches the end of second level education.

One Family recommends a greater emphasis is placed on evidenced based, targeted employability programmes as a means to improving access to employment for lone parents. One Family currently provides two Employability Programmes for lone parents in receipt of social welfare: the award-winning **New Futures Employability Programme** and the **New Steps Programme**. Using our insights as a trusted, specialist provider of services for one-parent families, we have designed these specialist bridging programmes

¹³ European Commission, (2021)

¹⁴ Indecon, (2022) *Review of the SUSI Grant Scheme*. Available at: https://www.indecon.ie/assets/files/pdf/report_on_indecon_review_of_the_student_grant_scheme.pdf

¹⁵ Maître, B., Russel, H., Smyth, E. (2021). *The Dynamics of Child Poverty in Ireland: Evidence from GUI*.

¹⁶ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, (2022). *MESL Annual Report 2022*

to give lone parents the confidence, skills and support they need to progress to education and employment. Both programmes have proved hugely successful in bridging the gap between caring for children full-time and getting back to education or employment for parents.

The New Futures Employability Programme is currently supported through funding received under the Employment & Social Innovation Programme (EaSI) 2014-2020. This is a collaborative project with the Department of Social Protection to pilot an integrated approach to supporting lone parents from welfare into education, training and employment in the north-east of the country. This pilot will be completed in 2024. The Labour Market Advisory Council Progress Report notes that: *"In Q1, 2022 an online profiling tool is being piloted in the North East for lone parents (as part of an EU funded digital activation project for lone parents). The experience of the pilot will also inform whether a similar system could be applied for jobseekers."* This does not provide an accurate description of the programme, and we provide an overview of key points below.

In 2019, One Family was awarded funding from the European Social Fund Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020 (ESF PEIL) to deliver the New Futures Employability Programme through a planned online delivery system. From 2006 to 2020, One Family delivered our Employability Programmes in-person in Dublin, Longford and Galway. This was done directly by us and in partnership with local providers. The New Futures Employability Programme was externally evaluated in 2010 by the Eustace Partnership, whose authors concluded the programme was "...a truly holistic approach to labour market progression." In 2019 and again in 2023, New Futures won the Special Recognition AONTAS STAR Award as a European Social Funded Initiative for making an outstanding contribution to adult learning.

Participants for both programmes are drawn from across the country and the community, with a significant number of participants coming from new communities including some who were living in Direct Provision. A number of parents completed the course despite living in homeless or overcrowded accommodation and most had existing qualifications in further education with some at postgraduate level.

The New Steps Programme is a 6-week, part-time introductory Personal Development programme. New Steps can be taken as a standalone programme or as an introductory course to the New Futures Employability Programme. Therefore, the profile of participants is that they are more distant from the labour market and would benefit from a more entry-level group course initially.

There are three distinct but complementary elements to the New Futures Employability Programme:

- Group-based training course focussed on career planning and personal development.
- Wrap-around family support services such as parent mentoring, counselling and parenting courses.
- Individual sessions with a key worker.

Currently, the programme is delivered online through weekly facilitated classes and our purpose-built online learning platform. It can also be delivered in-person where

appropriate. Participants are motivated to overcome personal barriers, clarify their career goals and move to further or higher education and/or directly into employment. One Family continues key work support for several months following programme completion where funding permits.

Both programmes have proved very successful. Progression rates for the New Futures Employability Programme are highlighted in the table below and as can be expected, the rate was lower at the start of the pandemic as the programme moved from in-person to remote delivery. Participants who were unable to progress following New Futures cited a lack of childcare, having a caring role, social welfare restraints and health issues as barriers. 60% of participants from the New Steps Programme progress on to the New Futures Employability Programme.

New Futures Employability Programme Progression Rates	
2019/20	75% progressed to further education, training and/or employment
2020/21	66% progressed to further education, training and/or employment
2021/22	73% progressed to further education, training and/or employment

One Family strongly believes this proven, highly successful and cost-effective programme should be mainstreamed and available to all lone parents who require it on a national basis. We recommend that provision should be available in- person as well as online to meet the needs of the diversity of parents around Ireland. The programme can be delivered in partnership with local voluntary sector and statutory providers subject to quality assurance by One Family.

Recommendations:

- Include organisations working on behalf of key target groups (such as One Family for lone parents) in Department of Social Protection staff training, particularly in Case Officer professional development.
- Increase the number of Case Officers to move towards international best practice of 1:100-150.
- Include specific targets for participation by children in one-parent families in early years care and education, consider providing free access to these children in line with the European Child Guarantee.
- Implement the actions contained in the Indecon review of the SUSI Grant Scheme, particularly extending eligibility to part-time and blended learning.
- Extend Jobseekers Transitional Payment to parents in employment, education or training until their child reaches the end of secondary school.
- Make employability programmes available to those farthest removed from the labour market. In particular, mainstream One Family's New Steps and New Futures Employability Programmes for lone parents.

Ends