



Human Rights, Equality and One Parent Families

Policy Paper

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Summary Recommendations

The below recommendations relate to areas of structural discrimination and unfairness experienced by people in one-parent families.

Delivering public services

1. Ensure all frontline and decision-making staff in public bodies have access to Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families: A Guide to Delivering Public Services.
2. Provide the appropriate training and supports for frontline staff to ensure they can provide up-to-date and accurate information to people in one-parent families. Staff should be trained to understand the specific challenges and responsibilities of people parenting alone and sharing parenting and to respond with empathy and respect.
3. Offer flexible, choice-based engagement and communication options in public bodies. Consider the caring responsibilities of parents in one-parent families by allowing for flexible and out-of-hours appointments.
4. Develop IT and administration systems to ensure information follows the service user, for example the development of a Unique Patient Identifier in health care settings. Once documentation or verification of circumstances is provided by a service user it should be uploaded to the system. Entitlements should be automatically added to a service user's account. All entitlements, correspondence and account information should be available for service users to view online.

Poverty and social inclusion

5. Establish a high-level, inter-departmental group which regularly reports to a government sub-committee and is tasked with coordinating policy responses aimed at reducing the poverty, deprivation and inequality experienced by one-parent families.
6. Develop a National Child Poverty Action Plan and establish a dedicated office to drive its implementation. The plan should have a focus on supporting one-parent families out of poverty through education, training and employment.

Education

7. Make SUSI available to parents engaging in education until their youngest child completes second level education.
8. Ensure parents in receipt of BTEA can access SUSI and make SUSI and BTEA available to ensure continuous access to education for parents irrespective of their housing tenure.
9. Make SUSI available for part-time and blended learning courses.
10. Remove the requirement to means test PhD stipends for OFP and JST payments.

Child maintenance

11. Remove child maintenance from the welfare and taxation systems, and instead treat it as a non-means tested, non-taxable income for children, as with Child Benefit, to reduce poverty in one-parent families.

Family law reform

12. Work towards the provision of regulation, oversight and public funding for reports/assessments to court and therapeutic, psycho-educational and family support services.
13. Urgently develop a child-centred Family Law Service Model to support families who are interacting with the family law system.
14. Amend Child Benefit rules to allow parents to share access to the support based on their custody agreement.

Social protection

15. Give lone parent households who are in receipt of Fuel Allowance entitlement to the receive the Living Alone Allowance, Telephone Allowance and Households Benefits package.
16. Reduce the weekly work threshold for Working Family Payment to 15 hours per week for one-parent households to increase their earning capacity.
17. Extend Jobseekers Transitional Payment to parents in education, training or employment until their youngest child reaches the end of second level education as recommended by the 2017 Joint Oireachtas Committee Report on Lone Parents.¹
18. Allow the same earnings disregard (€165 currently) for parents in receipt of Jobseeker Transitional Payment who are self-employed as is applied to parents.

Childcare

19. Amend the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act to ensure one-parent families 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 and permitting transferability between parents or to another appropriate carer in the case of a one-parent family.
20. In line with the European Child Guarantee, give access to free childcare and afterschool care for children in one-parent families by investing in NCS income-assessed subsidies.
21. Extend the maximum 45-hours subsidy under the NCS to parents not in work in recognition that these are the most disadvantaged families and access to quality childcare should be a child's right.

¹ Committee on Social Protection, (2017). *Report on the Position of Lone Parents*.

Taxation

22. Increase the standard rate band for the Single Person Child Carer Credit to be equal to that of a one earner married/civil partnership taxpayer unit. Remove the requirement for a primary claimant to relinquish entitlement. In lieu of both parents being able to avail of the Credit, if it is not taken up by the primary claimant, the secondary claimant should automatically qualify and vice versa. Where both claimants agree, they should be entitled to split the Credit evenly which will recognise and support shared parenting.

Housing

23. Establish a taskforce to review the impact of housing insecurity on one-parent families and develop appropriate solutions. This taskforce should be led by the Department of Housing and be responsible for developing a specific family homelessness plan within the Housing for All Framework, with targeted actions to prevent and address homeless among one-parent families.
24. Give fathers who share parenting equitable access to family housing supports, whether in emergency accommodation, the Housing Assistance Payment or social housing.
25. Establish a mechanism to provide people who are sharing parenting and retain an interest in the family home access to housing support schemes.
26. Develop a suite of mortgage supports targeting one-parent families including decoupling mortgage payments, child maintenance and other social welfare payments, and reopening the Mortgage Interest Supplement and the Mortgage Interest Relief schemes to new applicants who are parenting alone or sharing parenting and paying their mortgage alone.
27. Treat the receipt of child maintenance as a non-means tested payment for the child across all public bodies and standardise the deduction of paid maintenance across all local authorities in relation to social housing applications.

Shared Parenting

28. Include data collection on shared parenting in existing demographic surveys such as the Census and Growing Up in Ireland. Carry out standalone research into the lives of people in shared parenting families to explore how policies can be developed or adapted to meet their needs.
29. Ensure parents who are eligible for One Parent Family Payment and Jobseekers Transitional Payment and are sharing parenting are not barred from accessing these schemes because of their family type.

1. Introduction

In 2006 One Family published an introductory guide to human rights and how they can be used to advance the rights of one-parent families. A decade and a half later, One Family developed a project inspired by the original *Human Rights and One-Parent Families* publication and designed to bridge the gap between the lived experiences of one-parent families as public service users and implementation of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. Supported by funding from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, One Family commissioned research with parents to gather discursive testimony of parents' experiences and inform the development of two guideline publications on human rights and equality; the first for people in one-parent families and the second for those working to deliver public services. The Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families Guidelines are available at www.onefamily.ie.

While the focus of the research with parents and the two guideline publications is public service delivery, an underlying thread in feedback from parents related to the policies and structures which determine the way public services are delivered. Concerns about policies which were seen as unjust, inequalities in how supports were delivered to one-parent families versus other groups, and cultures within public bodies which create and reinforce stigma, mistrust or judgemental attitudes were all raised by participants in the research. Similar issues are commonly raised by families accessing One Family's services and form a central part of our advocacy and policy work. This paper seeks to give an overview of the research carried out in the development of the *Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families* guidelines, to outline what parents said and to connect the experiences of parents in accessing public services to broader public policy for one-parent families.

2. About One Family

One Family is Ireland's national organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting and separating. We were established as Cherish in 1972 by a group of single mothers who wanted to challenge the unjust treatment and discrimination experienced by one-parent families at that time. Since then, One Family has fought for one-parent families to be treated equally to other family types in Ireland. 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.

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. We believe all children have a right to a happy family life. We support families by providing specialist services and we campaign to improve the lives of one-parent families by changing the policies and structures that affect them. We are proud of the changes we have helped make over the last 50 years to how one-parent families are treated; but unfortunately, Ireland still has a long way to go to ensure adults and children in one-parent families are treated equally and without discrimination. For more information on our work visit www.onefamily.ie.

3. Background

Ireland has a long and shameful history when it comes to one-parent families. In the past, parents and children in one-parent families commonly experienced stigma and mistreatment by the State, religious institutions and society. Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby Homes, forced adoption and other abusive and discriminatory practices were commonplace in Ireland throughout the 20th century. The last of the Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries did not close until the late 1990s. While these types of institutions and the harsh practices they typified may be gone, some of the attitudes and beliefs which create stigma and discrimination against one-parent families can still be found in our structures, institutions, policies and in wider society today.

One-Parent Families in Ireland Today

Today the many one-parent families in Ireland make up a diverse range of family types. There is an ongoing steady increase in diverse family types in Ireland and this is replicated throughout Europe.² The most recent data on one-parent families comes from the 2016 Census. It tells us that one in five people in Ireland live in a one-parent family, while one in four families is headed by a lone parent. The vast majority (86.4%) of one-parent families are headed by mothers but many families share parenting of their children.³

Research from the Central Statistics Office in 2021 found 48 per cent of lone parents experience judgemental attitudes of exclusion, while 41 per cent reported feeling lonely some or all of the time.⁴ There is not much data on shared parenting in Ireland; however, many of the families referred to in the Census as 'households headed by one adult' are likely have some level of shared parenting. It is anticipated that the number of one-parent families may rise when the results of the 2022 Census are published.

One-Parent Families and Poverty

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.⁵ This report is referenced in the Programme for Government commitments towards lone parent families.⁶ All of the evidence and recommendations contained in these reports indicate that the poorer outcomes experienced by one-parent families urgently need to be addressed.

² Central Statistics Office, (2016). *Census 2016 Profile 4 – Households and Families*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Central Statistics Office, (2021). *Pulse Survey – Life at Home 2021: Renters, Lone Parents and Adults Living Alone or with a Parent*. [online] Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/FP/FP-PSLHRLPLA/pulsesurvey-lifeathome2021rentersloneparentsandadultslivingaloneorwithaparent/>

⁵ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, (2017). *Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland*. Government Publication Office: Dublin. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_social_protection/reports/2017/2017-06-15_report-on-the-position-of-lone-parents-in-ireland_en.pdf

⁶ Government of Ireland, (2020). *A Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*.

Across the EU, one-parent households are among those with worst material and well-being outcomes.⁷ One-parent households in Ireland have amongst the lowest equivalised income in the EU.⁸ 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.⁹ One-parent families are among those most at risk of poverty in Ireland; 22.8% of one parent families are at risk of poverty compared to 9.1% of the overall population and they are more likely to live in consistent poverty (13.7% compared to 4% of overall population) or to experience deprivation (44.9% compared to 13.8% of overall population). Children in one-parent families are four times more likely to live in consistent poverty than children in two-parent families.¹⁰

Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty

The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty is a legal obligation that makes all public bodies responsible for the promotion of equality, prevention of discrimination and the protection of human rights. Also sometimes called the 'Public Sector Duty' or 'the Duty' for short, it was introduced into Irish law in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 with the aim of putting equality and human rights at the heart of how public services are delivered. The Public Sector Duty means that, while carrying out their functions, all public bodies must have regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination;
- promote equality of opportunity and treatment for staff and persons to whom it provides services;
- and protect the human rights of staff and the persons to whom it provides service.

4. Research with Parents

A core part of the *Human Rights, Equality and One Parent Families* project is the voices of parents. Between autumn 2021 and spring 2022 One Family commissioned research with parents to:

- listen to their experiences of using public services;
- to ascertain their views on how public bodies can uphold the rights of one-parent families and fulfil their responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty;
- and, to gather their feedback on the development of two *Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families* guidelines.

Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the research was to gather information on the experiences of parents in one-parent families when using public services. The core questions at the heart of the research were as follows:

⁷ Eurofound, (2019). *Household composition and well-being*. Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg.

⁸ Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, (2019). *Working, Parenting and Struggling?*. Available at: https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/working_parenting_and_struggling-_/1?e=25010855/71456122

⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2016). *Concluding Observations: Ireland*. Geneva: United Nations.

¹⁰ Central Statistics Office, (2022). *EU SILC 2021*.

1. What are the lived experiences of people in one-parent families when accessing public services?
2. What are the views of parents on how public bodies can improve services to people in one-parent families.

Methodology

In autumn 2021 One Family commissioned Dr Jennifer van Aswegen of JVA Consultancy to carry out research to explore one-parent families' experiences of using and interacting with public services, in the context of human rights and equality. The research included three phases:

Phase 1: A survey available to parents online.

Phase 2: Online focus groups with parents.

Phase 3: A Rights Holder Steering Group made up of focus group participants.

The first phase, an anonymous online survey, used the Menimeter platform. The survey was disseminated and promoted via One Family's social media channels, e-zine and networks. The second phase of the research, focus groups with parents, ran concurrently with the online survey and was held via Zoom due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As well as taking part in a facilitated discussion, focus group participants also had the opportunity to take part in the survey via Mentimeter. Research questions and discussion topics focused on public service delivery. Participants were asked about their experiences of public service delivery within the past year.

Focus group participants were then invited to take part in the third phase of the research by joining a Rights Holder Steering Group. The Group provided feedback on findings from phases 1 and 2 and advised on the content and structure of the guideline publications.

Research Sample

In total 148 parents from one-parent families took part in the survey, with 17 also taking part in a focus group. Of these, 80 per cent indicated they were women, 18 per cent indicated they were men and two per cent preferred not to indicate their gender. Most participants (73 per cent) indicated they were parenting alone, whereas 27 per cent indicated they shared parenting of their child/ren.

Engagement with Public Services

Participants indicated they engaged with one or more public services in the last year (Figure 1). The most engaged with public bodies were the Department of Social Protection (23 per cent), health services (19 per cent) and family law and court services (17 per cent). Participants were asked a series of questions about which public service they engage with most. The most frequently engaged with service was the family law and courts services (26 per cent), followed closely by the Department of Social Protection (23 per cent) (Figure 2). While 15 per cent of parents indicated health services were the most commonly engaged with service, 30 per cent indicated health

services were the second most engaged with and 27 per cent indicated health services were the third most engaged with public service. Other public bodies parents listed included Tusla, the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, local authorities, and an Garda Síochána. Some responses relate to organisations or bodies that are not subject to the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty; these responses are included to provide a fulsome picture of public service use by one-parent families.

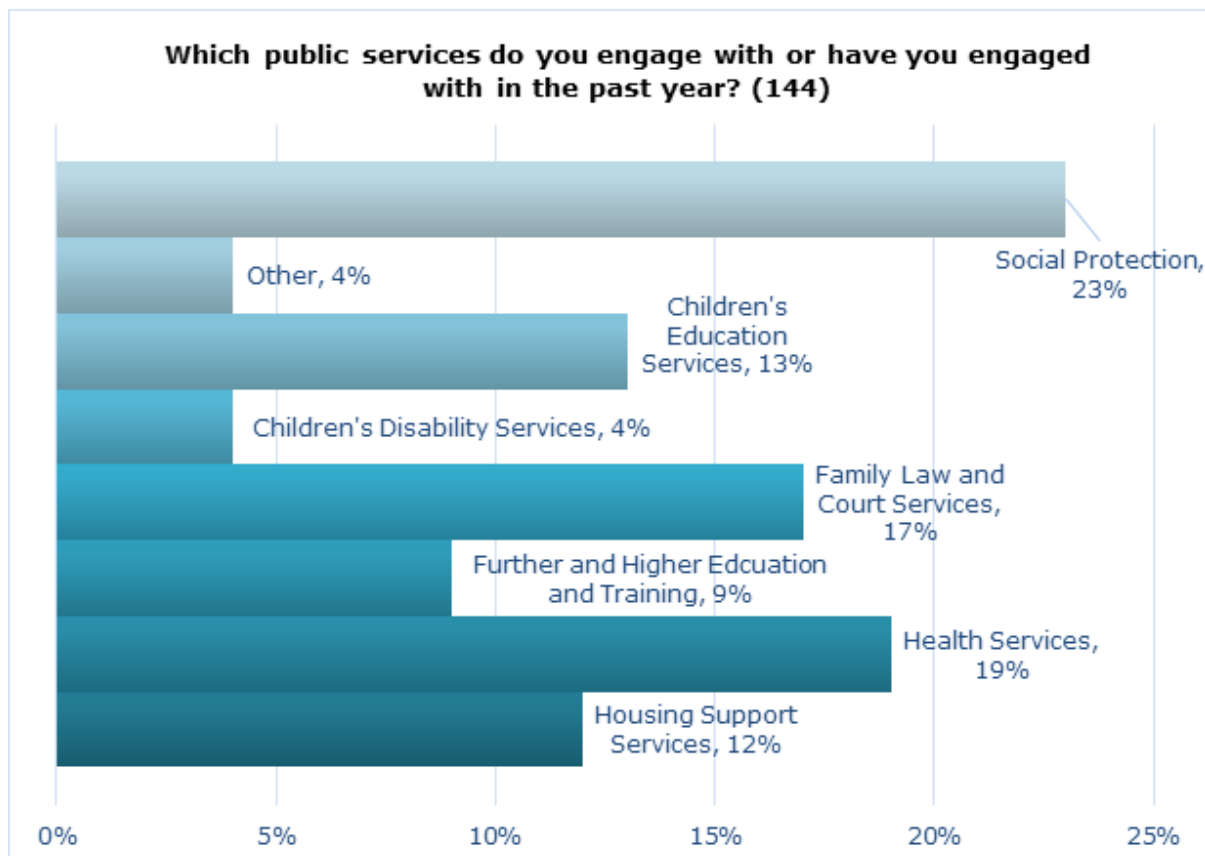


Figure 1: Engagement with public services in the last year.

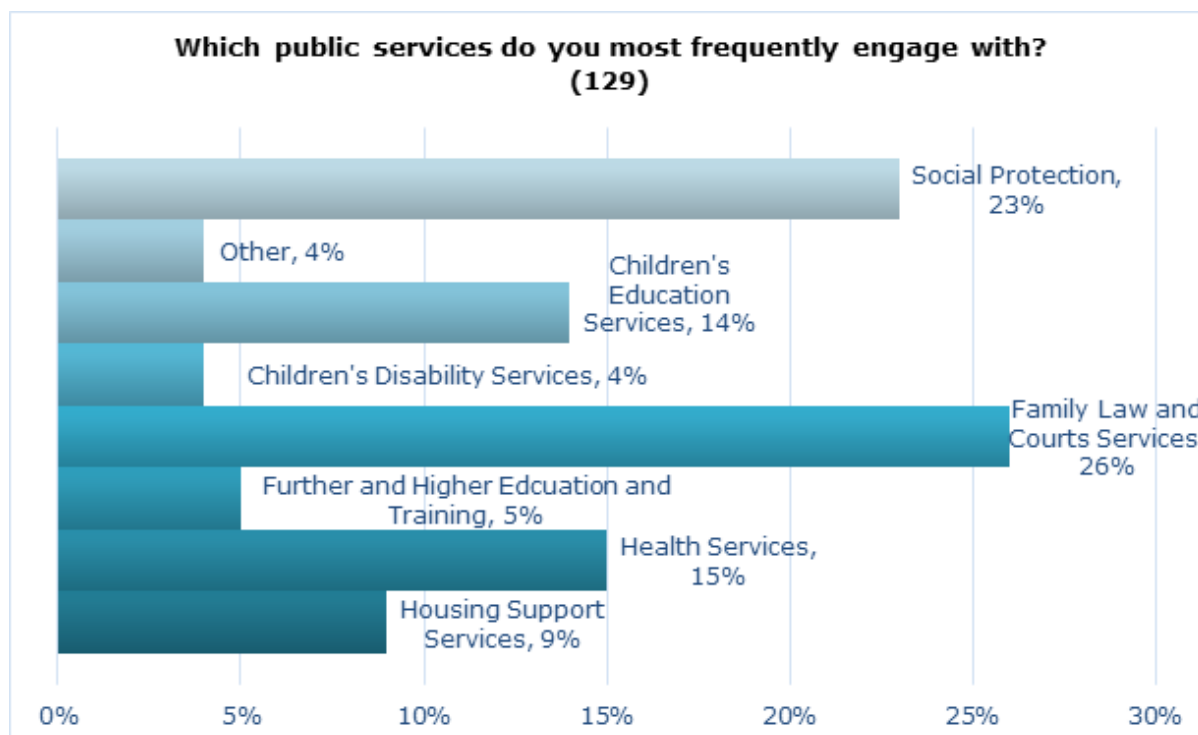


Figure 2: Most frequently engaged with public services.

Participants were asked about their experiences when interacting with public services, both negative and positive. They were asked what the impact these interactions had on them and their families and what changes they would like to see in how public services are delivered to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect human rights.

Some key themes which emerged were:

- **Dignity and respect** – these values were key in how parents described both positive and negative interactions with public services. It was also central to how parents believed they should be treated by public bodies.
- **Protection from harassment** – parents described experiencing degrading, humiliating, intimidating or offensive treatment which undermined their dignity during some interactions with public services.
- **Prevention of discrimination because of civil or family status** – parents described a range of interactions with public bodies in which they felt discriminated against because of their family type.
- **Prevention of gender discrimination** – both mothers and fathers reported feeling discriminated against because of their gender. In many cases, they felt this was directly linked to their status as belonging to a one-parent family.

Positive Experiences

Half of participants indicated they had had a positive experience of public service delivery. Only 49 per cent felt this experience had a positive impact on them or their family.

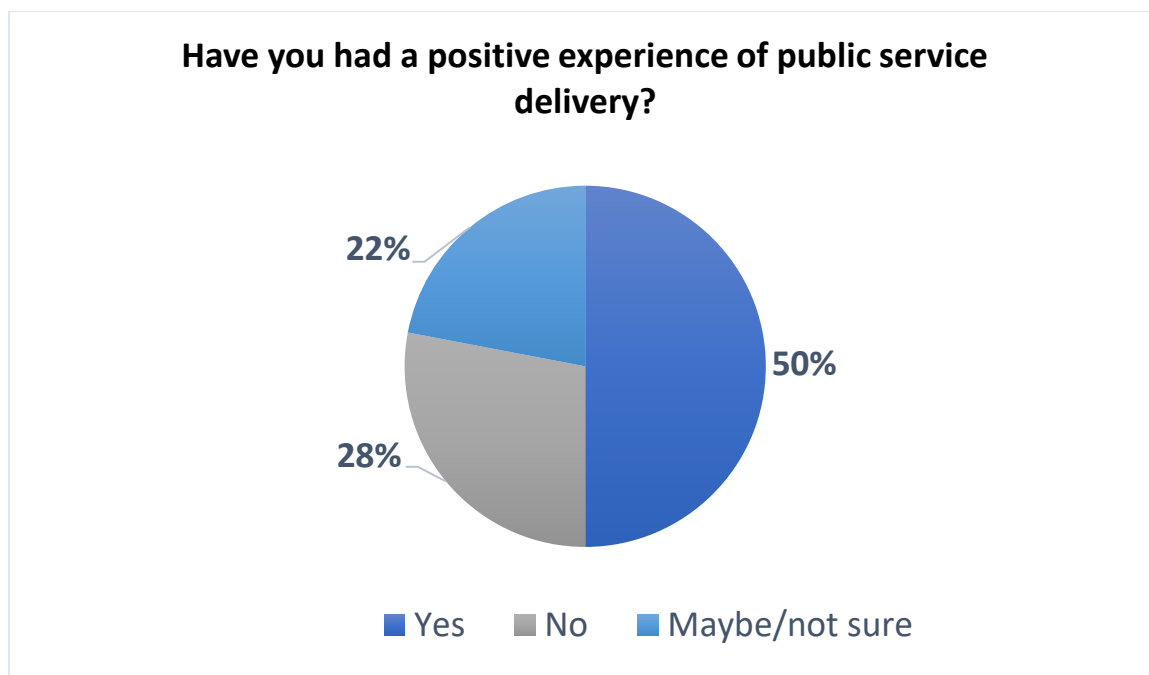


Figure 3: Positive experience of public service delivery

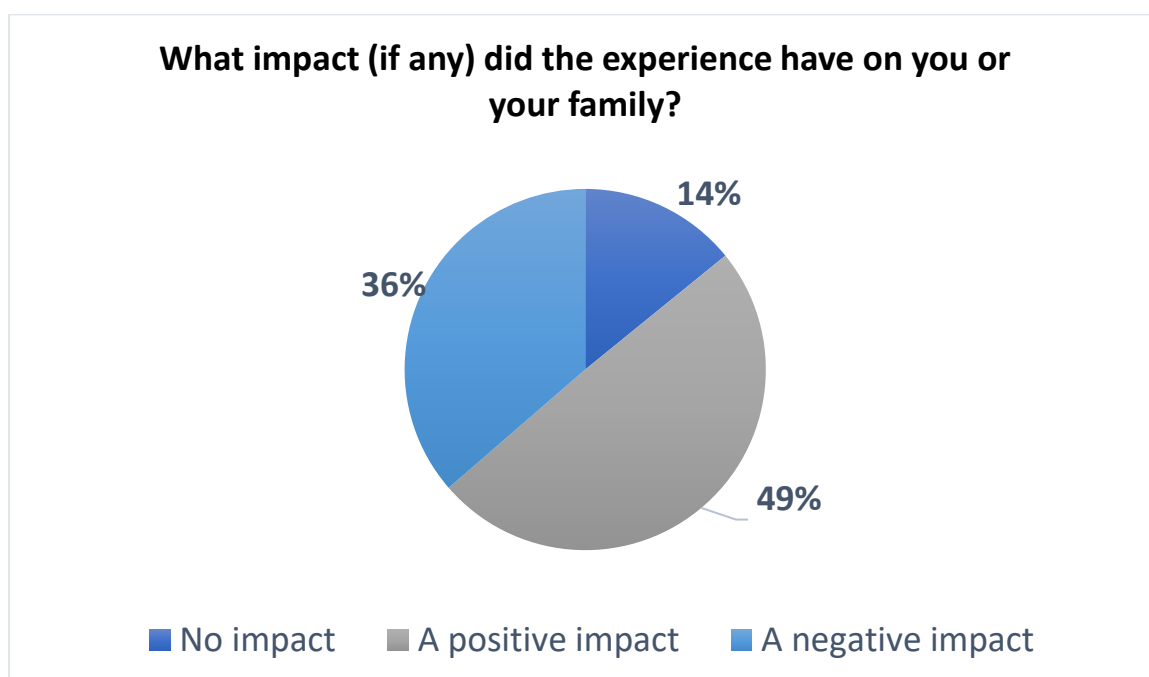


Figure 4: Impact of positive experience

A variety of positive experiences with public bodies were discussed by parents. In schools and other educational bodies, parents described feeling like their family type was treated equally.

"In general, I have had a positive experience in dealing with teachers and felt an effort to ensure our family type was included in the classroom environment. I feel my son is welcome and feels his family type is normal in the school."

"When my youngest was in a community crèche the staff were very supportive and (let me pay) when I could. They gave me great advice and encouragement to stay working and helped me out."

Some Department of Social Protection Intreo Officers and Case Officers were also singled out for their positive approach towards one-parent families, along with Revenue Officers.

"My Department of Social Protection Case Officer was professional, kind and insightful.....she recognised and acknowledged my previous skills, training and education."

"When I split up with my child's Dad, I had to get on to Revenue....and there was just somebody on the phone, and they were just really human. Just like "Oh, well, I hope you're okay now", you know... it was just a really human interaction."

"The Community Welfare Officer aided me in attaining the CE scheme I wanted, and this worked out very well for me. I went to college through the scheme and did quite well."

Other participants commented that getting support to access housing was positive.

"Having had to engage with homeless services who then advocated for us with both the City Council and a voluntary housing body. I had a very positive experience. We were very well looked after, not necessarily by the general admin staff but by the city council representative, the homeless service and the voluntary housing team."

"Social workers in the maternity hospital supported me and gave me guidance to get housing."

Other public bodies and organisations participants singled out for praise included the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, the Free Legal Aid Service, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service, members of the legal profession and non-governmental organisations.

The power of being treated equally

The impact of positive interactions can be powerful for parents. Not only did they describe feeling empowered to continue engaging with public services, but the experiences where they felt their rights were respected and they were treated equally had a positive effect on their own feelings of self-worth and their mental health.

"I won't be frightened to ask for help. I used to hate it."

"(I felt they) value me as who I am, reminded me that I am not alone. I know my worth and it built resilience moving forward."

"Gave me some confidence that people are there to help and will help."

"I was less stressed and more energised and positive engaging with my child."

"I felt respected, listened to, supported, my strengths acknowledged, and it helped me know not everyone in DSP looks down on people like me."

When asked about the impact a positive experience of using public services, some parents described practical and sometimes crucial outcomes for their families.

"We were able to get out of homelessness."

"We now have heating."

"The impact of that experience changed our lives for the better. It changed the course of all our lives. "

Negative experiences

When asked about negative experiences of using public services, 67 per cent said they had experienced unfair treatment, inequality, or discrimination. Parents described negative experiences with a variety of public bodies. Issues that were described included feeling discriminated against because of their family type and not being treated with dignity or respect.

Discrimination

Parents described feeling discriminated against mostly for being in a one-parent family, but also for their gender or disability.

"You are assumed to have no education or are only suitable for low paid jobs. All that is sent to you is to get you into these jobs rather than helping with childcare to do the job you're trained for. Add being a migrant and it's even worse."

"When my son was in ICU care, as I was parenting alone, some hospital staff weren't happy for me to have a family member with me as it wasn't my child's parent."

"I found when we'd go to hospital, (I got) a lot of questions because they were aware (I am) a lone parent..... I was getting quite condescending questions like "Are you cleaning? What are you feeding her?" I don't even know how to describe it. It's just, you know, they're saying it because they have an idea of what a lone parent is. That would probably be my hardest thing, dealing with the Health Services..... I don't buy myself clothes, because I'm trying to buy organic food, I'm trying to give her the best of everything. And it's just going in one ear, out the other."

"The woman I was speaking to and was referred to said to me it is my own fault, that if I didn't have my child, I could have a career. That was it. I left the meeting, and I complained."

"I have been discriminated against because of my gender. I was told by a judge in the Family Court that "These things favour the mother"

Dignity, Respect and Privacy

Parents discussed feeling like they were not given the respect they deserved, being treated with a lack of dignity and feeling they had no privacy in their interactions with public bodies.

"I felt I wasn't treated with respect or even as a human being. I felt judged. The lady who was assessing my lone parent claim was rude and did not communicate with me in a way that helped me understand the services."

They expressed feeling frustrated and disheartened by stereotypical assumptions, judgemental language, stigma and being treated like they were asking for charity rather than a public service user.

"It honestly feels like the minute you mention you're lone/single parent this stigma is attached and used to judge everything you do. "

A common theme was difficulty accessing services, information and referrals. Some parents felt their difficulty accessing the support they needed was related to their family type because of the type of support they were seeking or lack of understanding of the additional caring responsibilities they had. Parents identified the difference that helpful and supportive interactions where they were treated with respect could make to their outcomes.

"Applying for Disability Allowance and they made mistakes and said that I didn't submit essential information but I did. They keep sending me the same form letter- three times now and say I'm denied based on lack of requested materials. It's still not approved."

"I am no longer on One Parent Family Payment but when I was, I was audited six times in 18 months. None of my circumstances had changed. I was doing a four year degree and they were aware of this but I was still required to explain my circumstances six times."

"I have been treated rudely by staff. They don't understand that I have no childcare and so can't attend training courses or take up certain employment."

"I was waiting two years for an appointment to get my daughter an eye test for glasses. When I asked for an appointment in the afternoon so that I didn't lose wages because I parent alone, I was sniggered at and told tough."

"One Parent Family Payments and Working Family Payment- my maintenance means are incorrectly assessed since my child moved from childcare to school. The Department continues to deduct the previous fees paid by my former partner towards childcare despite these no longer applying/being paid."

Parents described needing to chase services or monies owed to them, having to make a complaint in order to be heard.

"The appeals process was so stressful. I spend months chasing up emails to no avail. I started a complaint with the Ombudsman and only then was it taken seriously."

"Following an appeal it was decided DSP owed me €30. The appeals section failed to alert me to this or initiate repayment for several months. It was paid once I queried it."

While parents did not name their experiences as such, some of the treatment they described constitutes harassment in that it violated their dignity or created an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them.

"(My One Parent Family Payment) had been diverted to another post office by an Intreo Officer in order to get me to come in. Why not ring someone? The stress of this....(I)

had no petrol but somehow had to dash to the office, queue up then find out they wanted a form to be submitted to them (no form posted to me) and then I had to drive to another post office to access money for the week. This is inhumane and cruel and so degrading. The manager laughed and said this is how they get people's attention."

"I think when you're approaching the court services, initially going in the door, from the point of view is privacy, we have no privacy. You're going immediately to a hatch that's in the public. Your information is discussed in front of everybody from security on the door to the person behind you in the queue. And then I think maybe the approach of the staff, I understand that they have to be professional, but I think just rudeness is not acceptable. You should be polite. We're not asking them to advise us in any way. I just think common courtesy."

"I was belittled in a social welfare office by an Officer when asking for financial help. She started talking about her personal life and how..... I need to manage like she has, regardless."

The impact of discrimination

Parents described the impact of feeling they were being treated differently because of their family type, their gender or experiencing a lack of privacy, dignity and respect in their interactions with public bodies. They described feeling like they hit a 'stone wall' and that they had nowhere to turn to. For some parents, it put them off accessing services in the future.

"(It was)...very traumatizing. Still feel emotional when I think about how we were treated that day."

"Damages (your) self- esteem, makes life seem pointless, wouldn't feel confident in asking for support I am eligible for. Shame on them."

"Made feel very low and lesser than. In a crisis I went for help and left feeling worse."

"It was embarrassing and frustrating. I was made to feel I was doing something wrong or hiding something when I was not. I felt patronised every time I went into the office."

Others described feeling traumatised, having their self-worth undermined or being made to feel less than other people. In some instances, parents reported that their experience had damaged or worsened their mental health, with increased stress particularly cited as an outcome.

"I was left short of money, short of childcare.... (with) no incentive to work without affecting my payment, and shamed at meetings, pressurised to find full-time work. I got letters about night security jobs! Stressed! "

"It was hurtful and frustrating. I felt belittled and humiliated as if I was a lesser person. It made me question myself and it affected my mental health."

"It is so stressful to be made feel like a bad person."

Hugely negative impact on my children and myself, particularly with regards to our sense of safety in our own home. Fearful, increased stress, demoralized. (The) children and I felt no one cared."

Other parents described the impact on their child, their relationship with their child or their ability to parent.

"I felt I wasn't good enough as a parent for my child."

"I felt completely alone and unsupported while trying to manage my child's mental health issues and take care of my own mental health."

What change would parents make?

Participants were asked what changes they believed public bodies should make to improve services for one-parent families. Training was one of the most common suggestions from parents. Their suggestions ranged from training on human rights and equality, to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence training, to training that would challenge public sector staff to examine their own unconscious biases and treat everyone with respect, regardless of their background.

"Train staff to treat people equally."

"Training on 'unconditional positive regard' and empathy/customer service training. Training on the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act."

"Training. Some people are in jobs so long and the outlook has changed. The public are not a bunch of scammers to be suspicious of, but people in the community with dignity you are paid to assist. Wording documents and forms should be updated."

"Training for providers, if that's what's necessary in order for people to deal respectfully with service users, training in what it means to be a lone parent and the barriers we face. To not assume lone parents are happy on welfare and are uneducated."

"There's one aspect which is training but another is personal self-development. People can have a day's training on "here's the facts on lone parents" but it's really digging into what their own personal assumptions are. And those assumptions are often supported by cultural assumptions. So yes training, but training with an element of probing self-development to know what your own biases truly are and not just what you're being told to believe on a whiteboard."

"Training to treat customers with dignity and respect. Operate with efficiency and don't blame the person seeking help, blame the system. Also don't judge others on their life circumstances or current. Things can happen to anyone."

Another core theme was that parents want public bodies and those providing public services to have greater understanding of and empathy for the circumstances and challenges that are specific to one-parent families. Parents reported feeling like public services are designed for a default two-parent family model and they want greater understanding and recognition of diverse family types.

"An understanding of the diversity in one-parent families."

"See us as a family like any other. Have payment plans. Have a maintenance collections unit. Have access to legal aid for parents supporting children by themselves."

"Be more empathetic/understanding to different family types. Make it easier to apply for help without feeling like you have to go beg. More online, easy to read information. I had to go into offices to ask for paper application forms."

"Not to judge a person for being a single parent- lose the label."

"See us as a family like any other."

"Never assume. Try to put yourself in their situation."

"Understand that not all families have the support of two parents or extended family."

Some parents had logistical suggestions for how public bodies could be more inclusive and attentive to the needs of one-parent families. These included using digital technology to make attendance at appointments and meetings easier and taking a flexible approach to scheduling which recognises the responsibilities parents have. Expanding eligibility to schemes, such as civil legal aid or the Affordable Housing Scheme, to be more inclusive of people in one-parent families was also suggested.

"Appointments outside of work and school hours so that we can attend with our child."

"Have payment plans. Have a maintenance collection unit. Have access to legal aid for parents supporting children by themselves."

Parents suggested that understanding the lived experiences of people in one-parent families could be achieved through listening and that consultation would help improve the services provided by public bodies.

"Consultation with single parents on their actual needs and how best to deliver those services in a way that is respectful and empathetic. A course on active listening for all public servants."

"Listen without prejudice."

"Listen to what I have to say."

5. Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Equality for One-Parent Families

The findings of the voice research with parents were used to develop two guideline publications:

- a guideline for people in one-parent families entitled *Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families: A Guide to Knowing Your Rights and Recognising Discrimination*;
- and, an accompanying guideline for those delivering public services entitled *Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families: A Guide to Delivering Public Services*.

These publications aim to inform and support parents navigating public services and to guide public bodies in their delivery of services to one-parent families.

Yet, it is clear from research and from One Family's practice work, that the inequalities and discrimination experienced by one-parent families goes beyond the one-to-one interaction individuals have with public bodies. In this section we explore the cultural, structural and policy mechanisms that perpetuate inequality for people in one-parent families and sometimes discriminate against them.

Accessing public services

As we have seen, participants in the research felt strongly that the unconscious biases of those delivering public services should be challenged; but the biases, judgements and assumptions that are built into the culture of a public body and the public system in general also need to be challenged, deconstructed and re-constituted. Our public services have evolved, particularly in recent decades; however, these changes are built on the foundations of a structural history which has denied rights and equality to people in one-parent families, has shamed and marginalised unmarried parents and protected the status of the traditional two-parent family model at the expense of anyone who didn't fit this mould.

"How lone parents are treated so abysmally is definitely gender biased in my opinion. We have a terrible history on how women and their children are treated here and this history affects peoples assumptions, in the public sector as well as out of it."

The result is a public service culture that can sometimes have a default position of suspicion towards parents who are trying to access supports. This same culture is often blind to the needs of one-parent families, such as the intractably high rates of poverty in this group.¹¹ And when there is a failure of broader policy responses, for example the lack of affordable, accessible childcare, this culture penalises people who are parenting alone or sharing parenting.

"It honestly feels like the minute you mention you're lone/single parent this stigma is attached and used to judge everything you do."

"The public are not a bunch of scammers to be suspicious of, but people in the community with dignity you are paid to assist."

Another systemic issue which was highlighted by participants in the research is the accessibility of information. Many parents reported finding it difficult to access reliable information and some felt that if they didn't have an in-depth knowledge of their rights and entitlements, they would not be able to access the supports and services which should have been readily available.

"Frontline staff should be able to advise you fully of your rights. I find I often have to go looking on gov.ie or the social welfare site because staff either aren't up to date, or they seem to be withholding information."

"You need to know what to ask for. I didn't know I could get fuel allowance until my aunt told me."

"I struggle to get help finding out what I am entitled to. Attitude of workers is not helpful and is judgemental."

"Oftentimes when engaging with social welfare you tend to know more about what you are able to claim than the person sitting behind the Perspex screen. I have had to advocate for myself when been told no until I could speak with someone who knew."

"I have found it extremely difficult to get to grips with the support services that are available to me. I find that the service providers expect you to know what to ask for rather than advising you what services are available. No one is joining the dots or

¹¹ Central Statistics Office, (2022)

suggesting that you also contact another agency that can also support or support in the interim. It's left to the service user to investigate and in my case, I was already in a very vulnerable, stressed and overwhelming situation."

While some parents raised the need for digitalisation and a move away from paper-based applications and correspondence, others highlighted the need for a personalised approach where service users could be guaranteed of speaking to someone who could deal with their query. The Office of the Revenue Commissioners automated service via www.revenue.ie was singled out by some parents as a digitised system which worked well.

"Some individuals have been pleasant and helpful, but it is not easy to get past recorded phone messages to speak to a real person."

"The amount of paperwork and proof of circumstances and the paperwork and documentation that is requested is ridiculous in this day and age. I submitted all my paperwork through email as I was informed that I could. Only to be told later that it would have been better to send it by post as hard copy post gets looked at sooner. It made no difference to how quickly my application for housing is being assessed and the amount of paperwork that I had to print out in order to submit the application was over an inch and a half of paperwork."

Recommendation: Ensure all frontline and decision-making staff in public bodies have access to *Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families: A Guide to Delivering Public Services*.

Recommendation: Provide the appropriate training and supports for frontline staff to ensure they can provide up-to-date and accurate information to people in one-parent families. Staff should be trained to understand the specific challenges and responsibilities of people parenting alone and sharing parenting and to respond with empathy and respect.

Recommendation: Offer flexible, choice-based engagement and communication options in public bodies. Consider the caring responsibilities of parents in one-parent families by allowing for flexible and out-of-hours appointments.

Recommendation: Develop IT and administration systems to ensure information follows the service user, for example the development of a Unique Patient Identifier in health care settings. Once documentation or verification of circumstances is provided by a service user once it should be uploaded to the system. Entitlements should be automatically added to a service user's account. All entitlements, correspondence and account information should be available for service users to view online.

Policy inequalities

While the culture and practices of public bodies have a large impact on the type of experience people in one-parent families have when using public services, public bodies and those working in them are obliged to implement the policies set out by government. Policies can create and compound inequality. Sometimes this can happen as an unintended and unforeseen consequence of an otherwise sound policy. In other cases, policies which were developed decades ago at a time when attitudes towards one-parent families were harsher than today, have evolved overtime; however, the foundation of the policy is based on an inequality or unfair premise.

The focus of the *Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families* research was public service delivery; however, parents shared their frustrations with policies they felt were contributing to their experiences of inequality and discrimination. Based on the responses of parents and our practice work we set out below some of the key policy areas contributing to inequality for one-parent families.

Poverty and deprivation

At the core of the unequal treatment one-parent families receive is the persistent high levels of poverty they experience. Three decades ago, around the same time as the last of the Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes closed, an ESRI report identified lone parents as the category most likely to be at risk of poverty, with the risk growing with each additional child the family has.¹² A decade later, in 2003, 33 per cent of households with one adult and children were living in consistent poverty.¹³

"We have become so poor I only buy near expired food these days."

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

Indeed the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and recession on poverty and deprivation in one-parent families cannot be understated, with Europarl noting Irish austerity measures had a *"marked impact"* on lone parents specifically.¹⁶ This is supported by research by research from the ERSI who found that "children suffered the worst outcomes on all poverty measures, and over the austerity period, discretionary policy changes particularly affected the incomes of lone parents."¹⁷

¹² McCashin, A. (1993). Lone Parents in the Republic of Ireland: Enumeration, Description and Implications for Social Security. Dublin: ESRI. Available at http://aei.pitt.edu/98970/1/BS29_-_is_this_BS.pdf.

¹³ Central Statistics Office, (2005), Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2003. Dublin: CSO. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/eusilc/2003/eusilc_2003.pdf

¹⁴ Society of St Vincent de Paul, (2019).

¹⁵ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, (2017).

¹⁶ EuroParl (2020). The situation of single parents in the EU. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL_STU\(2020\)659870_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL_STU(2020)659870_EN.pdf)

¹⁷ Regan, M., Keane, C., and Walsh, J.R. (2018) Lone-Parent Incomes and Work Incentives. Budget Perspectives 2019. Paper 1, July 2016. ESRI: Dublin. Available at <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2018-07/BP201901.pdf>

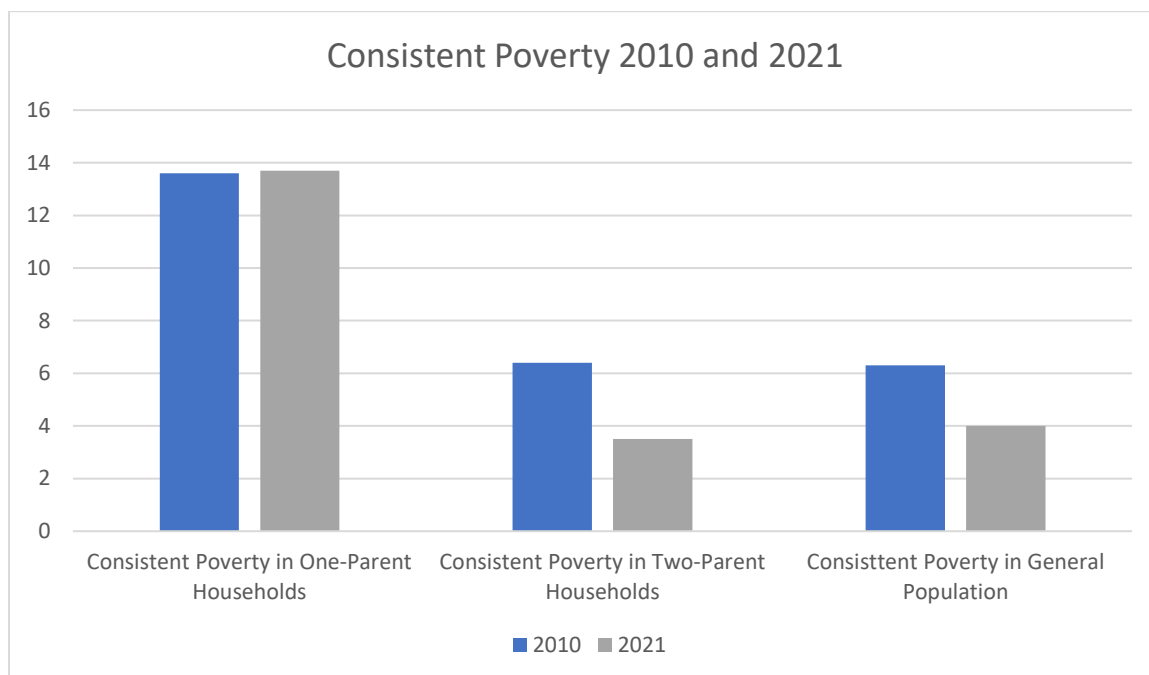


Figure. 5 Comparison of consistent poverty 2010 and 2021

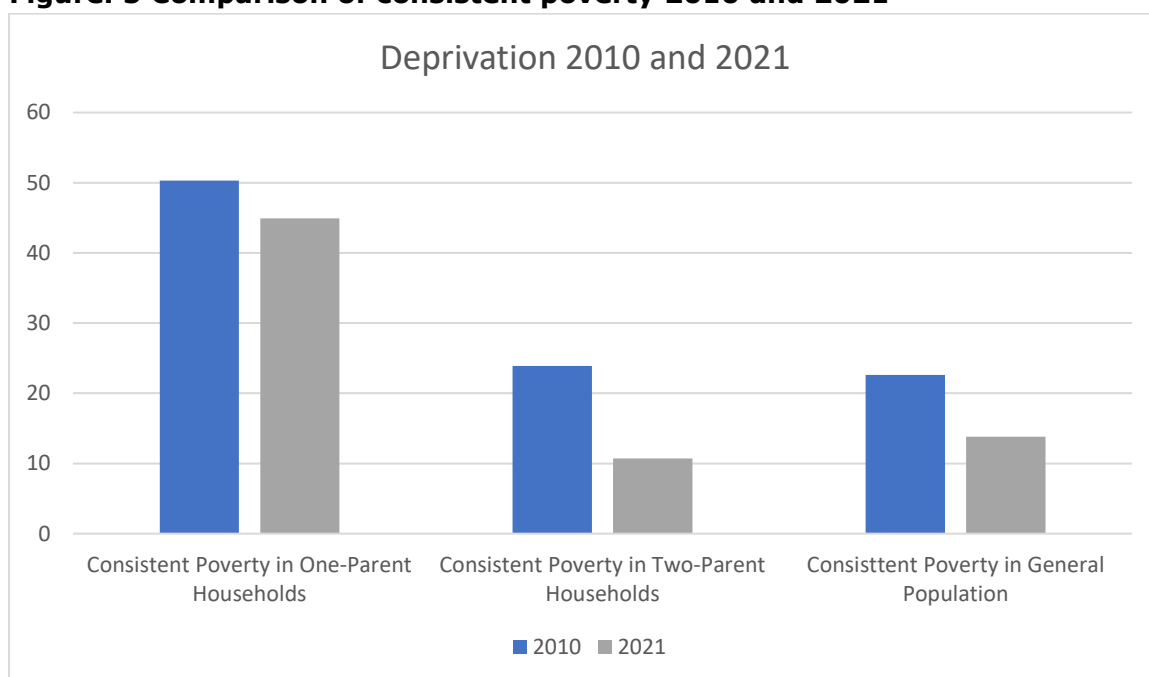


Figure 6: Comparison of deprivation rates 2010 and 2021

Figures 6 and 7 compare consistent poverty and deprivation rates for one-parent households, two-parent households and the general population in the midst of the financial crisis and the most recently available data for 2021. What we see is that both consistent poverty and deprivation have remained intractably high, while the same measures have been reduced for two-parent households and the general population, in most cases by around half. Today children in one-parent families are four times more likely to experience consistent poverty or deprivation as children in two-parent families.

Recommendation: Establish a high-level, inter-departmental group which regularly reports to a government sub-committee and is tasked with coordinating policy responses

aimed at reducing the poverty, deprivation and inequality experienced by one-parent families.

Recommendation: Develop a National Child Poverty Action Plan and establish a dedicated office to drive its implementation. The plan should have a focus on supporting one parent families out of poverty through education, training and employment.

Education

Lone parent participation in education decreased by approximately 20 per cent between 2011 and 2016.¹⁸ The reasons for this trend are complex and varied, but as with accessing employment, barriers to education are significant. The time and work needed to balance parenting with attendance at classes and study can be prohibitive.¹⁹ Significant financial barriers also exist, with one in five lone parents in Ireland unable to access formal education for financial reasons. Only 15 per cent of lone parents reported having a third level qualification in the last Census and 70 per cent were educated to level 6 or less on NFQ.²⁰

There are a number of technical issues relating to supports for one-parent families accessing education and training which disadvantage these families. For example, parents whose child has reached 14 years of age and move from Jobseekers Transitional Payment to Jobseekers Allowance must access the Back to Education Allowance. As a result of this forced transfer, access to a Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) maintenance grant is denied to these parents.²¹ In 2017 Maynooth University published an independent review of barriers facing lone parents when accessing higher education.²² It found, lone parents who transferred to BTEA were among the most economically vulnerable group among lone parent welfare recipients.

Recommendation: Make SUSI available to parents engaging in education until their youngest child completes second level education.

Another issue highlighted by the Maynooth Review is the extent to which housing insecurity acts as a barrier to lone parents accessing education. This is particularly true because of anomalies in the system, which block lone parents from accessing SUSI if they are in receipt of Rent Supplement and are on OPF/JST. The ability to access and stay in education should not be linked to housing tenure.

Recommendation: Ensure parents in receipt of BTEA can access SUSI and make SUSI and BTEA available to ensure continuous access to education for parents irrespective of their housing tenure.

¹⁸ Central Statistics Office, (2016), Census <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/>

¹⁹ Society of St Vincent De Paul, (2019).

²⁰ Central Statistics Office, Census (2016)

²¹One Family, (2021). *Submission to the Higher Education Authority on the National Action Plan on Equity of Access for Higher Education*. [online]. Available at: <https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Access-Plan-Submission-One-Family-Final.pdf>

²² Byrne, Delma and Murray, Cliona (2017) *An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation*. Technical Report. Department of Education and Skills, Dublin.

SUSI is also only available for full-time, in-person courses meaning parents in one-parent families are at a disadvantage compared to other students due to their caring responsibilities. SUSI should also be made available to parents engaging in education, regardless of the age of their youngest child (up to when their child leaves second level education). 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 continues until their course is completed to prevent parents dropping out.

Recommendation: Make SUSI available for part-time and blended learning courses.

In 2021 the rules for means testing for Disability Allowance were amended by the Minister for Social Protection to exempt PhD stipends, on the basis that it was unfair and disadvantaged a group (people with disabilities) who already faced considerable barriers in accessing education.²³ The same means test, however, remains for another group who already face considerable barrier in accessing education; one-parent families. Recipients of a PhD stipend are subject to a means test if they wish to access OFP or JST. These parents have worked to overcome the odds stacked against them. Not only is it unfair to place an additional barrier in their way, but given this practice was removed for recipients of Disability Allowance the same should apply to recipients of OFP and JST.

Recommendation: Remove the requirement to means test PhD stipends for OFP and JST payments.

Child Maintenance

The formation of an independent child maintenance agency in Ireland is something One Family have long campaigned for. In its absence, child maintenance is a largely private arrangement fraught with difficulty. The way in which child maintenance is administered in Ireland damages inter-parental relationships and contributes to child poverty. How child maintenance interacts with the welfare system needs urgent reform. Child maintenance should be viewed solely as a means to support the child, not as income for a parent.

"Department of Social Protection should handle all finances regarding children. It should also be taken out of the hands of the parents since it is used by the courts as a source of acrimony to encourage repeat court visits."

Issues relating to the administration of child maintenance payments within in the social welfare system include:

- i. There is a **lack of consistency** in how policies relating to child maintenance are applied. The varying, sometimes haphazard, way in which policies are applied to different claimants can cause financial hardship and emotional distress and weaves inequity into the fabric of the Department of Social Protection's (DSP) child maintenance procedures.

²³ Press Statement Department of Social Protection. (2021).

- ii. DSP regulations require the parent seeking income support to present proof of maintenance agreements or demonstrate 'efforts to seek maintenance' from the 'liable relative'.²⁴ This may require a parent to issue court proceedings which is highly problematic given the significant delays in getting court dates, the fact that a summons is issued which is an aggressive tool and courts are not adequately resourced to determine fair child maintenance arrangements. **Failure to provide proof of "efforts to seek maintenance"** can lead to payments being suspended, cancelled or not awarded.
- iii. There is a significant rate of non-compliance with child maintenance orders. Yet in our experience working with families, **child maintenance is often assessed as means regardless of whether it is paid or not.** This can leave a claiming parent with reduced social welfare rates, if the liable relative does not pay and DSP does not immediately make up any reductions in social welfare payments as a result of child maintenance being assessed.
- iv. In the shift from OFP to JST, the Department expressly **ends the child maintenance payment requirement** of the other parent who had been identified as a liable relative. This confuses parents, undermines often fragile maintenance agreements and can disrupt established maintenance payment arrangements.
- v. The **treatment of mortgage or rent payments made by the non-resident parent as maintenance** by DSP means some claimants are forced to forgo these payments in order to access social welfare supports. This can cause claimants to go into mortgage or rent arrears and increase housing insecurity.
- vi. Maintenance recovered by the Maintenance Recovery Unit of DSP is absorbed by the Department. **Recompense is not extended to resident parents in receipt of State supports.** Any income received by DSP, where agreed maintenance payments are paid, must be forwarded to the resident parent, for the direct benefit of the child.

Recommendations: As an overarching recommendation One Family would like to see child maintenance removed from the welfare and taxation systems, and instead treat it as a non-means tested, non-taxable income for children, as with Child Benefit, to reduce poverty in one-parent families. In the meantime;

- Stop multiple means assessment of child maintenance across different DSP payments and other State supports.
- Stop assessing child maintenance as means where it has not been paid as this is a frequent occurrence – a new system is required to ensure families do not lose out.

²⁴ Citizen's Information: One-Parent Family Payment Regulations:
https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/social_welfare_payments_to_families_and_children/one_parent_family_payment.html

- Stop requiring parents to go to Court to prove they have sought maintenance or that maintenance has ceased - accept self-declarations or another less onerous method of proof.
- Ensure that JST is underpinned by liable relative legislation in the same way that OFP is, to prevent the need for DSP to end child maintenance payments when claimants move from OFP to JST. Child maintenance should be available until a child reaches 18 or 22 if in education. They require child maintenance throughout this life-stage regardless of the 'activation' category their parent may be in.
- Ensure when the Maintenance Recovery Unit recovers a maintenance payment, the claimant parent is recompensed for any maintenance recovered before DSP absorbs any monies.
- Stop treating mortgage or rent payments made by the non-resident parent as maintenance when assessing eligibility for social welfare payments.

Family Law Reform

"Family law cases need to be taken out of the criminal system and trauma trained individuals be the first point of contact for families."

Issues relating to family law were raised by participants of the *Human Rights, Equality and One-Parent Families* research. The glacial progress in developing Ireland's outdated family law system and infrastructure is a source of great frustration and suffering for families. One Family know there are many challenges facing separated families, particularly those in conflict, including domestic violence; coercive control; lack of statutory child maintenance assessment and enforcement system; lack of comprehensive services to parents and children to support them in dealing with conflictual separation; lack of Child Contact Centres; lack of understanding and support by the state for shared parenting in housing, taxation and social welfare regimes; poverty and social exclusion.

"Family Law/divorce does not make provision for school expenses etc. which requires ongoing communication with an abuser – both physical and financial abuse."

In our submission to the Family Justice Oversight Group in 2021, One Family proposed a family law service model encompassing a child-centred model of family dispute resolution. Such a system would require resourcing, quality assurance and regulation with strong links to the court system. Services should be accessible to all families, regardless of their location, background, language etc. Services should include; universal information provision; two-step child impact assessments and parenting plans; establishment of Child Court Liaison Officer (CCLO) roles; specialist therapeutic services, parenting services, mediation and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR); peer support services for children; Child Contact Centres; domestic abuse services; and other specialist services including specific services for parental alienation.²⁵

²⁵ One Family, (2021). *Submission to the Family Justice Oversight Group*. Available at: <https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/FJOG.-Family-Law-Justice-Reform-Submission.-One-Family.-Feb-2021.pdf>

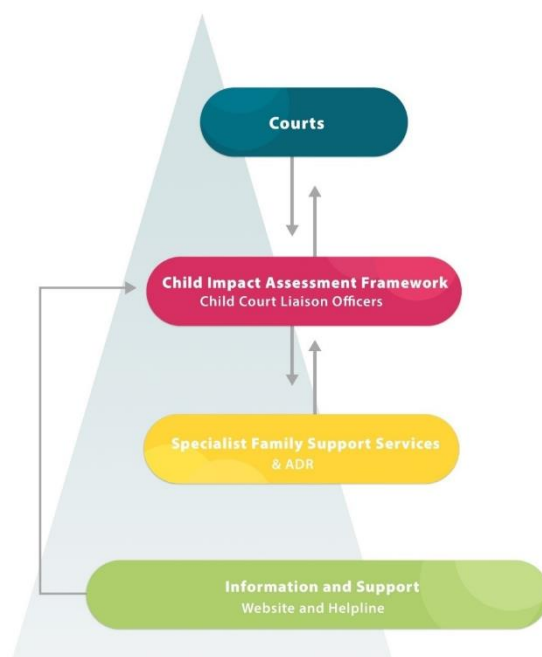


Figure 7. Family Law Service Model

We know that the absence of out-of-court services as listed above increases the degree and length of conflict; results in poorer outcomes and adverse childhood experiences; and cost families and the State financially. Linked to this is the *ad hoc* and unfunded approach to hearing the voice of the child in family law proceedings which requires urgent attention. Children have a right to be heard in matters that affect them under Article 12 of the UNCRC.²⁶ In general, family law proceedings can be onerously lengthy and expensive for families. Separated families are often dealt with across the domains of private family law, criminal law and child protection law. These artificially devised legal silos result in families being harmed through disjointed and sometimes contradictory decision making.

Recommendation: Work towards the provision of regulation, oversight and public funding for reports/assessments to court and therapeutic, psycho-educational and family support services.

Recommendation: Urgently develop a child-centred Family Law Service Model to support families who are interacting with the family law system.

Social Protection

Budget 2023 saw the highest social welfare budget in response to the current cost-of-living crisis. Yet despite having among the highest risk of poverty and deprivation, there were no targeted measures for one-parent families. Once off cost-of-living measures were welcome but contrary to the Government's wellbeing report, ESRI analysis confirms that lone parents will be slightly worse off in 2023 compared to price adjusted policies.²⁷ The inadequacy of the once off measures to address cost of living and the changes to social welfare rates in 2023 for one parent families were also highlighted by the Vincentian MESL Research Centre in their post-Budget analysis. According to this

²⁶ United Nations, (1989). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

²⁷ ESRI, (2022). Budget analysis available at: https://www.esri.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2022-10/SLIDES_Post%20Budget%20Briefing%202023_ROANTREE_DOORLEY_MCQUINN.pdf

analysis, after the Q4 2022 cost of living measures are included, a one parent family with two children (one in pre-school and one in primary school) will face a shortfall of €9.40 and for those with an older child this rises to €82.73. However, in 2023 these shortfalls will increase to €14.73 and €93.32 respectively. The research notes that 'the gradual progress made towards adequacy of income supports is likely to reverse in 2023'.²⁸ Budget 2023 demonstrates a lack of urgency in the Government's response to poverty and deprivation in one-parent families that is verging on apathy.

The lack of budgetary action in relation to one-parent families comes on top of a range of inequalities affecting one-parent families which are interwoven into Department of Social Protection schemes:

- **Child Benefit** is a universal payment to parents and guardians for the cost of caring for their child/ren. In shared parenting families Child Benefit is paid to the parent who has the majority custody. However, where custody is shared 50:50, Child Benefit automatically goes to the mother and there is no facility to switch or share the payment. This disadvantages fathers in shared parenting families who also carry the burden of paying for the cost of their child.
- **Telephone Allowance, Living Alone Allowance and the Home Benefits Package** are paid to households on a single long-term social protection payment, in acknowledgement of the large proportion of the household income spent on running a household. Despite many one-parent families depending on a solo social protection income, they do not qualify for these benefits like other households without children. The only additional payment they receive is the Qualified Child Increase, which has to stretch beyond the cost of raising a child and help cover household bills.
- Parents in one-parent families currently need to work the same number of hours per week as parents two-parent families to benefit from **Working Family Payment**, which is unfair.
- Around 320 parents on average automatically move from **Jobseekers Transitional Payment (JST)** to Jobseekers Allowance (JA) each year when their youngest child turns fourteen.²⁹ Yet 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.³⁰ Furthermore, when parents who are self-employed are in receipt of One Parent Family Payment they can avail of the same earnings disregard as parents who are taxed through PAYE. However, when their child turns seven years of age they automatically move to JST and are no longer eligible for the earnings disregard. There is no justification for this and it often greatly contributes to financial strain and in some cases causes parents to give up their self-employment.

Recommendation: Amend Child Benefit rules to allow parents to share access to the support based on their custody agreement.

Recommendation: Give lone parent households who are in receipt of Fuel Allowance entitlement to the receive the Living Alone Allowance, Telephone Allowance and Households Benefits package.

Recommendation: Reduce the weekly work threshold for Working Family Payment to 15 hours per week for one-parent households to increase their earning capacity.

Recommendation: Extend Jobseekers Transitional Payment to parents in education, training or employment until their youngest child reaches the end of second level

²⁸ [Microsoft Word - Budget 2023 - MESL Impact Briefing \(budgeting.ie\)](#) p. 1

²⁹ Minister for Social Protection (Heather Humphries), Dáil Question, vol 970, 26 April 2022.

³⁰ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, (2021). *MESL Annual Report 2021*

education as recommended by the 2017 Joint Oireachtas Committee Report on Lone Parents.³¹

Recommendation: Allow the same earnings disregard (€165 currently) for parents in receipt of Jobseeker Transitional Payment who are self-employed as is applied to parents who are employees. In February 2022 self-employed parents made up just 70 of a total 16,481 JST recipients.³²

Childcare

A recently implemented policy measure designed to improve gender equality in the care of young children, is an example of how there are sometimes unforeseen consequences of seemingly progressive policies that disadvantage one-parent families. In this case the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act was amended in 2021 to improve gender equality and transpose part of a key EU Directive; but it contains an inequality which discriminates against the children of lone parents. Under the legislation leave entitlement under the Parent's Benefit scheme follows the parent rather than the child. This means children in one-parent families receive half the dedicated time with a caregiver as children in two-parent families during a vital time in their early development.

Recommendation: Amend the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act to ensure one-parent families 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 and permitting transferability between parents or to another appropriate carer in the case of a one-parent family.

Ready access to affordable, quality childcare is a necessity to increase participation of parents in one-parent families in education and employment, and ultimately reducing the high rate of poverty they experience. Indeed, when cuts were made to the One Parent Family Payment a Scandinavian style childcare system was promised to support one-parent families and stop them slipping into poverty. The absence of such a system materially disadvantages one-parent families. Despite much investment and development in the early childhood care and education and school-aged care sectors in recent years, we are still some way off the type of free and accessible system characterised by Scandinavian countries. There is currently an inequality in eligibility for hours under the National Childcare Scheme where children of parents not in work/study are entitled to less than half the hours of children whose parents are working/studying. A child's access to quality childcare should not be based on their parent's principal economic status – it should be a right of all children.

Recommendation: Amend the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act to ensure one-parent families 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 and permitting transferability between parents or to another appropriate carer in the case of a one-parent family.

³¹ Committee on Social Protection, (2017). *Report on the Position of Lone Parents*.

³² Minister for Social Protection (Heather Humphries), Dáil Question, vol 970, 971 and 972, 26 April 2022.

Recommendation: In line with the European Child Guarantee, give access to free childcare and afterschool care for children in one-parent families by investing in NCS income-assessed subsidies.

Recommendation: Extend the maximum 45 hours subsidy under the NCS to parents not in work in recognition that these are the most disadvantaged families and access to quality childcare should be a child's right.

Taxation

In 2014 the One-Parent Family Tax Credit was replaced with the Single Parent Child Carer Credit (SPCCC). The change meant two parents sharing parenting were no longer eligible for a tax credit in recognition of their role as a lone parent. Since that decision was made only one parent, the 'primary claimant' or parent who the child lives with for the majority of the time, is eligible to receive the credit. In cases where there is an equal custody arrangement, the parent in receipt of Child Benefit Payment will automatically be the primary claimant. The SPCCC is problematic for a number of reasons:

- As the SPCCC is linked to the Child Benefit Payment it means where parents are sharing custody equally, one parent automatically receives much more statutory income and taxation support than the other for no just cause.
- As Child Benefit is paid automatically in most cases to the mother, gender inequality is built in to the SPCCC.
- While the credit is transferable, it relies on the primary claimant agreeing to transfer the payment to the secondary claimant. This is unworkable for many families, particularly where there is history of domestic abuse or acrimonious separation. Even where the SPCCC is transferred, the primary claimant reserves the right to withdraw this at any time. One Family is not aware of any other personal tax credit where an individual's access is controlled by another person.
- If a primary claimant is not eligible the SPCCC is not automatically transferred to the other parent, meaning many families lose the support altogether.

Budget 2022 saw the announcement of €50 per person increase to the Single Person and Married Couple tax credits; however, there was no similar increase to the SPCCC.

Currently two-parent families can earn up to €45,800 at the lower rate of tax, whether they have one income or two. The corresponding threshold for SPCCC recipients is €40,800. This means that in two households, both with one income, the recipients of SPCCC have an extra €5,000 of their income taxed at the higher rate, regardless of how many people are supported by that income. Furthermore, any parents who are not in receipt of SPCCC for reasons stated above, are not recognised by the system as a family at all and are subject to the single person tax band.

Recommendation: Increase the standard rate band for the Single Person Child Carer Credit to be equal to that of a one earner married/civil partnership taxpayer unit. Remove the requirement for a primary claimant to relinquish entitlement. In lieu of both parents being able to avail of the Credit, if it is not taken up by the primary claimant, the secondary claimant should automatically qualify and vice versa. Where both claimants

agree, they should be entitled to split the Credit evenly which will recognise and support shared parenting.

Housing

"I felt supported. I was pleasantly surprised to receive HAP within a couple of weeks. But my rent was increased almost straight away once my landlord realised I was a single parent. In one hand and out the other!"

Issues with accessing quality, suitable accommodation are linked to poverty, so it is unsurprising given the high rate of poverty experienced by one-parent families there is also disproportionately high levels of homelessness and housing insecurity. In 2021 research published by the ESRI and IHREC demonstrated that lone parent households reported some of the worse outcomes across a number of housing indicators; accessibility, affordability, security of tenure, cultural adequacy, quality and location.³³ Balakrishnan Rajagopal, UN Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, stated that the findings raised a fundamental question of how society treats one-parent families who are "the most impoverished and..... (more often face significant)arrears in paying for their housing costs and are among those with lowest security of tenure."³⁴

Recommendation: Establish a taskforce to review the impact of housing insecurity on one-parent families and develop appropriate solutions. This taskforce should be led by the Department of Housing and be responsible for developing a specific family homelessness plan within the Housing for All Framework, with targeted actions to prevent and address homeless among one-parent families.

"In relation to housing- I'm on the housing list 4 years and am currently in a one bed house supported by HAP. I've been approved to move to a 2 bed but not given any more towards the rent. Therefore, I can't afford to move."

The starkest example of housing inequality for one-parent families is their consistent overrepresentation in homelessness data. 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 and this applies to emergency accommodation and social housing also. These parents are overlooked in Government housing policy.

Recommendation: Give fathers who share parenting equitable access to family housing supports, whether in emergency accommodation, the Housing Assistance Payment or social housing.

³³ Russell H, Privalko I, McGinnity F & Enright S. (2021). *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland*. IHREC: Dublin.

³⁴ The Irish Times, (2021). *Lone parents and children account for more than half of homeless families*. [Published 14 September 2021]

One-parent families experience discrimination because of their housing status. For example, access to education supports, such as the SUSI grant, are often conditional on the type of housing support you avail of.³⁵ In the case of separated families, many family law orders allow for the family home to be retained until the youngest child turns 18. This means a parent who is secondary care giver and leaves the family home may retain an interest in that home but derive no material benefit. They may also be ordered to discharge the mortgage, leaving insufficient resources for their own housing needs. They are not entitled to social housing or HAP. Conversely, if the primary care giver parent leaves the family home, they are deemed to retain a beneficial interest in the family home and aren't entitled to housing support (unless domestic abuse is proven).

In 2014 Mortgage Interest Supplement closed to new applicants meaning a primary care giving-parent, who may have not been working or on minimal hours because of childcare, has no help to pay the mortgage. This ultimately leads them into the private rental market and puts them at greater risk of homelessness. In cases where there are mortgage arrears and a parent has left the family home, the residential-parent is unable to access the Mortgage Arrears Resolution process. It means the residential family cannot proceed without the consent of the non-resident parent, regardless of whether they can pay.

Recommendation: Establish a mechanism to provide people who are sharing parenting and retain an interest in the family home access to housing support schemes.

Recommendation: Develop a suite of mortgage supports targeting one-parent families including decoupling mortgage payments, child maintenance and other social welfare payments, and reopening the Mortgage Interest Supplement and the Mortgage Interest Relief schemes to new applicants who are parenting alone or sharing parenting and paying their mortgage alone.

Another inequality we are aware of through our work with families is the varying treatment of child maintenance by various different State agencies, with some means testing child maintenance and others not. Even within individual schemes there are discrepancies in approach, for example in local authorities. Our research has found a different approach being applied by local authorities throughout the country with some means testing the receipt of child maintenance when a family applies for social housing or Housing Assistance Payment and others not. Equally, some local authorities deduct any child maintenance paid when assessing means to qualify for social housing supports, and others do not. In practice this means inequitable access to social housing for one-parent families depending on where they live.³⁶

Recommendation: Treat the receipt of child maintenance as a non-means tested payment for the child across all public bodies and standardise the deduction of paid maintenance across all local authorities in relation to social housing applications.

Shared parenting

There is limited demographic data available on shared parenting in Ireland. There were approximately 218,817 lone parents and 356,203 children in one-parent families in

³⁵ One Family, (2021).

³⁶One Family. *Local Authority Approaches to Child Maintenance Paper (Unpublished)*.

Ireland in 2016; however, many of the families categorised as 'households headed by one adult' likely have some level of shared parenting.³⁷ This dearth of data on shared parenting families means they are almost wholly invisible in national and local policy. In 2017 One Family published the first national shared parenting study which found parents felt discriminated against because of their shared parenting family status.³⁸ Without data on shared parenting, public policy in Ireland is largely blind to the specific needs of children and adults in these families.

Public service delivery can be rigid when it comes to shared parenting families. For example, the current co-habitation rules that apply to parents in receipt of OFP and JST are inappropriate and discriminatory. People sharing parenting are often automatically assessed as co-habiting, which discourages shared parenting. As has been highlighted, access to housing supports is another example where public policy is failing shared parenting families. Parents are either viewed as part of a lone parent household or a single adult and there is no room for nuance. Anecdotally, we know the number of shared parenting and blended families are on the rise and public bodies and policy need to be able to respond to their needs and prevent discrimination.

Recommendation: Include data collection on shared parenting in existing demographic surveys such as the Census and Growing Up in Ireland. Carry out standalone research into the lives of people in shared parenting families to explore how policies can be developed or adapted to meet their needs.

Recommendation: Ensure parents who are eligible for One Parent Family Payment and Jobseekers Transitional Payment and are sharing parenting are not barred from accessing these schemes because of their family type.

Conclusion

One-parent families are no longer a hidden minority group, today they are a diverse range of families, each unique, and deserving of dignity, respect and equality with all other families. Yet today one-parent families are still often marginalised, face discrimination and suffer poorer outcomes because of their family type. The voices of parents involved in the *Human Rights and One-Parent Families* research are clear and strong – one-parent families want to be treated with dignity and respect, they want their family to be included in public policies and to be understood by those delivering public services, and they want to be free from harassment and degrading treatment. Most of all they want the opportunities and supports they need to make sure their family thrives, free from systemic stigma, administrative barriers, procedural pitfalls and poverty traps.

This paper contains a wide range of recommendations. As well as providing a roadmap for how One Family believes government and public bodies can reduce inequalities for adults and children in one-parent families, they serve as a snapshot of the level of difficulty, frustration and obstruction people who are parenting alone or sharing parenting face as they try to do the best for their families. Some of the recommendations listed require investment, commitment and creativity from government and policy makers, but many more are easily implementable with little cost

³⁷ Central Statistics Office, (2017).

³⁸ One Family, (2017). *National Shared Parenting Survey*. [online] Available at: <https://onefamily.ie/media-policy/one-family-campaigns/national-shared-parenting-survey/>

to the State but of life altering impact for the families they affect. At their core is One Family's vision of an Ireland where every family is cherished equally, and is enabled to enjoy the social, financial and legal equality to create their own positive future.

Ends.

Appendix 1: Significant Research Reports on One- Parent Families Published since 2016

(2021) Russell, H., Privalko, I., McGinnity, F. & Enright, S. *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

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

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

(2018) Regan, M., Keane, C., and Walsh, J.R. *Lone Parent Incomes and Work Incentives. Budget Perspectives*. Dublin: ESRI.

(2018) Millar, M., Crosse, R., Canavan, J. *Understanding, negotiating, and navigating the politicisation of evidence-based policy research: the case of Irish research on lone parent labour market activation policy*. Bristol: University of Bristol.

(2018) Millar, M., Gray, J., Et al. *In-Work Benefits: The (in)adequacy of in-work benefits in Irish lone parent labour market activation policy*, Journal of Poverty and Social Justice. Policy Press, University of Bristol.

(2017) Delma Byrne and Clóna Murray. *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: Jointly Commissioned by DES, DEASP and DCYA.

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

(2017) Indecon. *Independent Review of the Amendments to the One-parent Family Payment since January 2012*. Presented to Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection Prepared by Indecon Research Economists www.indecon.ie.

(2016) Millar, M and Crosse, R. *Lone Parents and Activation, What Works and Why: A Review of the International Evidence in the Irish Context*. Galway: The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway.

Appendix 2: Parent Survey Responses

Please describe the positive experience you have had with a public body?

"Moving my daughters' schools as a result of housing has been positive. The schools involved did everything they could to facilitate us with a place and the transition."

"In general I have had a positive experience in dealing with teachers and felt an effort to insure our family type was included in the classroom environment."

"My DSP Case Officer was professional, kind and insightful. Very different (to other experiences) – she believed that I deserve better than a CE 36mbarr and could absolutely gain paid employment. She recognised and acknowledged my previous skills, training and education."

"When my youngest was in a community creche the staff were very supportive staff and paid when I could. Great advice and encouragement to stay working and helped me out."

"Social workers in the maternity hospital supported me and gave me guidance to get housing."

"Having had to engage with homeless services who then advocated for us with both the City Council and a voluntary housing body. I had a very positive experience. We were very well looked after, not necessarily by the general admin staff but by the city council representative, the homeless service and the voluntary housing team."

"A staff member in Bray local Intreo office was very helpful when I wanted to do a college course."

"The Community Welfare Officer aided me in attaining the CE scheme I wanted, and this worked out very well for me. I went to college through the scheme and did quite well."

"I had to switch Intreo office due to moving from county Meath to Dublin. The Intreo service in Dublin was extremely helpful and supportive and dealt with my transfer quickly in order to ensure I was not left without income."

"Advised to speak to Women's Aid on applying to the district court for a protection order. I felt relief and it made sense of what was happening and had happened in how I was treated by my husband."

"One Family parenting courses gave me a focus and time to be myself, time to think and just a small pocket of time in the week where no demands were put on me."

"Does it count as a positive experience if they do their job?"

"(The) National school handled our separation very well."

"There have been times when I felt heard through the process but it almost felt too late while going through the legal system or working with authorities such as Social Workers or the Gardaí."

"MABS were pretty good. Helped me budget with maintenance payments. Although I shouldn't have to pay maintenance in the first place because an assumption of 50:50 joint custody should be the basis of all shared parenting when both parents are fit."

How did the experience impact you and your family?

"I was less stressed and more energised and positive engaging with my child."

"It alleviated stress"

"I felt respected, listened to, supported, my strengths acknowledged & it helped me know not everyone in DSP looks down on people like me."

"I feel my son is welcome and feels his family type is normal in the school environment."

"I felt supported. I was pleasantly surprised to receive HAP within a couple of weeks. But my rent was increased almost straight away once my landlord realised, I was a single parent. In one hand and out the other!"

"Enabling me to continue employment by being flexible with payments when bills such as car issues arose."

"We now have heating."

"The impact of that experience changed our lives for the better. It changed the course of all our lives."

"I got through to a very helpful revenue agent who offered me help without me having to seek it out. They were pleasant, friendly and lovely to deal with. Made everything so much easier."

"We were able to get out of homelessness."

"I won't be frightened to ask for help. I used to hate it."

"It is encouraging to get support from school for my daughter."

"Gave me some confidence that people are there to help and will help."

"Commenced working on a community employment scheme to update my employability skills."

"Value me as who I am, remind me that I'm not alone and know my worth and build my resilience moving forward."

Have you experienced unfair treatment, inequality, or discrimination from a public service body?

"You are assumed to have no education or are only suitable for low paid jobs. All sent to you is to get you into these jobs rather than helping with childcare to do the job you're trained for. Add being a migrant and it's even worse."

"I attended my local Intreo office for welfare support. When I mentioned I was a lone parent I was given additional applications to complete in comparison to before I mentioned."

"Known criminal (was) placed in the house between us and another lone parent household to minimise possible reactions from other houses with men living in them."

"I was told by a mediator on the phone when my child's father wanted to change agreement which I didn't agree with, that mums have to give more than dads that just the way it was."

"School payments are designed for two parent families. I can't access free legal aid as I'm just over the limit, yet I can't afford the services of solicitors as a lone parent of 6."

"The mediator secretly contacted my ex-spouse to advise him to cancel the process. When looking for support I was told I wasn't going to get a house just because I got myself into a stupid situation."

"I felt I wasn't treated with respect or even as a human being. I felt judged. The lady who was assessing my lone parent claim was rude and did not communicate with me in a way that helped me understand the services."

"Applying for Disability Allowance and they made mistakes and said that I didn't submit essential information, but I did. They keep sending me the same form letter- three times now and say I'm denied based on lack of requested materials. It's still not approved."

"I was belittled in social welfare office by an Officer when asking for financial help. She started talking about her personal life and how she has to buy paint and that for her home when she needs it and that I need to manage like she has regardless."

"I am no longer on One Parent Family Payment but when I was, I was audited six times in 18 months. None of my circumstances had changed. I was doing a four-year degree and they were aware of this but I was still required to explain my circumstances six times."

"When I first became a lone parent they encouraged me to apply for Jobseekers Allowance rather than OFP. I thus missed out on numerous entitlements and was also 'activated' - pressured to find full-time work. An employee of the private company carrying out activation admitted that they're instructed not to alert claimants to unclaimed entitlements."

"Following an appeal it was decided DSP owed me €30. The appeals section failed to alert me to this or initiate repayment for several months. It was paid once I queried it."

"CAMHS blamed my daughter's problems on me being a single parent and not providing her with a stable home environment."

"I have been treated rudely by staff. They don't understand that I have no childcare and so can't attend training courses or take up certain employment."

"If you can't afford private healthcare you are put on a very long waiting list and left struggling for months or even years waiting for treatment."

"I have been discriminated against because of my gender. I was told by a judge in the Family Court that "These things favour the mother"

"Local social welfare office, front desk male employee seemed to think my honesty about living in poverty was an act. I have never felt so low in all my life. I felt compelled to show him my overdraft."

"I was waiting two years for an appointment to get my daughter an eye test for glasses. When I asked for an appointment in the afternoon so that I didn't lose wages because I parent alone, I was sniggered at and told tough."

"Lack of support and understanding from CAMHS regarding parenting alone. Lack of mental health supports for parents – carelessness."

"Currently experiencing long delays (eight months since my initial application) in my application to South Dublin Coco for housing support. I have applied on the basis of Domestic Abuse and have now requested the support of my local TDs and councillors to identify the delay as I have provided all necessary and requested documentation and still cannot get a decision or an update on my application. At this stage I am living on my sister's sofa with my daughter, travelling over 60kms daily to bring her to school. I also cannot plan ahead to enrol her in post-primary school (she finishes primary school in the summer of 2022) as we do not know where we will live. The only response that I am getting from housing in SDCC is that I have to wait. I have had huge support and information from Gino Kenny's office in terms of the options available to me but that is the first time that anyone 'as offered me any information about alternatives or tried to help me find a way of solving my problem, despite having engaged with the Department of Social Protection, Tusla, Meath Women's Refuge and Legal Aid."

"Condescending engagement with Courts staff, judge and solicitors."

"Amazing experience in the District Court. I could select a suitable lawyer from a list. However, in Divorce Circuit Court I had an awful experience. I had to get a family loan of approximately €2,000 which I still owe. I was unsupported throughout with demands for paperwork I didn't know how to complete and didn't have the means to print and access documents. They kept asking for the same documents that I had already handed in, costing me more money."

"I was told initially I didn't qualify for any assistance, then I was put on BTEA. I was left to survive on €27 per week including child maintenance as my ex paid the mortgage. This was deducted as if I had money for bills, food, clothing, light and heating. I was told I didn't qualify for Supplementary Welfare Allowance due to my ex paying the mortgage. I didn't receive Back to Work Family Dividend on taking up employment despite being entitled to it."

"Was switched from one parent family to BTEA therefore couldn't qualify for grants and did not receive the cost of education allowance. BTEA expired mid-year 1 and I was left with no income as mortgage payment made by my ex was assessed as means."

"One Parent Family Payments and Working Family Payment- my maintenance means are incorrectly assessed since my child moved from childcare to school. The Department continues to deduct the previous fees paid by my former partner towards childcare despite these no longer applying/being paid."

"When my son was in ICU care, as I was parenting alone, some hospital staff weren't happy for me to have a family member with me as it wasn't my child's parent."

"I was excluded from important medical matters concerning my children as I am separated from their mother."

"There were times when I expressed concerns for my children to a child protection agency and I feel that these concerns were not taken seriously. Which ultimately led to a more unsafe environment for the children as these were not acted upon."

"Denying unmarried parents who are men only basic rights to their own children is gender-based discrimination."

"I don't understand why a public body delays payments that are due to a claimant until the claimant queries it. My Jobseekers Allowance payment was delayed by months until I queried it. This is a disrespectful and devious manner of operating."

"To get your 'attention' payments used to randomly cut off, so you would present to the local Intreo looking for your OFP. It had been diverted to another post office by an Intreo worker in order to get you to come in. Why not ring someone? The stress of this! I often had no petrol but somehow had to dash to the office, queue up then find out they wanted a form to be submitted to them (no form posted to me) and then I had to drive to another post office to access money for the week. This is inhumane and cruel and so degrading. The manager laughed and said this is how they get people's attention. It is horrendous."

"The appeals process was so stressful. I spend months chasing up emails to no avail. I started a complaint with the Ombudsman and only then was it taken seriously."

What was the impact of the unfair treatment, inequality or discrimination on you and your family?

"Left me feeling very stressed, hurt and alone. I felt that lone parents have no voice and are thrown to the side. "

"It was very stressful. I was in an untenable living situation and just wanted to secure a home for my family. It seemed to be like an unreasonable length of time to wait for the application to be processed."

"Hugely negative impact on my children and myself, particularly with regards to our sense of safety in our own home. Fearful, increased stress, demoralized. Children and I felt no one cared."

"My experience with Intreo had a negative effect on my family as I felt because my family fell outside their definition of a one-parent family, we would not be supported. My experience of the court service made me afraid to challenge my child's father for fear he would bring me back to court. It was very stressful for me. It has ultimately changed me as a person, my experience made me fearful and anxious."

"I would agree to any changes my child's dad wanted, I wouldn't argue if he cancelled or if he wanted to take him on holiday when I didn't think it was a good idea. I just went along because I didn't feel the court would support me. I didn't want to go back to court."

"I'm unable to provide my kids with extra stuff like music, school swimming, all books, bus fees. Also, I can't get maintenance as I can't afford to go to court. I can't afford a divorce. I'm paying my mortgage by myself and paying bills first before I buy food for my children."

"Constantly trapped and stressed and disheartened. System favours fraud."

"Made feel very low and lesser than. In a crisis I went for help and left feeling worse."

"Very traumatizing. Still feel emotional when I think about how we were treated that day."

"It made me angry and that I had to get someone to 'prove' I was telling the truth. It was also stressful straight after giving birth. Also embarrassed to have to 'explain' myself."

"Damages self- esteem, makes life seem pointless, wouldn't feel confident in asking for support I am eligible for. Shame on them."

"My life and the lives of my children have been damaged for good."

"The lack of supports for children with disabilities in Ireland effects my son's life day to day. There are skills that he can be taught with supports and without these he will always have struggles."

"Feeling like no one cares, I was very depressed all summer and had anxiety about how these people were treating me and my son."

"It was 41mbarrassing and frustrating. I was made to feel I was doing something wrong or hiding something when I was not. I felt patronised every time I went into the office. I was left short of money (no Fuel Allowance), short of childcare (OFP means more childcare hours), no incentive to work without affecting my payment, and shamed at meetings, pressurised to find full-time work. I got letters about night security jobs! Stressed! "

"I found that one needs to have a thorough knowledge of the social protection system before engaging with it. I was clueless and so was not guided correctly. The result was terrible stress, worry and shame and income loss. My child was 3 years old."

"Severe stress, severe anxiety....put the children into poverty all because we hadn't got enough money."

"Welfare of the children was not taken into consideration."

"I felt I wasn't good enough as a parent for my child."

"I felt watched, shamed. We were behind one month in rent during a housing crisis. Healthwise, it became I didn't sleep right one week in four when the rent was due."

"Social Welfare applications and processes are incredibly humiliating. The language used is not plain English and uses jargon specific to the Department. It is hard to get clarity."

"No one answered the phone, returns emails. There is an assumption you are out to scam the country by availing of supports. The thresholds are inappropriate – why is a PAYE worker able to get more support than a self-employed worker (Working Family Payment). It is impossible to get information to examine why decisions on assessments are made and how I only had access to this information after my appeal process. It is so stressful to be made feel like a bad person."

"I came away filled with upset and anxiousness. Feeling why do me and my children always get treated so unfairly."

"I felt completely alone and unsupported while trying to manage my child's mental health issues and take care of my own mental health."

"I have taken a year's academic leave from my degree program in order to resolve the situation. My daughter and I travel 60kms daily to bring her to school as we have no current fixed home between what was our family home and where we are staying now. I have missed the deadline to enrol her in a local post-primary school as we don't know where we will be living and I am unable to plan our immediate future or move forward in my degree course. It's also caused huge mental, emotional and financial stress on myself (the fuel bill alone) and my sister who we are staying with suffers with bi-polar disorder. She has become unwell since we started staying with her and the stress of having us in her home is adding to her own mental health issues."

"I feel desperate. I spend my time fighting. I'm exhausted."

"Huge stress put on myself and my children. Even verbally abused by a judge in the Circuit Court which caused huge upset. "

"It was hurtful and frustrating. I felt belittled and humiliated as if I was a lesser person. It made me question myself and it affected my mental health."

"Since last year when I applied for social welfare my son and I have been struggling financially on reduced payments to do an administrative error (in the Court). I have been forced to contact St Vincent de Paul each month for assistance buying food."

What one change could public service providers make?

"Communication, real time and non-bias training."

"Train staff, educate them on entitlements and how to deal with lone parents."

"Training for staff that supports them to provide service in non-biased way."

"Training for providers, if that's what's necessary in order for people to deal respectfully with service users, training in what it means to be a lone parent and the barriers we face. To not assume lone parents are happy on welfare and are uneducated."

"Allow all lone parents to avail of affordable housing regardless (of) if they previously owned a property."

"Listen without prejudice."

"An understanding of the diversity in one-parent families."

"Family law cases need to be taken out of the criminal system and trauma trained individuals be the first point of contact for families. Not solicitors."

"See us as a family like any other. Have payment plans. Have a maintenance collections unit. Have access to legal aid for parents supporting children by themselves."

"The law needs to be reformed and a shift in the balance between parents. Until the burden of childcare is equally shared and liabilities imposed on both parties, we will never have true equality."

"Consultation with single parents on their actual needs and how best to deliver those services in a way that is respectful and empathetic. A course on the active listening for all public servants."

"Respectful engagement."

"Training to treat customers with dignity and respect. Operate with efficiency and don't blame the person seeking help, blame the system. Also don't judge others on their life circumstances or current situation. Things can happen to anyone."

"The Department of Social Protection needs to reword the qualifying criteria for OFP – I was confused as I was leaving an abusive relationship and the wording highlights pursuing ex for maintenance. I didn't think I was entitled and they let me think that!"

"Be more empathetic/understanding to different family types. Make it easier to apply for help without feeling like you have to go beg. More online, easy to read information. I had to go into offices to ask for paper application forms."

"If money is owed to a claimant, then it should be paid by the public body immediately. They expect to be paid/repaid immediately! Respect is needed both ways."

"Not to judge a person for being a single parent- lose the label."

"Training. Some people are in jobs so long and the outlook has changed. The public are not a bunch of scammers to be suspicious of, but people in the community with dignity you are paid to assist. Wording documents and forms should be updated."

"Urgently to reflect dignity and respect using plain English, a charter for dealing with the public, a complaints process."

"Change in terminology, the accusation of guilt across the board, training in dealing with people in our position, accountability if found to be dealing with clients incorrectly."

"I think healthcare in the country should be the same for everyone regardless of your financial situation. People should not be left struggling and in pain for months or years on end."

"Train staff to treat all people equally."

"Training on 'Unconditional positive regard' and empathy/customer service training. Training on the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act."

"Understanding that people have limits as to what they can manage financially emotionally and time wise."

"Treat people as equals – with dignity and care. Many people who are/become single parents have been through trauma and the last thing they need is to be treated as second class."

"Never assume. Try to put yourself in their situation."

"Understand that not all families have the support of two parents or extended family."

"Listen to the person, treat them with understanding, empathy and respect. Be friendly and kind."

"Make sure the people behind the desk are up to date and know what they need to know and want to help people. Don't put someone in a client facing role when they have no desire to be there."

"To simply listen."

"Be more sensitive to people who are parenting alone."

"More empathy for people's circumstances."

"Listen carefully when a parent has a concern for their child's mental health to avoid the severity of the illness."

"People are given information and help if they already know they are entitled to it. There is a need for a more proactive approach to social welfare, education, employment and housing."

"Listen to what I had to say."

"Education in domestic violence especially coercive control and psychological manipulators."

"Appointments outside of work and school hours so that we can attend with our child."

Have you any other comments?

"Department of Social Protection should handle all finances regarding children. It should also be taken out of the hands of the parents since it is used by the courts as a source of acrimony to encourage repeat court visits."

"Oftentimes when engaging with social welfare you tend to know more about what you are able to claim than the person sitting behind the Perspex screen. I have had to advocate for myself when been told no until I could speak with someone who knew."

"Not sure how many times I have to write this, we have become so poor I only buy near expired food these days."

"I struggle to get help finding out what I am entitled to. Attitude of workers is not helpful and is judgemental."

"I have found it extremely difficult to get to grips with the support services that are available to me. I find that the service providers expect you to know what to ask for rather than advising you what services are available. No one is joining the dots or suggesting that you also contact another agency that can also support or support in the interim. It's left to the service user to investigate and in my case, I was already in a very vulnerable, stressed and overwhelming situation."

"Family Law/divorce does not make provision for school expenses etc. which requires ongoing communication with an abuser – both physical and financial abuse."

"We are Irish speakers and it is very hard to find services for single/shared parenting families as Gaeilge."

"How lone parents are treated so abysmally is definitely gender biased in my opinion. We have a terrible history on how women and their children are treated here and this history affects people's assumptions, in the public sector as well as out of it."

"More public information on services and support for lone parents."

"It honestly feels like the minute you mention you're lone/single parent this stigma is attached and used to judge everything you do."

"I feel like I'm judged for not working and then punished as soon as I get a job."

"You need to know what to ask for. I didn't know I could get fuel allowance until my aunt told me."

"The amount of paperwork and proof of circumstances and the paperwork and documentation that is requested is ridiculous in this day and age. I submitted all my paperwork through email as I was informed that I could. Only to be told later that it would have been better to send it by post as hard copy post gets looked at sooner. It made no difference to how quickly my application for housing is being assessed and the amount of paperwork that I had to print out in order to submit the application was over an inch and a half of paperwork."

"Some individuals have been pleasant and helpful, but it is not easy to get past recorded phone messages to speak to a real person."

"Frontline staff should be able to advise you fully of your rights. I find I often have to go looking on gov.ie or the social welfare site because staff either aren't up to date, or they seem to be withholding information."