

Pre-Budget Submission for 2026: Addressing the Needs of One-Parent Families

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The National One Parent Family Alliance (NOPFA) was established in 2020 in response to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on one-parent families and the shared concern regarding the high levels of poverty experienced by lone parents and their children. The Alliance comprises Barnardos, Family Resource Centre National Forum, Focus Ireland, National Women’s Council, One Family, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, SPARK, and Treoir.

Since 2016, nine reports on one-parent families and poverty have been published, including the 2017 Joint Committee on Social Protection Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland. Each of these reports consistently highlights the persistent issue of children growing up in poverty.

A core aim of NOPFA is to ensure that the needs and experiences of one-parent families, and the children within these families, are explicitly acknowledged and addressed in policy and budgetary decisions that affect their lives. NOPFA has several overarching policy goals which, if implemented, would be transformative for the lives of individuals in one-parent families and would significantly reduce the levels of child poverty in Ireland.

Budget 2026 must prevent one-parent families from being further entrenched in poverty as the cost of living remains high. The measures outlined in this document should be viewed as the initial step in sustained investment over multiple budgets to help lift families out of poverty permanently. We believe this is achievable, but it requires the Government to make the appropriate decisions in the forthcoming budget and to plan for progressive improvements over the course of the term of this government.

We note that one parent families have been identified as a key target group by the Child Poverty and Well-Being Office in the Department of An Taoiseach in their first progress report¹ and we hope that this work will see the interdepartmental collaboration needed to support one parent households. We also note that there are no specific child poverty targets and that it is an expected outcome from the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025. We believe that we need ambitious child poverty targets and that they should be underpinned by legislation, which could support the achievement of the targets.

The 7 Key Requests for NOPFA in Budget 2026.

NOPFA has identified five critical requests for consideration in Budget 2026. These measures are essential to support one-parent families and alleviate child poverty in Ireland. The key requests are as follows:

1. Extension of Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST):

- Extend the JST for lone parents who are engaged in education, training, or employment until their youngest child completes second-level education. This extension will provide crucial financial stability and support for lone parents striving to improve their qualifications and employment prospects.

2. Increase the Income Disregard for OPFA and JST

- Raise the income disregard for the One-Parent Family Allowance (OPFA) and JST. Additionally, index-link this disregard to the minimum wage to ensure that it keeps pace with inflation and cost of living increases. This adjustment will help lone parents retain more of their earnings, reducing the financial strain on their households.

¹ Child and Poverty Well-Being Programme Office (2024) *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well Being Programme Office*. Accessed here - <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/first-progress-report-of-the-child-poverty-and-well-being-programme-office.pdf>

3. Benchmarking Child Support Payment:

- Align the Child Support Payment with the primary welfare payment, incorporating a differential rate for children under and over 12 years old. The preliminary suggestion is to set the rate at 45% for children under 12 and 66% for those over 12, inclusive of the child benefit payment, in line with the equivalised rate used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for calculating the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). This benchmarking will ensure that child support payments are fair and reflective of the varying needs of children at different stages of development.

4. Increase the Fuel Allowance:

- Increase the fuel allowance by an additional €9.50 per week and benchmark it to the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research². Extend this allowance to recipients of the Working Family Payment. This measure will help low-income families manage the rising costs of energy and heating, ensuring that they can maintain a warm and healthy living environment.

5. Support Payment for Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Recipients:

- Ensure there is a support payment for individuals receiving the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) who are the group at highest risk of poverty after housing costs³. This support payment will provide additional financial assistance to those struggling to meet their basic needs, helping to prevent homelessness and housing insecurity.

6. Better Integration of Services to Support Lone Parents in Employment

- A cross-departmental strategy is urgently needed to break down the barriers that prevent lone parents from sustaining full-time employment. We are calling for coordinated action across the Departments of Health, Social Protection, Children, and Further and Higher Education to tackle these gaps. ensure vital supports stay in place as parents move into employment, improving financial stability and long-term outcomes for one-parent families.

² Vincentian MESL Research Centre, (2024) *MESL Update Report 2024*, accessed here - https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2024_-_update_report.pdf

³ CSO, *SILC Report 2024*, (2025) accessed here -

7. Extend the Living Alone Allowance, Telephone Allowance and Household Benefits Package to all one parent households in receipt of a social welfare payment.

- In recognition of the costs of running a household on one social welfare payment, social protection offers additional support to single adult households in receipt of a pension or a disability payment. One parent households are not entitled to this payment. In addition, as the payments to support children only meets 88% of the needs of a primary school age child and 64% of a secondary school child, their primary payment in subsidising the needs of their children and are therefore already at a disadvantage compared to other single adult households.⁴

Extend JST for parents engaged in Education, Training or Employment.

NOPFA continues to highlight the significant challenges faced by lone parents once their youngest child turns 14. At this point, parents must transition to either the standard Jobseeker Payment or the Working Family Payment, depending on their circumstances. This transition can result in a substantial reduction in income, coinciding with a period when the costs associated with raising a child increase significantly.

Analysis from the Vincentian Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Research Centre in their 2023 pre-budget submission indicates that a lone parent working full-time on the National Minimum Wage experiences a weekly income loss of €58 when moving from the Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST) to the Working Family Payment (WFP).⁵

⁴ Society of St. Vincent de Paul. (2024). *Minimal Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Budget 2025 Impact Briefing*. Retrieved from https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_impact_briefing_-_budget_2025.pdf

⁵ Vincentian MESL Research Centre, (2022) *Pre Budget Submission 2023*, accessed here - https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/vpsj_mesl_pre-budget_2023_submission.pdf#:~:text=This%20submission%20builds%20on%20the%20evidence%20from.relative%20to%20the%20changing%20cost%20of%20minimum

Increase the Income Disregard and index link it to changes in the minimum wage.

Over the years, the income disregard has not reflected changes made to the minimum wage, which reduces the value of work to recipients of the One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) and Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST). When OPFP was first introduced in 1997, the income disregard was equivalent to 26 hours at minimum wage. Today, the income disregard is equivalent to 12.22 hours at minimum wage.

To restore the income disregard to 2020 levels, the income disregard would need to be increased to €220.60 today. For Budget 2026, we propose that the income disregard be index-linked to the minimum wage and set at 16.5 hours multiplied by the minimum wage.

Year	Minimum Wage	Income Disregard	Hours worked before loss of welfare
2000	€5.58	€146.50	26.25 hrs
2012	€8.65	€146.50	16.93 hrs
2020	€10.10	€165.00	16.34 hrs
2025	€13.50	€165.00	12.22 hrs

Supporting Data

1. Historical Context:

- In 1997, the OPFA was first introduced and included an income disregard. This allowed recipients of OPFA to work the income equivalent of 26 hours of work at the minimum wage, before their OPFA was reduced.

2. Current Situation:

- As of 1 January 2025, the national minimum wage in Ireland is €13.50 per hour. The current income disregard for OPFP and JST is €165 per week, which equates to approximately 12.22 hours at the minimum wage.

3. Proposed Adjustment:

- To restore the income disregard to its 2020 value, it would need to be increased to €220.60 per week. This calculation is based on the

minimum wage of €13.50 per hour multiplied by 16.5 hours. Index-linking the income disregard to the minimum wage ensures that it keeps pace with inflation and cost of living increases, thereby maintaining the value of work for recipients.

- Index-linking the income disregard to the minimum wage and setting it at 16.5 hours multiplied by the minimum wage will provide much-needed financial stability to one-parent families. This adjustment will help lone parents retain more of their earnings, reducing the financial strain on their households and encouraging continued engagement in work, training, and education.

Benchmarking Child Support Payment rates.

The Child Support Payment (CSP; formerly Increase for Qualified Child) is a vital support for one parent families. While the increase in the rate of the CSP in recent Budgets has been welcome, particularly the differential rate for over 12s, according to MESL research the current rate does not meet the associated costs for either younger or older children. Inclusive of both Child Benefit double payments, the once-off Payments, social protection payments still only meet 92%% of costs for children under 12 and 67% of costs for children over 12.⁶

The uncertainty every year of how the CSP rate will change is a source of significant worry for one parent families. This Budget should use this opportunity to move away from ad hoc increases to the CSP towards benchmarking the rates at a percentage of the primary social protection payment. This would be similar to the approach taken for the Increase for a Qualified Adult, where the increase is linked to the primary payment (set at 66%) and rises accordingly.

This is aligned with the CSO's approach to assessing equivalised household incomes for the Survey on Income and Living Conditions, which counts all children aged 14 or over as dependent adults and applies a similar 66% cost assessment, reflecting the increased cost of older children. It also aligns very closely with the

⁶ Society of St. Vincent de Paul. (2024). *Minimal Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Budget 2025 Impact Briefing*. Retrieved from https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_impact_briefing_-_budget_2025.pdf

MESL assessment of costs for second-level children, which in 2024 stood at 64% of the base social protection rate. The CSO are currently re-assessing their approach for children under 14 (currently set at 33%) as to whether it accurately reflects costs – the MESL data suggests that the cost of a child under 12 ranges from 24% (pre-school) to 41% (infants and primary school) of the base social protection rate. To account for this, we have suggested benchmarking to 45% of the primary social protection rate in advance of the CSO's completing any reassessment and to ensure all costs are covered. Both benchmarks should be inclusive of Child Benefit, as detailed below.

This would also ensure that future benchmarking of working age payments and indexing to cost of living increases would be automatically reflected in the CSP. This is even more essential as we move beyond the once-off expenditures which have been a feature of recent Budgets.

In Budget 2026, the CSP for children under 12 should be increased by a minimum of €10 per week, and to €20 for children over 12. This should be the start of working towards benchmarking of the payment to 45% of the primary social protection payment during this government term. This would ensure that all children would have their minimum essential needs met and would significantly reduce child poverty.

Below, please find worked examples, based on the rates in 2025.

For children under 12: benchmark to 45% of primary payment

45% of €244 (base rate) = €109.80

Minus weekly Child Benefit (€32.21) = €77.49

Increase of €27.49

For children over 12: benchmark to 66% of primary payment

66% of €244 (base rate) = €161.04

Minus weekly Child Benefit (€32.21) = €128.73

Increase of €66.73 (from €62)

The estimated single full-year annual cost of indexing the child support payment to 45% of the qualified adult payment for children under 12 years and to 55% for children aged 12 years and over is €371.5 million.⁷

Increase the Fuel Allowance.

During the winter months, there is a significant extra financial burden on families in terms of energy costs and heating their home. Not being able to adequately heat your home is one of the 11 core indicators of consistent poverty. The fuel allowance is given to low-income families in recognition of that extra financial burden in the winter months. There should not be situations where families must choose between heating the home and putting food on the table. The issue of fuel poverty needs a targeted approach to facilitate a just transition in the fight against climate change.

The 2024 MESL report showed that from March 2020 to March 2024, household energy costs in the MESL increased by 62.7% for urban households and 54% for rural households.⁸ However, the fuel allowance has not kept pace with this increase. In 2020 the weekly fuel allowance was €24.50, the fuel allowance for winter in 2025 is €33⁹, this is an increase of only 34.69%. For the fuel allowance to keep pace with the rise in energy costs, the weekly fuel allowance should be increased by €9.50 per week.

The universal credits in previous budgets, although welcome, are a short-term solution to rising energy costs and fuel poverty. Long-term targeted solutions like increasing the fuel allowance in line with the cost of living, and extending the eligibility of the fuel allowance, give greater certainty to families.

Working Family Payment (WFP) is a payment to support people who are on low pay. This recognition of an income support need should also qualify those in receipt of WFP, for fuel allowance.

⁷ Department of Social Protection. (2025, May 15). *Social Welfare Rates – Parliamentary Question No. 260*. Oireachtas. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-05-15/260/>

⁸ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. (2024). *Latest Minimal Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Report Published*. Retrieved from <https://www.svp.ie/news/latest-minimal-essential-standard-of-living-mesl-report-published/>

⁹ Department of Social Protection. (2024). *Budget 2025*. Retrieved from <https://gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/budget-2025/>

Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and Poverty Risk.

Many one-parent households rely on the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) to meet their housing costs. The failure of the state to build sufficient social housing over the past decade has resulted in many individuals who should be in social housing instead residing in the private rental sector and relying on HAP. HAP payments are often below market rents, leading many households to pay what they would for social housing, plus substantial top-ups to landlords. This situation places these households at a much greater risk of poverty.

The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024 highlights that the risk of poverty after housing costs remains significant. The at-risk-of-poverty rate was 21.5% for people in receipt of housing payments but increased to 57.3% after deducting housing costs in 2024, underscoring the financial strain on households reliant on HAP.¹⁰

Collaboration Between Departments

To address these issues, the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Housing must collaborate closely to find a solution that protects these vulnerable households. One critical measure is to ensure there is a support payment for individuals receiving HAP who are falling below a minimum income threshold. This support payment would provide additional financial assistance to those struggling to meet their basic needs, helping to prevent homelessness and housing insecurity.

Better Integration of Services to Support Lone Parents in Employment

A cross-departmental approach is urgently needed to support lone parents in sustaining full-time employment by addressing persistent barriers in healthcare and childcare access. Although lone parents are entitled to retain their medical card for

¹⁰ Central Statistics Office. (2025, March 20). *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024: Key findings*. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2024/keyfindings/>

the first three years after entering full-time work under current policy, the reality is more complex.¹¹ Members of the National One Parent Family Alliance (NOPFA) consistently report cases where lone parents faced excessive demands for income documentation and complex bureaucratic hurdles, resulting in some abandoning the application process altogether.¹² This creates a perverse disincentive to work, as modest earnings can lead to the sudden loss of vital healthcare entitlements due to means-tested thresholds that have not kept pace with wage inflation or the cost of living.¹³

Similarly, while the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) offers subsidies to reduce the cost of childcare, its income thresholds have not been indexed to inflation, limiting access for many low-income working families.¹⁴ Without updating and coordinating these thresholds, lone parents risk falling into a "benefit trap" where employment results in greater financial insecurity. A coordinated strategy across the Departments of Health, Social Protection, and Children could implement index-linked eligibility criteria and tapered supports, ensuring lone parents retain access to healthcare and childcare when transitioning to or remaining in employment.

NOPFA recommends the establishment of a formal mechanism for cross-departmental collaboration between the Departments of Health, Social Protection, Children, and Further and Higher Education to align policies and supports. This coordination should include:

- Indexation of medical card and National Childcare Scheme income thresholds to wage inflation and cost of living.
- Simplification and streamlining of the medical card renewal process for working lone parents.

This integrated approach would reduce barriers to employment, support income stability, and improve long-term outcomes for one-parent families.

¹¹ Department of Health. (2024). *Eligibility for medical cards*. Health Service Executive. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/cards-schemes/medical-card/>

¹² NOPFA. (2025). *Internal member feedback on healthcare access barriers*. [Unpublished].

¹³ Society of St. Vincent de Paul. (2023). *Poverty Focus 2023: Lone parents and barriers to work*. SVP Ireland. <https://www.svp.ie>

¹⁴ Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. (2024). *National Childcare Scheme: Policy guidelines 2024*. Government of Ireland. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/childcare/>

Extend Living Alone Allowance, Telephone Allowance and Household Benefit Package to all one parent households on long term social welfare payments.

Amend the eligibility criteria of the Living Alone Allowance (LAA), Telephone Allowance (TA) and Household Benefit Package (HBP) to include all one parent households on long-term social welfare payments, such as OFP and JST recipients (and Jobseeker's Allowance recipients who are lone parents beyond the JST phase). In practical terms, one adult plus dependent children would count as "living alone" for purposes of the LAA, and as a qualifying household for HBP. This change would recognise one-parent families as single-adult households facing higher poverty risks and would extend to them the same supplementary supports that other single-adult households receive.

Payments to support children only meets 88% of the needs of a primary school age child and 64% of a secondary school child and this means that a single social protection payment is not only running a household but is also subsidising the needs of children in a household and are therefore already at a disadvantage compared to other single adult households.¹⁵

One real-world consequence of excluding lone parents from the HBP (and thus the free TV licence) is seen in court and prison statistics. Every year, a significant number of low-income individuals face prosecution for failure to pay the €160 TV licence fee. Many are fined, and some end up in jail for short periods due to fine default. Studies have found that women – often mothers in difficult financial circumstances – are disproportionately represented among those imprisoned for non-payment of TV licence fines.¹⁶

By extending the Household Benefit Package to lone parents, the State would automatically cover the TV licence for those households, removing thousands of the most financially fragile families from the TV licence enforcement net. This would have several positive outcomes:

- **Preventing Criminalisation of Poverty:** Lone parents would no longer face court for an inability to afford the licence. This spares single parents (and their

¹⁵ Society of St. Vincent de Paul. (2024). *Minimal Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Budget 2025 Impact Briefing*. Retrieved from https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_impact_briefing_-_budget_2025.pdf

¹⁶ Irish Penal Reform Trust. (2023, July 23). *Journal.ie: Nearly 15,000 court summonses for failure to pay for a TV licence were issued last year*. <https://www.iprt.ie/iprt-in-the-news/nearly-15-000-court-summonses-for-failure-to-pay-for-a-tv-licence-were-issued-last-year/iprt.ie+2>

children) the ordeal of legal action or jail for what is fundamentally a poverty-related issue.

- **Reducing Prison Admissions for Fine Default:** Ireland could further cut the number of committals of women to prison. Even though those jailed for fines are usually released within hours, the process is a waste of Garda and court resources and can have traumatic effects on families. Eliminating the root cause for lone parents (by giving them a free TV licence) is a commonsense preventive measure.

Conclusion

If the Government is serious about ending child poverty, it must start where the need is greatest. One-parent families are at the epicentre of Ireland's child poverty crisis. Children in these families are three times more likely to experience consistent poverty than their peers in two-parent households. This is not a marginal issue—it is a structural failure that demands bold, targeted action in **Budget 2026**.

The seven key asks put forward by the **National One Parent Family Alliance (NOPFA)** are not optional extras; they are essential interventions to break the cycle of poverty for the more than 200,000 children living in one-parent households. These include:

- Extending the **Jobseeker's Transitional Payment**
- Increasing the **income disregard**
- Benchmarking **child support payments** to the cost of living
- Raising the **fuel allowance**
- Providing a **support payment for HAP recipients**
- Enhancing **interdepartmental coordination**
- Extending eligibility for the **Living Alone Allowance and Household Benefit Package** to lone parents

Each measure is designed to remove a barrier, close a gap, or reduce a cost that disproportionately impacts one-parent families. Implementing them is not just a policy choice—it's a moral imperative.

Anything less than a targeted, evidence-based package of supports would amount to political lip service. If child poverty is to be more than a rhetorical priority, the Government must underpin its commitments with legislation and set ambitious, binding poverty reduction targets. We already know where the deepest deprivation lies. Budget 2026 must finally deliver for the children who need it most.

Ends